

Colombian Andes, August 2022 (by Venkat Sankar)

After first visiting Colombia in January 2020 as part of a group mammal watching tour focused on endemic primates, I knew I needed to return soon. Colombia is a fascinating country for mammal enthusiasts, with a massive diversity of large & small mammals that includes many charismatic but poorly-known species. Despite easy access from the US, it's also seriously under-visited by mammal watchers (for obvious historical reasons). So, there's a lot of potential to explore and find new sites for a range of exciting mammals. I'd started chatting with Rob Smith and Claudia Diaz from Wild About Colombia (WAC) about a return trip almost immediately afterward, but like many things, those plans were shelved due to the pandemic.

Fast forward to June 2022. Thanks to various academic commitments, I still hadn't figured out my summer mammal watching plans so dreams of Spectacled Bear, Mountain Tapir, and Pacarana were beginning to creep back into my idle mind. I promptly fired off an inquiry to Rob and Claudia, and was pleasantly surprised to hear that Rob was available to guide me in search of rare Andean mammals during my preferred vacation time. Lacking time for my usually obsessive pre-trip research, I largely entrusted Rob with devising an itinerary that included enough time at the right sites for my (very ambitious) list of target species. And so, I arrived in Bogota on the morning of August 10th in eager anticipation of my next Colombian adventure.

Mammal Watching in Colombia

Having visited twice, I'm now convinced that Colombia is set to become one of South America's top mammal watching destinations. Thanks to recent improvements in security, a range of new sites have opened up in the last ~5 years and the possibilities are just staggering. For example, I can't think of another country where you can realistically expect to see Jaguar, Giant Anteater, Spectacled Bear, Mountain Tapir, Amazon River Dolphin, Sakis, and Spider Monkeys in 3 weeks! The birders are already out there exploring some of Colombia's most remote, newly-safe corners – and they're discovering something exciting and rare every trip. I think it's about time we do the same.

Travel is now pretty straightforward in most safe parts of Colombia – roads are good, internal flights are fairly reliable, food ranges from acceptable (i.e. sanitary) to excellent, and you can nearly always find good, clean (albeit basic at times) accommodation. Nearly everyone is friendly and happy to help if the need arises. The scenery is often stunning.

I should also add that there are not one, but two good mammal watching seasons in Colombia. The Nov-Mar period (the dry season in the North & Los Llanos) is certainly prime for mammals but also corresponds to the peak season for birding tours. So, expect lodging and reserves to book up far in advance. What many don't know, however, is that July-Sep can have equally good weather (relatively dry everywhere except in the flooded Llanos), with a fraction of the crowds. So be sure to consider this period for mammal-focused visits as well.



Brown Dwarf Hairy Porcupine (*Coendou vestitus*), a Colombian endemic and one of the most localized mammals in the New World; only about a dozen records of this species exist since its description in 1889

Wild About Colombia

As previously, I have nothing but praise for WAC (<https://www.wildaboutcolombia.com/>). Rob and Claudia arranged a logistically precise trip that put me in the correct sites, for an appropriate duration of time, to have the maximum possible chances of finding my target species. Everything, from the airport transfers, to meals and accommodation, and park/reserve entry went by almost entirely without a hitch.

I was accompanied by Rob throughout the tour, and as before he was a great guide and companion in the field. He's always keen to hire and support local guides, behaves ethically around wildlife, and is skilled with light placement for night photography. Leaving aside the sites where we were breaking new ground for mammal watching, he knew locations and target species well (particularly relevant for the bear & tapir). Finally, he's genuinely keen to learn about and seek out new target species large and small, and is happy to search as long as it takes to find wildlife.



Rob and I in Chingaza NP, very pleased with our Spectacled Bear sightings!

Itinerary & Key Targets

August 10: arrive Bogota and drive to Chicaque

- **Lemurine Night Monkey, Brown Dwarf Hairy Porcupine**

August 11: return to Bogota, fly to Pereira, and drive to Santa Rosa de Cabal

August 12-13: full days in Santa Rosa de Cabal

- **Stump-tailed Porcupine, Pacarana, White-tailed Olalla Rat, Mountain Coati**

August 14: drive to Montezuma Rainforest Lodge

August 15: full day in Montezuma Rainforest Lodge

- **Western Dwarf Squirrel, Olinguito, Northern Oncilla**

August 16: drive to SFF Otun-Quimbaya

August 17-19: full days in Otun

- **Yapok, Lemurine Night Monkey, Andean Squirrel, Mountain Paca, Pacarana, Olinguito, Mountain Tapir**

August 20: return to Pereira, fly to Bogota, and drive to PNN Chingaza

August 21-22: full days in PNN Chingaza

- **Mountain Coati, Spectacled Bear, Little Red Brocket**

August 23: depart Bogota

The Cloud Forest

As you can see above, I had a *very* ambitious list of target species. I've spent plenty of time in Neotropical cloud forests and know how difficult the mammal watching can be, so I emphasized to Rob from the beginning that I'd be very pleased if I even see half of these mammals. In the end, we saw 8 out of 15 – and had great views of most of these species – so I consider this trip a success. This is to emphasize that having realistic expectations in this habitat is really important – you're not going to see a Pacarana, Oncilla, and Little Red Brocket in the same trip, and honestly the odds of seeing just one are stacked against you, even if you spotlight/thermal scope 5-6 hours every night for a week straight.

Therefore, after having spent 2 full weeks mammal watching in cloud forest ecosystems, I now understand why everyone plans their Ecuador tours so they spend 1 week in the Andes and 1 week in the Amazon... The cloud forest is tough!! Almost all my mammal targets were mainly montane species, so my only choice was to spend the whole trip in their habitat. But if this were my first time in the country, I'd also definitely balance time in the Andes with time in the lowlands searching for Colombia's special primates etc., as frankly that's much easier work!

While the habitat is beautiful, searching for mammals in the Andean cloud forest honestly feels like you're hitting a wall at times. All the problems of tropical habitats are amplified to the extreme: high mammalian diversity, but low abundance; dense habitat; elusive mammals (particularly as there are few mammal bait stations/stakeouts in this part of Colombia); strong weather dependence; and seemingly high randomness (= large differences in mammal activity despite very similar conditions on successive nights). But with the right planning, lots of patience, enough time in the field, and a bit of luck with the weather (overcast, humid, and misty being best – and dry and clear worst), mammal watching in the cloud forest can be really rewarding. Certainly nothing gets your heart racing like a proper sighting of one of these near-mythical species after 3 nights of searching the misty forest!



The Colombian cloud forest is often breathtakingly beautiful: Montezuma; Finca Cortaderal, above Santa Rosa de Cabal



And incredible birds like Andean Cock-of-the-rock and Torrent Duck filled our downtime

Parque Chicaque

Rob and I visited this small private reserve about 1.5h from Bogota, for 1 night at the start of the trip. Located at around 2300m on the western slope of the Eastern Cordillera, Chicaque consists of very rugged, scenic cloud forest with a substantial component of rare Andean Oak (*Quercus humboldtii*). My main target was the distinctive, micro-endemic, and very rare **Brown Dwarf Hairy Porcupine**, and we had excellent views of 2 animals (both found by thermal scope). It is one of the few porcupines with flexible bristle-quills, and also perhaps the smallest in the New World. Our 4-hour night walk also yielded a remarkable 15+ **Lemurine Night Monkeys**, a **Buff-bellied Climbing Mouse** (endemic to cloud forests of the Eastern Cordillera), and 3+ **Kinkajous**. We also briefly saw a very blackish **Central American Agouti** by day, and 3-4 **Brazilian Cavies** (endemic ssp. *anolaimae*) en route from Bogota airport at La Florida marshes.

This would also be a good site for Child's Rice Rat and Bogota Yellow-shouldered Bat, as well as Andean Squirrel, which I regret not looking for here.

Santa Rosa de Cabal

We arrived in Pereira the afternoon of the 11th and met Sandro, our cheerful and tireless driver, and Juan Camilo, a local field biologist with years of experience surveying mammals in the region. We spent 2 full days and 3 nights searching for mammals in the adjacent Campoalegre Conservation District, a mixture of pasture and intact cloud forest patches ranging from 2200-3500m (though we largely stayed above 2500m). These forest patches, and their edges would be the focus of our search for numerous exciting species – Stump-tailed Porcupine, Pacarana, Mountain Coati, Mountain Tapir – all of which Juan Camilo had observed previously here.

We spent the first night walking along forest patches around 3000m looking for Stump-tailed Porcupine. While we failed to find this species, we had a spectacular sighting of the rare **White-tailed Olalla Rat** in thickets of dense *Chusquea* bamboo. This remarkable rodent, a bamboo rat of the high Andes, is rare, elusive, and nocturnal, living its entire life in the impenetrable subalpine bamboo thickets. We were able to watch the relaxed animal for over 10 minutes, and made what are likely the first recordings of its call. Absolutely amazing, especially since I had almost no hope of seeing this target species.

We scanned the edges of these forest patches for 12+ hours over the next 2 days in the hope of Mountain Coati and Mountain Tapir sightings – both species Juan Camilo sees regularly here – without luck. We also made a short visit to the pasture-paramo near Lagunas de Otun for the endemic Colombian Tapeti, but much to Juan Camilo's surprise, the hitherto reliable rabbits were missing. I should note that despite the lack of diurnal mammals, birding was excellent with Fuertes' Parrot, Noble Snipe, White-throated Hawk, and (for Rob) Carunculated Caracara.



Lemurine Night Monkey (*Aotus lemurinus*) and **Buff-bellied Climbing Mouse** (*Rhipidomys fulviventer*) were seen well on the night walk in Chicaque

The remaining 2 nights were spent mostly walking along streams in lower forest patches (~2500m). Again, mammals seemed unusually sparse but we did see a **Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth** and perhaps the most significant sighting of the trip – a *Diplomys* tree rat that appeared superficially similar to the **Colombian Rufous Tree Rat**. However, occurring in a separate mountain range and 1000m higher than prior records, it could well represent an undescribed taxon. Sadly, I couldn't manage photos, but all 3 of us saw the animal well. We appreciated its large size, coarse (but not spiny) fur, uniform rich rufous brown dorsal coloration and paler venter, and thick black tail comparable in length to HB covered in relatively dense hairs. Frustratingly, we also saw a large, dark rodent that give dim eyeshine – either a Pacarana or Mountain Paca – but it bolted before we could get conclusive views.

The high forest patches (3000-3500m) would also be worthwhile places to look for Andean White-eared Opossum, Paramo Colilargo, Child's Rice Rat, Mexican Harvest Mouse (to-be-split ssp. *milleri*), Central Andes and Niceforo Maria's Oldfield Mice, Bogota Yellow-shouldered Bat, and Cadena's Long-eared Bat.



The endemic, poorly known, and rarely seen **White-tailed Olalla Rat** (*Olallamys albicauda*); in fact, our sighting was the first record of this species for the department of Risaralda

Montezuma Rainforest Lodge

Montezuma is a pleasant family-run ecolodge (very popular with birders) on the Chocó slope of the Western Andes near Pueblo Rico, close to the border of Risaralda and Chocó departments. While, as far as I can tell, no one has ever searched for mammals here, Rob thought it would be a good place to sample mammals of the Western Cordillera. A ~12km road runs from the lodge through basically pristine cloud forest to the top of Cerro Montezuma, where it ends at an army camp. That last part is crucial: thanks to the base, the road has zero night-time traffic and is one of the few safe places in the Western cordillera for night work. Better yet, it spans an elevation gradient from 1300-2300m through basically unbroken, high-quality habitat.



Chocó Dwarf Squirrel (*Microsciurus similis*), a potential split from Western DS (*M. mimulus*)

The Chocó is the wettest place in the western hemisphere, and it lived up its reputation on our first night as we had steadily increasing, wall-to-wall rain. We went out nonetheless, but only saw a **Nine-banded Armadillo** in 6 hours of soggy, miserable night work. Thankfully, conditions improved a lot the next night and we had some great sightings: 2 **Olinguitos**, 3 **Kinkajous** (one of which was in the same tree as an Olinguito, for comparison), a bright orange **Panama Mouse Opossum**, **Central American Woolly Opossum**, and distant, poor views of **Stump-tailed Porcupine**. Montezuma would be as good a place as any to search for Northern Oncilla, thanks

to the road; Joel Such, a researcher based at the lodge, records them commonly on camera traps. Interestingly, the majority of oncillas here are melanistic. A strange, dark night monkey sp. (possibly Panamanian Night Monkey) is also locally common lower down. I'd strongly encourage more mammal watchers to visit here for night work, but plan to stay at least 3 nights to provide a buffer for rain, and give enough time to see a good diversity of species.

We mostly rested at the lodge during the day, but nonetheless saw interesting mammals visiting the bird feeding tables. **Central American Agouti** and **Red-tailed Squirrel** were omnipresent, and we had good views of **Choco Dwarf Squirrel** (potential split from *M. mimulus*) twice and a single, beautiful **Tayra** (seemingly reliable here). It's impossible to ignore the birds; even I enjoyed Crested Owl, White-throated Screech Owl, Black-and-gold Tanager, and Orange-breasted Fruiteater.



We enjoyed spectacular views of the adorable **Olinguito** (*Bassaricyon neblina*) AKA “cloud forest teddy bear” high on the Montezuma Road



All that night work also produced good owl sightings – highlights included the marvelous Crested Owl, a species I've long-wanted to see, and White-throated Screech Owl

Other possibilities: Yapok and Armored Rat might be possible around streams and Central American (?) Red Brocket has been camera-trapped above the lodge. Common Dusky Rice Rats regularly visit the bird feeding area, and both (endemic) Colombian Western Andes Cloud Forest Mouse and Western Colombian Rice Rat should occur higher up the mountain. Uncommon bats like Western Broad-nosed Bat (*Platyrrhinus nitelinea*) may also be present.

SFF Otun-Quimbaya

From Montezuma, we backtracked through the Cauca Valley and returned to Pereira, from where we continued to this well-known birding site. This reserve covers a sizable expanse of mature native cloud forest along the Otun River, interspersed with old tree plantations. Otun must be the world's best place for **Mountain Tapir** – we had 2 sightings in broad daylight while entering the reserve on our first afternoon (8/16), another on our second night drive (8/17), and a fourth the afternoon of the 18th. All the sightings were excellent – the animals were very relaxed, and we usually had time to leave the car and quietly approach closer on foot.



Close views of the charismatic **Mountain Tapir** (*Tapirus pinchaque*) are a great reason to visit Otun-Quimbaya

Night work in and around (forest fragments surrounding the adjacent town of La Florida) the reserve was also quite productive, by cloud forest standards. Over 3 nights, we saw **Central American Woolly Opossum**, **Common Opossums** (a confusing dark morph here is easy to string as Andean White-eared Opossum), lovely **Southern Spiny Pocket Mice**, **Delicate Pygmy Rice Rats**, **Broad-footed Climbing Mouse**, **Great Fruit-eating Bat**, **Ismael's Broad-nosed Bat** night-roosting under a bank in the road, a smaller possible **Thomas's Broad-nosed Bat** in a clump of epiphytes, **Olinguito**, **Kinkajous**, and **Crab-eating Fox**. Lemurine Night Monkey is usually common here too and Andean White-eared Opossum is findable, but arboreal mammals were unusually scarce on my visit, perhaps due to a spell of dry weather in the preceding weeks. Pacarana, Mountain Paca, and Northern Oncilla are seen rarely.

On the third night, Juan Camilo and I tried a night walk along a trail that heads uphill from Otun into the Ucumari Regional Park. The streams here are good for Yapok and Montane Fish-eating Rat, but we couldn't find any of the former and the sole semiaquatic rodent we saw escaped identification. However, a pretty **Cauca Slender Opossum** and horribly-named **Colombian Central Andes Cloud Forest Mice** were consolation. A 3-hour hike up the trail leads to a cabin at La Pastora, which would be a nice place to spend a night and seek out mammals of the higher elevation forest. I should mention, though, that I consistently found night walks above 2000m strangely unproductive at all sites visited, with a marked increase in productivity starting immediately below the contour. I'd love to hear if others have observed the same thing.



As a particular fan of heteromyids, I was really pleased to see the pretty **Southern Spiny Pocket Mouse** (*Heteromys australis*) several times



Previous page: We saw many poorly-known small mammals on night walks in and near Otun, including the **Delicate Pygmy Rice Rat** (*Oligoryzomys cf. delicatus*), **Broad-handed Climbing Mouse** (*Rhipidomys latimanus*), and **Ismael's Broad-nosed Bat** (*Platyrrhinus ismaeli*)

As in other sites, we didn't spend too much time out by day here. We searched for the endemic Andean Squirrel for an hour or two each morning. This is a species Rob usually has no problem finding in a morning's birding in Otun, so our failure to spot one grew increasingly funny as the days wore on. We left without a sighting. My disdain for sciurids grew ever stronger. We did however see **Colombian Red Howlers** and as usual, great birds – Cauca Guan, Red-ruffed Fruitcrow, (Colombian) Rufescent Screech Owl, Torrent Duck, and Andean Cock-of-the-Rocks.

Otun is a lovely site and there is a long list of smaller species in particular that one might find, beyond those above. These include gems like Little Woolly Mouse Opossum and Alberico's Broad-nosed Bat and localized regional endemics such as Bogota Fruit-eating Bat, Colombian Grass Mouse, Narrow-footed Bristly Mouse, and Child's Rice Rat.

PNN Chingaza

Chingaza is a scenic national park (popular with Colombian, but not foreign tourists) that occupies a broad chunk of paramo and cloud forest immediately NE of Bogota. This is Rob's preferred site for **Spectacled Bears**, and enjoying prolonged, close views of this iconic Andean mammal proved to be the perfect end to the trip.

We dedicated around 3.5 days in the park to the task, and spent the first day driving the roads looking for fresh feeding sign (ripped up *Puya* bromeliads). While we found these in some areas, we also got word that bears were frequenting the first few miles of elfin forest immediately after the entrance gate and made a plan to focus on this area early the next morning. Our strategy worked, as we quickly found a large male bear feeding on a cow (dead of natural causes; they legally graze in one sector of the park) the next morning. We watched the bear feed for over an hour, then climb a tree just 30ft from us, build a makeshift nest, and fall asleep. Meanwhile, a second bear also approached the carcass (unsuccessfully) in the hope of a meal. It was (obviously) incredible to witness so much behavior of this species, and the whole sighting easily ranks among my top mammal experiences.

Other mammals in the park were understandably anti-climactic. **White-tailed Deer** (ssp. *goudotii*) were omnipresent around the Chuza dam, and we tried a discreet night walk around Monteredondo to look for the (usually common) endemic Bogota Tapetis. We also spent an evening and (a very cold) morning driving and walking roads through the elfin forest in the hope of chance sightings of Little Red Brocket or Mountain Coati without success. Chingaza is probably one of the better places to look for both species, but of course they're still difficult. Regardless, the bears and a great dinner with Rob in Bogota ended the trip on a high note.



We enjoyed incredible **Spectacled Bear** (*Tremarctos ornatus*) sightings in Chingaza NP

Species I missed

The only key mammal I thought I had a decent chance of seeing but missed were Mountain Coatis. We were initially hoping to visit Rio Blanco for this species, a well-known birding reserve where Rob has had many sightings, but this ended up being impossible as accommodation in the reserve was unavailable. You have to be prepared to hike a lot, but it does seem like a good site. In retrospect, not being able to visit here damaged our odds from the outset.

I didn't see a Pacarana, Oncilla, Mountain Paca, or Little Red Brocket either, but honestly all these species were longshots at best. Maybe once more mammal watchers go to Colombia, we'll develop sites & strategies to find these mammals at least semi-reliably. I'd have loved to see a Yapok, but this species is widespread enough that I'm sure I'll find one on a night walk elsewhere, hopefully soon.

In summary, Colombia – or at least the Andean region of it – is not the world's easiest place for mammal watching. But for those who enjoy going off the beaten track in search of rare and obscure species, there are few more exciting places in the world right now. I'll be back!

Species List

1. Central American Woolly Opossum (*Caluromys derbianus*)
2. Common Opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis*)
3. Panama Mouse Opossum (*Marmosa isthmica*)
4. Cauca Slender Opossum (*Marmosops cauae*)
5. Nine-banded Armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*)
6. Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth (*Choloepus hoffmanni*)
7. Lemurine Night Monkey (*Aotus lemurinus*)
8. Colombian Red Howler (*Alouatta seniculus*)
9. Brazilian Guinea Pig (*Cavia (aperea) anolaimae*)
10. Central American Agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*)
11. Stump-tailed Porcupine (*Coendou rufescens*) [better view desired]
12. Brown Dwarf Hairy Porcupine (*Coendou vestitus*)
13. Colombian Rufous Tree Rat (*Diplomys* cf. *caniceps*) [potentially a new ssp./sp. as 1000m higher than existing records, and in a different bioregion]
14. White-tailed Olalla Rat (*Olallamys albicauda*)
15. Choco Dwarf Squirrel (*Microsciurus* cf. *similis*) [often synonymized with *M. mimulus*]
16. Red-tailed Squirrel (*Sciurus granatensis*)
17. Southern Spiny Pocket Mouse (*Heteromys australis*)
18. Colombian Central Andes Cloud Forest Mouse (*Handleyomys intectus*)
19. Delicate Pygmy Rice Rat (*Oligoryzomys* cf. *delicatus*) [taxonomic status of Andean pops. indeterminate]
20. Buff-bellied Climbing Mouse (*Rhipidomys fulviventer*)

21. Broad-footed Climbing Mouse (*Rhipidomys latimanus*)
22. Great Fruit-eating Bat (*Artibeus lituratus*)
23. Thomas's Broad-nosed Bat (*Platyrrhinus dorsalis*) [possible]
24. Ismael's Broad-nosed Bat (*Platyrrhinus ismaeli*)
25. Tayra (*Eira barbara*)
26. Olinguito (*Bassaricyon neblina*)
27. Kinkajou (*Potos flavus*)
28. Spectacled Bear (*Tremarctos ornatus*)
29. Crab-eating Fox (*Cerdocyon thous*)
30. Mountain Tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*)
31. White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus goudotii*)



A particularly colorful **Central American Woolly Opossum** (*Caluromys derbianus*) at Montezuma