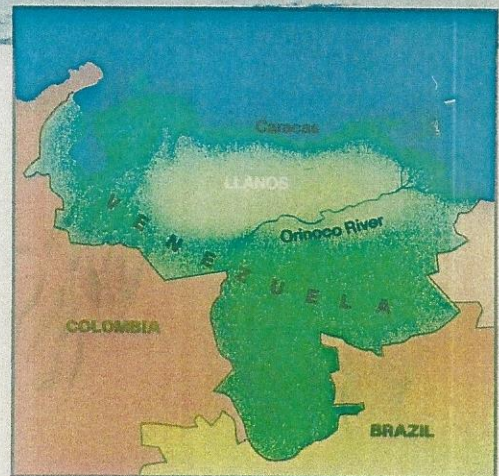


THE LLANOS OF VENEZUELA ABOUND WITH EXOTIC WILDLIFE



KINGDOM OF THE RIVER RATS



These cumbersome creatures taking a swim in Venezuela's mighty Orinoco River are called capybaras, and at up to 100 pounds they have the obvious distinction of being the world's largest rodents. Along with an extraordinary assortment of anteaters, bats, snakes, predatory cats, monkeys, crocodillians and birds, the capybaras inhabit an area of central Venezuela known as the llanos (plains). The llanos consist of some 100,000 square miles of flat grassy savannas and forested swamps. During the May-to-November rainy season, much of the area is flooded; the rest of the year the vegetation is parched by dry tropical heat. Although this is the richest wildlife region in South America—the equivalent of Af-

rica's Serengeti Park—the llanos do not attract many tourists. Most of the land is privately owned, and except for the capys and the birds there are no great congregations of wildlife. The creatures here tend to be small and elusive, and the untrained eye may see little more than the flash of a tail. These photographs were taken on two ranches, the 185,325-acre El Frio owned by the Maldonado family and the 7,413-acre Alto Masaguaral of Tomás Blohm. Blohm and the Maldonados are dedicated conservationists who, over the last 10 years, have opened their property to increasing numbers of wildlife biologists from abroad, even as they work to protect the llanos from mounting internal threats.

Member of the guinea pig family, the capybara (above) has partially webbed toes, no tail, a cleft palate and utters a low, abrupt grunt.

Photography: Stephen Green-Armytage

Beginning in the late 1800s, wealthy ranchers turned over much of the llanos grasslands to beef cattle. But the wild animals still trespassed at will, peacefully coexisting with the livestock. The cattle do not have to compete for food with any of the resident wildlife since the only herbivore is the capybara, which prefers to remain in the swamps anyway. The most striking difference between the Venezuelan llanos and the great wildlife preserves of Africa is that here there are no wild ungulates—grass-eating hoofed animals such as elephants, giraffes and antelopes. In bringing in cattle, the ranchers have supplied the one type of animal nature seemingly forgot. At the same time they provided themselves with an economic incentive for keeping the llanos unspoiled.

In 1974 the Venezuelan government banned all hunting nationwide and established an animal sanctuary, the 1,628,389-acre Aguaro Guariquito National Park, in the very center of the llanos. But the hunting prohibition has not succeeded in eliminating poaching. A number of the larger animals—including the ocelot, jaguar, giant anteater, anaconda and Orinoco crocodile—are endangered. Another troublesome development is the construction of government-financed dikes to control flooding and make more of the llanos suitable for farming. Ecological considerations tend to be given a much lower priority in South America than in the U.S., and studies on how altering the pattern of wet and dry would affect wildlife were not undertaken until after the project was well under way. The impact on wildlife is certain to be significant, although no one yet knows which species will suffer most. In the more populated northern areas of the llanos, the Venezuelan government is promoting land reform, dividing up ownership of once privately held ranches. As more people move in, more animals are driven out.

But the most dire threat to wildlife is posed by the oil industry. As Venezuela's reserves of conventional crude dwindle, the oil companies have started going after the heavy oil that lies deep beneath the llanos. Already roads have been built and some 50 oil wells drilled within Aguaro Guariquito Park itself. The ranchers who are now responsible for preserving the area are going to find it harder and harder to resist the lure of industry and the various "reforms" of their government.



Called whistling ducks because of their high-pitched cries, flocks of thousands can be seen flying about the savanna.



Often found around cattle, the yellow-headed caracara is a scavenger that feeds on carrion and small mammals.

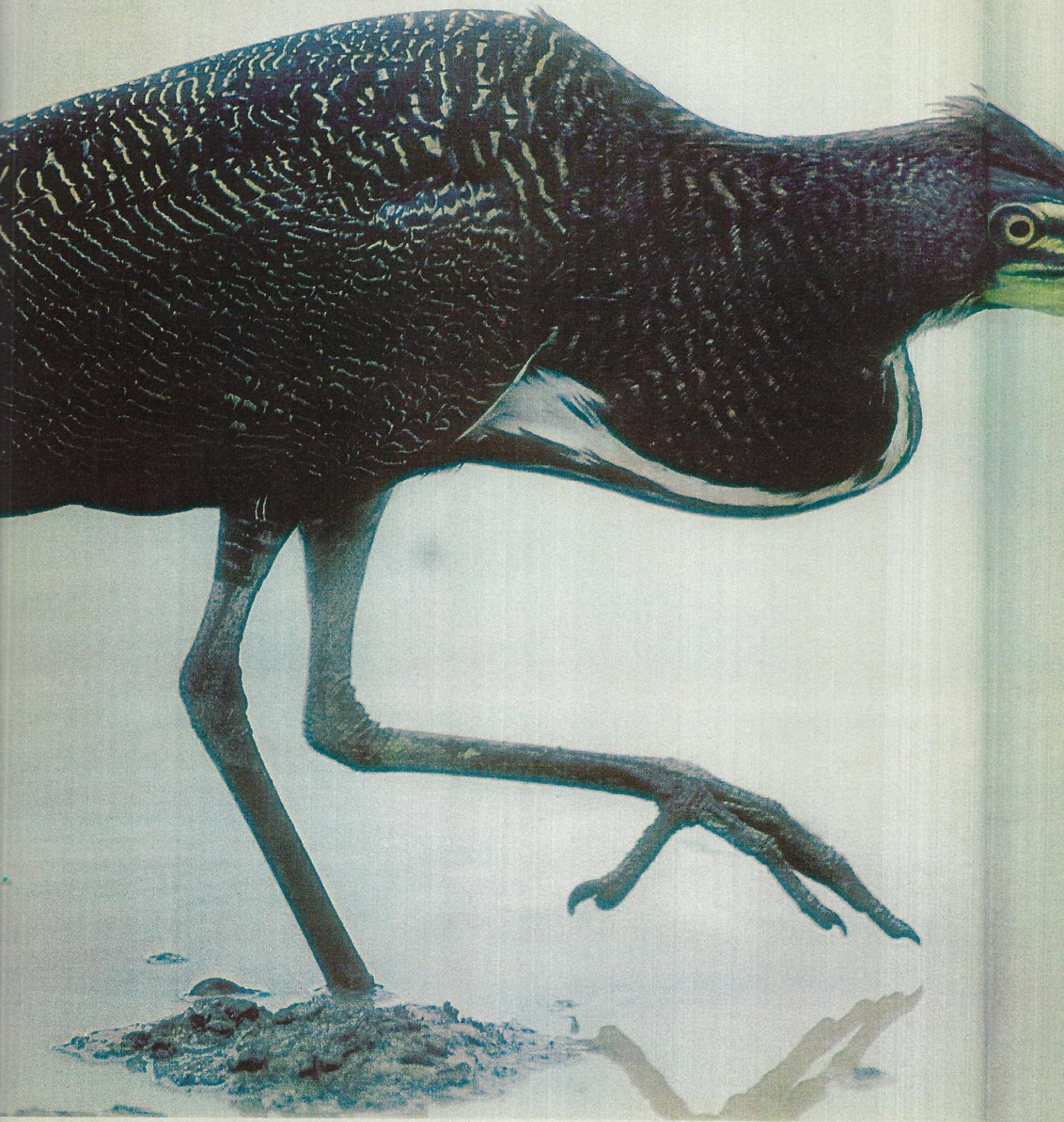
REFUGE SHARED BY NATURE AND MAN



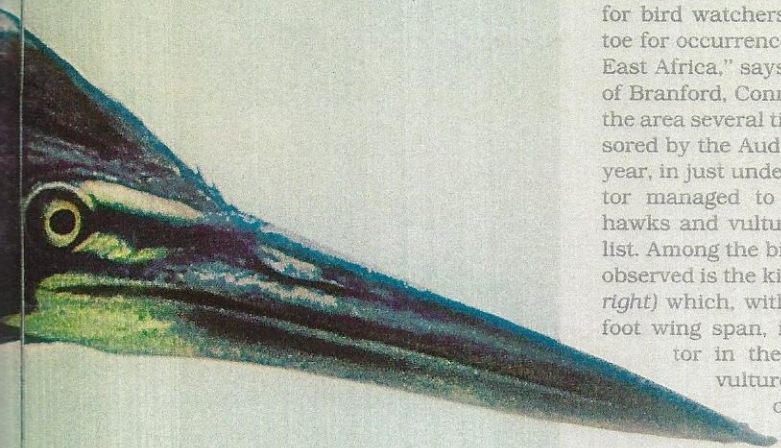
the dry season. These geeselike, tropical ducks are found not only throughout South America but also in Southeast Asia, East Africa and Madagascar.



argest and most endangered snake in the llanos, the anaconda keeps to the swamps and eats mostly birds, which it kills by constriction.



through the shallows
and minnows, the
is the rarer of the
two tiger-heron varieties.



Of the 2,936 species of birds in South America, nearly half can be seen in Venezuela, and some 350 of them live in or visit the llanos. These birds are diverse, numerous, relatively easy to see and well documented in field guides—made to order, that is, for bird watchers. “They go toe-to-toe for occurrence with the birds of East Africa,” says Dr. Noble Proctor of Branford, Conn., who has visited the area several times on trips sponsored by the Audubon Society. Last year, in just under four hours, Proctor managed to add 19 types of hawks and vultures to his lifetime list. Among the birds of prey he has observed is the king vulture (*bottom right*) which, with a six-and-a-half-foot wing span, is the largest raptor in the llanos. All other vultures feeding on carrion immediately retreat to a safe

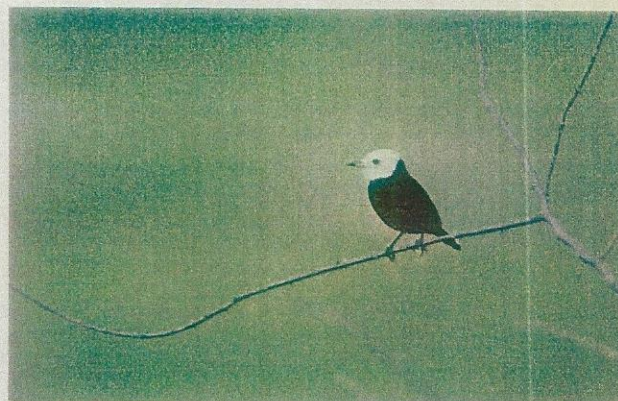
distance whenever this “king” approaches. The best time for birding in the llanos is during the December-to-April dry season. As the lagoons dry up, the birds concentrate in large numbers near the remaining water. Few Venezuelans seem interested, however. Local conservationists say that there are only about a half dozen good bird watchers in the llanos. In contrast, despite the rugged conditions and run-down hotels in the area, U.S. bird enthusiasts vie for the chance to be among the 80 or so who go on the Audubon Society’s four scheduled tours every year. It is also possible to go as an individual—ranch owners usually grant entry on request. Any American bird watcher worth his binoculars would gladly brave fierce heat and fiercer insect bites just to get a glimpse of the fascinating tiger-heron at left or a white-headed marsh tyrant (*right*), one of Venezuela’s 154 species of flycatcher. But the treat to top all is a view of the rich colors of the hoatzin (*top right*), perhaps the strangest bird in the llanos. Once thought to be related to the chicken, it has been reclassified as a member of the cuckoo family. The hoatzin digests food not in its stomach but in its gullet, using a kind of cowlike fermentation process. Newborn hoatzins have practically no feathers but do have a claw at the bend of each wing. They use these claws to clamber through bushes and to pull themselves out of the water after swimming. When hoatzins are several weeks old, they lose these claws as well as their ability to swim, and join avian ranks on a full-time if clumsy basis.



Strictly a leaf eater, the big awkward hoatzin can barely fly.



A type of falcon, the crested caracara eats reptiles and birds.



The white-headed marsh tyrant darts along llanos wetlands.



Nesting in hollow trees, the king vulture leads a solitary life.

BONANZA FOR BIRD COUNTERS



The long muscular tail of the red howler monkey is thickly furred except for the underside of the tip, which serves as a sort of fifth hand.

HOWLERS



Mornings and evenings the forests reverberate with the raucous calls of male howler monkeys, the largest of the half dozen species of monkeys in the llanos. The larynx of the male is enlarged, enabling it to produce lionlike roars that can be heard a mile away. At dusk the ocelot (left) slips out of its day bed in the trees and prowls the plains for small animals.

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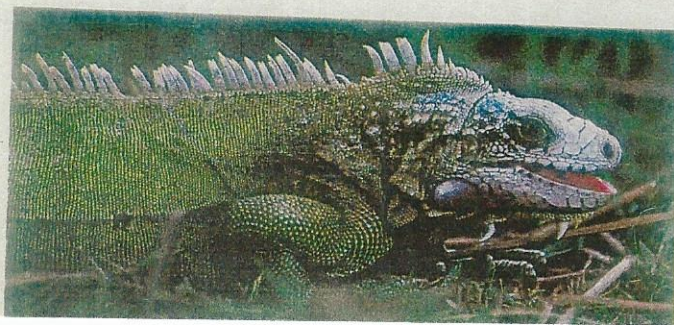


LORD OF THE CROCS

The largest predators, such as this 12-foot-long Orinoco crocodile, are usually the ones most hunted by man. The croc is the most valuable of all. A single hide can bring a poacher as much as \$17 a foot, and a handbag made from that skin would bring \$2,000 to \$3,000. The last census indicated that there were only



about 50 Orinoco crocodiles left throughout the llanos. This is not enough to ensure the continuation of the species. The reptiles are so widely dispersed that the female is often unable to locate a mate. Scientists are beginning to try to breed them in captivity and restock the llanos with baby crocs. ♠



Considered a delicacy in South America, the iguana (left) has serrated teeth that tear through the flesh of birds and small animals.