



# WINTER'S PLANET

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BY STUART WINTER

# Alas, poor Romeo... the frog prince without a mate



**PLIGHT OF THE UNDER-FROG: Romeo is the last male of his kind and desperately needs a 'Juliet'**

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PANTOMIME season is upon us and in a country far, far away there lives an ugly frog longing to find his true love. In the traditional Christmas fairy tale, The Frog Prince, it takes only a kiss for the hapless amphibian to fall into the arms of a flaxen-haired maiden. The Brothers Grimm would struggle writing a denouement for the tale of Romeo the Sehuenecas water frog. Only the blood, sweat and toil of dedicated conservationists can pen a happy ending for his tragic story.

High in the sweltering, tropical montane forests of Bolivia, a team of biologists and vets are scouring rivers at the height of the rainy season for a partner for Romeo, feared to be the last of his kind, an “endling” hopping inexorably towards extinction.

Romeo's domain today is an aquarium at Bolivia's K'ayra Center of the Museo de Historia Natural Alcide d'Orbigny in Cochabamba City, where he arrived a decade ago after being collected and taken into captivity with the hope of helping save his kind from an onslaught of environmental disasters.

Climate change, habitat destruction, pollution and the introduction of ravenous trout into the mountain rivers conspired to send numbers of Sehuenecas water frogs – Telmatobius yuracare, to use their scientific name – plunging. The spectre of deadly chytridiomycosis, an infectious fungal disease that has devastated amphibians around the world, has only added to the water frogs' woes.

Time is running out. At 10 years old, Romeo is reaching the final third of his life span. Science has fewer than five years to find him a mate to continue the bloodline. Repeated searches for a female over intervening years have floundered but, as with all tales of woe and pathos, comes a hint of comedy.

An amusing enterprise between Global Wildlife Conservation, the Bolivian Amphibian Initiative and Match, the world's largest relationship company, has raised £20,000 to fund the quest for Romeo's Juliet. For our frog hero it meant having an online “singles” profile posted by Match to pull in donations and how could any female resist his charm?

“I'm a pretty simple guy,” swoons Romeo, with a hint of a grin. “I tend to keep to myself and have the best nights just chilling at home, maybe binge-watching the waters around me. I do love food, though, and will throw a pair of pants on and get out of the house if there's a worm or snail to be eaten.

“As for who I'm looking for, I'm not picky. I just need another Sehuenecas like myself. Otherwise, my entire existence as we know it is over...”

LIKE all good pantos, it will take an intrepid heroine to win the day and rescue Romeo from his life of imposed chastity. Enter stage right, Teresa Camacho Badani, chief of herpetology at the Bolivian museum and leader of the expedition which ventured forth last week.

“We are looking forward to scouring the streams to find Romeo his Juliet,” she enthuses. “I hope to find as many Sehuenecas water frogs this time as I did on the trips more than 10 years ago and ultimately set Romeo up on a blind date. This is a unique opportunity to prevent the extinction of a species that has become a playful flagship for conservation.”

The challenge is tough, yet the good guys should always get to live happily ever after, as Chris Jordan, GWC's Central America and Tropical Andes coordinator, pledges: “At GWC we're all about giving the under-frog a chance. Romeo hasn't given up hope, his fans haven't given up hope and neither have we.”

## Rupert's

Odd Party

EPISODE 6



“My Chinese doll is fine, I know, It leaves my shop tomorrow, though.”



The shop door slams, and Rupert blinks, “It's early-closing day!” he thinks.

Rupert takes quite a long time choosing the balloons and crackers he wants for his party. At length the parcel is ready and the shopman sees him off.

“I see you're still interested in my Chinese doll,” says the man. “This is the last you'll see of it. By tomorrow it will be gone. Now goodbye, little bear.”

Rupert is no sooner outside than the shop door closes firmly. “Goodness me!” he mutters. “I seem to have cut it very fine. It must be early-closing day again.”

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