5 Wildlife on Wild Rivers

The Amazon River **Our canoe slid silently through the night. Strange sounds came from all around us. A leaf brushed over my arm in the dark. I grabbed my friend's arm.**

"Laura!" I whispered loudly. "Why did you talk me into coming here?"

We were in Brazil, visiting friends on a tributary of the Amazon River. This canoe trip was a chance to hear the jungle sounds at night.

I was nervous before we started our canoe trip. Other tourists had been swimming in the river during the day. Later they joked about the piranhas in the river. I didn't want to hear their stories about how these tiny, fierce fish could eat a human being in a couple of minutes.

Now in the humid darkness our guide told us to look up in the thick trees over our heads. There were two little lights up there. He said they were eyes. I thought, "How cute! Probably a monkey!"

Then he said he thought it was a snake, a really big one—the kind that drops down out of a tree to attack an animal.

"An animal like me," I shuddered.

Last year in school we learned that the Amazon is the second longest river in the world after the Nile River in Egypt. We learned that the lands along the Amazon support an amazing number of animals, reptiles, and insects.

As we passed from the smaller tributary to the Amazon River itself, we began to see more canoes and fishing boats. But mostly we saw rainforests and heard birds and insects chirping in the trees. During the day it was sunny and hot on the river. When we tied up the canoe to explore, we found the forest refreshingly cool and shady.

Dozens of other huge rivers pour their waters into the Amazon. In school last year we learned that the area in which a river's tributaries drain is called the river's **drainage basin.** The Amazon River has one of the largest drainage basins of any river in the world. In places, Laura and I saw what looked like two rivers flowing side by side. That's because some tributaries carry gray or black soil particles into the Amazon, while other tributaries carry light brown soil.

vocabulary
drainage basin the area drained by a single large river and its tributaries

This satellite photo shows the Amazon River and some of the tributaries in the Amazon's drainage basin.

Until they mix completely, the waters of the two tributaries flow beside each other in the Amazon, like two rivers in one.

The Orinoco River

After Laura and I toured the Amazon River, we planned a trip to the Orinoco (or uh NOH koh) River. Like the Amazon, this river crosses the northern part of South America and empties into the Atlantic Ocean. Boats and ships travel up and down the river, so we found a boat tour with no problem.

As we traveled along the Orinoco River, we saw that the land to the north of the river is a wild and beautiful place. Venezuelans (ven uh ZWAY lunz) call it the Llanos (YAH nohs). Cattle ranches share this land with wildlife such as monkeys, anteaters, and crocodiles.

The land to the south of the Orinoco River is even wilder. Its mountains contain the world's highest waterfall, Angel Falls. Laura has been there once before, and she says that someday when we visit Angel Falls, the sight will simply take my breath away.

The Mackenzie River

In Canada a long river called the Mackenzie flows north from the Rocky Mountains to the Arctic Ocean. It flows through many lakes and swampy areas. With its tributaries, it covers a very large drainage basin in northwestern Canada.

The Mackenzie River crosses the Arctic Circle. That means that during the long Arctic winter, the river is frozen solid for months. But during Canada's short summer, the Mackenzie River comes alive.

Thousands of birds such as geese, ducks, and swans spend the summer along the river. They feed on the grasses and short plants that grow in the summer's warmth. When winter comes, the birds migrate south.