

EPIC SCIENCE FAILS

Nat Geo explorers spill their most embarrassing moments.

BY ALLYSON SHAW

Even scientists goof up sometimes! These Nat Geo explorers share some of their wildest slipups and hardest fails.



Helping Hand

THE SCIENTIST: Agustín Fuentes

COOL JOB: Biological anthropologist

THE LOCATION: Indonesia, a country in Southeast Asia



“It was nighttime, and I was lost in the jungle. I had decided to chase a rare maroon leaf monkey off the trail for hours, forgetting to grab a buddy or notice where I was going. I started to panic: I realized I could be lost for days.

“Soon I heard crackling branches and rustling leaves—something big was coming. It was an orangutan, which I knew could be aggressive. I was too scared to move. But the ape offered her hand. That’s when I recognized her as a formerly captive orangutan we knew well. Holding my hand, she guided me back to camp, only about 15 minutes away.



MAROON LEAF MONKEYS

“Eventually I switched my research from rare primates to animals that often interact with people. And now I *always* focus on safety!”



Swab the Poop Deck

THE SCIENTIST: Asha de Vos

COOL JOB: Marine biologist

THE LOCATION: Off the coast of Sri Lanka, a country in South Asia

“I was on a boat photographing a blue whale when I spotted strange, brick-red lumps pop up to the surface of the ocean. I leaned over to get a sample: It was whale poop! Poop is useful to scientists because it can tell a lot about the animal it came from, including what it has eaten.

“As I moved to put the poo in a jar, our boat hit a wave. The gunk spilled all over my hands, legs, shirt, shorts—even spraying my face! I washed myself off but stank for the rest of the day. Thankfully we prepare for accidents like this by collecting two samples, so we already had a full jar—plenty of poop to work with!”



EW! BLUE WHALE POOP!



BLUE WHALE



Cave of Mud

THE SCIENTIST: Genevieve von Petzinger
COOL JOB: Paleoanthropologist
THE LOCATION: Spain, a country in Europe

“I squeezed myself feet-first into a cave opening that didn’t even come up to my knees. The cave would be tight, but it’d be worth it when I found the Ice Age art I was looking for.”

“I was *not* prepared. The walls were so close that my nose scraped against them. And I wound up crawling through deep mud. Three exhausting hours later, dirty and very tired, I wiggled back to daylight



LOOKING FOR CAVE ART

with ... photographs of two small, red dots.

“I found less art than I expected, and a lot of people might think that all that effort was a waste of time. But I know that every discovery—no matter how small—teaches me something new. And those dots were made by someone 15,000 years ago, so that’s pretty cool too!”



JONATHAN KOLBY TESTS WATER IN AFRICA FOR A FROG-KILLING FUNGUS.



Hide-and-Peep

THE SCIENTIST: Jonathan Kolby
COOL JOB: Conservationist
THE LOCATION: Cusuco National Park in Honduras, a country in Central America



“I was leading students through the jungle when I spotted a small, bumpy, brown frog sitting on a rock. I suspected it might be special so I lunged to catch it, thinking, ‘Easy—I’m a frog-catcher!’”

“I opened my fist ... and showed the students a handful of mud. How could I have missed? Why didn’t I snap a photo first to show other scientists? I desperately crawled around in the mud for an hour while the students yawned. Eventually I gave up.”

“The next year I returned to that spot—and found a frog on the very same rock. This time I took a photo first, then I caught it! Turns out it *was* special: a Miles’ robber frog, which had been declared extinct decades ago. The fail turned out to be a delayed win!”

MILES’ ROBBER FROG

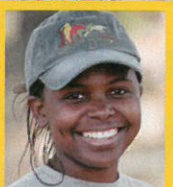


TAKE THE QUIZ: WHICH EXPLORER ARE YOU?
natgeokids.com/june-july



Lion Stare-Off

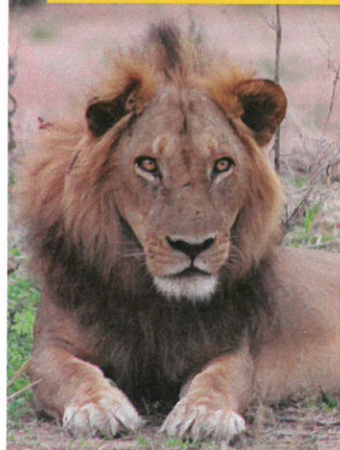
THE SCIENTIST: Thandiwe Mweetwa
COOL JOB: Lion biologist
THE LOCATION: Zambia, a country in Africa



THANDIWE MWEETWA (RIGHT) HELPS PUT A TRACKING COLLAR ON A SLEEPING LION.

“It was my first time seeing lions up close—three males. A team member shot one of the lions with tranquilizer darts, putting him to sleep so we could put a radio collar on his neck. I walked behind as my team moved the nearly 500-pound lion on a stretcher. But suddenly the lion sat up and growled. The darts had malfunctioned, and now the lion was turned toward me. For two minutes I had a staring contest with an unhappy lion! Finally the lion lost interest and stumbled away.”

“Sometimes accidents happen, and that day I was lucky to be with such a calm team. Now I know how to stay cool in scary situations.”



PETR KLALAB / SHUTTERSTOCK (ORANGUTAN); MARK THIESSEN / NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE (FUENTES); RYAN M. BOLTON / SHUTTERSTOCK (MONKEYS); FRANCO BANFI / GETTY IMAGES (WHALE); YASHA HETZEL (DE VOS); OCEANSWELL (POOP); GIBSON BANDA (COLLARING LION); EDWARD SELFE (MWEETWA); THANDIWE MWEETWA (MALE LION); DILLON VON PETZINGER / NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE (VON PETZINGER PROFILE); DILLON VON PETZINGER (IN CAVE); SARA D. RAMIREZ (AT RIVER); JONATHAN E. KOLBY (KOLBY PROFILE, FROG)