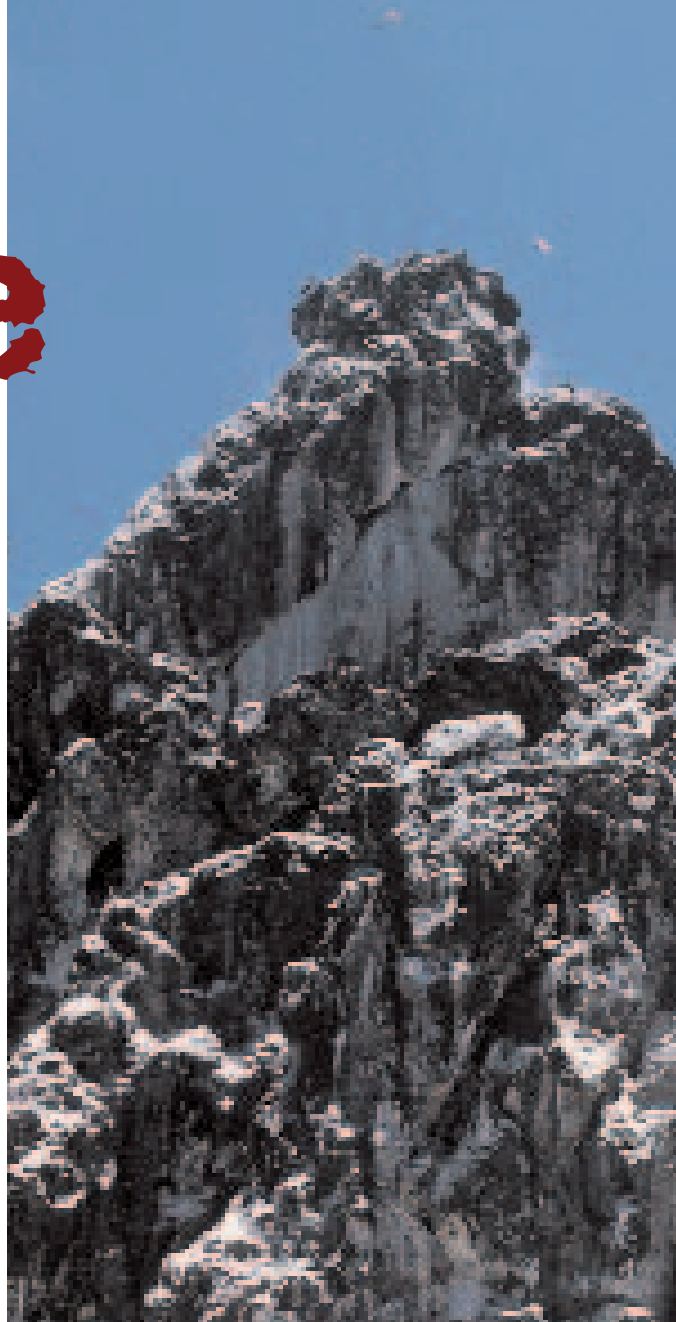


Alone

Filmmaker Lance Milbrand recounts what it was like being stranded at the birthplace of hurricanes to document sharks, eels, and bird life on a remote island in the Eastern Pacific.

Clipperton is a coral atoll, a true sunken volcano totally enclosed by the sea. It's shaped like a rectangular donut and created mostly of broken corals and bird guano. An enigma, Clipperton is named after an eighteenth-century English pirate and is located 700 miles off the coast of Mexico in the Eastern Pacific, but the territory is owned by France. Basically, Clipperton is in the middle of nowhere. The center of the atoll contains poisonous hydrogen sulfide water, which is undrinkable. The only source of fresh drinking water on the atoll is rain. Varying in size, Clipperton is about two and a half miles across and it takes 7 hours to walk its perimeter.

After 8 years of planning and four self-funded trips to National Geographic in Washington, D.C., to describe my





(far left) Here I am with one of my Canon cameras at Tern Island.

(left) A temporary camp set at the base of the rock. I slept here two nights and each evening, the ground would become overrun by large, hungry land crabs.

(below) At the edge of the lagoon, this masked booby is surrounded by hundreds of land crabs. The crabs would come out from their burrows in the late afternoon, eating pond weed or literally anything they could put into their mouths.

film, I wrote a grant to National Geographic Expeditions Council and pitched my idea to Explorer. Thirty-four people were in the room when I explained my project, and a few days later, everyone said yes. What had I gotten myself into?

My name is Lance Milbrand. I'm an explorer and natural history filmmaker and I volunteered to leave my great wife and regular life to be left alone on this uninhabited atoll. My mission: Create a first-person narrative documentary about isolation and the remoteness at the birthplace of hurricanes. Except when I was dropped off and picked up, I had to videotape myself and consider many calculated risks. I also had to assemble complex natural history sequences for the camera, including animal behaviors rarely if ever seen, as well as plot a new map for National Geographic Maps. The last map of Clipperton was created in 1935.

Working closely with Maya Laurinaitis, producer for Explorer's Natural History Unit, we came up with a logistical plan, shooting plan, and storyboard. The toughest part of filmmaking was building actual sequences of animal behavior and not forgetting the details. Some of my targeted shots were of sharks, bird activities, and eels that leave the safety of the ocean to feed on land crabs. I placed my cameras at certain angles to capture drama while at the same time respecting my subjects.

My departure was at the beginning of the American invasion of Iraq, and for weeks the French Government denied me permission to visit their atoll. Finally, Maya con-



Alone



A



B



C



D

vinced the French Government that I was not a threat to national security on Clipperton and I was given the green light.

Assembling all of the necessary supplies took months and we had to scramble to make it in time. National Geographic wanted me to bring extras of everything, just in case I ran into trouble. I brought along three Sony PD150 cameras; two Canon XL1 cameras and various lenses; three Gates underwater housings; one small single-chip camera for hiking; two clam shells for reviewing footage; a wireless camera that I attached to my kite; a jib arm with weights and a dolly track; two wireless microphone systems; a shotgun microphone and zeppelin; a small Honda generator for charging batteries; 130 blank 40-minute tapes; a satellite and video telephone; a GPS; a skiff; kayak; scuba gear; camping supplies; clothes; food; and 46 gallons of water. I was, in effect, my own video rental house, supermarket, and one-man city. To help keep my cameras running, I packed

them in waterproof Pelican cases. To help keep me running, I planned to eat a lot of Cliff Bars. To keep me hydrated, I brought Gatorade powder and mixed it with my water.

Just getting to Clipperton is a huge undertaking, but getting supplies aboard an airplane would have cost two arms and

(left) Lensing the shot with my Canon at Tern Island.

(left, A) In the wild, crabs tear holes in the eyes of the coconut, reaching in to eat the fruit.

(left, B) Male brown boobies fight fiercely for mating territory. Fights often took place right outside my tent and could last for 10 minutes or more.

(left, C) I heard that a few fishing boats had crashed on shore, and my suspicion held true: Clipperton has become rat infested. Ship rats often screeched at night, eating what they could and crapping over all my gear. One ate a hole through my tent and came inside while I was reviewing footage.

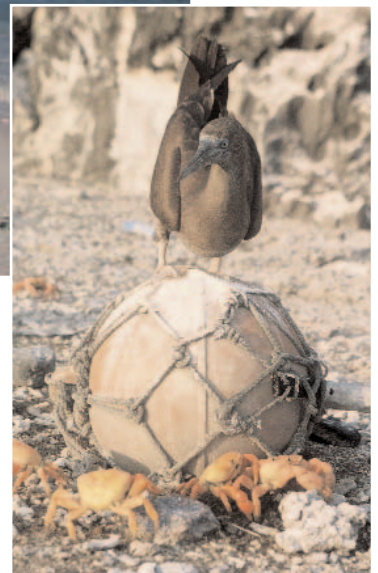
(left, D) Two adult masked booby sitting on coconuts. On almost every part of the atoll, birds are roosting.



(top right) The first view of Clipperton atoll. Boobies are already out foraging for small fish and they greet the boat at sunrise.

(above) Shoreline along the main palm grove; a brown booby coasts by.

(right) An immature booby perches on top of a fishing buoy, avoiding hungry crabs. This bird was my buddy and unlike the adult booby, never squawked.



April 19, Saturday, Day 11

Alone

My skiff is in the lagoon and I drove it over to "the rock" to explore and film. The atoll has one high vantage point, a volcanic rock, and from high atop this rock, one can see several palm groves, passing rain clouds and remnants of unlucky sailors and their shipwrecks.

It's hot, real hot with a light breeze. The ground here is softer along the lagoon and I was able to put up the sunshade and establish my temporary camp. From one side, my camp is about 30 feet away from the edge of the lagoon, and the huge rock with perching birds looms behind me. I went exploring and decided to grab my climbing helmet, DCR-PC 120 camera, GPS, and go to the top. My elevation reading was different than the old map—134 feet and the 1935 map says it should be 70 feet? Which is right? I will have to climb up again another day to check the instrument. It was a bit scary of a climb because the white guano is slick, but I had great views. I would not want to climb to the top in the rain.

In 1906, the Mexican Government sent an Army garrison to the atoll in hopes of claiming the territory for Mexico. When their

supplies stopped coming, all of the adult men perished and the women and children were raped by a crazy lighthouse keeper. Eventually, the women murdered the lighthouse keeper. I also saw what appears to be the lighthouse itself at the bottom of a crack in the rocks. Lighthouses in the old days needed daily tending with kerosene and wicks. Over the years, the lighthouse must have fallen down off the top of the rock. It must be the lighthouse casting because the metal is green copper and what else would be brought so high at such trouble?

The crabs rarely came out in the afternoon. As the sun goes down, they appear from holes in the ground and are surrounding my camp, trying to climb and tasting everything they can. The bird noises are a lot different near the rock. Terns are feeding on insects along the edge of the lagoon and their calls are more like a raging clerk, clerk, clerk, clerk. As I write, I look over at my cot that keeps me off the ground. I jammed some rebar along its sides to keep it from collapsing. I have a lot of days to go. If my repaired cot does not work I can always sleep in the skiff. I've got six or eight big

crabs trying to eat my shoes right now, with my feet still in them! After dinner, I will go down to shoot the crab feeding migration along the edge of the lagoon.



(above) Large waves push crushed corals ashore, building walls of corals. The largest structure on the atoll, a volcanic rock, can be seen in the distance. With my GPS, I measured it at 134 feet, higher than the 1935 map estimate of 70 feet.

(bottom left) I am at the landing area with all of my gear. The palm grove in the distance would become my base camp.

(far right) I am preparing food at a temporary camp. I brought a lot of canned goods, but also caught and ate fresh lobster from the tidepools.

two legs. Luckily, sport fishing boats leave from my hometown and travel 2200 miles in search of yellowfin tuna. I could load my gear and hitch a ride with some hardcore fishermen. The plan was to load my supplies here in San Diego, drive the boat to the atoll, unload me and all of my stuff, and leave me there. The boat I arrived on would leave, and then another fishing boat would pick me up 46 days later, or so I hoped.

My arrival boat made it to Clipperton in 6 days. Getting there was the easy part; getting ashore was hairy. Many skiffs met the bottom of the reef, only to injure their crews and lose all of their supplies. There are only two cuts in the reef where a small skiff could make it through—wave and wind conditions had to be perfect.

Once we made it to Clipperton, I had to wait 2 days before the conditions were right to go ashore. National Geographic sent along a second cameraman, Erin Harvey, to document my arrival, and we estab-

May 4, Sunday, Day 26



lished my base camp within the atoll's largest palm grove. My Mountain Hardwear tent was low profile, perfect for high winds, and I set it up within a colony of what must have been five thousand roosting sea birds. It was brown booby mating season, and I was not going to miss any of the action. It is estimated that one million seabirds live on Clipperton and five million orange land crabs patrol the shores. Erin departed soon after setting up base camp, and I was left to explore my surroundings.

I knew I would have extreme heat (110 degrees in the shade), driving rain, and high humidity. I was asked to design and build a wireless system to fly a camera attached to a kite. I had to learn how to use a satellite telephone and video phone, and be well-versed in its use in case of medical emergency. The humidity often caused my video cameras to stop working, but I pressed on.

To accomplish my goals, I tried to think like the animals. Too often in today's television, correspondents place the animal in distress, and I did my very best not to handle my subjects. I would be patient and wait, move slowly, and place the camera in the foreground on the subject and then walk around into the background. I also shot a lot of scenes just holding my own camera and talking into the lens with my subject in the background. (If you have a matte box, you can see your reflection in the 4 X 4 filter.)

Understanding the big picture of what really happens on the atoll meant moving

It was a tough start to my day since I was up most of the night with lightning and thunder. The storm probably lasted 6 hours and I caught over 20 gallons of drinking water. In the a.m., the sky was black, windy, and rainy. I donned my rain gear and shot some images with the waterproof splash camera but gave up after a bolt of lightning hit close by. Flash-bam is not good! It was fun taping last night with the full flash of lightning along the horizon and also seeing the outlines of the booby. I took the camera into the palm grove to shoot parent and red-footed booby chick. Between a break in the storm, I called Maya and we discussed the goings-on. She wants drama. Our last few conversations, she asked for natural history. I guess she wants everything.

I set up a scene running three cameras, and my objective was to show a crab breaking into the soft spot of a coconut and eating the fruit. To get this shot, I needed to saw a coconut in half and have a crab hungry enough to sit on top and stick its claw into the hole of the shell. To create a steady base, I gathered some old bricks and placed them on the ground to form a square with a hole in the center. I wrapped my small single-chip camera in a big ziplock bag and I taped an ND filter over the lens. I placed it facing upward, toward the sky, pushed the record button, and then covered the camera with the coconut shell on top. Once a crab became interested, this shot was very cool. I was clearly showing the claw coming in, tearing off the fruit and moving the

morsel to its mouth while frigate birds were soaring very high in the background, giving the scene an almost evolutionary feeling. (When shooting up into the sky, its best to wait for the sun to be low in the morning or late in the afternoon to avoid contrast problems.) My second camera was a closeup shot, fairly nearby the action of the feeding crab. My third camera was a wide that showed all of the action with me in the shot and it also doubled as my audio camera. The coconut sequence took some effort, but worked out when the crab wanted to be there, not necessarily when I wanted it there. Now all I need is a wild shot of the crab feeding without the coconut sawed in half to blend them all together. The setup was easy; it was the waiting that drove me nuts.



After dinner, I walked the lagoon with my flashlight and saw at least 10 rats. When I came back to camp to review video footage, a rat had eaten soap inside the tent and pooped all over the place. He then came back inside while I was inside the tent! I thought he came through a small opening in the zipper door, but I found a hole in the tent floor that had been gnawed through. I need to fix that hole.

I hope tomorrow brings stable weather.

May 19, Monday, Day 41

The ship that would take me home returned and dropped Erin off to help me. We had been asked to call into National Geographic headquarters and videotape the call. Meanwhile, a big grey military helicopter buzzed overhead a few times, checking us out. I used the VHF radio to call the captain of our boat to see how things were going.

Our captain told me we needed to pack and be off the atoll now because the French Navy boarded their boat and told them they had to leave because they did not have a fishing permit. Erin and I had planned to shoot additional scenes, but my conversation with the captain made us scramble to get out and over to the other side of the atoll with all the gear. Suddenly, the military helicopter landed just north of our camp, on the other side of the palm grove. We could



just barely make out that several military men were on the ground, carrying rifles, and were dressed in camouflage fatigues. We cautiously walked forward and introduced ourselves to a smiling man. His name was Stephan and he spoke better than average

English, which was lucky for us. Stephan was a French journalist and much to my surprise knew my name. He said, "You must be Lance." Stephan knew that I was there because he had to check in with the French Visa people in Los Angeles. Other people walked toward us carrying video gear and we traded interviews for our cameras.

Our dialog was cut short because we had to keep moving our equipment off the atoll, but we had a good meeting and they treated us well.

By 6:15, we were on our boat home and the sky was the most beautiful orange color. It was announced by the French military that our boat could stay; only we needed to go over to their ship tomorrow morning to retrieve necessary permit papers. I went to my stateroom to sleep after I ate my second helping of cheesecake. The next day,

the first tropical storm of the season, Andrea, approached the atoll. She packed 200 miles of rain and 55-knot winds. As it turned out, I got off the atoll in the nick of time and every boat that was in the area had to leave immediately.

I doubt that I could ever top a world-class adventure like living alone on Clipperton. I'm grateful for National Geographic Expeditions Council and National Geographic Ultimate Explorer for giving me the opportunity to share my adventure.

Alone



(above) Land crabs become active near dusk and migrate together looking for food; and just so happens they walked through my camp. It has been estimated that five million land crabs live on Clipperton.

(bottom left) Here I am, posing with camera gear at my temporary camp at the base of the rock.

away from base camp and living in the elements, along different parts of the atoll. Some parts of Clipperton had more wind. Others had more waves. Moving gear can be tough in any shoot. I had this great cart called a Roll-Ezz that has big, wide sand wheels. The cart allowed me to move most gear in one trip, but I had to try and avoid running over the land crabs. What I was not mentally prepared for were the large unwelcoming rats that have taken over nearly the entire atoll. They must have come ashore from recent shipwrecks. Rats build nests by making comfortable beds, and I saw most of their nests were stuffed with bird feathers and crab body parts. They have or are becoming the new apex predator on the atoll, eating young birds and crabs. X

Lance Milbrand is a producer, director, and cameraman. He is a director of photography for National Geographic Explorer, and has done work for many organizations, including *CBS Sunday Morning*, the BBC, and the National Marine Fisheries Service.