

## Lost Worlds of the Guiana Highlands

By S. McPherson. 2008. Redfern Natural History Productions, Poole, Dorset, England, UK, 385 pages, 29.99 GBP, Cloth.

The table-topped mountains, or tepuis, of the ancient Guiana Shield of northern South America first came to prominence with the novel *The Lost World* written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1912. In this story, contemporary humans were warring with ape-like creatures in the midst of dinosaurs on top of flat mountains surrounded by vertical cliffs. Apparently, the idea came after Doyle heard a lecture in London on the first ascent of Mount Roraima, which now forms the tripartite border with Brazil, Guyana and Venezuela, by Everard Ferdinand Im Thurn in 1894. Besides being an explorer, naturalist and later diplomat, Im Thurn was curator of the British Guiana museum and his climb to the top of Roraima at almost 3 000 metres elevation was to primarily collect plants for Kew Gardens in England. Not only did he bring back new species to science, but also many new genera found only on tepuis, which may have been the inspiration for the unexpected findings in *The Lost World*.

This intrigue and fascination is continued and aptly conveyed by the *Lost Worlds of the Guiana Highlands* by Stewart McPherson. It is well written and liberally supported by spectacular colour photographs of magnificent landscapes that are unique to this region of the world. After a brief introduction to the Guianas, the layout of the book, and an explanation of terms used in the text, the author starts off with a bang by presenting 24 consecutive photo spreads of jaw-dropping images of tepuis. Next, he settles you in with a lesson on the geological history that gave rise to the unusual geographic features found in this area. One of the longer chapters covers the human history of and man's interaction with the Guiana Highlands, starting with the indigenous Amerindians living in the shadows of the mountains to the European colonists looking for the imaginary golden city of Eldorado. My only criticism of this book is the overuse of lengthy quotations of passages from the published journals of the early explorers. Granted, it would be very difficult to get and read many of these old publications, but I was looking for a modern interpretation and distillation of the sometimes difficult-to-follow Old English grammar.

My favourite chapter is titled "Some Strange Country of Nightmares", which is based on a quote by Im Thurn on his first impressions of the features on the summit of Roraima that are seemingly from another world. The images of eroded and sculpted rock are

enough to make me go there myself to check it out. The next chapter discusses the evolutionary processes that result in the speciation of the unique tepui flora and fauna, and the ecological processes that maintain this biodiversity. Almost a quarter of the book is a chapter devoted to describing the unusual organisms that live in this environment "above the clouds". More to the strength and interest of the author, there is a preponderance of botanical discussion with in-depth detail on the bizarre lifestyle of the carnivorous plants. Animals get short shrift but some of the tops of the higher tepuis are probably essentially devoid of vertebrates. However, surprisingly, there is an endemic rat (*Podoxymys roraimae*) found only on the summit of Mount Roraima and so different that it belongs in its own genus.

The last chapter examines the future prospects of the Guiana Highlands in terms of exploration, the indigenous people living in the area, and conservation from a regional perspective. Although the scenery and landscape are beautiful, the plateaus are in the remote and sparsely-inhabited interior of the Guianas. However, with the construction of roads and associated influx of settlers from the populated coast, particularly in Venezuela, this relatively unknown tropical paradise will undoubtedly experience substantial change in the near future. Most mountain tops have been unexplored and one recent discovery was an extensive subterranean cave system, which may entice the breed of hearty adventure seekers. A city of gold was never found but mining still occurs throughout the area, albeit primarily on a small scale. Nonetheless, there are ecological impacts with altering of the landscape and poisoning of the rivers with the use of mercury in the gold extraction process. The challenges will make it difficult to maintain the uniqueness of the area but the Amerindian communities seem cognizant of their task to preserve the ecosystem for future generations.

Notwithstanding a few errors, such as page references in the index are not in numerical order and inaccuracies like the caption in Figure 10 which actually should be the view of the prow of Mount Roraima towards the east, the book is well worth the read. It will be of interest to people searching for something off the beaten track.

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