

THE LIZARD THAT WALKS ON WATER



As our boat winds its way through the slow-moving freshwater canal system of Tortuguero National Park, the lush vegetation encroaches over the riverbanks bringing the rainforest and its residents closer. Floating quietly along the winding rivers, everyone's eyes scan the trees, shrubs and water for wildlife. Caimans moving in the water, herons resting on branches or monkeys leaping from tree to tree. "There. Over there. On that big green leaf. A Basilisk" I called out.

The boat glides closer to the riverbank where a large green lizard was resting on the lush vegetation. Amazingly we were able to come within a couple of meters of this Green Basilisk. This prehistoric looking creature remained motionless as we watched closely standing on the front deck of the boat. Then suddenly it disappeared into the dense greenery.

The adult males are easier to spot as they are larger than the females, growing up to 0.9 meters (3 feet). Plus only the adult males have a distinctive crest of skin (dorsal like fin) on the top of their head stretching down the back onto the long tapered tail.

I have seen two of the four species of Basilisk while traveling in Costa Rica; the Green Basilisk on the Atlantic coast of the country and the Common Basilisk on the Pacific side. Both regions are perfect habitats for these reptiles, with lush vegetation and a constant source of water in a hot humid climate. Living in the undergrowth of rainforests close to rivers and streams, they use these bodies of water as a way to reach their food. Maybe more importantly, they use them as quick and convenient escape routes from predators such as raptors and snakes.

Basilisks, relatives to the Iguana, are good swimmers and divers. What makes them even more unusual is that they are able to run across the surface of water for a fair distance before breaking the surface and

then treading water to reach the other side. The long powerful hind legs with long toes fringed with scales almost web like, allows the Basilisk to move quickly over the water not breaking the surface for long distances.

This unique habit of "walking on water" has given them the name of Jesus Christ Lizard. I have seen young Basilisks scurry across shallow creeks but have yet to witness an adult walking on water. Possessing speed and agility and easily frightened, their sudden escape leaves only ripple patterns on the clear water surface.

Searching for the Green Basilisk or Common (brown in color) Basilisk, can be somewhat challenging. Each species is well camouflaged according to their particular habitat, blending into the surrounding vegetation and thus highlighting why camouflage is so important to their continued survival.

The nature guides in Costa Rica are excellent at spotting wildlife. They have developed an almost x-ray like vision, able to scan the dense foliage, finding animal after animal. They possess extensive knowledge about the creatures, which assists them in their search.

I have spotted many wildlife species in the Costa Rican rainforests including several Basilisks. One adult was resting on a large green leaf basking in the bright morning sun. Because reptiles are cold-blooded animals and need to heat up their bodies, good places to look for them are in trees and shrubs blanketed by the hot tropical sun. Another Basilisk was clinging to a lower branch of a tree. I have also found several young basilisks resting on rocks along slow moving creeks while hiking through the rainforests.

On one particular hike, in the Corcovado National Park, our group would have walked past an adult Common Basilisk if it wasn't for the keen eye of our tour guide. Even when it moved about rustling over the fallen leaves, you really needed to focus as their skin color blends perfectly into the forest floor. With head raised, its eyes watched our every move, as we responded in kind. Then, in a split second, it vanished further into the dense undergrowth.

While walking on trails in the tropical rainforests or taking a canal boat ride, having a keen eye and remaining quiet definitely improves your chances to see the Basilisk. And don't forget to check along the creeks and rivers too. You may observe this lizard walking on water. **ca**

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