

Alejandro Arteaga: A Wildlife Photographer in his own words

Enamored of his Country's wildlife, a young Ecuadorian herpetologist and conservationist lets beauty shine through in his striking photographic portrayals of endangered reptiles and amphibians

Ecuador is home to nearly 900 species of reptiles and amphibians. This country, smaller than the state of Arizona, houses more than 10% of the world's herpetofauna (all reptiles and amphibians). However, it is believed that, in Ecuador, about 35% of such amazing biodiversity is still unknown to science. This astounding diversity, mostly overlooked by wildlife photographers, is what drew me into the world of macro photography. Above all, it is my intention to discover, document and conserve Ecuador's reptiles and amphibians through technical and artistic photography. As a biologist, I always strive to capture images that are technically and scientifically valuable; as a photographer, I try to take pictures that are visually compelling. I believe that this type of photography is the best tool for improving people's perception of reptiles and amphibians, while it opens a window for knowing them in detail and to conserve them for their inherent, ecological and aesthetic value. Either as a research method, or as a hobby, the photography of reptiles and

amphibians is for me a highly productive and gratifying activity. A little about me: I'm a biology student at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador; an institution in which I have worked as photographer and researcher. Even before that, I have been interested by nature photography and, above all, by Ecuador's astounding diversity. In particular, the diversity I have long considered most attractive and most in-need-of-conservation: reptiles and amphibians. It is my intention to work within both areas, art and science, in order to help conservation efforts as a biologist and to divulge information as a photographer. For some years now, I have successfully been using Canon digital SLR camera bodies (including the 7d, my current workhorse) and mainly Canon's 100mm f/2.8 Macro, which I consider the best lens for herpetography. The second lens I use most is the Sigma 15mm f/2.8 fisheye, which creates fantastic wide angle-macro shots in which the subject is portrayed in its environment. For the lighting, I use Canon's 430EX speedlite; for stability, any tripod with ground-level capabilities.



Enchanting Ecuador

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Northern Glass Frog

(*Hyalinobatrachium fleischmanni*), 13/11/02 | Ecuador, Esmeraldas, La Concordia
Canon EOS 7d | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/50 f/8 | ISO 400 | Tripod | Flash

I spent at least 2 hours trying to photograph this frog from the best angle, which in this species is logically from below. (1)

Shooting this glassfrog from below was tricky. It first involved getting a thin, clean glass; then, using two diffused flashes from the sides, and finally, to angle the glass so reflections would be minimized. (2)

Condor Glass Frog

(*Centrolene condor*), 23/11/10 | Ecuador, Pichincha, Quito - Facilities of the Life Raft for Frogs
Canon EOS 7d | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/125 f/14 | ISO 250 | Strobes

Ever since I saw my first glass frog, I've always wanted to portray one below and lit from behind. I have long considered this the ultimate glass frog picture, as these creatures are translucent. The shot was anything but easy. It was taken in a studio, with two strobes lighting the frog from behind, positioned to each side. An assistant held a thin, clean glass diagonally on top of a black velvet backdrop, so the frog was resting on it during the shoot. (3)

Giant Glass Frog (*Nymphargus grandisonae*)

| 23/11/09 | Ecuador, Pichincha, Rio Guajalito Protected Forest
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/200 f/16 | ISO 100 | Flash

Having long heard about glass frogs, those enigmatic, translucent inhabitants of remote forests, it had always been my dream to find one. I then decided to visit a poorly-known cloud forest in the eastern slopes of the Ecuadorian Andes, in order to search for the famous glass frogs. I was alone, with my headlamp, my field notebook and my camera, surrounded by dense cloud forest. Then I saw it: posing there on a leaf, right next to a stream, just as I imagined. For a moment, I stared at the frog, then I grabbed my camera, my off-camera flash and took as many pictures as I could. The encounter lasted just a few minutes before the frog disappeared in the vegetation. I just couldn't believe it: I had seen a glass frog! moreover, I had grabbed a decent picture of it! I was thrilled.





Bridled Forest Gecko (*Gonatodes humeralis*)

| 04/05/10 | Ecuador, Napo, Archidona | Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/60 f/16 | ISO 100 | tripod

I faced two difficulties when making this picture: first, the light was dim; and second, the leaf was swaying in the wind.

To overcome these two problems I used a tripod, set the camera on self-timer and held the leaf still with my free hands. (1)

Turniptail Gecko (*Thecadactylus rapicauda*)

| 09/07/10 | Ecuador, Esmeraldas, Caimito | Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/200 f/16 | ISO 100 | flash

I love silhouettes, but I must admit I've had a hard time with this technique. Not in this case though, as I just found a perfect subject, this large, opaque gecko, and a semi-translucent, fibrous leaf-sheath. (2)

Emerald Glassfrog (*Espadarana prosoblepon*)

| 05/11/01 | Ecuador, Sto. Domingo de los Colorados, Tinalandia Lodge

| Canon EOS 7d | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/200 f/16 | ISO 100 | Flash

This pair of glassfrogs were found foraging on riparian vegetation during a warm night.

Using an off-camera flash held behind the leaf made it possible to render them as silhouettes in the picture. (3)

Convict Treefrog

(Hypsiboas calcaratus) 01/11/08 |

Ecuador, Morona Santiago, Limón

Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8

Macro | 1/250 f/8 | ISO 400 | handheld

Most often than not, I try to keep my subject's eyes in focus. This shot was no exception: by placing my camera so the focusing plane was aligned with the frog's eyes, I managed to focus on them sharply.



Convict Treefrog

(Hypsiboas calcaratus)

| 01/11/10 | Ecuador, Morona Santiago, Limón

Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro |

1/125 f/3.5 | ISO 400 | Handheld

Nocturnal frogs, such as this one, are rarely found during the day. However, it may be quite rewarding to capture them until the next day. In this case, the frog was kept moist inside a collecting container until the next morning. Then it was photographed under soft, early-morning light.

Emerald Glass Frog

(Espadarana prosoblepon) | 08/08/10 | Ecuador, Pichincha, Mindo

Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/200 f/14 | ISO 100 | Flash

Glass frogs are on the top of my photography list during every outing. Most often than not, I come back home empty-handed; quite unusually, I find only one; very rarely one, then another.

Only once in my life, I've found two, together on the same branch. As always, I became enchanted by their beauty before I got my camera and off-camera flash out of my bag.

It was pitch black, right besides a cold-water stream in a cloud forest, all I had to achieve focus was my headlamp; which quite conveniently frees my hands to hold my photographic equipment.





Palmar Treefrog (*Hypsiboas pellucens*)

| 09/07/10 | Ecuador, Pichincha, Mindo | Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/100 f/4 | ISO 400 | tripod, flash

This green, big-eyed frog wasn't sitting right on top of the *Heliconia* inflorescence when I found it. It actually was some meters away from it, on a green leaf. I thought that moving the frog to the bright red perch would be much more visually compelling, as both colors contrast quite nicely.

Pinocchio Rain-Peeper

(*Pristimantis appendiculatus*)

| 08/11/10 | Ecuador,
Pichincha, Rio Guajalito
Protected Forest
Canon EOS Digital Rebel
Xti | 100mm f/2.8
Macro | 1/200 f/13
| ISO 100 | flash

Once I saw this odd-looking amphibian, I knew I had to photograph it in profile.

I wanted to make that conical tubercle on the snout, plus those on the eyelids, stand out against a black background.

This was not difficult to achieve, given it was photographed during night using a single off-camera flash.





Neotropical Green Anole (*Anolis biporcatus*)

| 05/08/10 | Ecuador, Esmeraldas, Caimito
 Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/200 f/16
 | ISO 100 | flash

Two techniques allowed me to capture this flash shot without the typical flat appearance. One, I used the speedlite off-camera; and second, I attached a large diffuser in front of the flash unit, in order to achieve a softer light. (1)

Amazonian Poison Frog (*Dendrobates ventrimaculatus*)

| 27/06/10 | Ecuador, Pastaza, San Juan de Piatúa
 Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/5 f/16 |
 ISO 100 | tripod, flash

The challenge with this frog was to avoid touching it, and yet, prevent it from escaping. I achieved this by using a plastic bag as a glove, so I would not have to deal with its toxic skin secretions. (2)



Peter's Leaf-toed Gecko

(Phyllodactylus reissii) | 27/05/10 | Ecuador, Manabí, Alandaluz
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro
| 1/200 f/16 | ISO 100 | flash

Most geckos are nocturnal creatures. By using a flash to light only the foreground, I managed to create a black background that gives a sense of nocturnality to the shot.



Brown Sipo

(Chironius fuscus)
| 27/06/10 | Ecuador,
Pastaza, San Juan de Piatúa
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti |
100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/200
f/16 | ISO 100 | flash

Quick and aggressive. That's how I'd describe this snake. To get my picture, I had to overcome these two aspects of the behavior of this bad-tempered snake. What I did was to have an assistant distract the snake and hold the flash while I approached the subject from the side. I still was very nervous, I admit.



Pale Rain-Peeper

(Pristimantis eugeniae)
| 29/10/10 | Ecuador,
Pichincha, Las Galarias Reserve
Canon EOS 7d | 100mm f/2.8
Macro | 1/40 f/9
| ISO 320 | tripod | flash

From the start, I knew this strange amphibian gathering deserved its own creative technique: I combined the dim available light with a tiny dose of flash. In order to keep my camera steady, I used a tripod; to get a background that was really black, I placed a black velvet behind the frogs.





Eyelash Palm Viper

(Bothriechis schlegelii)

| 27/06/10 | Ecuador, Esmeraldas, Unknown locality

Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro |

1/200 f/20 | ISO 100 | flash

I was kind of trembling when I took this picture. The subject is one of Ecuador's most dangerous snakes, and I knew it right. I used the 100 mm lens, but I would have been much more confident using a 180 mm macro. With that working distance, a close-up portrait like this would have been far less risky.

Gummy Rain-Peeper

*(Pristimantis riveti) | 29/10/10 | Ecuador, Cañar, Mazar Reserve
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro |
1/100 f/8 | ISO 100 | tripod | flash*

Very rarely, I spend less than 15 minutes shooting a frog (unless it escapes). In this case though, the frog was very chilled-out and just stayed still for enough time to allow me to set up my photo equipment and grab the shot I wanted.



San Lucas Marsupial Frog

*(Gastrotheca pseustes) | 05/06/10 | Ecuador, Cañar, Mazar Reserve
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro |
1/200 f/3.5 | ISO 200 | Handheld*

Here's a shot made with nothing but soft, overcast light. I just chose a low f/stop and lay on the ground to improve stability. The situation suggested a vertical composition, as it shows the frog in its microhabitat.

Graceful Snail-eater

(Dipsas gracilis)

| 09/07/10 | Ecuador,
Esmeraldas, Caimito
Canon EOS Digital Rebel
Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro
| 1/200 f/18 | ISO 100
| tripod | flash

Grabbing a shot of a snake while it sticks its tongue out is not an easy trick.

What I did in this case was to place the camera on a tripod, set it on self-timer, and wiggle my hand right in front of the snake's snout.

Every time I did this, the snake felt the air-borne particles of my hand and stuck its tongue out.



Yellow-flecked Sipo

(Chironius flavopictus) | 13/11/02 | Ecuador, Esmeraldas, La Concordia
Canon EOS 7d | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/400 f/4.5 | ISO 400 | Flash

Shooting this snake was certainly one of the most defiant photographic tasks I've ever faced. Other than being fast and jittery, it was extremely aggressive, to the point it bit my hand and then disappeared in the vegetation.





Cuenca Nelson Frog

(Nelsonophryne aequatorialis)
|05/10/08|Ecuador, Azuay, Cuenca
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti
| 100mm f/2.8 Macro
| 1/8 f/10 | ISO 800 | tripod

I remember struggling to get this shot: first, the frog would just not stay still; second, the light was very dim; third, I had no flash; and fourth, it was very windy.

All of these were ingredients for a blurry photo. For about two hours I failed to get a sharp picture. I felt frustrated... until I grabbed this shot, the only decently sharp one among nearly 100 shots. For me, the solution was to keep shooting in order to improve the chances to get a keeper. Additionally, I raised the ISO to get a slightly higher shutter speed while maintaining an adequate f/stop to cover the entire scene.

Brown Debris Snake

(Coniophanes fissidens)

|09/07/10|Ecuador, Esmeraldas, Caimito
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm
f/2.8 Macro | 1/60 f/7.1
| ISO 100 | tripod

Being terrestrial and diurnal,
this snake suggested
a ground-level perspective.

To achieve this, I placed my camera
on the ground, on top of a cloth.

This way, I achieved the lowest
possible shooting angle.



Banded Cat-eyed Snake

(Leptodeira annulata) | 27/06/10 | Ecuador, Pastaza, San Juan de Piatúa
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/3 f/5
| ISO 100 | tripod | flash

I already felt like I had grabbed the picture I wanted when a stingless bee landed on the snout of the snake. Sometimes, a second element adds an interesting touch to the final image.



Stubfoot Toad

(Atelopus sp. nov.) | 15/06/10 | Ecuador, Morona Santiago, Centro Shuar el Tiink
Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/8 f/8 | ISO 100 | tripod | flash

This critically endangered species was photographed in a stream. The shot in this circumstance was tricky, given that I had to be partly submerged in cold water. Plus, I did not want to use the flash alone, as it reflected too much on the skin of the wet toad. Using the tripod was difficult as well, as it was submerged in water, and shaking.



Amazon Wood Lizard

(Enyalioides laticeps) | 27/06/10 | Ecuador, Pastaza, San Juan de Piatúa

Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xti | 100mm f/2.8 Macro | 1/200 f/16 | ISO 100 | flash

This lizard was found sleeping on a horizontal branch at night time.

In this circumstance, I approached it and woke him up with the flash of the test-shot.

As soon as I did this, it opened its eyes and allowed me to get a second capture.