Treasure ISLANDS

Join the search for strawberry poison frogs in the Bocas del Toro Archipelago, Panama.
Article and photos by Gerlinde Höbel

Strawberry poison frogs

(Dendrobates pumilio) occur throughout the tropical lowland forests of the Atlantic sides of Central America, from northern Nicaragua to western Panama. In Nicaragua and Costa Rica, the frogs tend to be more or less uniformly red, hence the name strawberry poison frog. In Panama, however, especially on the different islands of the Bocas del Toro Archipelago, the variability in coloration is mind blowing — yellow to blue, with or without dark markings — everything seems possible.

Treasure Among the Trash

I had my first encounter with this amazing display of color rather unexpectedly. I was supposed to spend a couple of lazy days on the beach of Colón, the only island of the archipelago with regular boat service to the mainland. I rented a bike to get to one of the secluded beaches outside the little town where I was staying when I came upon a group of howler monkeys feeding in the trees. I stopped and watched them when my attention was suddenly diverted by the tell-tale buzzing calls of poison frogs.

Once I listened more carefully, there seemed to be frogs calling from all along the little trail, especially from an unsightly trash heap. I got off the bike and moved toward the pile, and I did not have to look long before I saw my first little treasure. There it was, a strawberry poison frog sitting on a white plastic bottle in the middle of the trash pile, calling like the heap was its castle. The frog was yellow, with a contrasting pattern of large black blotches on the back and smaller brown spots on the legs — wow!

I looked around and soon found more frogs. I even discovered a pair engaged in courtship. The male called, jumped ahead, stopped and called again, waiting for the female to follow him. I watched for a couple of minutes until they disappeared into a dark crevice among the garbage. I wondered whether they would lay their eggs there, which would be guarded by the male until the tadpoles hatched and then picked up by the female to be transported individually to water. There the female would come back from time to time to lay unfertilized eggs to feed the developing tadpoles.

Considering the breeding biology of the frogs, the choice of the trash heap to call from suddenly did not seem so strange. Once filled with rainwater, the old bottles and tins would provide perfect little containers in which the frogs could raise their young. Fascinated, I got out my camera and tried to photograph as many frogs as I could find. Then I paused.

Did that twig next to me just move? It did! The twig turned out to be a brown vine snake (Oxybelis aeneus) that had just captured an anole (Norops sp.) and probably was annoyed to have its lunch hour disturbed by a camera snapping away.

Off to Solarte

Lazy days on the beach were no longer on the agenda. I wanted to explore more frog habitats. As I returned to my hotel in the evening, I tried to find out whether other islands also had frogs and what color they were. I was told that the "little toads," as poison frogs are called there, were everywhere, but nobody could tell me exactly where I could find them.
Severely inflicted with *Dendrobates* fever, I arrived at the little harbor the next morning hoping to find a boat that would take me to Solarte, the closest neighboring island. When I arrived on the island, I was greeted by a hysterically barking dog. Luckily its owner was close by, and I introduced myself and asked for permission to look around his property in search of frogs. He was a naturalist himself and agreed to show me around. It wasn’t long before we found the first poison frog.

This time the frogs we found were bright orange without any dark markings. Only their toes were white. The site where we found them was quite different from the habitat on Colon Island. The vegetation was dense and junglelike, with lianas (vines), big palm fronds and thick tree cover. Against this dark, shaded background the bright orange frogs were easily spotted. Again I found a courting pair, and I even witnessed a fight between two rival males. The two males locked in an embrace and wrestled for minutes until one gave up and hopped away.

On my way back to the boat I found a beautiful green parrot snake (*Leptophis* sp.) that laid still on the forest floor as I took some pictures. After a couple of hours in the hot and humid forest, I was thankful for the offer of a cold lemonade and a chat in the shade of the property owner’s home while I waited for the boat.
Where to Go, Where to Stay

**Location.** The Bocas del Toro Archipelago is located in the province of Bocas Del Toro, in the northwest part of Panama, bordering Costa Rica.

**Climate.** The climate is tropical — hot and sometimes very humid. There are two rainy seasons: a longer one from May to August and a shorter one in December and January. Many animals tend to be more active in the rainy season, but water conditions for snorkeling tend to be better in the dry season. Still, there is a lot of sunshine even during the rainy season, and animals, including frogs, are also active in the dry season. There really is no bad season for visiting the islands.

**Culture and language.** The people of the province are made up of mainly indigenous tribes, many of which still live in small isolated villages scattered throughout the islands. In the towns on Colón and Bastimentos, the culture has a laid-back Caribbean flavor. Although Spanish is the official language, many islanders are fluent in English, especially in the main towns.

**Getting there and getting around.** Several domestic and Central American airlines provide service from the United States to Panama City, Panama. From Panama City you can get to the islands by air; or you can take a bus or car to the coast and then a ferry boat to the islands.

Once in Panama City, the easiest way to get to the city of Bocas (on Colón, the main island of the archipelago) is to fly from Panama City on one of the local Panamanian airlines, such as Aeroperlas (flyop@aeroperlas.com). The flight takes about one hour. The landing strip is just three or four blocks outside of Bocas town, easily within walking distance to most hotels and restaurants. Note that the flights to Bocas depart from a different airport (Albrook) rather than the international airport (Tocumen). Allow at least three hours for a safe connection.

If you are more adventurous, you can either take a bus (departs Panama City in the evening hours and arrives early morning) or drive your own car. This will take you over the Continental Divide, and on the descent you arrive at the town of Chiriqui Grande. From there you can either take the ferry to Colón Island or continue by car all the way to the town of Almirante before taking a ferry to Colón Island from there.

Once in Bocas town you can rent a bike to get out of town, explore the island and get to one of the beaches. To get to other islands or some of the more secluded beaches, you need to find someone with a boat. There are organized daily tours to some beaches, like the famous Red Frog Beach on Bastimentos (ironically not the best place to find frogs). By asking around you can find a boat to take you pretty much everywhere. Just ask. People are generally very friendly and helpful.

**What to bring.** Light, comfortable clothing, a hat, sunscreen and a water bottle are essentials. If you have snorkeling gear, bring it; otherwise you can rent it there. You might also want to pack rubber boots and a flashlight for nighttime frog excursions. U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere, so there is no need to change currency.

**Where to stay.** Over the last few years the islands have experienced a tourist boom. A range of hotels for every budget have opened around Bocas town.

**What to eat.** Bocas boasts a variety of restaurants that cater to most every taste. Take advantage of the location, and try the great seafood, the arroz con coco (coconut rice) and the variety of delicious plantain dishes.

**What to do.** Bocas del Toro is great for everyone who likes nature, the outdoors and every possible type of water sport. I suggest you start exploring Colón by bike (there are several mountain bike and moped rentals). The slow pace of cycling along a beachfront trail affords the best opportunities to enjoy the tropical nature offered by the islands. Bocas also offers dive shops, a deep sea fishing outfit and numerous sailboat and catamaran cruises.

**TOP TO BOTTOM:** The strawberry poison frogs' colors were varied; this one was on Bastimentos Island. * On Solarte Island, the author came upon these two fighting Dendrobates pumilio males. After a short time, one gave up and hopped away. * On Popa Island, green strawberry poison frogs were found in forest that was lining pastureland. * This parrot snake (Leptophis sp.) posed on the forest floor on Solarte Island. * The locals called the poison frogs "little toads." This *Dendrobates pumilio*, yet another unique morph, was photographed on Cristóbal Island.
to return me to Colón.

That night in the restaurant, I was told that people from Bastimentos Island often come to Colón to shop or work. I reasoned that this might be my chance to hitch a boat ride with one of them heading back to Bastimentos. The next morning I tried my luck and went down to the pier to wait for someone going to the island. In less than 30 minutes I got my ride.

Bastimentos Village is the second largest settlement of the archipelago, but still only consists of a couple of houses and a bar. I walked down the 5-foot-wide main street, and already I could hear the telltale buzzing of calling males of D. pumilio. I found a small, shady path that ran along the beach, where the slight breeze from the sea kept the heat and humidity down and made for a pleasant walk. As I hiked, I kept an eye out for movement.

"Bastimentos turned out to be poison frog heaven. They were everywhere! And the variability in color within the same site was amazing."

Almost every palm tree seemed to have its own resident yellow-headed gecko (Gonatodes albogularis). The males are beautifully colored with blue-and-black-mottled bodies and yellow or orange heads. The females are less colorful but still very entertaining to watch as they run up and down and around the trunks of the palm trees, always trying to be on the opposite side from the strange person with the big black camera.

Bastimentos turned out to be poison frog heaven. They were everywhere! And the variability in color within the same site was amazing. There were light orange frogs with dark spots, white frogs, golden-brown ones, even bluish frogs. Most sported some kind of darker marking, from large spots to small dots. The most common variety seemed to be a red body color with large black spots and a lighter color on the feet.

The frogs were just beautiful. And all
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Yellow-headed geckos (Gonatodes albogularis) could be found on palm trees along the beach of Bastimentos Island. This is a male.

Strawberry poison frogs (Dendrobates pumilio) exhibit a diverse number of colors and patterns. In Costa Rica and Nicaragua, they are mostly a uniform red. This is a calling male.

This is the main street on Bastimentos Island, where poison frogs were calling from the vegetation between houses.

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over! As I kneeled on the ground to take pictures of one frog, I had to be careful not to squish another. After many hours, I finally found my way back to the village. This time around I had to wait longer for a boat to take me back to Colón, but luckily the bar was open, and they had my favorite brand of Panamanian beer. Life was good!

**Cristóbal Bound**

My next destination was the island of Cristóbal. Although it was not much further away than Bastimentos, it turned out to be a lot harder to get to. There are small settlements on the island, but I had to hire someone from Colón to ferry me over and back. When I finally reached the island, my hopes of finding frogs were not very high. I was dropped off at a small settlement surrounded by cattle pastures. I didn’t find a path leading to the forest and didn’t hear frogs calling.

I walked into the village to try to find someone who could tell me the whereabouts of the little toads. I found a young man who was willing to help me look for frogs, while the rest of the village went off to a neighboring island for a Saturday afternoon game of baseball. For hours we searched in vain, and I almost gave up hope. But finally, following a muddy path toward the interior of the island, I could hear frogs buzzing.

On the steep banks of a dried-out creek, I spotted some strawberry poison frogs. The frogs were red with black markings, but this time they had blue-and-black-colored legs. Their beauty made me forget the heat and humidity, and the fact that my boots were 3 pounds heavier with all the mud that stuck to them.

Photographing the frogs turned out to be quite a challenge. The terrain was steep, muddy and densely covered with banana and heliconia plants. I had to hurry to take pictures and make some call recordings before I headed back to the boat.

**Little Toads or Bust**

I had only one day left on Bocas del Toro, and I decided to try to get to Popa, one of the largest islands of the archipelago. Because it is quite far from Colón, finding a boat was difficult — and expensive. But I had been told that there were blue *D. pumilio* on Popa, and I had to see them.

The boat ride took well over 90 minutes, but time passed quickly as we rode along uninhabited stretches of several islands, with beautiful views of forests and mangroves.

Large stretches of Popa are densely forested all the way down to the water line, so the boat could only land at one of the small settlements. Around the settlements, the forest is cut back for cattle pastures, which obviously isn’t prime habitat for frogs. My heart sank again.

For the longest time I couldn’t find anyone willing to take me to find little toads. They told me I should come back tomorrow and that they would catch some for me then. That was not an option — by then I was supposed to be on a bus bound for Costa Rica.

Finally, a man was kind enough to take me further into the interior of the island. It turned out, however, that I did not need a guide after all. Crossing the pasture toward the forest edge, I could already hear them. Right across the barbed wire, as soon as pasture gave way to forest, the poison frogs were calling. Finding the frogs was quite a different matter, and it took me some time until I finally spotted the first one.

They were not blue after all, but rather olive-green. And they were tiny, on average just five-eighths of an inch long. This is small even for *D. pumilio* standards, which can grow to a size of almost a full inch. But once I had my search image down, I started finding frogs, and I even uncovered a female carrying a tadpole. I was searching along the edge of an open pasture, and the sun was beating down on me. Time flew by nevertheless, and all too soon I had to return to Colón to get ready to leave.

I spent five amazing days on Bocas del Toro, immersed in tropical nature and beautiful frogs. There are still more islands to visit, and I haven’t even started to explore the mainland. I hope to go back someday to see what other treasures the islands hold.