

Greg Easton Ecuador Trip Report—Cayambe Coca NP, Antisana Ecological Reserve, Guango Lodge:  
March 3-5, 2023

I was worried after the first day that this might be a trip report without any pictures which I'm pretty sure is against my rules, but in the end managed a few to share. A business trip to Chile and Uruguay gave me an excuse to stop in Ecuador for a quick visit on my way south. Based on others' trip reports I reached out to Mario Pillajo and Jose Gallardo respectively for guiding and driving services. Mario responded quickly on Facebook messenger and we made arrangements. Jose responded via email but unfortunately was unavailable during my stay so I rented a truck through Avis and drove myself. Mario recommended a truck and in hindsight I would say it was a requirement for good access to Cayambe Coca. I got a free upgrade to a 4x4 but only used 4-wheel drive for 1 hill ascent in wet, rough conditions.

As can be expected these days, my flight from Atlanta to Quito was delayed a couple of hours so I didn't land until just before 10:00 PM. Termas Papallacta responded to my email that they would be able to check me in near midnight despite indicating otherwise on their website. The Avis agent at the airport helped complete the required paperwork and then drove me to their location less than a mile down the road to get the vehicle. It had been many years since I last drove a manual transmission but by the end of the trip I was comfortable once more. The truck had a map system but it didn't work so I tried to enter in the destination on my phone. While the map pulled up to show my location, it wouldn't give me directions. I had taken a screen shot of the directions while on my phone at home and was glad to have that perspective as I drove. As I expected, driving in Ecuador was not for the faint of heart. The road to Papallacta, the jumping off point for Cayambe Coca National Park heads straight up the Andes ascending from an elevation of 9,350 feet in Quito to the pass at 13,215 then down to 10,860 at the Termas Papallacta Hotel in an hour's drive. The road winds and climbs continuously and the rental car was not ideal for the conditions. The lack of power meant frequent down shifting and the headlight's narrow focus made it difficult in the dark to anticipate the length and severity of the turns. Gratefully the highway had 2 lanes each direction so it was possible to pass the cargo trucks that literally were crawling up the grade in places. Further up the mountains I hit rain and fog which further hampered my visibility. Eventually my cell signal dropped altogether so I couldn't see even my immediate position on the map. I wasn't exactly sure where and when to turn or if my pace was ahead or behind of the timing I had seen on the map at home. Bear crossing signs built my anticipation and slowed my pace. When I saw the first sign saying Papallacta at the top of a pass I took a sharp left onto a dirt road. After a couple hundred yards of potholes and puddles I figured that wasn't the right place so returned to the highway. My cell service resumed so I could see my position on the map but still wasn't able to get directions or zoom in and out. From the pass at km 24 the road descends quickly for another 12 km to the town of Papallacta. The map indicated the most direct route would be to take the first "exit" but when I slowed to turn I saw a sign indicating not to enter that direction. There wasn't another option to turn until reaching the other side of Papallacta nearly another 10 km later where the road seemed to cover twice the actual distance. I would learn in the morning that the long route was indeed the correct route. Entering the town a sign indicated Termas Papallacta was 2.7 km up the canyon. When the valley flattens after a steep climb there's a cluster of restaurants and lodgings and the road dead ends into a gate for the Termas Papallacta Hotel. A guard eventually verified I had a reservation and my key had been left with him. He allowed my entrance and I followed him across a small wooden bridge to my accommodations and parked the truck. The layout clusters individual units or duplexes around semi-private hot spring pools. Some were still being used at 11:45 but I was more than ready for sleep.

In the morning I realized I was in a little paradise of verdant flora and it was easy to see why this was a popular destination for international travelers and Quito residents. After a nice buffet breakfast Mario met me in the hotel reception that I hadn't seen the night before. Mario spoke decent English that combined with my smattering of Spanish was adequate for our necessary communications. Termas Papallacta has more than 50 rooms/cabins for rent but also has a large public accessed hot springs facility so there were at times likely 100+ vehicles on site. At the end of the parking lot Mario took me to a small visitor's center with pictures from the park and some specimens. We met his brother Patricio and got some rubber boots for the day.

We retraced my route from the night before to the continental divide at km 24 and I realized in the daylight that is the point with the shrine to the Virgin del Paramo Papallacta and the antenna's referenced in other reports as the primary place to look for spectacled bears. The elevation difference between Papallacta and km 24 meant transitioning from a wet near cloud forest to the high altitude paramo with its distinct smaller vegetation and greater visibility. The daylight also showed better used guard rails than I ever remember seeing so I was more appreciative of my discomfort driving the night before. We stopped several times along the drive, just parking partially out of the right hand lane to stand on the side of the road scanning the hillsides for the distinctly black figures. We turned left, opposite the road I had mistakenly taken the night before and took a dirt track that paralleled the highway from enough distance that it was good bear terrain on either side of us. The road ends and we returned to the highway and proceeded down towards Quito, pulling over whenever there was good visibility of the surrounding mountains. Mario was well equipped with binoculars, a spotting scope, and a 600mm camera lens. The weather was typically overcast and the wind and rain came and went through the duration of my trip. As we descended we saw patches of planted eucalyptus and pine. Cattle and sheep were not uncommon along the valley and lower hillsides. I was a bit surprised that our search seemed focused primarily right along the highway but of course Mario knew much better than I. 30 minutes later at another stop Mario said the magic word, "Oso." Beyond my naked eye's view Mario had spotted a black object on the hillside. The Andean Bear was grazing on its favorite, Achupalla, a member of the Bromeliad family. Mario would later show me up close how a bear's presence could be identified by the mess remains of the Achupalla—when the bears rip the cluster of stems the bright white base is exposed. Within a day the white begins to brown so a cluster of white remnants indicates a bear's recent passage.

We returned to the pass via the old road and then went up to the antenna at 14,091 but the visibility was approaching nil. We returned to Termas Papallacta and entered the park again. The valley was littered with waterfalls cascading down forested sheer hillsides. The trees gave way as the altitude increased and we were in the paramo again. In one of the rare flat meadows we found a white-tailed deer buck. After lunch we explored the far reaches of the road and despite much recent sign of bear activity we had no further luck. An Andean Rabbit was the only other mammal of the day. In all of our driving in Cayambe Coca I think I saw three other vehicles and several motorcycles. The park is used by locals for trout fishing, but apparently not for much else. We just about had it to ourselves. Mario knew the rangers at the gates and had been provided a key that allowed us through a gate we otherwise could not have passed. After an excellent dinner at the hotel I enjoyed the hot springs before bed.



White-tailed buck



The spectacular paramo





Typical aftermath of a Spectacled Bear feast

Morning broke with more clouds and rain so Mario recommended we descend again towards Quito. Mario found another bear marginally closer than the previous day, but still needing binoculars to view. With the inclement weather Mario didn't think it worth going back to the highest parts of the park. Apparently some guests had seen a mountain tapir in the valley just above the lodge around 2:00 the previous day so after lunch we slowly explored the lodge's property. The resort maintains a series of trails along the rushing river. Mario knew the primary trails and several secondary paths I wouldn't have noticed on my own. We found fresh tapir tracks and excrement, but no tapir. Without luck we decided to return to the park. The continuing rain was leaving its mark on the roads. Most of the roads had channels on either side for the runoff, but frequent landslides plugged up the channels. In one stretch all of the water was being diverted into the road and deep furrows were being carved down the middle of the already rough road. We stopped and spent ten minutes in the freezing water removing mud and debris to redirect the water down its intended course. It had been a long fruitless day when we headed back towards the lodge. When we reached the top of the valley above Termas Papallacta we pulled over to scan the clearing. Above the cattle just below the protective forest a mountain tapir was grazing! After watching for a few minutes and taking some distant photos, Mario had me drive half a mile to edge of the developed property. On foot we walked through the staff quarters across a bridge, over a couple of fences and into the pastureland. Our aim was to sneak behind and above the tapir. Mario's plan worked to perfection. The contour of the slope allowed us to gain altitude completely out



of sight. Eventually we stopped behind a large rock outcropping. Mario indicated for me to peer around the corner to take the first picture but I paused for 30 seconds to catch my breath. The radio-collared tapir was just 75 yards away and seemed unperturbed as we snapped photos. Compared to the other new tapirs, the mountain tapir is much darker, almost black in color and sports a thick furry coat for warmth. After 5 minutes I had take more than enough pictures and we retreated back down the slope. My water-logged hiking boots were a small price to pay for the special close-up encounter on foot. Despite a total of just 4 mammal sightings, I was feeling content after two days.











The closest Spectacled Bear taken with my 200mm lens with 1.4 teleconverter





The same bear with my iphone zoomed in through a spotting scope

Termas Papallacta was full that evening so I had to stay just down the road at Mamallacta. What an eclectic place! But the hosts were friendly and the shower warm and at ½ the cost it worked just fine. From the sunroom on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor you get a 360 degree view of the valley and ironically I could make out the spec of the tapir in the distance! So much work and it was visible literally from my hotel! Mario had asked if he could bring his son Martin the next day so I met the bundled up 7 year old the next morning at 6:00 AM. Having seen the two target species and with another day of poor weather looming we had decided to drive in a totally different direction and visit Antisana Ecological Reserve for the day. We drove down from the mountains to Pifo on the outskirts of Quito then took a new modern freeway 30 minutes south before turning East sharply back up the mountains past the town of Pintag to Isco Canyon where we stopped to watch several Andean Condors soaring on the thermals. There were a number of interesting smaller birds at the viewpoint too. Driving into Laguna de Mica we saw about 40 white-tailed deer and a single Andean Fox. At the lake we saw another Andean Rabbit. By comparison, Antisana was crowded with dozens of cars and several buses of tourists. The Antisana Volcano only revealed its edge through the clouds, hinting at what loomed above us. On the way back road construction forced us to detour around Pintag on a road that was worth the experience—a just wider than one lane track that clung to the ridges and cliffs surrounding the town.

---





Isco Canyon where the Andean Condors are common

















With an afternoon to kill I offered to drive Mario and Martin all the way back to Papallacta rather than having them take the bus from Pifo. By the time we reached Papallacta I had decided to drive another 15 minutes to visit the Guango Lodge and Mario wanted to join me. The small lodge is at a considerably lower elevation and has private forests on the mountain side and along the river with trails providing access to prime birding territory. Mario, of course, spotted much more than I on our loop to the waterfall and river. The highlights were the Andean Toucan, watching a Torrent Duck in the river and the hummingbirds feeding at the lodge. We didn't see any mammals but it was a great way to spend my last afternoon. In the 3 days I drove 542km most of which was at very slow speeds.















Mammal List:  
Spectacled Bear  
Mountain Tapir  
Andean Fox  
White-Tailed Deer  
Andean Rabbit

---