



# Monkey memoirs: wild life in an Amazon wilderness, Thomas R. Defler

HuacuPress, 2025, pp. 345, ISBN 9798306783741

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Received: 3 June 2025 / Accepted: 6 June 2025

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Thomas Defler's career in the Colombian Amazon spans nearly half a century. In these memoirs, he takes readers on a remarkable journey through 17 years of life at the Caparú Biological Station in Vaupés, Colombia, where he not only conducted groundbreaking research on multiple primate species but also raised orphaned primates for reintroduction into the wild. The book reaches far beyond field anecdotes to present a profound narrative of scientific dedication under extreme conditions, culminating in a harrowing forced abandonment that paradoxically led to the conservation triumph Defler had long envisioned. Through 16 chapters and an epilogue, the book weaves together intimate animal portraits, pioneering research discoveries, and reflections on conservation in conflict zones, creating both a scientific memoir and a testament to the complex relationships between researchers, local communities, and the primates they study.

The book opens with Defler's arrival in Colombia in 1976 as a Colorado native recruited through a Peace Corps program. His initial naivety is refreshing—he admits to arriving with little Spanish, less understanding of Colombian culture, and an overconfidence that would soon be tempered by reality. Early chapters establish not only the logistical challenges of establishing Caparú but also the extraordinary biodiversity that made the location ideal for long-term primate research. The construction of the station itself, built with indigenous assistance and traditional materials, represents a commitment to integrating research with local knowledge and practices.

What distinguishes this memoir is Defler's willingness to share both triumphs and failures with equal candor. His accounts of stumbling upon cocaine laboratories, negotiating with armed groups, and calculating risks versus scientific

gains provide sobering context. One particularly vivid episode describes his near-fatal encounter with a 2.5-m *Bothrops atrox* snake while collecting fruit samples—a specimen that exceeded published size limits for the species. Yet, these dangers are presented matter-of-factly, as occupational hazards to be managed rather than sensationalized.

The heart of the book lies in Defler's comprehensive work with multiple primate species, extending well beyond the woolly monkeys emphasized in his academic publications. The narrative of Huacú, a tití monkey who lived with the research team for 15 years, provides an emotional through-line that illuminates the profound bonds possible between researchers and their subjects. Defler chronicles her development from a 300-g orphan to a territorial adult who never successfully paired with wild males, having imprinted on her human caregivers. Her eventual death from a neurological condition, after a year-long battle with seizures, forms one of the book's most poignant chapters.

The rehabilitation efforts documented here reveal both successes and sobering failures. While some orphaned primates successfully reintegrated with wild troops, others faced tragic ends. Mafafa, an alpha female woolly monkey, died fleeing from Rojo, a male uakari whose inappropriate attachment to human females led to increasingly violent behavior. The incident where Rojo sank his canines into Defler's throat in a jealous rage over a female student dramatically illustrates the dangers inherent in raising wild primates. These accounts provide essential balance to romanticized notions of wildlife rehabilitation.

Defler's pioneering research contributions emerge through detailed observations of primate behavior and ecology. His development of one of the largest trail systems for primate study—120 km of paths mapping a 760-hectare home range—enabled systematic documentation of woolly monkey feeding ecology and social structure. His innovative techniques, including swimming in flooded forests to observe normally shy uakaris, yielded insights into their

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specialized seed predation strategies and the ecological relationships within the igapó ecosystem.

The book's final chapters deliver its most dramatic content. A 1991 guerrilla robbery, where FARC members terrorized the staff while young woolly monkeys playfully interacted with an armed guard, foreshadows the catastrophic ending. In 1998, guerrillas returned with ultimatum: leave immediately or die. Defler's subsequent 54-h escape down the Apaporis River, swimming and floating while evading pursuit, transforms the narrative from scientific memoir to survival thriller. The psychological toll of abandoning the animals dependent on human care adds profound emotional weight to this already harrowing account.

Yet, the epilogue reveals an unexpected redemption. Angela Maldonado's assumption of caretaking responsibilities ensured many animals' survival, while the 2009 establishment of Parque Nacional Natural Yaigojé-Apaporis fulfilled Defler's decades-long conservation vision. This bittersweet conclusion transforms personal loss into lasting environmental protection.

Defler's writing style remains engaging and accessible throughout, skillfully balancing scientific accuracy with narrative drive. The inclusion of 37 color photographs and hand-drawn animal illustrations and maps helps readers visualize both the studied animals and their environment. His ability to convey the sensory experience of the Amazon while maintaining focus on scientific and conservation themes demonstrates exceptional storytelling skill.

For aspiring field primatologists, this book provides an invaluable reality check that extends beyond the physical challenges to encompass the political and ethical complexities of working in conflict zones. Defler's successful

mentoring of numerous Colombian students, many now leading conservation efforts, adds another dimension to his legacy beyond the research itself.

If there is a criticism, it is that Defler sometimes assumes familiarity with Colombian geography and history that international readers may lack. Additionally, while his detailed accounts of research mishaps and animal management challenges provide essential honesty, some readers might find certain episodes excessively detailed.

"Monkey Memoirs" succeeds in documenting a crucial period in Amazonian primatology while providing hard-won wisdom for future researchers. The book serves multiple purposes: as a scientific record of behavioral observations across multiple primate species, as a practical guide to the realities of wildlife rehabilitation, and as a powerful argument for conservation despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In an era of accelerating habitat destruction and persistent armed conflict in biodiversity hotspots, Defler's memoir stands as both historical record and urgent call to action. Readers will close this book with deep appreciation not only for the remarkable primates of the Amazon but also for the researchers who risk everything to study and protect them, understanding that sometimes the greatest conservation victories emerge from the most devastating personal losses.

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