

A Long Weekend in Panama

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I. ITINERARY & SUMMARY:

Day 1 (12/28/17): Departed Tocumen at 0930, reaching Tortí at 1530. Evening visit and spotlighting at San Francisco Reserve 1700-2030. Night at Hotel Avicar.

Day 2 (12/29/17): Morning at Chucantí Nature Reserve for Brown-headed Spider Monkey 0800-1200 before returning to Hotel Avicar for lunch. Depart Tortí at 1400, arriving at Canopy Tower at 1730. Night drive on Semaphore Hill with guide Alex from 2000-2200.

Day 3 (12/30/17): Morning visit to Pipeline Road 0800-1100 (up to Rio Frijolitos) with guide Alex. Afternoon searching sites around Gamboa for Lesser Capybara. Night walk on Semaphore Hill from 2000-2130.

Day 4 (12/31/17): Morning visit to Gamboa Rainforest Resort and Pipeline Road entrance. Relaxing most of the afternoon. Night drive 2045-2230 before driving back to Tocumen.

Highlights: excellent views of **Brown-headed Spider Monkey, Rothschild's (Andean) Porcupine, Western Lowland Olingo, Spectral Bat,** and **Northern Tamandua** among a host of other Central American rainforest species, with comfort and "easy" hours added bonuses!

II. LOGISTICS:

For the Tortí section of the trip, it would be highly advisable to use a guide, especially if you'd like to locate the spider monkeys in a short amount of time and do not speak fluent Spanish. I hired Michael Castro (castromi12@hotmail.com), who used to work at Canopy Tower but now free-lances. He was reliable, friendly, and eager to please, ready to spend several hours spotlighting after a long day of travel. Importantly, he also had good eyes and knew the sites and habits of the spider monkeys well. Hotel Avicar is the best choice of accommodation in the area; the rooms are clean and very comfortable, food is good, and there are even a few mammals on the grounds. The hotel's owner, Andres, is friendly and helpful and knows many of the wildlife guides who visit the area (i.e. Michael).

For the 2 nights in Soberania NP, Canopy Tower, although expensive, is probably the best choice of accommodation for mammal watchers. My guide Alex Sanchez comes similarly recommended, and worked hard to get me the mammals I wanted to find and gave me tips to look for certain species on my own if necessary. I'd highly recommend renting a car while in the Gamboa area as Canopy Tower is blissfully free of regulations and you can walk and drive, day and night, as you please. All excursions out of Canopy Tower are extras and pricing sometimes borders on extortionate, so if you are keen on mammals it may be best taking a first excursion with lodge guides to familiarize yourself with sites (and visit stakeouts, fruiting/flowering trees, etc.), then continue visiting these locations on your own as the place (and guides) are decidedly bird-focused. Semaphore Hill, Pipeline Road, and other sites are legal to access independently day and night and I never ran into any issues with spotlighting on foot or by vehicle.

III. SITE GUIDE:

A. TORTÍ (Chepo and Darien Provinces)

This very interesting area, on the edge of the Darien, was recommended to me as a good place to look for Brown-headed Spider Monkey by Ignacio Yufera. As it happened, the area seemed to have a lot of potential for a variety of interesting species (despite rampant deforestation) and certainly merited more than just a one-night stay.

On the grounds of Hotel Avicar in Tortí town, we observed at least 3 **Red-tailed Squirrels** and a **Common Opossum** while walking at night. Mantled Howlers were calling from a strip of trees behind the hotel in the morning and Andres told me it should be easy to locate them with searching. There is currently a roost of **Central American Tent-making Bats** under one of the palm trees along the walkway to the rooms, and the numerous Heliconia plants look promising for Spix's Disk-winged Bat (though I didn't have time to search them properly).

The entrance to San Francisco Reserve is a few miles west of Tortí. The reserve, owned by Wally Kasuboski, a Catholic priest from Wisconsin, comprises one of the largest patches of natural primary forest left in the region. Father Wally, or "Padre Pablo" to the locals, has lived in the region for 30 years and supports dozens of local communities through his system of aqueducts. Most birders visit in the morning, but it's probably best to try this site in the evening, as the entrance road and trails are good for spotlighting. One note on access: the reserve gates shuts at 1800 so you must enter the reserve, register, and pay the \$10/person day use fee before then; after this time, you are free to remain in the reserve as long as you wish.

The access road to the base of the forest (4WD not necessary) travels through farmland and scattered riparian woodland, and is worth some effort spotlighting. We saw a skittish **White-tailed Deer** (the small, rufous rainforest form; a potential split) dash into a banana plantation at dusk and spotlight a **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth** and an excellent **Northern Tamandua** in a paddock. The habitat looks good for Nine-banded Armadillo, Forest Rabbit, and Crab-eating Fox (a recent arrival to the region) and Wally regularly sees Lesser Capybara along the creek leading down from the ponds at nightfall.

It's best to follow the left branch of the jeep trail, which travels along a rocky, fast-flowing stream into the forest. We frequently found sign of Water Opossum on stream banks, and the habitat looks excellent for Armored Rat. Spotlighting on foot, we observed an unusually confiding (but distant) **Western Lowland Olingo** and a **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth**; sign of Paca and Collared Peccary were abundant, but the bright moon likely interfered with chances. We also heard Mantled Howlers (commonly seen) and others have found Geoffroy's Tamarin, Panamanian Night Monkey, and Kinkajou. Black-headed Spider Monkey occurs in the reserve, but is most often seen around a dam higher up the mountain; Michael Castro suspects this species is easier to observe at Chucantí as there are more viewpoints over the forest to track calling animals at that site.

Chucantí Nature Reserve protects the region surrounding Cerro Chucantí, the highest peak of the Serrania de Maje range of Southeast Panama and encompasses one of the global strongholds of critically endangered **Brown-headed Spider Monkey** (*Ateles fusciceps*). The subspecies present here, *rufiventris*, is entirely glossy black in color, with the total population in Panama likely in the low hundreds and restricted to this site and the area surrounding Cana in PN Darien. Access involves a couple of river crossings that maybe tricky without 4WD.

While the habitat on the reserve buffer, poorly-connected scraps of remnant forest on ridge tops and along creeks, is quite uninspiring (I initially thought we were wasting our time before hearing the monkeys calling!), the monkeys seem to cling on in viable numbers and are relatively habituated, as they are not hunted by the local villagers. They are best seen just as the temperature begins rising in mid-morning, around 1000, when they are readily heard calling above the forested valleys. Michael Castro knows the resident spider monkeys here well; I visited the site where he observes them most often (he reckoned 80% likelihood in a morning of searching), and observed three troops (3, 6, and 2 animals each), with superb, prolonged views of the latter two groups. Walking away from them, as they lounged and ate figs in the open, was painful!

If planning a visit, bear in mind that trails here are steep, rough, and muddy and you'll need to move fast when monkeys call if you'd like to get good views. I found out upon my return that chiggers are abundant in tall grass here. The deforested slopes surrounding forest patches are also very hot and humid once the temperature rises, which is the optimal time to search for monkeys, so getting to the animals is no small task. Interestingly, it seems that since the monkeys overnigh in inaccessible areas higher up the mountain, later visits are actually more advisable than early morning ones!

There is very little other wildlife easily seen here due to the poor state of the habitat; **Mantled Howlers** are quite common and **Geoffroy's Tamarins** are findable by following their surprisingly loud calls. We also observed sign of Tayra at one site.

B. CANOPY TOWER & GAMBOA (PN SOBERANIA)

The Canopy Tower itself provides a great base for mammal watching in Soberania NP. Sitting on the observation deck at the top of the tower, or looking out the dining room windows mid-morning is a good way to see **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth** (almost omnipresent) and **Geoffroy's Tamarin**. Two habituated troops of tamarins generally visit between 1000-1300 to feed on bananas placed on a large tree, offering superb eye-level views. Mantled Howlers are easy to hear calling in the mornings, and are often seen from the windows of the tower as well, but not during my visit. In mornings and afternoons, a cheeky **White-nosed Coati** can often be seen around the tower entrance trying to steal food.

Every evening (around 1900), I saw the resident **Central American Woolly Opossum** visit the "tamarin tree" to feed on banana; reportedly, it is occasionally joined by Panamanian Night Monkey, Kinkajou, or Western Lowland Olingo. Spotlighting from the tower's upper deck often

yields **Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth** and more **Central American Woolly Opossums**, each of which I saw once.

Evening on the upper deck offers probably the best chance anywhere to see the fantastic **Spectral Bat** (Greater False Vampire Bat). Look for them hawking around the "golf ball" at the top of the tower in the hour immediately after nightfall, in swift arcs into and out of the forest canopy. On 12/29, I only observed 1 animal briefly but on 12/31, two animals (an adult and juvenile seemingly) put on a show for more than 5 minutes—superb!

I suspect the Spectral Bats constitute a small family group living nearby, which hunt the **Pallas's Mastiff Bats** (*Molossus molossus*) that roost in the building (which I saw twice flying around the dining area at nightfall).

At the tower, I also finally met mammal watcher Brian Keelan, whom I had corresponded with over the last couple of years on various bats in California. I spent the evening of 12/30 recording bats on the deck with Brian in the hope of finding him a Spectral Bat; while we didn't see one of those that day, we did observe and obtain excellent echolocation call recordings of **Pallas's Mastiff Bat**, **Greater White-lined Bat**, and an *Eptesicus* species as well as a couple more unidentified bats.

The winding road entrance road to the tower up Semaphore Hill is a good starting point for exploring the area. Since I had already seen most species present here, I only spent limited time here by day driving the road up or down, seeing 1-3 **Central American Agoutis** each drive, twice lone male **White-nosed Coatis**, and a gray-phase **Variiegated Squirrel** at the base of the road. There is a roost of **Lesser White-lined Bats** under the bridge at the base of the road (readily identified by chocolate brown coloration and yellowish stripe), but checking culverts was less productive than in the past it seems (I only saw 1 **Common Long-tongued Bat**). Alex also showed me a roost of excellent **Panamanian Night Monkey**, which is currently very reliable.

The guided night drives down the hill in the lodge's open-back vehicle produce a variety of nice species, especially when spotlighting is supplemented by thermal camera (which Brian had). My one complaint, however, was that the lodge was short-staffed and so only ran one drive (on 12/29)—it would've been nice to know that prior to arrival for planning purposes. That said, the one 2-hour drive we did (down and back up the road) was among the best I've ever had: we saw 2 **Brown-throated Three-toed** and 1 **Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloths**, a **Kinkajou** in a flowering Balsa and a **Panamanian Night Monkey** in a nearby Cecropia, a **Tome's Spiny Rat** (ID by size, white feet and underside, shiny fur, and long naked tail), and best of all, three wonderful **Rothschild's** (Andean) **Porcupines** (all picked up in Brian's heat scope)! For a species reputed to be quite rare, I suspect it's actually common here and just elusive and difficult to find with a spotlight: so a thermal camera is really the way to go for this species. A shorter self-initiated night walk on 12/30 found a **Central American Woolly Opossum**, 2 **Kinkajous**, and an excellent, close-up **Western Lowland Olingo** (the latter 2 species in the Balsa), while a quick drive down on 12/31 got a **Kinkajou** in the Balsa. Northern Tamandua and Nine-banded Armadillo are also reportedly quite regularly though I dipped here.

Several other notable mammal sites are scattered around the general Gamboa area. The road between Semaphore Hill and Gamboa (called Gamboa Road in various reports) should be good for night drives, but only late at night once traffic is no longer present. I observed 2 young **Collared Peccaries** here, and others have seen Common Opossum and Nine-banded Armadillo. Gamboa town itself is a good place to look for Variegated Squirrel (try the feeders in front of Canopy B&B), though I dipped as I arrived too late in the morning; **Central American Agoutis** are also omnipresent. The nearby Ammo Dump ponds still hold **Lesser Capybara**, but they are really only likely at night, when they graze just in front of the security gate.

Heading North from the ponds, you enter the beginning of the famous Pipeline Road (Camino Oleoducto). For walks, it's best to drive to the vehicle gate 2.0 km in and hike, preferably early enough to reach the interesting bits of the road beyond the Rio Frijolitos before the midday heat kicks in. **Red-tailed Squirrel** is abundant along the first section of road, while **Mantled Howler** can usually be located singly or in small groups in trees near small rivers. **Panamanian White-faced Capuchin** is common along much of the road and best located by following its raucous calls and noisy movements through the canopy. Northern Tamandua and Collared Peccary are seen quite regularly but are not particularly predictable, while Tayra and Jaguarundi may be seen with much luck (the latter especially is quite difficult). Neotropical Otter can be seen from time to time from bridges over the larger rivers, while Rufous Tree Rat is sometimes reliably seen at tree hole roosts near the turnoff to the Rainforest Discovery Center.

I never did night walks on the Pipeline Road, but from reading others' reports it seems you can expect a similar range of species to Semaphore Hill, though some (i.e. Western Lowland Olingo) are less common. Nine-banded Armadillo and Paca are more common here, with the latter especially best seen late on moonless nights. The grassy fringes along the entrance to the road immediately after the Ammo Dump ponds is the best site for **Forest Rabbit**, which is unlikely to be seen elsewhere; I found 3 in one evening.

Heading South from Semaphore Hill, you first pass Summit Park, worth a brief stop to see the extremely abundant **Central American Agouti** and Central American Tent-making Bat roosting in the palms along the entrance walk (which I didn't look for). A few km to the South is the Radisson Summit Hotel & Golf, a very reliable site for **Lesser Capybara**. We asked at reception about tips to look for Capybara and were directed to a site on the golf course where we got excellent close-up views of 6 animals. This is a surprisingly elusive species and for the time being, this seems to be a reliable spot.

IV. SPECIES LIST: 28 SP. TOTAL

<p>Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth (<i>Bradypus variegatus</i>)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 observed 12/28 at San Francisco Reserve, with 1 each on Jeep Trail and entrance road - 2 seen 12/29 on Semaphore Hill night drive - 1 seen 12/30 at Pipeline Road - 1 seen 12/31 at Canopy Tower
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Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth (<i>Choloepus hoffmanni</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 observed 12/29 at Canopy Tower, with 1 on observation deck at nightfall and another on Semaphore Hill night drive
Northern Tamandua (<i>Tamandua mexicana</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 observed very well 12/28 on San Francisco Reserve entrance road night drive
Panamanian Night Monkey (<i>Aotus zonalis</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 observed 12/29 on Semaphore Hill night drive - 3+ seen 12/30 at stakeout on Semaphore Hill
Geoffroy's Tamarin (<i>Saguinus geoffroyi</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 6+ seen 12/29 at Chucanti Nature Reserve - Habituated troop observed 12/30 and 12/31 at Canopy Tower
Panamanian White-fronted Capuchin (<i>Cebus imitator</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 15+ seen 12/30 in at least 3 different troops on Pipeline Road - 2 seen 12/31 on Pipeline Road (before Discovery Center turnoff)
Mantled Howler (<i>Alouatta palliata</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4 seen (2+1+1) 12/29 at Chucanti Nature Reserve - 4 seen (1+1+2) on Pipeline Road, mainly near river bridges 12/30
Brown-headed Spider Monkey (<i>Ateles fusciceps</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 11 seen (3+6+2) 12/29 at Chucanti Nature Reserve; really exceptional views of beautiful animals!
Rothschild's (Andean) Porcupine (<i>Coendou quichua</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 seen 12/29 on Semaphore Hill night drive, all picked out by Brian's thermal scope; excellent views of the latter 2 in full view on branches
Lesser Capybara (<i>Hydrochaeris isthmus</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Excellent close-up views of 6 animals at a small pond on the golf course of Radisson Summit Golf Resort afternoon 12/30 - 4 observed 12/31 on night drive at Ammo Dump ponds security gate
Central American Agouti (<i>Dasyprocta punctata</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seen commonly in Soberania NP 12/29, 12/30, and 12/31 by day - The best sites were Summit Park and lawns in Gamboa though also observed on Pipeline Road and Semaphore Hill
Tome's Spiny Rat (<i>Proechimys semispinosus</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 seen briefly on Semaphore Hill night drive 12/29; ID by size, white legs and underside, long naked tail, and glossy

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	fur
Red-tailed Squirrel (<i>Sciurus granatensis</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 on 12/28 at Hotel Avicar (Tortí) - 2 (with more heard) 12/30 on Pipeline Road
Variegated Squirrel (<i>Sciurus variegatoides</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 at base of Semaphore Hill 12/30; grayish phase animal
Forest Rabbit (<i>Sylvilagus gabbi</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 in grassy roadside areas at the start of the Pipeline Road on 12/31 night drive
Pallas's Mastiff Bat (<i>Molossus molossus</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 in Canopy Tower dining room 12/29 - Several recorded on Canopy tower deck 12/30 - 2 probable in Canopy Tower dining room 12/31
Greater White-lined Bat (<i>Saccopteryx bilineata</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 recorded and seen on Canopy Tower deck 12/30
Lesser White-lined Bat (<i>Saccopteryx leptura</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3+ seen in day-roost underneath bridge at the base of Semaphore Hill 12/31
Spectral Bat (<i>Vampyrum spectrum</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 seen hawking out of canopy once 12/29 from Canopy Tower deck - 2 (adult+juv likely) hawking in and out of canopy and around Canopy Tower "golf ball" from deck 12/31; excellent!
Common Long-tongued Bat (<i>Glossophaga soricina</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 day-roosting in a culvert on Semaphore Hill Road
Central American Tent-making Bat (<i>Uroderma convexum</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Observed day-roosting under a palm tree at Hotel Avicar (Tortí) 12/28, 12/29
White-nosed Coati (<i>Nasua narica</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adult male observed scavenging for scraps around Canopy Tower 12/30, 12/31 - 2 more adult males observed on Semaphore Hill 12/30, 12/31
Kinkajou (<i>Potos flavus</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 seen at flowering Balsa on Semaphore Hill night drive 12/29 - 2 seen in flowering Balsa on Semaphore Hill night walk 12/30 - 1 seen in flowering Balsa on Semaphore Hill night drive 12/31
Western Lowland Olingo (<i>Bassaricyon medius</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 seen on San Francisco Reserve night walk 12/28 - 1 seen very well near flowering Balsa on Semaphore Hill night walk 12/30

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Collared Peccary (<i>Pecari tajacu</i>)	- 2 seen well on Gamboa Road night drive 12/31
White-tailed Deer (<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>)	- 1 briefly observed at San Francisco Reserve 12/28
Central American Woolly Opossum (<i>Caluromys derbianus</i>)	- Habituated animal seen each night feeding on bananas at Canopy Tower - 1 more observed from Canopy Tower deck 12/29 - 1 observed on Semaphore Hill night walk 12/30 - 1 observed on Pipeline Road night drive 12/31
Common Opossum (<i>Didelphis marsupialis</i>)	- 1 observed at Hotel Avicar (Tortí) on 12/28

V. WHAT I MISSED & THANK YOU'S:

I was hoping to see **Water Opossum** and **Armored Rat** at San Francisco Reserve. Both seem reasonably common around the creek, and I saw distinct sign of Water Opossum in particular. I suspect with a night of serious effort at this site, there would be a reasonable chance of finding one or both of these mammals. I tried for **Neotropical Otter** twice at the Lago Bayano bridge, but the water level was too high and flooded the banks where animals can often be resting so dipped; **Colombian White-faced Capuchin** (*Cebus capucinus*) is possible in forest around the Rio Mono bridge at Lago Bayano, but is easier around Cana in Darien. With more time, I'd be interested in checking out side trails as the forest around Lago Bayano looked very promising.

The only top priority target I missed was **Rufous Tree Rat**, which is often located at roost sites on the Pipeline Road, usually close to the intersection with the spur to the Discovery Center. There were no reliable roosts known when I visited the Canopy Tower, and while an animal was currently roosting at Canopy Lodge (2h away at Valle de Anton), I learned about this too late to incorporate it into my itinerary. I was expecting to see **Nine-banded Armadillo** at some point but never did—I guess I just wasn't lucky. I'd have loved to have seen a **Tayra**, but didn't put in effort in the best places, the Pipeline Road past the Rio Frijolitos bridge and the forest behind Gamboa Rainforest Resort (trails near the Orchid garden and Serpentarium). I was also hopeful of **Jaguarundi**, but I think you'd be very lucky to see one on the Pipeline Road from what guides told me. I dipped **Neotropical River Otter** as I didn't take the Chagres River boat trip; they are seen quite regularly here (Proboscis Bat is also guaranteed).

Thank you to Ignacio Yufera for answering my various queries on different species, Michael Castro for his help in the Tortí area, and Alex Sanchez in Gamboa/Canopy Tower. Your information and guidance were instrumental in the success of this trip!