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EXPLORER MOMENTS

How an Endangered Bird Helped Save a Brazilian Rain Forest

Anita Studer wanted to study the Forbes's blackbird, but the decimation of its habitat led her to plant millions of trees.



Ornithologist Anita Studer developed a tree planting program to reforest the Pedra Talhada.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIO LATZEL, ROLEX AWARDS



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By **Gary Strauss**

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A person's life path can sometimes meander before it takes root.

Anita Studer found hers planting trees, helping reforest and preserve Brazil's Pedra Talhada tropical rain forest.

After stints attending law school and vocational school, waitressing, and driving taxis, the Swiss native began pursuing a graduate degree in ornithology and an academic career. On a trip to the Pedra Talhada in 1981, Studer became fascinated with the Forbes's blackbird, threatened by extinction due to the massive deforestation of its habitat.

An academic adviser told Studer that the small, long-tailed bird, known in Brazil as the asunmara, would make a good dissertation topic, but warned her to act quickly because the forest would likely be gone within a decade, and with it, the critically endangered species native to Brazil's Atlantic Forest.

"That was like a punch in the face, and it changed my life," Studer says.



Studer prepares an indigenous sapling for planting on a hilltop in northeast Brazil.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIO LATZEL, ROLEX AWARDS

She had an epiphany: save the forest, and she'd have the time she'd need to study the bird.

"People told me you cannot save the forest, but the more they told me, the more I wanted to do it," says Studer, a Rolex Laureate. "As a young scientist, how could I study something that would disappear? There were probably only a few hundred left then. This was a bird that needed to survive."

Studer soon began organizing tree seed planting efforts, raising indigenous saplings for the Pedra Talhada. Her farmers? Local kids from the village of Quebrangulo, organized into tree clubs.



Studer teaches ecology at a tree nursery in the Brazilian village of Quebrangulo.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIO LATZEL, ROLEX AWARDS

Persuading landowners to allow trees to be replanted was difficult at first, because they saw only a loss of income. Then a flood that swept through the stripped region destroyed more than 150 homes, a consequence of deforestation and subsequent soil erosion. "Instead of seeing the forest as something to be cut down, the flood convinced people that reforestation was important," Studer says.

Due largely to Studer's lobbying efforts, Brazil's government designated 11,000 acres of the Pedra Talhada a biological reserve in 1989, ensuring protection from from commercial logging, farming, and cattle grazing. It was "the greatest day of my life," says Studer.

Eventually, more than 10,000 children were recruited to start tree nurseries in 19 villages in 16 of Brazil's 26 states. Studer's efforts are featured in Italian documentary *Mamma Foresta e i Bambini di Strada*, which translates to *Mother Forest and the Street Children*.

To finance tree-growing operations, environmental awareness, and education projects, Studer recruited donors and established the Geneva-based Nordsta Reforestation and Education Association, which has also supported a solar energy program that provides power to rural schools without electricity, health centers, and vegetable gardens in northeast Brazil.

In the 30 years since her conservation work began, Studer says six million trees have been planted across Brazil, including a 25-kilometer corridor known as the Swiss Forest. And the Forbes's blackbird is flourishing.

"What's more important is the multiplier effect—we've induced so many people to plant, so many children growing up with a green hand, and raised the environmental conscious everywhere in Brazil," Studer says. Tree nurseries also provide local jobs, "giving even more value to the trees."

After recently publishing an educational comic book on the Pedra Talhada and completing a Portuguese-language book covering 30 years of biodiversity research, Studer says a little black bird may have derailed a career as an academic, but it's given her life far more meaning.

"If it hadn't been for the bird, I could have been one of the best ornithologists in Brazil," she says. "But protecting the forest was much more important than a good career."

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