

Editors note:

Mac is a healthy, vigorous, athletic young man. His difficulty with the terrain was not due to him being out of condition or unfit in any way. Read any first-hand account about foot travel in New Guinea and you will hear all about the bugs, poisonous snakes and plants, stinging vines, sharp rocks and a hundred other things (besides the ever-present malaria mosquito and leeches) that make this island one of the most formidable places on earth to non-natives. This is why the Highland people and the wild dogs remained isolated from the outside world until a mere 50 years ago. The photos are of Mac during his adventure and of the local people and dogs.

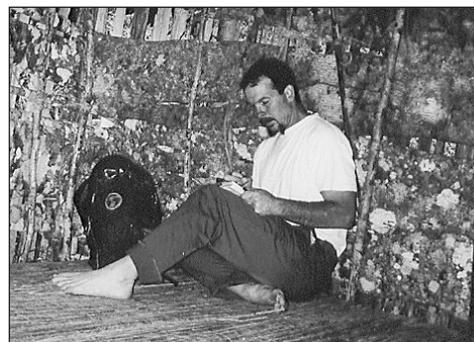
In the summer of 1996, after completing my inter-sexual [hermaphrodite] pig research study on the Islands of Vanuatu in the Southwest Pacific, I, with financial assistance from I. Lehr Brisbin Jr., flew up to Papua New Guinea to re-establish government and university connections, and to proceed up to Mt. Stolle for one month, to attempt to study the New Guinea Singing Dog in its natural habitat.

For a country so rich in natural treasures, it is a shame every visitor's first look must be of the capital city of Port Moresby. Port Moresby is broken down into five separate areas, which require shuttle transportation to get to and from each. The streets are teeming with exhaust-spewing vehicles and unemployed, betel chewing (a nut chewed for its narcotic effect), young men, who have left their Highland villages for the lure of the big city. Safety, especially after nightfall, is indeed a factor.

After spending two chaotic days in Port Moresby, I took a domestic flight to Tabubil in the extreme western Sandaun Province. Tabubil, a town of about 10,000, is a wild outpost created solely to satisfy the needs of the Ok Tedi Mining -

Company, which has been ravaging the remote Star Mountain area for its bounty of gold and copper. In Tabubil, I spoke with Ok Tedi officials who generously (for the cause of conservation) offered me a helicopter ride to Mt. Stolle and the Mekil research facility. The catch was, at \$900 an hour, they would only be able to offer me a one-way flight. I was very thankful for the offer. I chose to accept a flight in as this would be when I would be carrying the most weight in supplies. This was my first time in a helicopter, and this was a small one called a "Squirrel", a two-seater. This was perhaps the grandest flight I have ever taken. An hour to the Northeast of Tabubil, the pilot took us over some of the most remote and spectacular wilderness in all the world. A primitive research facility, Mekil is perched in a high altitude mossy cloud forest at approximately 6000 ft. At Mekil, it rains 340 days of the year averaging 300 inches per year. Nothing ever completely dries out and various molds have made their home here. To say getting around the forest was difficult would be an understated lie. The trunks of all the trees were covered with slick moss that extended up to the forest canopy. To depend on trees for handholds while climbing around the mountainside was indeed risky business. Every footstep had to be strategically placed so as to not slip back down or plunge through invisible above ground roots.

With the competent assistance of two young villagers from the closest village, Monakomofib (4 hour walk downhill), I spent almost four weeks looking for dogs, looking for dog signs, playing singing dog tapes at dawn and dusk, and setting stop snares and rubber-jawed leg hold traps. One of my assistants knew a small amount of English, but generally, most Papuans speak their local dialect and "Pidgin" or Tok Pisin (a playful blend of many languages, developed by traders which many countries in the South Pacific have in some form).



To make a long story short, I never saw a dog. I did, however, hear a dog howl, collected fecal samples, made plaster casts of tracks, took measurements of villager's prized wild dog skulls, and documented village dogs (see photos) that had remarkable similarities and vocalizations to that of the highland wild dog.

Just a short note about village dogs; Papuan villagers clearly differentiate between village dogs and the wild dogs that live in the upper elevations. Village dogs, though valued highly for their hunting skills, (cus cus, cassowary, wild pig, and even wild dogs) are loosely maintained on the periphery of the village itself. An occasional scrap of food is slung in the direction of a dog, but more often than not, village dogs have to fend for themselves from what they can forage in the forest. Clear ownership of village dogs is maintained, but other than for hunting, these dogs are largely ignored and considered a nuisance in the village. Occasionally a child will be seen carrying around a mal-nourished, mange-ridden puppy, but more often, dogs venturing into the village are targets of accurately thrown burning embers and rocks.



My 1996 One Man Adventure Looking for Wild Singers continued

The time came to leave Mekil, and I prepared for my two day walk-out to the nearest bush airport at Mianmin village. I soon learned that the only way a person could prepare for such a journey was to actually be born and raised in these mountains. I carried my 25 lb. pack and my barefooted, 5'1", 117-pound assistant carried my 40 pound pack. The 4-hour trip to Monakomofib was no problem on fresh legs and downhill. Then we crossed the raging May River, and from then on it was all uphill. I would like to say I was exaggerating for the effect of this excerpt, but due to the steepness of the terrain, my hands and feet would be touching the mountain simultaneously, as we steadily climbed up. I would climb twenty steps and have to stop to rest because my pulse was pounding in my sweaty temples. My pack was soon feeling extremely heavy and throwing me off balance. By three in the afternoon, I threw away all my manly pride and told my Papuan companion of my dilemma. At this point, I felt like it was a matter of my survival. He, matter-of-factly, offered to carry my pack as well as the one he was already carrying. Later, I tripled his pay. Shoot, I was about ready to throw my pack in the bush for later generations to enjoy.

Formerly reliable streams my guide knew had dried up, and I was becoming severely dehydrated. At one point, my urine became deep orange in color and I knew I was in trouble. At 4:30 PM we crested the mountain, and continued another hour and a half to the remote village of Sokamin. Here, we were offered food and water. I had no appetite, but enthusiastically drank what seemed like gallons of water. Exhausted, I forced myself to make a journal entry and fell asleep. Tomorrow would be another full day.

They say it rained hard that night, but I couldn't have told you that. The forest was saturated as we set out at first light. About ten steps into my journey, I slipped down onto some sharp rocks and cut my palm wide open. Great start. The walk to Mianmin and the airport was an 8-hour carbon copy of the day before. Later, I was to learn that it was very easy for the locals to follow where I had been. They said they followed my sweat trail going up hill and my ass-drag going downhill. It's funny now.

They say that time changes a person's view, dims the perception of discomfort. However, I can honestly say that I have never before, or since, participated in a more arduous, physically taxing activity. When I boarded a plane in Mianmin, I sat with a group of Highland men, all colorfully dressed in traditional garb, with bones piercing their noses, bird-of-paradise feather head dresses, and cassowary skull necklaces. They were headed for a sing-sing, a grand dance and feast that has replaced the traditional warring between tribes. What a great place - Papua New Guinea.

James McIntyre

Photos of the highland trip

