

Small world

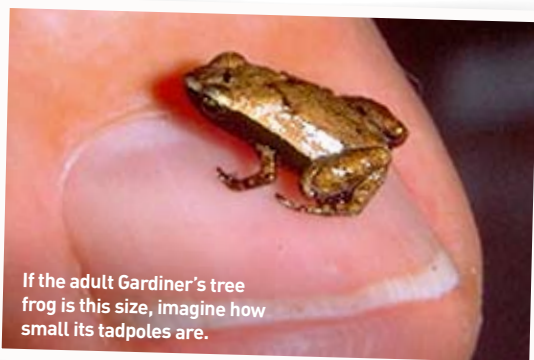
Diogo never dreamed that his quest to find one of nature's miniature marvels would lead to an even bigger discovery.



DIOGO VERÍSSIMO
CONSERVATIONIST
THE SEYCHELLES

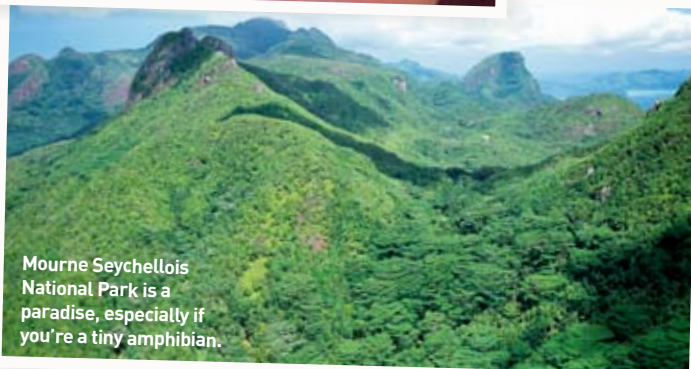
THE SEYCHELLES ARE famous for their white sandy beaches and crystal-clear waters, but that's not all they have to offer. A few years ago, I spent six weeks on Mahé, the biggest island, studying the importance of various bird species for ecotourism. The day before I was due to leave, I set myself a stiff challenge: to see Gardiner's tree frog, one of the smallest frogs in the world.

Endemic to the Seychelles, the adult grows no longer than 11mm and can sit comfortably on a fingernail – and, just to make my task even trickier, its green-brown coloration provides fantastic camouflage in the leaf litter it loves.



If the adult Gardiner's tree frog is this size, imagine how small its tadpoles are.

Dr Justin Gerlach



Mourne Seychellois National Park is a paradise, especially if you're a tiny amphibian.

Bruno Barbier/Robert Harding/Photolibary

To find such a minuscule beast, I decided to follow the trail network that winds through Mourne Seychellois National Park, a hilly area of lush forest covering some 30km². I set off one morning and was soon immersed in the beautiful sights, sounds and scents of the park. I kept my eyes peeled, but the odds were against me and I was far from optimistic.

After walking for about an hour, a cricket-like insect caught my attention so I stopped to take a photo. Peering through my macro lens, I was amazed to find the smallest frog

"Careering downhill, I grabbed the sturdiest thing within reach. A fallen log seemed to fit the bill, but it crumbled into dust."

I had ever seen – almost accidentally I had stumbled upon my quarry. I quickly took some photos but, after just a few minutes, my Gardiner's tree frog melted into the leaf litter as if it had never existed.

Thrilled to fulfil my impossible mission so easily, I continued my trek uphill towards the park's viewpoint to enjoy the beautiful vista of Mahé and the deep blue ocean surrounding it.

But on my way back, instead of concentrating on the path, I was busy keeping an eye out for a second froggy encounter and the chance to take some more photos. After all, when would I ever get the opportunity again? I made a wrong

turn, strayed from the trail and suddenly I was lost in the middle of the forest.

At first, I wasn't too worried. If the viewpoint was uphill then the way home had to be downhill, and as long as I headed in the right direction I would eventually find the park exit. But I was walking on a dense carpet of dry leaves and, as the slope became steeper and steeper, I found that I was having to make mad dashes between trees, zigzagging to slow my increasingly out-of-control descent.

Eventually, the inevitable occurred: I slipped and found myself careering downhill. Fighting panic, I grabbed the sturdiest thing within reach. A fallen log seemed to fit the bill, but it was so rotten that it crumbled into dust in my hand. I plummeted for another 30m or so until I smashed into a rather more solid trunk. Well, at least it stopped my descent.

LOOKING UP INTO the canopy of the tree I had crashed into, I was just in time to see a medium-sized brown bird with a round body fly silently away. I didn't recognise it. At that moment I was more concerned about getting back to civilisation in one piece.

But when I finally reached home, my thoughts returned to this chance encounter. I thumbed through a couple of field guides and – with a delight matched only by my joy at finding the Gardiner's tree frog – I realised that I had probably seen a Seychelles scops owl, another island endemic and a species so rare that it was declared extinct in 1958 (before being rediscovered in 1960).

I have no idea what the odds are of stumbling accidentally – in the space of a couple of hours – on not one but two incredibly rare species that are found nowhere else in the world. But I will be forever grateful that I bothered to try to photograph a nondescript cricket – because otherwise I might have seen neither.



The Gardiner's tree frog is so small that Diogo thought this one was a cricket.

Diogo Veríssimo