

THE RAIN FOREST

INSIDE THE CANOPY

Let's explore the variety of plant and animal life in the rain forest and how they interact.

The Quetzal is one of the exotic birds that lives in the rain forests of Central America. The Mayans and Aztecs worshiped the bird as god of the air.

More than half the animals of the rain forest are found in the canopy. Birds feed on insects, fruits and seeds. Hummingbirds of Central and South America, and sunbirds of Asia, sip nectar from flowers. Toucans in South America feed on fruits and berries. Other birds that can be found include parrots and birds of paradise.

Howlers, spider monkeys, capuchins and squirrel monkeys are some of the 64 species of monkeys that make their home in the rain forests of Central and South America. Other animals found in the canopy include sloths, bats and flying squirrels. Orangutans and gibbons are found in the Southeast Asian rain forests of Borneo and Sumatra.

Jaguars, margays and ocelots are a few of the predatory cats found in Central and South America. Leopards are found in the Southeast Asian forest.

Makeup of a rain forest

Rain forests are similar throughout the world. Plant and animal species will vary in rain forests of different continents.

Canopy

(60-90 feet)

The heart of the forest. It consists of the tops of closely spaced trees. The crown of each tree almost touches the next, forming a mass of leaves and branches that prevent sunlight from reaching lower layers. Some trees grow taller and push through canopy. They are called emergents.

Strangler fig

Sprouts in canopy from seeds dropped by birds and bats. It develops roots that reach to the ground. The roots may eventually surround the host tree and in time kill it by depriving it of food, light and water. Host tree decomposes, leaving hollow fig tree. Shell becomes home to forest animals.

Understory

(Near ground— to 40-50 feet)

Consists of trunks of the canopy, young trees, shrubs, ferns and small trees that thrive in dim light.

The Morpho butterfly is found in the Amazon rain forest of Brazil.

The Epiphytes

Epiphytes are plants that attach their roots to host plants. They grow high up on branches of trees where they get more sunlight. They receive nourishment from the air and rain, taking root in wind-blown soil and vegetation. Mosses, lichens, ferns, orchids, bromeliads and cacti are included.

Orchids are epiphytes with two kinds of roots. One anchors to the host, the other hangs free to absorb water and nutrients from the air and plants around them. Many of the orchids found in the rain forest are grown domestically for their exotic flowers.

Butterflies and hummingbirds help pollenate orchids and bromeliads in bloom. Different species are attracted to different kinds of flowers.

Bromeliads

Leaves form a holding place to store water for nourishment. Many small creatures find refuge inside the leaves. Mosquitoes and frogs lay their eggs in the water. Mammals and birds eat the insects.

The emerald tree boa prefers the high branches of the rain forest of Brazil, but snakes, frogs and lizards can be found at almost every level of the forest.

Lianas

90 percent of all vine species in the world are in tropical rain forests. Some grow out of the floor and climb upward. Some wind around young trees and get pulled along as the sapling grows toward light. Others climb trees, winding around trunks.

Forest floor

Vegetation is very sparse, except where sunlight filters through. Plants that do grow have large leaves to absorb whatever light is available. Dead animals and leaf litter on the floor are broken down by insects and decompose quickly. The soil is not rich, so trees do not send roots deep into the earth. Instead, roots grow along the ground, drawing nourishment from the material on the floor. These roots will not support large trees. Instead, the trees develop buttresses for support. These are large growths that fan out from the base of the tree.

The giant anteater of the Amazon rain forest in Brazil has powerful claws to deal with termite mounds.

Termites are common on the forest floor. They build enormous mounds and feed on dead plant tissue. In turn, they are a source of food for frogs, lizards, birds and anteaters.

Antelope, deer, hogs, tapirs and many kinds of rodents feed on roots, seeds, leaves and fruit that drop to the ground.