

PANAMA 25 January 2016 – 3 February 2016

One of the many things I like to do when trying to determine what destinations I want to travel to, is do random internet searches of lodges and what animals show up. By chance, I found a Panama trip report from Cheeseman tours that visited the Los Quetzales Ecolodge and Spa in western Panama which is located near the border of Costa Rica. Mainly a birding trip report, it did show that one of the cabins has nightly visits from Cacomistles and Kinkajous. I had already wanted to visit Coiba Island, so decided to plan a trip around these two places, as well as a stop at the Canopy Tower that had good results for others on this page. I used Yampu tours in the United States as usual to set up my trip, and they had Ancon Expeditions do the ground work in Panama. Ancon did a great job and everything about the trip went smoothly. My buddy Jyl joined me on the trip.

Day 1 – took an evening flight into Panama City, then stayed the night at the Bristol Hotel downtown.

Day 2 – We were transferred to the Albrook domestic airport to take a thirty minute flight to David, Panama. From there we had a 90 minute ish private transfer to the Los Quetzales Lodge which is located in Guadalupe, about 70 km from David. You could also drive from Panama City (450 km away) which in theory should take about 6-6.5 hours. The lodge itself can set up a



transfer from David. We did find the majority of the staff had limited English (to match my limited Spanish) so setting up a guide was a good idea. We met our guide Genover Santanaria (nickname Ito- email genover700@hotmail.com) in the lobby of the hotel. While he is mainly a birder, he was very enthusiastic to look for mammals. Besides doing tours near the lodge, he is also keen to set up longer camping type trips to look for other mammals. The lodge itself is situated in highland cloud forest at 2,200 meters above sea level, and lies within the boundaries of the Volcan Baru national park. The property consists of a main lodge and spa, plus cabins that are situated up on a hill in the cloud forest, that take about 30-35 minutes to reach via the lodge. They use a tractor to bring guests up to the cabins, but you could also use a 4 wheel drive. To see the Cacomistles you have to stay in Cabin number 8. It would be difficult to go just for a night tour,

especially if people are staying in the cabin with its remote location. I was told they do not let tourists from the lodge go up to the cabins at night. Cabin number 9, which is located right behind 8, also has visits, but not as frequent. The cabin consisted of three comfortable sleeping areas, a kitchen, dining area, living area with a wood stove and three bathrooms. The upstairs has a balcony where you can put fruit out at night for the wildlife. The first night they only left us with 6 plantains. My recommendation is to ask for extra fruit, especially if you want to watch the wildlife longer. Kinkajous, I also learned, are eating machines and can plow through food quickly. There are also hummingbird feeders and a seed feeding station for birds. The lodge can also arrange bringing up dinner and breakfast for you (pretty much the best food on the trip), as well as get a fire started for you as the cabin had no heat. After arriving at the cabin, I saw my first mammals, as three Bang's mountain squirrels were enjoying themselves at the seed feeding station.

Again cabin number 8 is the only one they come to, but you do have chances to see the squirrels while hiking. When Ito saw my squirrel enthusiasm, he recommended that we hike up the Los Minas trail to look for Alfaro's pygmy squirrels. According to him they are common sightings from the trail. The trail head was about a 5 minute walk from cabin number 8. I do not remember seeing a sign for the trail head, but is one of



the more popular trails, as it ends at a waterfall, staff members should be able to point you in the right direction. The trail is considered a moderate hike, however every time I hike at elevation I am reminded how out of shape I really am. The forest patches about 300 mm from the actual waterfall are the best places to look for the squirrels. While we scanned on the way up and saw nothing, within one minute of looking on the way down, I was watching my first pygmy squirrel. It was too fast for pictures, however it did give good views. After the hike we went back to cabin number 8. Right at dusk, when my friend and Ito walked into the cabin to start cutting up fruit, a Cacomistle ran down the cabin length, then started drinking from one of the hummingbird feeders. I heard something behind me, and turned and two Cacomistles (a female with an older offspring) were sitting in the seed station staring at me. As soon as we started putting the fruit out, the Cacomistles readily came to eat, but except for the younger individual, would grab a piece of fruit and run off. That night, five separate individuals came to snack (I



After Ito left I was standing on

the porch with my friend waiting for something to show. My friend looked at me and said, “ummm look down”. Literally 10 cm from my hand a Kinkajou was eating, not caring at all about my presence. He proceeded to snack with us just sitting right by him, very relaxed. When one of the Cacomistles saw him, it let out the most ear piercing banshee screams I have ever heard. Pretty much when the Kinkajou was eating, no Cacomistles would come on the porch. They would however look down from the roof and hang out in the trees by the cabin waiting their turn.



All in all, while not really a natural experience to

some people, it was a fantastic experience for me, and in my opinion is no different than watching birds at a bird feeding station or baiting mammals at a hide to photograph.

Day 2 – in the morning more Bang's mountain squirrels were in the seed station. We decided to spend the day bird watching as I had never seen a Resplendent Quetzal, and it was what the lodge is known for. We drove to an area by the national park headquarters to wait for the quetzals. All in all we saw five individuals (two males and three females). We also saw a Red Tailed squirrel, and a lone Bang's mountain Squirrel.



That night we set out about three times as much fruit as the first night. The first mammal to show up was the Kinkajou from the previous night. Then within 5 minutes the largest Kinkajou I have ever seen showed up and proceeded to mow down an entire porch length of fruit in 10 minutes. The Kinkajous seemed very relaxed with one another. It was not until they left, that the Cacomistles showed up (three lone adults at separate times). We decided to go to sleep before all the fruit was eaten. At 1 am, I was awoken to what sounded like a mixed herd of 200

Cacomistles and Kinkajous running up and down the roof, making intermittent banshee screams and chortling, for what seemed like hours. We had left the hummingbird feeders out to try to attract bats (none seen), and when we woke up the next morning, the outside of the cabin (with the feeders dismantled on the ground and fruit peels everywhere) looked like a frat party we had not been invited to.



Day 3- The Bang's mountain squirrels were again at the seed station as we left cabin number 8. From the lodge we had set up a private transfer to the Heliconia Bed and Breakfast. The lodge is owned by a Dutch ex pat couple, Kees and Loes Roos. They also run Tanager tours, which is currently the only tour company that runs organized tours to Coiba island. They also serve as the main guides. The hotel is located about an hour south of Santiago in the Veraguas province. It was supposed to take five hours to get there, but with the road conditions and amount of construction on the roads, it took almost 6.5 hours. The lodge itself sits on about 8 hectares of secondary forest. The hotel has 8 rooms, two with air conditioning. They also provide a home cooked dinner and breakfast with the Coiba packages. One of the rooms had a group of Long Nosed Proboscis bats roosting on the entrance ceiling. One with a small baby.





A lone Nine Banded armadillo was also behind the main hotel on a small hill at dusk (sadly my camera was in the room). I was told Northern Tamanduas were a common sighting, and was told two individuals were seen the day after we left for Coiba, hanging from a tree near the dining area.

Day 4 – We drove about ten minutes to the harbor and picked up our transfer boat. My friend and I were joined by a young couple from Germany for the tour. The boat trip took around 3 hours to get to the Coiba Island Ranger Station. On the way in we saw multiple pods of Pantropical spotted dolphins. We also saw two yellow bellied sea snakes on the surface of the water, which was an exciting find for me.



The island itself was previously a hard labor prison area, especially during the time of Manuel Noriega, and was known for brutal conditions, torture, and executions. The prison was closed in 2004, and the national park was started in 1992. The island itself covers about 270,125 hectares, with only

20% being above water. It is home to 36 species of mammals, the howler monkey

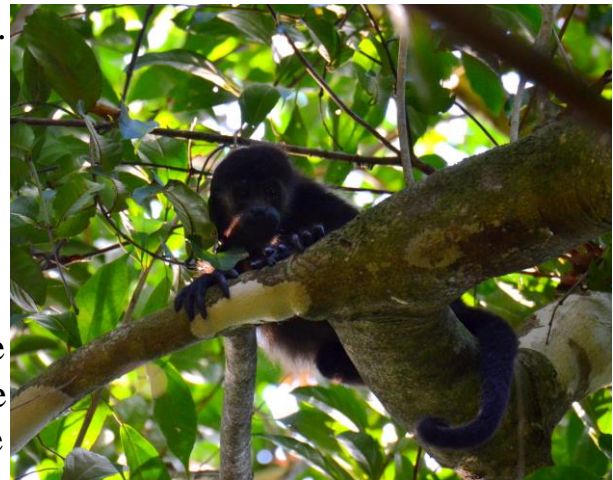
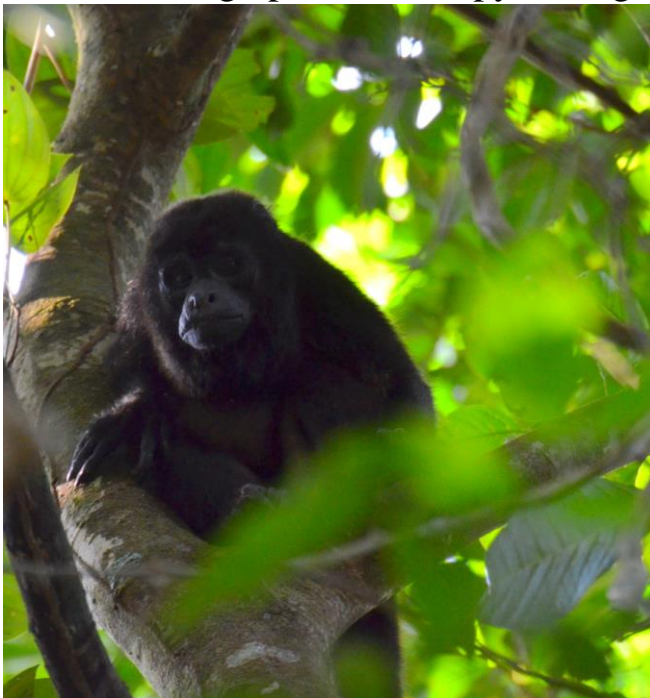
and the agouti being my main targets. The only

place to stay on the island is the AMAM ranger station.

They had several cabins with two rooms, each with five beds and a private bathroom. You can also camp. There is electricity between 7 pm – 6 am. There is a small kitchen area, but you have to bring food in with you (which was included with the tour). This was my first experience staying at a ranger station. I



was told as far as ranger stations go , from the German couple , that it was clean and comfortable. After checking in at the ranger station (basically just need your passport number), we headed out via our boat to snorkel. The snorkeling was fine. A nice variety of fish and sea turtles. The majority of the coral however was blanched white from rising sea temperatures due to a recent El Nino year. After this we did our first island hike along the Sendero dos Monos trail, one of the better trails to look for the howlers. In the exact location that our guide stated they commonly hang out, about a five minute walk from the trail head, we found two howlers sitting up in the canopy staring at us.



After
the
hike
we

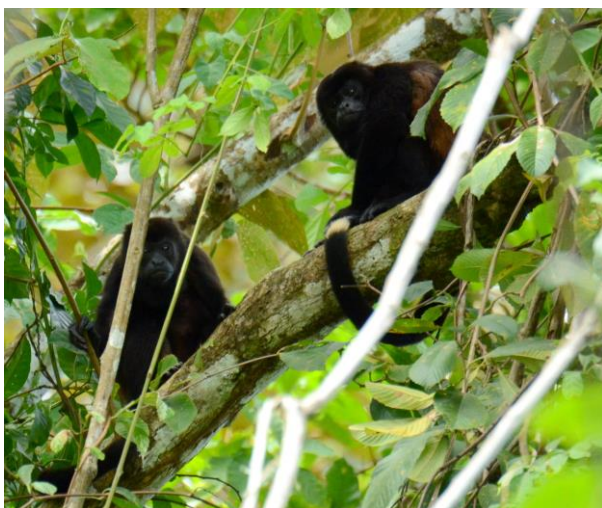
went back to the ranger station. We were told because of the large number of crocodiles around the island, not to get in the water after dark. Once we got back we saw our first of MANY Coiba Island agoutis around the station grounds. Dusk

and dawn were the best time to see this very approachable species.

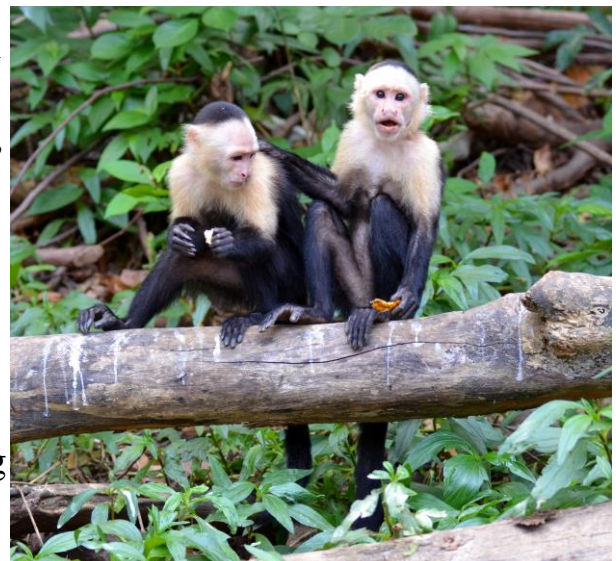


We also saw a troop of White Headed Capuchins, as well as a lone Common Opossum that tried to walk into the dining area while we were eating dinner.

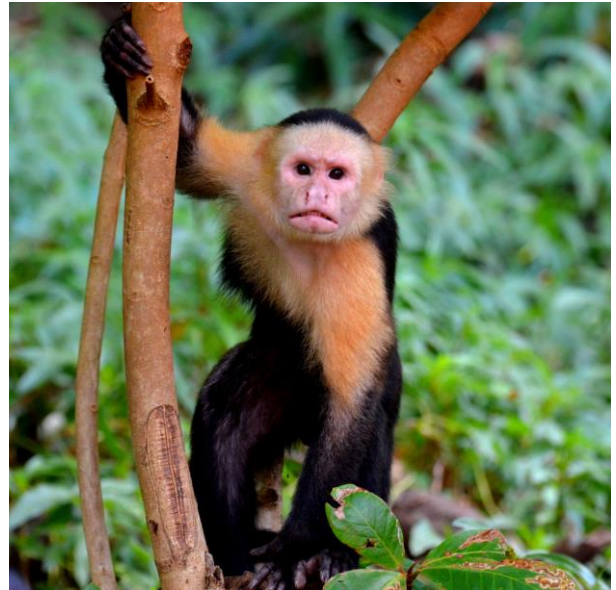
Day 5 – included more agoutis in the morning, a mammal less mangroves tour, and a hike to a hot springs area along the Sendero los Pozos trail, that had been previously used by Noreiga to relax after a full day of torturing prisoners. Along the hot spring trail we saw a second pair of howlers very high in the canopy. Back at the ranger station we again saw the



capuchins, agoutis, and another common opossum walking around



camp.



Day 6

– our last morning, there were more agoutis walking around. The boat trip back took closer to 4 hours due to rough seas. After getting back to the Heliconia bed and breakfast we were driven to Santiago (which took about 1 hour) to pick up a Seneca light aircraft that we had chartered to fly us back

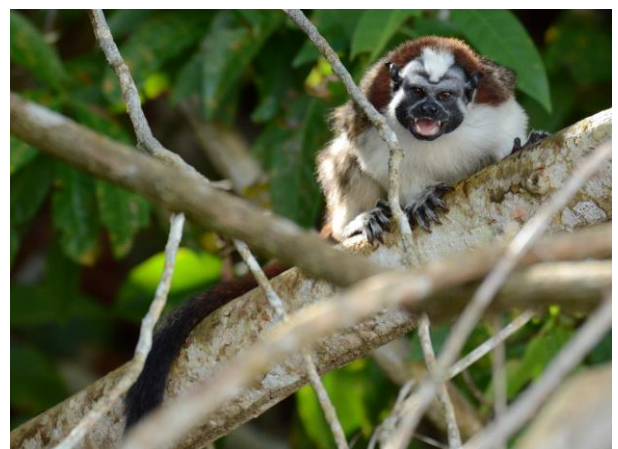
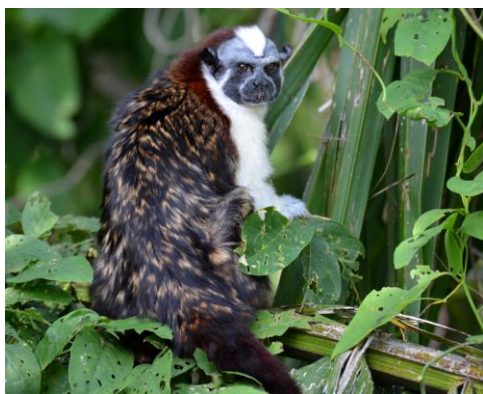
to Panama City. From there we were transferred to the Canopy Tower which has been previously described on this blog. When I got to the tower I asked the first guide I saw what the chances of seeing a Western Night monkey was. She had told me that there was an active day roost at the Gamboa Rainforest Lodge and that they would try to take us. We also signed up for a night tour each night. Two of the nights my friend and I were the only ones doing it, so I do not think the rule of having to have a certain minimum number of tourists still holds. The night tour basically takes you down the private road from the lodge to the main highway area. It usually lasts about 1.5 hours depending on what you see. The first night out we saw two Brown Throated Three toed sloths, one Kinkajou, and one Olingo (which Jon Hall reported as Western lowland and not the Allen's as reported by the Tower).



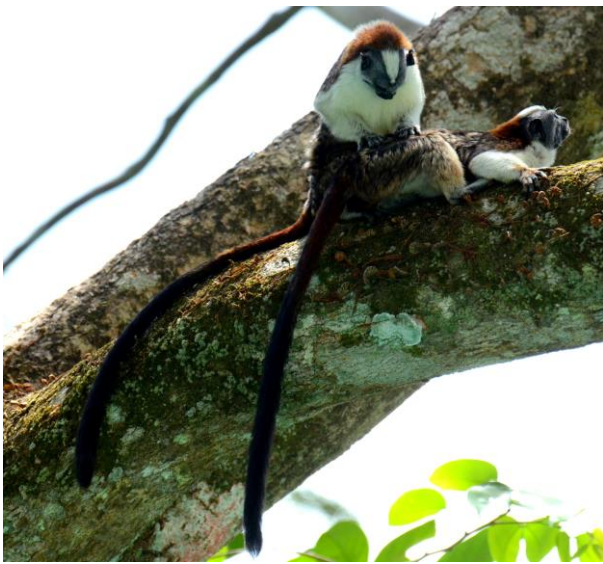
Day 7 – the last time I went to Panama, I did a small boat tour of the Gatun lake area to one small island that had some White Headed capuchins on it. I was not super impressed. Part of our tour was to repeat this experience and I did not realize it until I got to the Tower. All the guides there however kept talking about how it was there favorite excursion to go on. Rich, a guide from Ancon tours, took us as well as two other couples on the trip. This time the trip far exceeded my expectations. He told us how some of the primates on the small islands along the lake had been placed there for research studies, however he also had seen primates (such as mantled howlers) swimming from shore to islands. We stopped at multiple islands that day and had excellent views of Geoffreys's tamarins and White Headed



capuchins. We also saw a group of Long Nosed bats under a large fallen tree.



I asked Rich if we could stop to look for the Western Night monkeys at Gamboa, since we used their dock to take the boat trip. After getting detailed directions from one of the Canopy guides, we set off. The roost site is located on a trail to an indigenous village. I figured since it is their known site, getting more detailed directions from them is warranted. We went at about 1 pm, and saw nothing. Rich then told me about a spot that was pretty much guaranteed for the species at the Melia Panama Canal hotel which is located in Colon. Since we were going by that hotel the next day, we were told by the Tower guides that we could make a pit spot. We had a small siesta time back at the Tower that was interrupted by a small troop of Geoffrey's tamarins right outside our window.



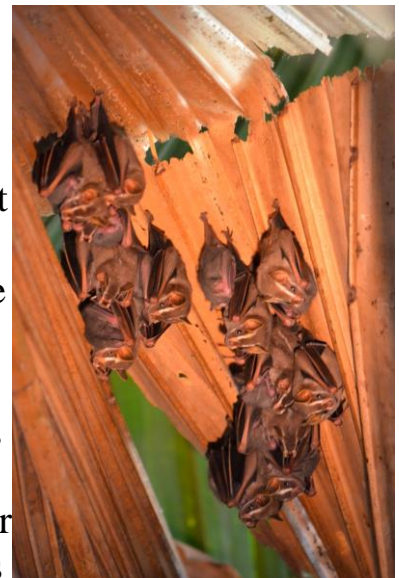
That afternoon we had a tour to the Summit, which is basically a small zoo and botanical

garden. They also have a roost site, right across from the main office for Common Tent making bats.

On the way to the Summit, a small troop of Mantled Howlers were in a tree on the side of the road. After the Summit, we were taken back to Gamboa Rainforest resort



to try again for the Western Night Monkey. I was a little discouraged to try again after the earlier fail. This time we were there at 4 pm, and sure enough, one night monkey peaked out at us for a brief period of time. I was



told that at least three monkeys had been seen recently in this tree. After that we did a small walk around the grounds and saw a Variegated Squirrel

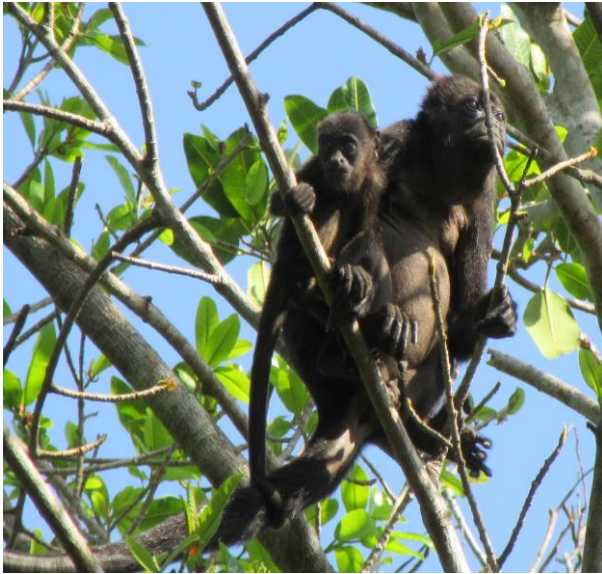
and several Central American Agoutis.

We did search for Lesser Capybaras , that I had seen well the last time I was in Panama, and did not see any. I was told they are now mainly hanging out in the water by the marina. On the drive back up to the Canopy Tower we saw a small family of White Nosed Coatis. On our second night safari, we saw two Kinkajous, two Common Opossums, an Olingo and two, Hoffman's Two toed sloths.



Day 8 – In the morning at breakfast I noticed bats coming into the roof of the lodge. I was told by one of the guides that they are mainly Little Mastiff bats. We were scheduled on a day trip to the San Lorenzo National Park and Fort which is located on the Atlantic Coast roughly two hours from the Canopy Tower. We ended up being the only guests on the tour so we were able to stop at the Melia Panama Canal hotel without objection from another guest (ie tourist that only wanted to look at birds, which has happened to me befoer). Being an upscale hotel, it has a wall around it with a guarded gate. We told the gate attendant that we wanted to see the property to possibly stay there another time, and were let in without difficulty. To get to the day roost, take the road from the guard station until you come to a road on your right that winds around the back of the hotel. You will see a historical looking black artillery gun in front of you before you turn to the right. Once you see a large blue water holding tank on your right, park. Behind this and slightly to the right is a large ficus tree. The actual roots of the tree are below you, so the night monkeys are pretty much at eye level on the right side of the tree. We got to the hotel around 9 am, and as soon as they heard us, two very sleepy night monkeys poked out and stared at us.





We also saw several Central American Agoutis on the property. After this we headed to the San Lorenzo National park and did two hikes. We saw two family groups of Mantled Howlers and a small troop of White Headed capuchins.



We also saw a lone White Nosed Coati run in front of our car. After that we went to the historical fort. In one of the cells we found a lone Lesser Sac Winged bat and two Common Big Eared bats.



We then went back to the Canopy Tower and decided to have a drink on the roof. Two Geoffrey's tamarins were hanging out in one of the trees by the roof. I did each night look for the Spectral bats that Jon hall descried, and never saw them. On our final night drive we saw a Central America Woolly opossum, four Hoffmans Two toed sloths, three

Olingos, a Forest rabbit and a Common opossum.



Day 9 – home

A couple thoughts about the trip.

If you really want to see a Cacomistle, cabin number 8 is a must. If it is booked, I would recommend trying to stay at another time. For the bird lovers, there is an amazing variety of hummingbirds, plus the Quetzals were beautiful.

1. With a lot of leg work you could possibly do the Coiba trip yourself. This would involve hiring a boat and setting up accommodation permits with the national park service which I was told is now difficult. Supposedly they are thinking of setting up a small restaurant by the ranger station, as well as improving the cabins to be for two people each, instead of five. You can also camp/pitch a tent, by the ranger station as well. We did hike the trails behind the ranger station to look for Howlers , where they are sometimes seen. However , it was nice having a guide that knew of good locations to look for them (both trails we saw them on we needed a boat to get to).
2. I have never had so many family and friends question me about getting the Zika virus. I explained it was not on my itinerary.

Trip list

1. Bang's Mountain Squirrel – *Syntheosciurus brochus*
2. Alfaro's pygmy squirrel – *Microsciurus alfari*
3. Kinkajou – *Potus flavus*
4. Cacomistle – *Bassariscus sumichrasti*
5. Nine banded armadillo – *Dasybus novemcinctus*
6. Long nosed proboscis bat – *rhynchonycteris naso*
7. Pantropical spotted dolphin – *Stenella attenuata*
8. Common opossum – *Didelphis marsupialis*
9. White Headed capuchin -*Cebus capacinus*
10. Coiba Island Agouti – *Dasyprata coibae*
11. Coiba Island Howler Monkey – *Alouatta coibensis*
12. Mantled Howler Monkey – *Aloutta palliata*
13. Geoffrey's tamarin – *Sa guinus geoffroyi*
14. Western Night Monkey – *Aotus zonalis*
15. Hoffman's Two Toed Sloth – *Chioloepus hoffmanni*
16. Brown Throated Three Toes Sloth – *Bradypus variegatis*
17. Western Lowland Olingo – *Bassaricyon medius*
18. White nosed coatimundi – *Nasva narica*
19. Common Big Eared Bat – *Micronycteris microtis*
20. Common Tent Making Bat – *Uroderma bilobatum*
21. Central American Woolly Opossum - *Caluromys derbianus*
22. Red Tailed Squirrel – *Sciurus granalensis*
23. Central American Agouti – *Dasyprocta punctata*
24. Tapeti (Forest rabbit) – *Sylvvilasus gabbi*
25. Lesser White Lined Bat – *Saccopteryx leptura*
26. Variegated Squirrel – *Sciurus variegatoides*
27. Little Mastiff bat – *Molossus molossus*