

Rancho Mastatal Updates

December 2005

Well, we're off to the races once again. Or is it that we're always running some kind of race here in Mastatal? We're currently hosting one of our favorite groups of the year, the instructors and students of our annual Wilderness First Responder Certification Course with Aerie School for Backcountry Medicine. The group, as usual, is made up of an assortment of fascinating, motivated, and considerate folks. It's a delight to have DAVE, ANDREA, MARIA and ANNA MCEVOY with us for another elongated stay. We're honored to call them friends. For anyone reading this that spends time in the backcountry, anywhere in the world, we could not recommend this course to you enough. Dave offers the program year-round and has put together one of the most impressive curriculum's of its kind. For more information about wilderness first aid, first response, and EMT training, check out his great website at www.aeriemed.com. Volunteers DESA VANLAARHOVEN and JEREMIAH EANES, both of whom will find themselves in future situations where this kind of training could come in handy, are shrewdly taking advantage of this offering to get certified while in Mastatal. GEOFF KINDER and ROGER are also taking advantage of a wonderful opportunity to get their WFR recertifications with Dave. It's heartwarming and exciting when everything comes together so well for everyone like this. There's a synergy that tends to permeate this place. In addition to Desa and Jeremiah, twelve other North American and Costa Rican individuals are getting certified during this intensive 72-hour course including FRANKIE MORA, a young, local Mastatal guide who is receiving a full-paid scholarship to participate. To date he's been super enthusiastic about the material and will have his first opportunity to put his new training to use (though hopefully not) when taking the class on an amazing hot springs/river float/waterfall tour, a one-of-a-kind trip offered only through Frankie and his little yet growing guide company. The WFR Course will segue into our yearly renewable energy course with Solar Energy International. We're looking forward to see IAN and his clan once again. We'll be making more solar cookers, installing another biodigester in town, and setting up a small solar installation at the "choza". Besides bringing his beautiful self back to Mastatal, Roger was also bearing North Pole quality gifts for many in the community and at the Ranch, including a DVD that he produced of a collage of music and photos from Mastatal and the Ranch from 2005. It was one of the greatest gifts that anyone has ever bestowed upon us and instigated a flood of unstoppable tears on the first occasion that I watched it. It was beautifully done and an inspirational reminder of everything that gets accomplished here by so many incredibly special people each year. Thanks again Rog. I'm doubtful I could express my gratitude



A tree frog at night

photo by Claudio Pinzauti

enough. Our projects are marching forward as we hit our stride in 2006. It will be another incredible year. Come down and see what we're doing and how we're getting on. Lots of love to you all.

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RM Program News: Summer Camp

The local youths have finished up another year of school and are now enjoying their summer vacation. It's a time that we all looked forward to as kids. No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks. Oddly enough, many of us liked going to summer camp where education was often a focus. It may have been hidden under the cover of various entertaining activities, but the agenda was there somewhere under all of the fun. We just didn't realize it at the time because we were actually enjoying it.

VERONIQUE, a volunteer here at the Ranch, has spearheaded a new community project here in Mastatal. Most of the youths in town don't have the resources to go spend their vacations in another place, and there are no organized events here to bring them together. Instead, many of them spend their time at home. Because of Vero's initiative, they now have the opportunity to hang out with their buddies and attend a summer camp a few days a week. And here is the kicker... they are learning throughout the entire thing!

Attendance and participation have surpassed our expectations, and the camp is running smoothly. The youngsters are having fun playing games, singing songs, cooking delicious desserts in the new community cob oven, swimming, hiking, and doing arts and crafts (just to name a few of the many activities that Vero and her crew of eager volunteers have come up with).

This is the first time we have ever seen any kind of supervised and organized activity that brings our community's youths together regularly during their vacation. We expect that it gives their parents some extra quiet time. Perhaps more importantly, we have seen it bring smiles to the faces of our young friends who now have something to really look forward to during their time off from school. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Veronique for her initiative and effort to make this great summer camp become a reality.

Brian "Sparky" O'Rourke

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Conservation Update: Pico, Pico de Gallo: Saving a Stray Dog

About a half year ago, another stray dog appeared on the streets of Mastatal. Emaciated to the bone

and covered in scars and wounds, he wandered from house to house in search of food. Occasionally, his desperation would bring him through the front gate at the main house. This appearance would bring on collaborative shouts from gringos gathered on the front porch, and he would turn to flee. We couldn't help but feel bad with every syllable screamed. We knew the rule though: no more dogs.

Still determined and becoming more and more curious with each visit, this Scooby-Doo look-a-like would not disappear. Robin wanted someone to drop him off in another town, and some visitors almost did so. Pulperia regulars, including some volunteers and students, began "accidentally" dropping potato chips and pseudo-Fritos to the floor. This was enough to keep him at a close enough proximity to smell the delicious meals being cooked at the Ranch.

"Hey guys, mind if I just get a little taste? Can I just hang out for a little while? Don't you want to let me in and keep me?" These were just some of the questions that he was asking through the inquisitive look that seemed to define him. Robin was relentless in her mission to rid the town of such a large mutt, but Timo was becoming partial to him. In a rushed attempt at making him seem more like a friend worth having around, I named him "Pico de Gallo" after the Mexican salsa. The pressure was building, and everyone was jumping on the "Save Pico" bandwagon.

Eventually, there came a day when Robin had the entire place to herself. She would finally be able to get rid of him on her own terms. He appeared with one ear standing, with the other one flopped over, and with a face covered in slobbering drool. Robin thought he was the most pathetic-looking creature since Mangey first appeared. Unlike Mangey, he also had potential to be a very good-looking dog. Her heart was filled with pity. "Come here Pico," she said as she placed some food in front of him.

From that moment, it didn't take long for Pico to become part of the family. It took a little bit of work and temporarily increased many of our stress levels (as he wolfed down our cakes and uncooked breads), but he is now the huggable brother of Rancho Mastatal. Our days simply are not complete without hearing Pico's vocal impressions of Chewbacca, seeing the bear-face that he wears on his backside, wondering how his balls can actually be that big (and debating when to take him to get them chopped off), and seeing the take-off of his red-rocket. On top of that, the pity that was once in Robin's heart has turned into love, and everyone is on board the "We Love Pico" bandwagon.

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Building Report: The Hankey House

"The foundations have been laid and preparations have been made... it's a great day for building!"

The afternoon rain has just started chucking it down, I'm safe under the shelter of the main house's back porch, but I'm picturing the footing holes that we sweated over all morning, filling up or caving in under the wash of the tropical downpour. We shall discover the damage tomorrow morning...

The most recent building project at the Ranch is now in full flow. Work got started about three weeks ago when, after a short period of finding my feet, I got a chance to corner Tim and Robin and propose designing (and heading up the building of) a new long-term volunteer house. I think they were all glad I was so enthusiastic and motivated, but also a little nervous that I wasn't biting off more than I could chew! I assured them I was in for the long haul and started to put pen to paper... or should I say pencil to sketchbook. I designed two different structures, one for each of the possible sites, and then opened up a brainstorming session to choose a structure/site. After a great bouncing around of ideas, the decision was taken to go ahead with the one closest to the main cluster of buildings. The south-facing, sloping site is nestled in a patch of forest near the Hooch (the Ranch's recently completed bamboo tree house). It was a closely fought battle between the two proposals. Although the amazing views from the first house were hard to brush aside, easy access to water and electricity and more of a community orientated site (being next to the majority of the accommodation) made the second building the obvious choice.

The Hankey House (which started as a temporary name but seems to have stuck) is essentially a post and beam, wood frame structure. From a side view, it takes inspiration from the 'V-shaped' design of the Hooch, but has a rectangular footprint. Designed to take advantage of the slope that it is situated on, it projects from almost nothing (at the top of the slope near the path), high into the treetops. By stepping the ground floor and starting the first floor half way into the building, the structure can be 'sunk' into the slope and its effective roof-height greatly reduced. The angled posts at the front (downslope) of the building concentrate the foundations on a gentler slope uphill, while enabling the building to lean out into the forest. Counterbalanced balconies are suspended high above the ground and will give the Hankey House a very open, at-one-with-the-forest feel. The only walls will be toward the back of the house: a curved cob wall will dig back into the slope and seamlessly morph into wattle and daub on the sides. These will help with the building's thermal mass and give privacy to the bedrooms. Otherwise, the structure is an almost entirely open plan, leaving the Teak-post framework exposed and natural as if they were still part of the surrounding forest.

Having only recently started to pour the foundations, it's obviously just the start of the project... There'll probably be a little blood, undoubtedly loads of sweat and quite possibly a few tears to come, but I'm looking forward to the adventure. It's a great pleasure (apart from the odd dream-filled night and my incessant sleep-talking, which is the cause of great embarrassment) to be leading the building team and an honor to have it named after me.

Robert Hankey

Volunteer/Guest Gossip: Getting In Sync for the New Year

I think Lindsey said it best when she cried out, "No! I can't show you that!" Clearly, this one of many instances of her sleep-talking could be attributed to pre-lip sync anxiety, also known as stage fright. And who could blame her? It's not every day you get to indulge your inner rock-star with a live performance in the guise of Def Leppard, not to mention the added pressure of keeping your new spandex mini-shorts a secret for like four days. Nevertheless, the show went off without a glitch. Well, except for that part when Jake set up the wrong music and proceeded to belligerently, if quasi-good-naturedly berate all the f***ing idiots who couldn't just give him the right f***ing music. But alas, as Sparky always says, "I wanna get with you. And your sister." I mean, "the show

must go on.” And so it did, with inspired performances by all members of the 2005 Rancho Mastatal Christmas family. Thanks to Tim, Robin, Jake, Sparky, Vero, Claudio, Jeremiah, Andrew, Bonnie, Matt, Lindsey, Lori, Stacey, Jeff, Shalom, and, of course, Mangey for making this the first in what is sure to be dazzling future of lip sync contests here at the ranch. Extra special thanks to Desa and Geoff for showing us a Whole New World of gratuitously climactic endings, and to Rob for reminding us what it means to be a woman, or at least what it looks like.

In other news, everyone went to great lengths (i.e., took showers) in efforts to get spruced up for the annual community Christmas dance where we became reacquainted with the dry ice and strobe lights of our not-so-good ole days of high-school dances. The ladies were given ample opportunity to test our newly-acquired but far-from-perfected salsa and merengue skills (for which Junior deserves a shout-out), and even the gringo boys showed off their slick moves. The best thing about all this drunken revelry was that it gave Tim and Robin the perfect opportunity to sneak off into the night, leaving us to stumble/sing all the way home.

Fortunately, Christmas brought not only drinking, dancing, and some no-nonsense ping-pong, but the reappearance of Bonnie and Matt and with them, an onslaught of baked goodies and holiday cheer. Thanks Bonnie, it would have been a shame not to pack on the traditional seasonal pounds this year. Regardless of how we, as individuals, celebrate (or don't) the holidays, it was close to impossible to avoid succumbing to the infectious sing-song spirit brought to us by more festive revelers, and what better family to feel a part of than the one here at Rancho Mastatal.

Admittedly, throughout the month, we had moments in which it was doubtful whether we'd all roll into the New Year unscathed, what with several simultaneous cases of fish poisoning, strained and sprained body parts, Tucker's heat-stroke, and Jeff's loss of footing sending him in the Choza toilet, but we appear to have made it safe and sound, if not a bit emotionally scarred (Jeff), through another beautiful and inspirational, albeit risky, month at your and my favorite place to call home, Rancho Mastatal. The sky is clear, the cicadas are giving us a preview of what's to come (acoustically) in the following month(s), the anticipation is building for Rob's first-of-the-year birthday river trip, and we're preparing to cook up a whole new year's worth of old favorites as well as here-to-for unknown recipes, in the kitchen and beyond...

Stacey

Community Facts/Stories: A Rock-Star Holiday Week

This last stretch of the year so full of holidays that constitute what we like to call “the giving season” has come and gone, and yet we did not present each other with many tangible gifts here at the Ranch. On the contrary, we were out to crush each other in intense battles of ping-pong, Mexican-train dominoes, whiffle ball, and lip-syncing. With all said and done, no hard feelings have been left on the surface. We shook hands, congratulated each other on games well-played, and continued on to the next event or sat and watched the remainder of the one in session. Our version of a Christmas present almost seemed to be wrapping up these competitive feelings inside ourselves only to untie the ribbon in the next game, hopefully revealing a victory. We would learn that it was much, much more.

The ping-pong tournament included sixteen gringos paddling their way toward one of the top three

spots for a chance to play the winners of the tico tourney. Rob came out of the loser's bracket as the number three man to the crowd's cheers and swinging of his signature "Horrible Hankeys." Some consider the idea a rip-off of the Steelers' "Terrible Towel." Timo took the runner-up position as he fought through a number of overtime games on his way to the championship. Geoff remained confident and unrattled throughout the entire thing as he breezed through to an undefeated championship title. One of the largest crowds in the history of the Litterbox, our ping-pong stadium, cheered and jeered through every game with the intensity of Fenway Park during a Yankees' playoff visit. This all led up to the gringo-tico tourney. The two most deserving players, Geoff and Junior, faced off in a monumental international championship in front of another sell-out crowd. In a late rally, Geoff was able to stick it to the local favorite and take home the gold. Congratulations Geoff!

The month's Mexican-Train domino games have been as spirited and as cutthroat as ever, but the veterans have been resolute and steady in their play. Timo, Robin, and Sparky have continued to engineer victories through even the bumpiest of rides.

Another of the holiday gaming highlights was the Whiffle Ball World Series, which would span across Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day. Game one of a best of three series was squeaked out by Matt, Sparky, Robin, Andrew, and Rob with power-hitting, great pitching, and bobbled balls by the inconsistent opposing team's outfield. Game two was consistent on both sides in a high-scoring match that ended in a one-point victory by Geoff, Timo, Desa, Jeremiah, and Jake thanks to great play by the entire team and final-inning heroics by Timo. On a day that shook Mastatal with a small earthquake (5.1 on the Richter Scale), they went on to win the series. It seemed to be a lopsided game three that somehow came down to the last pitch for a struggling batting squad. All in all, it was a memorable Whiffle Series that ended with good feelings from both sides.

The main event occurred after a Christmas Day full of gaming and cooking and a full-fledged pizza dinner. Everyone listed above plus Jeff, Stacey, Lori, Lindsey, Bonnie, Claudio, Vero, and Shalom were about to send shock-waves through the rock world in the first ever Rancho Mastatal Drink 'n' Sync, a lip-syncing contest in which everyone would be a winner. From Bon Jovi to Beck, from Rockin' Robin to A Whole New World, with wardrobe from the eighties and even from the opposite sex, the spotlight shined favorably on every participant and on every lipped syllable, waving mullet, and shaking hip. We laughed hysterically and dropped our jaws in awe and wonder throughout the night. Who needs snow when you have creativity, imagination, and the ability to mock and mimic your favorite rock-stars?

More importantly, who needs winners when we have laughter and good company? Those two things became our gift to each other this holiday season. We didn't have to wrap them up in shiny packages this year because we were creating our gifts together and sharing them with each other, and a stocking is too small to fit all of these new memories.

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Comida Corner: Spicy Popcorn (with garlic-sage butter)

The popcorn on your Christmas tree has gone stale, yellow snow is losing its appeal, and nobody wrapped any of your gifts with edible paper. Maybe it's time to treat yourself with a snack that is certain to spice up the New Year. The *Rebar Modern Food Cookbook* brings us another great gift, perfect for a date with season five of *The Simpsons*.

Ingredients (serves 4 to 6):

½ cup popcorn

¼ cup butter

2 garlic cloves, minced

2 tsp chile powder

2 tsp dried sage leaves, crumbled

1/8 tsp cayenne

½ tsp salt, or more to taste

2 tbsp nutritional yeast (optional)

1. Pop popcorn in a hot-air popper or on the stovetop.
2. Meanwhile, heat butter over very low heat in a small saucepan. Add garlic and simmer the butter and garlic very slowly for a couple of minutes. Add the chile powder, sage, and cayenne and continue to simmer for another minute. By now your popcorn should be popped and warm.
3. Slowly drizzle in the melted butter mix into the popcorn while stirring with the other hand. Scrape any remaining mix into the popcorn with a rubber spatula. Add salt and yeast, if using, and stir everything up thoroughly, so that all of the kernels are well coated. Season to taste and serve right away!

Buen Provecho!

Inspirational Impressions: Just Us Chickens

“With a fellowship of amateurs leading the way, we can depend in the end only on our responsibility to each other. That is all we have. But it is enough. You see, if the game's wide open, if none of us really knows what we're doing, then it might be you who jumps in to save the day. If it's just us chickens, you may be the chicken you've been waiting for.”

-Eli Pariser (director of MoveOn.org as quoted in Orion magazine)]

Abrazos and Happy Holidays,

The Little Elves at the Ranch