

Yucatan Peninsula trip report, 10-20 December 2016

VLADIMIR DINETS

Northern Yucatan Peninsula has remarkably low biodiversity for a mainland Neotropic area. It has been inundated in Pleistocene; its deciduous forests are a dry island separated from the rest of the continent by a rainforest belt; it's been almost completely deforested by the Mayan Civilization; it was also one of the first parts of the Americas to see the introduction of European hunting technologies. Mammalwatching here isn't easy and sometimes a full night's drive or walk will result in zero sightings. However, it has a few endemics and near-endemics, and some other species are easier to see here than elsewhere.

This was my fourth trip to the Yucatan; I found two interesting locations not yet on the mammalwatching map.

Hacienda San Miguel (www.hacienda-sanmiguel.com) is a few miles W of Valladolid in Yucatan State. I heard about it from a local zoology student back in 2003; he claimed that it was possible to see all of Yucatan's endemic birds and mammals there. Some of these are very rare and little-known, so I was highly skeptical of his claim, but it is true. This historic hacienda, where you can stay in somewhat rustic conditions for ~USD50, is a beautiful quiet place, conveniently located about halfway between Cancun and Merida.

Ask for Room 6 which has a balcony overlooking a citrus orchard on the S side of the hacienda, where **Central American agoutis** showed up at dawn, while **pacas** and **Virginia opossums** visited at night (unlike elsewhere in tropical Mexico, Virginia opossums are more common than common opossums in N Yucatan; one lived in a burrow near the horse barn). Under the balcony was a large pile of dry logs and brush where I flipped a **Yucatan small-eared shrew**, the best mammal of the trip. A **hispid pocket gopher** lived under the lawn in front of the reception; in three days that I was there it built only one fresh mound (just before dawn) and was briefly visible for a couple minutes while doing so (note that the mounds are leveled in the morning by the gardener). A **hairy-legged myotis** fed around the light in front of the hacienda church and sometimes briefly roosted on the church wall. Swarms of **Jamaican fruit bats** visited fruiting trees around the hacienda; if you looked closely, you could spot a few **greater fruit bats** among them. The pool looked like it had been designed for bat netting; I didn't have a mistnet and thus couldn't confidently identify the visiting bats, but it was obvious there were numerous species present. One briefly landed on a thatched roof nearby; I think it was an **Argentine brown bat**.

A groomed trail crosses the orchard (look for American vine snakes sleeping in trees) and enters the forest near a small hut where **common big-eared bats** roosted at night sometimes. Behind the hut is a deep well where a few **black-winged little yellow bats** roosted; if you shined a light there, they started flying up and down the well in incredibly tight spirals. The trail then returns to the hacienda through a patch of forest where **Yucatan deer mouse** occurred. Another groomed loop trail goes between two dry sinkholes where I saw a **grayish mouse opossum**, which is very rare in Yucatan.

A partially overgrown path leads S from the SW corner of the property and into some tall forest (tall forest in N Yucatan means trees 8-10 m high). Here I found **Yucatan** and **Deppe's squirrels** during the day, and saw a **Mexican mouse opossum**, a **Gaumer's pocket mouse** and,

best of all, a **vesper mouse** at night. There were also tracks of a **Yucatan brocket** about a mile down the trail.

To the W of the hacienda is a large overgrown field where **white-footed mouse** and **slender harvest mouse** were easy to find at night by walking along the edge and looking for moving grass stems.

If you follow the road E towards Valladolid, the first village is Pixoy. There is a small cave just outside the village (ask locals for directions) where I found small numbers of **Jamaican fruit bats**, **lesser dog-like bats** and **broad-eared freetails**, plus one **golden bat**. If you drive W on the same road, the first village is Uayma, famous for its beautiful church where a few **black mastiff bats** roost (there is another small colony in Valladolid cathedral, not directly visible). The second village is Tinum, after which the road goes through good forest and has virtually no nighttime traffic. If you turn left in Dzitas (the fourth village), you'll cross more good forest and soon get to Chichen Itza. I drove this route (there and back) twice on one night and saw a **nine-banded armadillo**, a **Yucatan brocket**, a **grey fox** and a **big-eared climbing rat**. A huge bat flew across the road; I think it was a **big-eared woolly bat**. Next morning I drove it again and saw a roadkill **margay**.

Birding at the hacienda was great: wild ocellated turkeys walked out of the forest every morning to join domestic turkeys at the feeding pen; Yucatan flycatcher, Mexican sheartail, Yucatan parrot and orange oriole could be seen on the grounds, while Yucatan jay, Yucatan vireo, Yucatan woodpecker, black catbird and rose-throated tanager were fairly easy to find in the forest. I saw both Yucatan poorwill and Yucatan nightjar on the road to Chichen Itza, while Yucatan wren occurred in an overgrown pasture near Uayma.

Chichen Itza used to be a great mammalwatching destination where you could see numerous bats, rodents (reportedly including **vesper mice** in Cenote X'toloc), and small carnivores. Nowadays you can't enter at night (there are security cameras and guards with dogs); all interior spaces are locked up, and you can't even climb the Great Pyramid. I didn't even see Yucatan squirrels that people have reported just a few years ago. It's a lot more interesting to visit less developed Mayan ruins to the S.

Isla Mujeres, a much smaller and more built-over version of Cozumel, has extremely low biodiversity even by Yucatan standards. The only native mammals reported from the island are **Jamaican fruit bat** and **Pallas's long-tongued bat**; both were easy to see in flight in and around the tiny remnant forest at 21.208664N, 86.718477W. Less arid habitat exists on steep slopes in Garrafon National Park, a snorkeling place. The park is officially open only during the day, although the reef where you snorkel has mostly nocturnal fauna. If you swim out from the park soon after dark and snorkel around 200-300 m from the shore, you have a good chance to see **Atlantic spotted dolphins** (I did at first attempt). A 1-km concrete trail follows the shore from the park to Punta Sur, the easternmost point of Mexico. Along the trail are a few caves (no bats seen, but there were a few droppings) and shady trees, under one of which a very skittish bat (almost certainly a **southern yellow bat**) was roosting at night. The Point is also worth visiting during the day: it's fairly scenic, there are some interesting eroded formations, you can see all four native land reptiles of the island (all of them non-endemic lizards), and watching the sea might be worth some time, although I didn't see anything except for possible **bottlenose dolphins** very far away and dozens of magnificent frigatebirds.