

TROPICAL FOREST JUNIOR

Tropical or rain forests are those woody vegetation formations that develop between the latitudes of the Tropic of Cancer and that of Capricorn. Here the average temperature is about 25°C with variations of not more than 2-3°C and with abundant rainfall (over 1.500 millimetres a year). Some forests are characterised by short daily showers (rain or equatorial forests); others (in Southeast Asia) are subject to periods of relative dry weather and periods of abundant rain (tropical or monsoon forests).

The absence of seasons, due to the geographic position of the forests and the great humidity encourage the growth of luxuriant vegetation.

The foliage of adjacent treetops forms a very thick canopy. Only about 1% of the sunlight that hits the canopy reaches the forest floor and the lower layers are too dim for any vegetation to develop. It is for this reason that the undergrowth is practically absent. In the layer that goes from 1 to 20 metres from the floor, there is little light (about 5%), great humidity and a complete absence of wind. Hence plants that require pollination are rare because this takes place with the help of the wind. Flowers are very gaudy and perfumed to attract pollinating insects, birds and bats.

In this ecosystem, leaves have an oval shape, are of different sizes, and very often end with a *drip-tip*, a tip that bends downwards and that accelerates the elimination of rainwater. The majority of the plants of this ecosystem are about 30-40 metres tall (equivalent to a 12-storey building). The trunk of these plants is as straight as a column for 20 metres and then it branches out abruptly forming a crown of leaves.

The animals that live at the base of the trees are predominantly mammal diggers (rodents or armadillos), ground-dwelling monkeys, boas and pythons, frogs, gallinaceans, leopards and jaguars, snails and ants, spiders and scorpions.

Under the canopy and on the tall branches there are monkeys, sloths with long, strong claws with which they hang from branches, small nectar-feeding birds (hummingbirds in America, sunbirds in Africa), multicoloured birds (toucans, parrots, birds of paradise), tree snakes, big butterflies and bats (flying fox).