

Rancho Mastatal Updates

February 2007

Rancho Mastatal UPDATE for the month of FEBRUARY 2007. The first few days of March brought us some refreshing, glorious, and badly-needed rains, the first that we'd received in over six weeks, the longest period that we can remember being without rain in Mastatal. The thirsty earth voraciously gulped down the water, filling in the cracks that had appeared over the course of the last few dry weeks. The reddish dust that seems to cover everything this time of year was washed away from every leaf revealing vibrant shades of green everywhere. The yellowed grass started sprouting new green shoots literally overnight. Everything is alive once again. We hope not to have to wait as long for our next rains.



Another unbelievable denizen of the Costa Rican rainforest - a giant grasshopper

Two high school group visits, one from just outside of Portland, ME and the other from Wappinger Falls, NY highlighted the month of February at the Ranch. These were the first groups that we had received from either of these schools and both programs, in our view, were a great success. We hope to continue to work with both institutions in the coming years. We'd like to thank Jake and Carrie from the Cape Elizabeth High School and Goldy and Owen from the Randolph School for being such great leaders on their respective trips. We'll be looking forward to speak with you in the near future and we hope that we can visit you in the fall.

All of our projects continue to move forward as we watch our busiest months go by. We recently said sad goodbyes to GEOFF, SPARKY, EMILY, DAVE, ANDREA, ANNA and MARIA and will soon be bidding adieu to some of our other amazing long-terms. The coming and going of so many friends throughout the year is definitely one of the real challenges associated with what we do here at the Ranch. We can't fret too much though, knowing that we'll be seeing many of you in the fall and then again back here in Mastatal in the not-too-distant future. Enjoy and see you again soon. The Conservation Report will return next month.

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RM Program News: Electric Bike Revolution

Mastatal to San Miguel in fifteen minutes at high noon without sweating. Yes, the dream has become a reality. Thanks to IAN WOOFENDEN and CHRISTOPHER FREITAS and this year's SEI crew, the Rancho now has an electric bike. What started life as a simple and unimposing Trek 3500 has been transformed into a fearsome 36-volt monster that bested the field at the first annual Mastatal Hill Climb. The beast features a 36-volt motor mounted in the hub of the front wheel, wired to three 12-volt sealed lead-acid batteries and a controller that are mounted in wooden pannier-style boxes on a custom-made rear pannier rack (the original store rack lasted about fifteen minutes under the weight of the batteries). After some beefing up of some of the wires to handle the hill to Leo's, it's now fully road-ready and available for runs to the phone, local errands (such as fetching Robin from the soccer field) or just to get some breeze in your hair on a hot day. There is a small charge for use, for both Ranch folks and Ticos, which will go towards purchasing another electric bike.

Building Report: New Hankey Entrance

There once was a man named Hankey, who built a wondrous house of teak and cob and cedar and other good things, to house the good and gentle volunteers of the Ranch. As the folk songs of Puriscal attest, his feats of construction were Herculean given the scant six months he worked . . . but one feature remained to be completed. Unless you were El Grande or an Olympic gymnast, it was a challenge to get in and out of the Casa de Hankey. A gangplank resting on an old log and a sawhorse was rigged up to permit entry and exit, and volunteers began to happily inhabit the Hank in early January. It was decided that an entrance worthy to be attached to the Splendour (note British spelling) that is the Hankey House should be built post-haste.



Designs were commenced, ideas were floated, Imperials were consumed. Sadly, the stand of bamboo on the Hooch side of the house was uprooted by a storm in December – but we were determined to make sweet, organic lemonade out of this bitter lemon of de-vegetation. The silver lining was that it opened up the space to a more expansive deck design for the entrance.

After a few drafts and conversations with volunteers and Timo and Robin, a working design was put together, and the entrance crew started to get its act together after the big Jaco Super Bowl Susio-fest and the bed-making workshop with a group of volunteers in mid-February. The game plan was to construct a four foot-wide walkway that extended from grade near the trail to the downhill side of the house. From the threshold of the Hankey a set of steps would take you down to a transitional deck, in the corner of which a short elevated walkway would take you out to an octagonal/leaf-shaped concoction jutting out over the forest below. This deck would be big enough

to accommodate three to four folks totally committed to hanging out, serving as a kind of set-off living room for people living in the Hankey, where someone could sneak away to read, play cards or write obscene song lyrics for the next group roast.

Step one on the road to deck-hood was to put the hurtin' on the bamboo root ball sitting defiantly right where we wanted to build. A determined group (actually just Nate and Geoff) set to it one fine morning with implements of destruction, and battle was joined. More folks were called in, and the damn thing eventually succumbed to machetes, pickaxes, spades and the innovative "bust up the roots and roll it down hill" technique. It should be noted that Nate and Geoff sacrificed the body for the greater goal – they developed nasty rashes that everyone suspected was caused by the green bamboo. We hope that its roots will take on another part of the hillside and a new stand will emerge in the coming years.

Full body rashes are not an auspicious beginning to any building project, but we pushed onward. Our roof post and rafter structure was to be made of teak. Our joist framing plans originally called for use of the same hardwood used for joists in the Hankey house. Timo advocated the use of teak instead, which made sense for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the abundance of teak up at Leo's property available for use, its strength and density, and the scarcity of other local hardwoods. Teak is a non-native species that has been planted widely in this area, and its secretions prevent other species of trees from growing in the understory. It grows relatively straight and wide and has been used in several Ranch structures.

We've done several teak runs over the last couple months, and several volunteers and staff have pitched in on stripping the green logs. The barn had a lot of teak begging to be used. So we framed the walkway and transitional deck structures out of teak, which involved a whole lot of "flattening" – creating at least one flat side on the round log with various and sundry tools: the circular saw (ornery until a new blade was put on, and then only slightly recalcitrant), the chainsaw (unwieldy...like swatting a fly with a sledgehammer), the drawknife (quiet and meditative but time-consuming), kerfing with a saw and knocking out the pieces with a broken off machete (or as Greg calls it, the "Tico chisel), the power planer (almost felt like cheating, and makes a sound that's a cross between a busy go-kart track and cicadas on methamphetamines). In short we flattened a bunch of teak and cut some stub tenons on our joist pieces, and small notched mortises on our girders, put it all together with some teak posts and started putting some cedar decking on it. Just the other day Keith and Amanda put up the rafters for the shed roof to cover the first deck, and we poured the concrete footers for the octagonal deck that will be framed up soon. (Note: we haven't decided on a name for this beast. Candidates thus far: the Pankey, El Galleon, the Hoochankey. Please send suggestions.)

It's been a blast working a lot of different people on this project: Chris, Keith, Amanda, Mike, Erin, Nate, Geoff, Timo, Robin, Alan, Ryan, Rachel, students from the Randolph School, students from the Villanova group, Gilbert, Alex, Caraca, among others. Working in the great outdoors (even in the convection oven that is the Hankey hillside until 2 pm), pausing to watch the occasional toucan above, stealing each other's tools,

putting together wood in different ways, problem-solving and troubleshooting and invoking Uncle Larry with frequency and reverence – what more could one want out of life?

It's a good start to creating an entrance worthy of the Hank. The funkiest framing remains to be done. It will require pluck and courage and a steady supply of beer. The goal? An entrance of the volunteers, by the volunteers, for the volunteers. Because remember: a flute without holes is still a flute, but a house without an entrance is like a donut. And a donut with a hole is a Danish. And how can you get inside a Danish? What?

Jon Mingle

Volunteer/Guest Gossip: And Now... An A Smith Original Song written at El Rancho

(Email Alan for chords and with questions about the melody)

El Pescadors de Puntarenas

On the Peninsula of Puntarenas, she ate Ceviche and smoked cigars
With a peg-legged pescador, while her lover waited for the time to
pass
That night bed bugs crawled up his shorts, in the room behind Marie's
bodega,
After a night of drinkin', con el pescadors de Puntarenas.

Like all their fights, it made no sense, but he left with his bags at
3 AM,
Escorted by vicious dogs, down the road of fish heads and tin shacks.
Sleepin' on a bench, near the ferry, a drunkard picked his pocket
And woke that gringo, who kicked that Tico, and yelled,
"Fuera! Borracho Pescador"

She met him in Tambor the next day. They swam naked and made love in
whale bay
Around the bend, a gypsy from Puntarenas, orchestrated dragonflies at
dusk
Majestic waves brought colorful jingling rocks, to silver sands,
beneath magenta cliffs
That gypsy said its ok to pass, and cast a spell on her with transient
eyes
The bars close on Semana Santa, so they drank with Rasta Nicos
And danced to Otis Redding, at a dead end fishing hub in Port Limon.
Brought there by El Brujo who fished cocaine out the Caribbean
And did 15 years for shootin a pescador en Punta-re-ay-nes
Hours after robbing abaaaank

Community Facts/Stories: A Pilgrimage to Handcrafted Guitars

The lists were written and translated into Spanish. Six of us volunteers (Nate, Dave, Christopher, Heather, Alan, and Sparky) were to drive into Puriscal to check for a few `important' pending emails, grab some lunch at Dona Tona's, cool down with a couple Imperiales at Bico's Bar, and of course, run some errands for the Ranch. It almost sounds like a chore, but the idea of running errands has actually never been so appealing. One list for the grocery store, one for the hardware store, one for the various bills that needed to be paid throughout town, and one for the random (sometimes impossible) leftovers that



photo by A.J. Calomay

often take some serious searching. All lists extensive; some lists intimidating. We huddled up and proceeded to create a map in the dirt, erecting buildings out of small stones and laying roads with a simple drag of the finger. After deciding on teams, positioning, and a rendezvous point and time, we attacked those lists. We were on a mission. It's a great way to get to know the town and get some serious Spanish language practice. Within a couple hours, the truck was packed full of almost every item on the list, and the bills were all paid. Mission complete (quite painlessly).

That efficiency left the afternoon completely free in the big city. I say `big city' only because Puriscal is much larger than Mastatal. In reality, it is more of a sizeable transition town between San Jose (the true `big city') and rural Costa Rica. Alan wanted a new guitar and knew of a man in Puriscal who makes them. He asked me to go to the man's house with him to translate. Obviously, Alan thought he would end up with a grand piano or fancy tambourine if he tried this mini-mission on his own.

We grunted our way up the hill and strolled past about two hundred sodas and small bars within the distance of five blocks. "Sparky, I really love this town," Alan said as we passed the first bar and then a soda. Cue more conversation about guitars, life, love, and everything in between. Another soda. "Sparky, I really love this town." Feel free to copy the previous three sentences and paste them repeatedly here. Eventually, we came upon a small sign that read `Guitarras Misael Badilla 175 Est.' To the left, a small road winds past numberless houses and fenced-in yards with furious dogs (complete with foaming mouths) that size up to nothing larger than my Nalgene. We stopped at a house that Alan knew to be Misael's based on a visit from the year before. "Hola! Hello? Misael?" Repeat ten times as yet another wannabe mini doberman yipped and attempted some tough barks while hopping back and forth from hind limbs to front and back again as if trying to land a part in Breakin' 2. A beautiful young lady finally answered Alan's calls and perhaps invaded his dreams. It was the wrong house, but she was able to point us in the right direction. I picked Alan's jaw up from the road, locked it back onto his face, and we made our way down another unmarked street. A high school student helped us find the final turn, which took us down a tiny gravel path (apparently a driveway for four different properties).

At the end of the path is a house that sits apart from the others, which seem to rest on top of each other. "Hola!" This time the call was answered immediately. We were welcomed in and asked to take a seat. Misael introduced us to his family, and the dialogue began for a new guitar. He showed us his most recent creations, two beautifully crafted classical guitars made of cedar. Similar to the Ranch, Misael uses readily available local woods and materials (although he can go nuts with just about any type of wood one wants for a higher fee). After tuning the guitars to each other, he led me through four chords and into a little jam session. Alan recognized the tune as Blue Moon and added vocals to the mix. They say music can bring people together. It felt pretty damn good to me, and I know Al was lovin' every second. Everyone in the room had a smile on his or her face stretching ear to ear. Like all songs, it had to come to an end. Then, it was back to business. After showing off the ridiculously amazing guitar he made for his two children, Misael took us into his shop (which is about as complex as our own woodshop in front of Jeanne's) and showed us the templates that hang on the wall.

After some lengthy discussion and weighing numerous options, Alan decided on the guitar that he wanted built: a black, left-handed, classical cedar guitar with a small rounded cut just below the 12th fret, a single-sided head (all tuning knobs on top... sorry for my lack of guit-box lingo), a slightly smaller neck than usual, and, here's the kicker, it will be an electric acoustic. All this for 100,000 colones (about two-hundred American dollars). In just one month's time, Al will be the proud owner of a beautiful piece of local art (one he can actually use) custom-made just for him. We all know that A. Smith is ready. Keep your ears open. Once he gets that amp, you'll be sure to hear Starboard Cork (Canta No Llore) from miles away. I guess some songs never do come to an end.

If anyone would like one of these amazing *guitarras*, you should come visit and meet the wonderful Misael Badilla Vargas in person. It is well worth it. He can also be reached at 011-506-416-49-92 (Spanish spoken only).

F?tbl Follies: Galacticos Dazzle in 2007 Debut

After an excessive long hiatus, *Los Galacticos* took the field again last week in San Vicente. It was the first light the gold and black jerseys had seen in months, but boy did they shine. Traveling without captain ALEX, senior defensemen JUAN LUIS and other veteran players, Mastatal rounded up some seasoned help from the Ranch. For TIMOTEO it was his first true appearance since his eye operation in October, though Robin's pleas to not head the ball received mixed results. Filling in the large void in the midfield was none other than *EL GRANDULON*, whose awesome size provoked some suspicious comments from the opposing striker as to his ability to play. Grande certainly did not take long to prove him wrong. Off on the wing *TIBURON* used his white lightning tacos to blind his opponents as he moved the ball up front to the gringo duo of *BRUJITA* and OWEN. But after a first half full of prime opportunities and excellent ball movement, the Galactico strikers were still without a goal.

From the opening whistle play was mostly dominated by the Mastatal offense, backed by a steadfast first half performance from CARACA in net. After the break MARCOS switched in and continued the shutout well into the second half. The Galacticos took advantage up front with two

crosses from Tyler on the left wing which resulted in pretty goals from Caraca and first-timer CHRIS, who had replaced valiant Owen, a young man on the verge of heat stroke having arrived in the country less than twenty-four hours prior to gametime. The match was later sealed with a nice combo between acting captain JUNIOR and CARACA, and after an own-goal by the young Galactico defense, the final score was 3-1. With lots of positive support from the sidelines, great food and drink, and a high caliber of play on the field, twas a solid first outing overall for 2007, which will hopefully spill over into future matchups. Stay tuned for results from March madness, which is poised to feature games, dancing and plenty of horsing around in San Miguel over St. Patty's Day weekend. Look out...

Golazos all around,

Brujita



Guaria Morada - the Purple Country Girl
photo by Desa

Inspirational Impressions: Vernal Equinox

Lord of the springtime, Father of flower, field and fruit, smile on us in these earnest days when the work is heavy and the toil wearisome, lift up our hearts, O God, to the thing worthwhile – sunshine and night, the dripping rain, the song of the birds, books and music, and the voices of our friends. Lift up our hearts to these this night and grant us Thy peace. Amen

---- W.E.B. Du Bois

Abrazos,

The Ranch Crew