

Panama 2017

There are already quite a few trip reports on Panama, so here I will only provide a short update on issues that might be useful to people visiting the country to watch mammals. I was in Panama with my family for 2 weeks in July 2017, visiting Gamboa, Amistad NP (Los Quetzales lodge), Panama City and the San Blas islands. We rented a vehicle for the first 8 days, and the rest of the time we took flights and used Uber (which works very well in Panama City and is much more convenient than taxis).

Car rental

What is it with car rental in Panama? Trip Advisor is awash with warnings about how complex renting a vehicle there can be, and even forewarned with this knowledge, the process still took over 90 minutes. We rented from Dollar in Albrook airport, partly because we were going to drop the vehicle off there, and partly because people said it's less complicated than renting at the main airport at Tocumen. In Panama it is mandatory to pay insurance of either \$18 or \$23 a day on top of the usual vehicle insurance (CDW), which is typically an extra \$12 a day. Many people use their credit cards to cover the CDW, but I've heard that they can try to make this difficult for you, so take a copy of your credit card coverage (preferably in Spanish), to show them that you are covered. Even with this knowledge it still took an hour and a half to get our hands on the vehicle, as the guy at the counter could not reconcile his figures with what we'd already paid to Expedia, and tried to convince us that part of that amount was Expedia's commission that we would have to pay Dollar. After an hour back and forth on this I turned him over to Lara, and when I returned 10 minutes later he was meekly filling out the forms, having accepted our figures. Even then he said we had to sign an empty credit card receipt for reasons that I still can't fathom. No extra charges had been added to our card by the end of the trip, but it was still a very bizarre process.

Few of the roads in Panama are properly signed, so I suggest you use Google maps or get a GPS. We purchased a local phone chip at the airport (\$3) and put \$10 on it which lasted us the whole trip. Google map times are pretty accurate, but we did get held up for 40 mins or so by a demonstration, and I got caught speeding once which took a little while to talk my way out of.

Gamboa

We looked into staying at the Canopy lodge, but it gets quite pricey when traveling with 4 people, particularly when many of the guided walks/night drives are extra costs. It probably wouldn't have been fair for me to stay there and put the rest of the family in a small B&B (although it did cross my mind), so instead we rented an AirB&B in Gamboa owned by a lady who works for the Smithsonian, and hired a guide who came out each day from Panama City (about 30 mins away). His name was Garceth Cunampio, and he had worked in the Soberiana NP for many years, so knew many of the people in the area, which helped with getting recent sighting information. He was eager to please and willing to work well into the night. Others who have reported here walked the Pipeline Road without a guide and saw many of the same species we encountered, but I was glad to have Garceth as he spotted several mammals that I would have missed. Other than the primates we saw most of the species at night along the stretch of forest from Gamboa to the Pipeline road and along the

Pipeline Road itself. The track gets pretty wet, so I recommend taking gum boots. There is only one small shop in Gamboa, so I recommend you stock up with food at a supermarket in Panama City.

Mammal list for the Gamboa area (3 nights):

Common Opossum – one individual in the rubbish bin at the Rainforest Discovery Centre, looking suitable guilty.

Central American Woolly Opossum – two individuals on two nights close to the entrance of the Pipeline Road. One was rather effectively staring down two Night monkeys.

Gray Four-eyed Opossum – a quick glimpse at the entrance to the Rainforest Discovery Centre road

Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth – One on Pipeline Road.

Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth – One in Gamboa

Nine-banded Armadillo – One in garden in Gamboa

Common Tent-making Bat – Two in garden in Gamboa

Geoffrey's Tamarin – Small group in Gamboa. The Tamarins have set routes in the town, mostly following the gardens of the houses that feed them. They are most visible in the early morning and afternoon from about 4pm onwards.

Panamanian Night monkey – 2 individuals near Pipeline Road entrance

White-faced Capuchin – just outside Gamboa

Mantled Howler – Rainforest Discovery Centre road

Variiegated Squirrel – 3 in gardens in Gamboa

Red-tailed Squirrel – 1 on Pipeline Road

Tomes' Spiny Rat – 1 at night at Discovery Centre entrance hut

Lesser Capybara - We saw one Capybara at the ammo dump, but they were much easier to see on the short road leading to the Gamboa lodge. If you're coming from Gamboa town you turn left just before the bridge traffic lights, and then scan the area leading down to the lake to the right of the road.

Central American Agouti – Many in gardens in Gamboa

Forest Rabbit – Many at entrance to Pipeline Road

Olingo – One about 2 km along Pipeline Road, at the last minute of the last night. This species looks similar to the Kinkajou, but is smaller and much shyer, and tried to slink away and hide from the torch. We had seen a Kinkajou 5 minutes earlier and by comparison it behaved like a 4-year old that has just drunk a Red Bull.

Kinkajou – Three along the Pipeline Road.

We also saw several Caiman along the Pipeline Road, one Crocodile, Basilisk Lizard and Iguana in Gamboa, as well as numerous brightly-coloured dicky birds.

Los Quetzales

This lodge is a 7-hour drive from Panama City (8 hours with stops). The main lodge is close to a small village at the edge of the Amistad Park, and cabin 8 (where the Cacomistles come) is a 25-minute drive up a very rocky road within the cloud forest inside the Park. We considered hiring a 4-wheel drive pickup which would allow us to do the drive ourselves, but were glad we didn't, as the road basically involves boulder-hopping, and after it rains you need a 4-wheel car with high clearance, low range, and preferably diff-lock. The lodge will drive you up and down once a day without extra charge, and you'll probably want to spend

most of your time in the cabin and surrounding forest anyway. Again, buy food at a city (we stocked up in David) before getting to the lodge if you intend to feed yourselves.

The cabins are in a truly spectacular bit of forest, and the best thing is that the animals tend to come to you. People who visited in the past mentioned many Kinkajous and Cacomistles coming to the feeding stations on the veranda of the cabin. We did have a tame (and rather portly) Cacomistle visit every night, but only one, and we didn't see any Kinkajous. I asked the lodge owner (a very interesting man called Carlos Alfaro) about this, and he told me that the other animals had stopped coming about 8 months ago, and now only the one Cacomistle was visiting. Unfortunately, I suspect that this means that the carnivore population has been affected by a disease, such as parvo virus, distemper or rabies. We see this occasionally in carnivore populations in Tanzania, and it always takes a few years for the populations to recover. If you're visiting the lodge in the next year or two in the hope of seeing either of these species, I would first check with the management to find out if they are still coming.

The only mammals I saw away from the cabin were three Montane Squirrels on the Las Minas trail. Night walks were very quiet, and I would recommend just staying put and enjoying the Cacomistle. Avoid the Las Cascadas trail if you're looking for wildlife. The trail is mostly straight up or straight down, and in the wet season you'll spend a significant amount of time on your arse. It would have been nice to see a Quetzal – an honorary mammal if ever there was one – but it was the wrong time of the year and we missed it.

Mammal list for Los Quetzales (3 nights):

Cacomistle – 1 individual every night.

Chiriqui Singing Mouse – groups of 3-4 every day. This has to be one of the best mammal names ever. We unfortunately didn't hear any of them singing (apparently they sit up on their hind legs and trill like an insect), but we saw them throughout the day looking for scraps on the veranda.

Chiriqui Harvest Mouse – 1 animal on day 3 feeding for about 10 minutes on the veranda of the cabin. A rotund mouse with a huge tail.

Red-tailed Squirrel – several animals seen feeding on the veranda of the cabin on day 2 and 3.

Montane Squirrel – 3 individuals on the Las Minas trail. There appears to be some confusion about the species of squirrel inhabiting the Los Quetzales area. Jon reported that several people had mistaken the animals visiting the cabins for Montane Squirrels, when in fact all of the pictures proffered were of dark Red-tailed Squirrels. There were also reports of Alfaro's Pygmy Squirrels on the Las Minas trail. We saw three squirrels on the trail at around mid-morning, and all of them looked like Montane Squirrels, which are larger and have a bushier tail. I checked with a squirrel researcher who has done a lot of work in that area, and she confirmed that the small squirrels along those trails are the Montane Squirrel, and that Pygmy Squirrels are not known from that area.

Panama City

We visited the Metropolitan Park for little more than an hour at midday, more to pass the time than in the hopes of seeing much. We were pleasantly surprised to come across a number of animals, including both a two and three-toed sloth, Agouti, and Howler Monkey. Ended up sweating like hogs and I think the Uber driving was having second thoughts about picking us up when he saw us.

San Blas Islands

We spent three days here and it proved to be a mammal desert, with not even a bat flying by to liven things up. The snorkeling was OK, but the most interesting wildlife sighting was the daily migration of swallows onto a small mangrove-covered island. The island was no more than an acre in size, and yet every evening a million plus swallows would fly out to it to roost on the branches of the mangroves. Apparently the birds migrate up and down the coast and are only there for 3-4 months of the year.

Charles Foley