

Positively Panama

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Pre-trip:

Everyone knows the best part of having a baby is taking a babymoon. Well, maybe not the best, but it's certainly up there. So, with the wonderful news that my wife Ann and I were expecting our first child, we feverishly began plotting a trip. An expiring credit with Copa Airlines narrowed down our choices. With this credit, we could visit Chile with a Panama stopover and snag double the countries (and double the mammals!) Sounded easy enough. The catch: Chile had just reopened its borders post-Covid, and entry required an extensive Mobility Pass approval process (more on this in my Chile report.) Mine had been approved weeks earlier, but Ann's remained not.

Five months pregnant and eager to take our first international trip since 2019, Ann and I boarded a plane to Panama... with her Chilean Mobility Pass still pending...

Itinerary & Key Targets: (December 1st – December, 4th 2021)

Canopy Tower was a must, as I had seen many trip reports boast fantastic hauls here. A welcomed suggestion from Venkat Sankar filled in an extra night at Burbayar Nature Reserve (Be sure to follow the lodge's directions closely, as they don't appear on GPS.)

Day 1: Tocumen International Airport, drive to Burbayar Nature Reserve (Armored Rat, Yapok)

Day 2: Burbayar Nature Reserve, drive to Canopy Tower (Western Lowland Olingo, Panamanian Night Monkey, Andean Porcupine, Spectral Bat), and Pipeline Road (Central American Tapeti)

Day 3: Canopy Tower, drive to Pipeline Road

Day 4: Canopy Tower, drive to Gamboa Rainforest Reserve (Lesser Capybara), drive to Parque Municipal Summit (captive Lesser Capybara, Harpy Eagle), return to Tocumen International Airport



Burbayar Nature Reserve:

This scenic lodge is situated on the Continental Divide where the distributions of various species meet. It was closed for 4 years, reopened in 2019, only to have their doors again shuttered due to Covid. Although usually frequented by birders, I hoped to expand their mammalian footprint with a visit. At 90 minutes Northeast from Tocumen International Airport, Burbayar is very accessible even for a short stay. Ahead of our arrival, management implored us to be prepared with a 4x4 vehicle. Unfortunately, we didn't read the fine print and managed to rent an SUV bereft of 4-wheel drive - an oversight we only realized halfway there. Ann, the ace driver between the two of us, had gotten as far as the entrance when she bravely attempted one final steep incline. Mud encased our wheels as we slid backwards into a deep gutter, rendering the car virtually immobile. Before panic fully set in, the lodge's exceedingly helpful owner, Marco came to our rescue and expertly maneuvered our vehicle to safety. Our rental remained at the bottom of this treacherous hill, while the lodge's 4x4 vehicle transported us to the top. We were the only guests for the night and Marco had graciously traveled from Panama City to ensure a comfortable stay.

We checked in as dusk fell and immediately set out for a night walk led by Toño, the lodge manager and site guide. We encountered several tree frogs and an adorable sleeping hummingbird before concluding with an uber cooperative **Derby's Woolly Opossum** adjacent to the lodge's cabins. A lovely home cooked dinner fueled an encore night walk. Excitement peaked in the opening minutes as I spied a decent-sized heat signature in front of the stream near the base of the precarious driveway. I hurriedly motioned to Toño's, thinking we may have a **Yapok** on our hands. Once the light was on, it scurried into the brush, now mostly obscured. I snapped one photo, then the animal was gone. This "Yapok" turned out to be an **Armored Rat**, a thrilling lifer with a badass name. The remainder of the walk along the main road proved uneventful besides tiptoeing around an exceedingly venomous *Fer-de-lance*. Back at the lodge I managed a few shots of **Orange Nectar Bats** swooping in on hummingbird feeders the lodge had kept filled overnight at my request.





Derby's Woolly Opossum



Armored Rat



Orange Nectar Bat



The following morning, we hiked the same trail from the previous night resulting in distant views of a **Red-tailed Squirrel** and a brief Toño-only glimpse of **Panamanian Night Monkeys** peeking from a hole, high in a tree. This nest was a new discovery for Toño, otherwise we would've staked it out for when the monkeys emerged at dusk. I held out hope there would be another chance at Canopy Tower.

Before our departure, I asked about any known bat roosts. Toño hesitantly showed me down a hill from the main road where a river lay before a small bridge. The thermal confirmed bats, but if I wanted to get closer, I'd need to wade thigh-deep through murky water. Now barefoot, I gingerly stepped over slippery rocks until I was close enough for photographs. Shamefully, all this effort led to a group of unspectacular **Seba's Short-tailed Bats**.

We then retraced our steps back past the airport, as the Canopy Tower was only an additional 35 minutes further West. All the while, we still had no update on Ann's Chilean Mobility Pass...



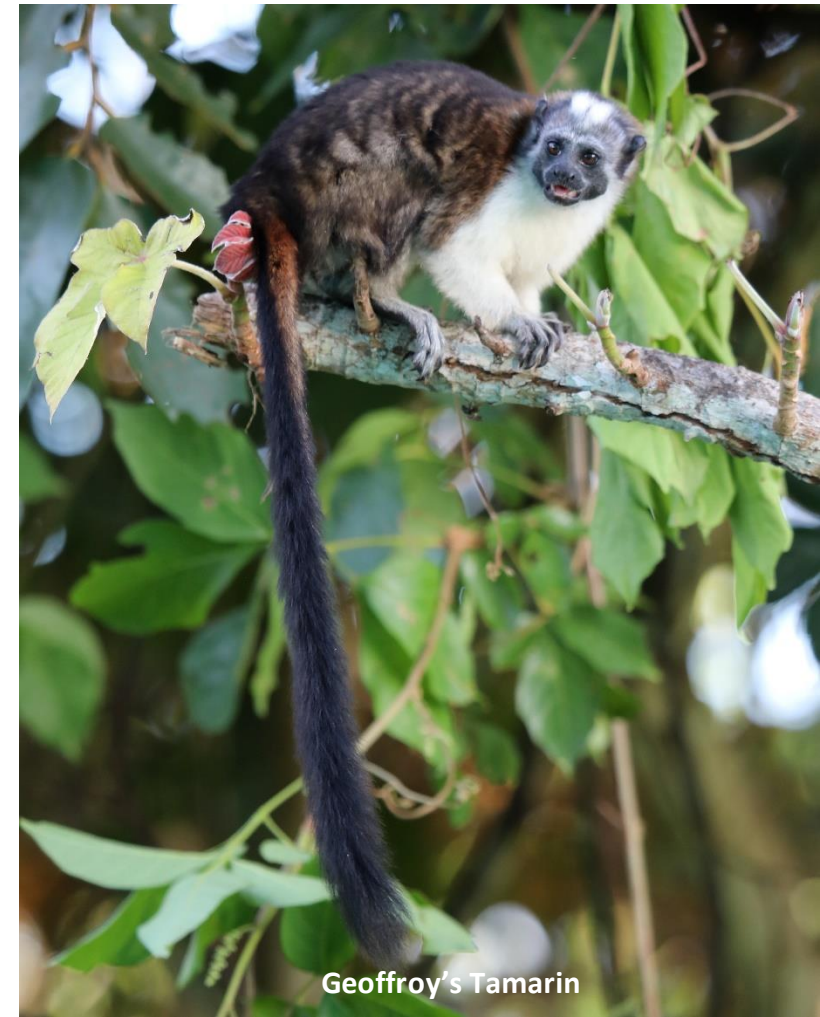
Seba's Short-tailed Bats

Canopy Tower/Pipeline Road/Gamboa:

Canopy Tower is probably the most unique ecolodge I've ever stayed in. Originally constructed as a radar station in 1963 by the US military, it reopened as an ecolodge in 1999 - certainly an oddball origin story. Nevertheless, its location, height, cylindrical shape, and many windows combine to create the perfect place for observing nature from different layers of the rainforest. While the amenities don't exactly match the high price point, the wildlife watching is top notch and worth every penny.

Upon arrival, we were both quite fatigued and retreated to our 3rd story room for some rest, but activity outside our window beckoned. A pair of **Geoffroy's Tamarins** cavorted around in a tree right outside our room. Ah, this was the life, mammaling from bed. Shortly before dusk I climbed up onto the tower's roof to await bats and was not disappointed. Bats flew in from all directions, including noticeably behemoth **Spectral Bats**, with wingspans of three feet.

Dinner was enjoyed from the highest floor of the tower, boasting a 360-degree view of the surrounding jungle. I've never looked at food so little during a meal, forever vigilant for nocturnal visitors. And, a little before 7:00 pm, we got some! Baited banana had attracted a group of curious **Western Lowland Olingos**, who happily chomped on the reliable treat. A thermal scan of the area also yielded solitary **Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth** and **Central American Woolly Opossum**. Finally, to my relief, by 9:30 pm a pair of **Panamanian Night Monkeys** commandeered the banana bait station, making up for the near miss earlier.



Geoffroy's Tamarin



Western Lowland Olingo



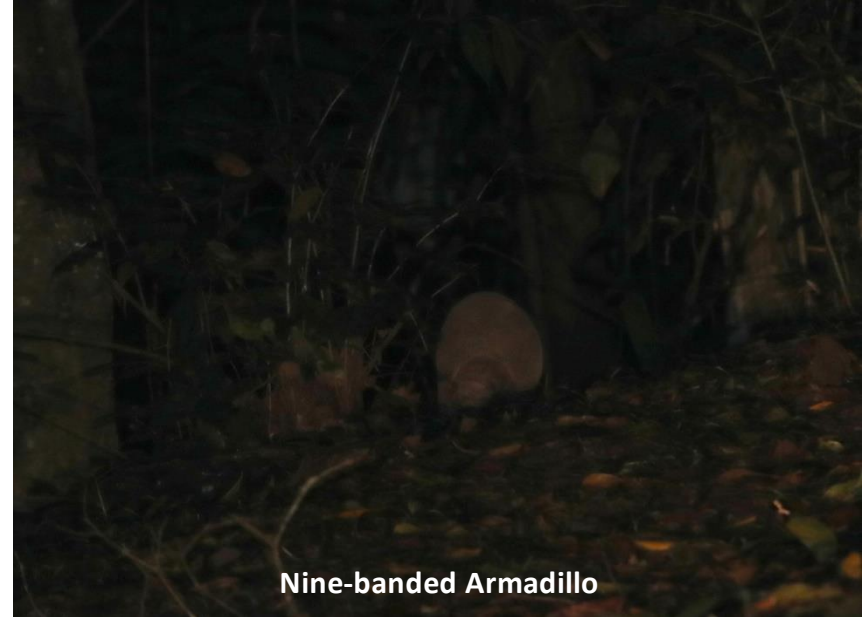
Panamanian Night Monkeys

Exceedingly satisfied with our first night at the tower, we proceeded to drive to Pipeline Road, touted as being a must-visit area for wildlife. The road from the Tower to the main road cuts through a forested area called Semaphore Hill. Here, an armadillo burst onto the scene, crossing the road in front of us: a **Nine-banded Armadillo** masquerading as the much rarer **Northern Naked-tailed Armadillo**. Later, with the benefit of a computer screen, I was able to see that what had first appeared to be a flat head with small ears, was instead the thick, striated tail of a Nine-banded.

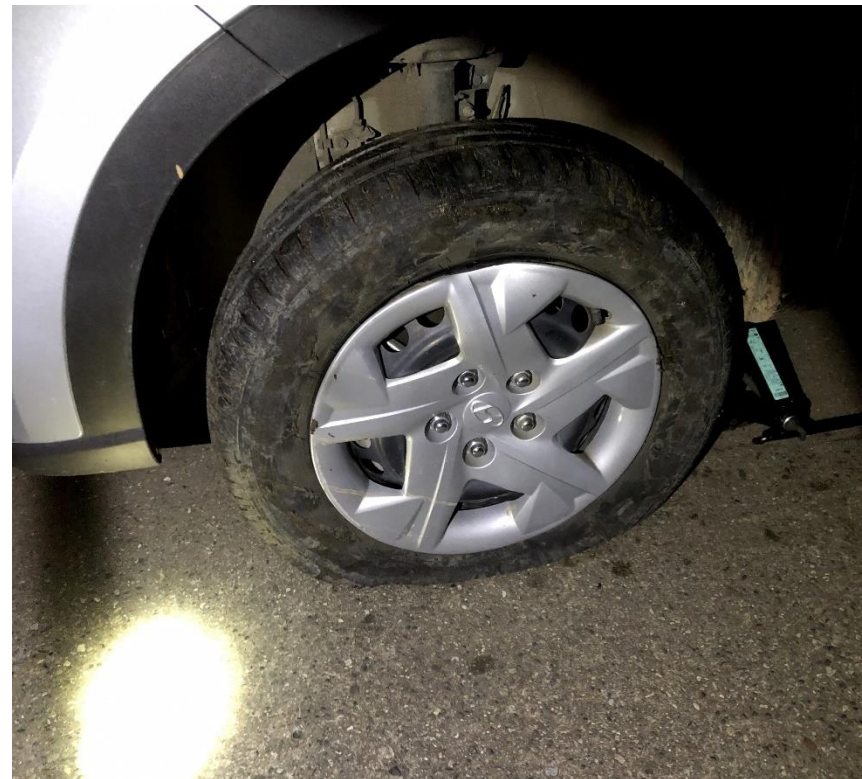
The high of our successful evening was promptly followed by a low - air pressure that is - as we ended up with a flat tire. With our tight schedule, there was no time for a full replacement, so we rocked a donut for the remaining two days, with no further issues. Unfortunately, this delay did cut into our **Lesser Capybara** search, which proved fruitless around the lake area leading up to Pipeline Road. And so began my unusual struggle with this giant, commonly-seen rodent.

Pipeline Road, however, lived up to the hype. In an hour of walking, we thermalled a continuous army of bats enjoying a midnight fruit snack. The sheer volume of thermal hits was overwhelming. Eventually I had to stop photographing every individual, instead turning my focus to noticeable variations. It was fascinating to watch them eating at night like this, unphased by our presence. Bat species here likely included: **Large Fruit-eating Bat**, **Heller's Broad-nosed Bat**, **Great Stripe-faced Bat**, and **Thomas's Fruit-eating Bat**. In between bats, we spotted our third **Derby's Woolly Opossum** of the trip. An uneventful drive back to the tower was made up for with a 1am visit to the banana bait which now nourished a **Kinkajou**.

The looming lack of Ann's Mobility Pass cast a dark shadow over the trip thus far. Our flight to Chile was now one day away and Ann wouldn't be allowed to board without an approved pass. Tipped off by travel message boards, I tried pleading with them over Instagram DMs. I pulled at all the heartstrings: lamenting how this was planned as a big celebratory trip ahead of our first baby and now we're fearful of having to cancel the whole thing. Five minutes later, the nerve-racking "someone's responding" ellipsis danced on my phone screen... They had responded! They appeared ready to help and wanted her documents again. We sent them right away and within the hour Ann had confirmation of her APPROVED Mobility Pass for Chile! Sweet relief! Back to adoring Panama!



Nine-banded Armadillo





Large Fruit-eating Bat



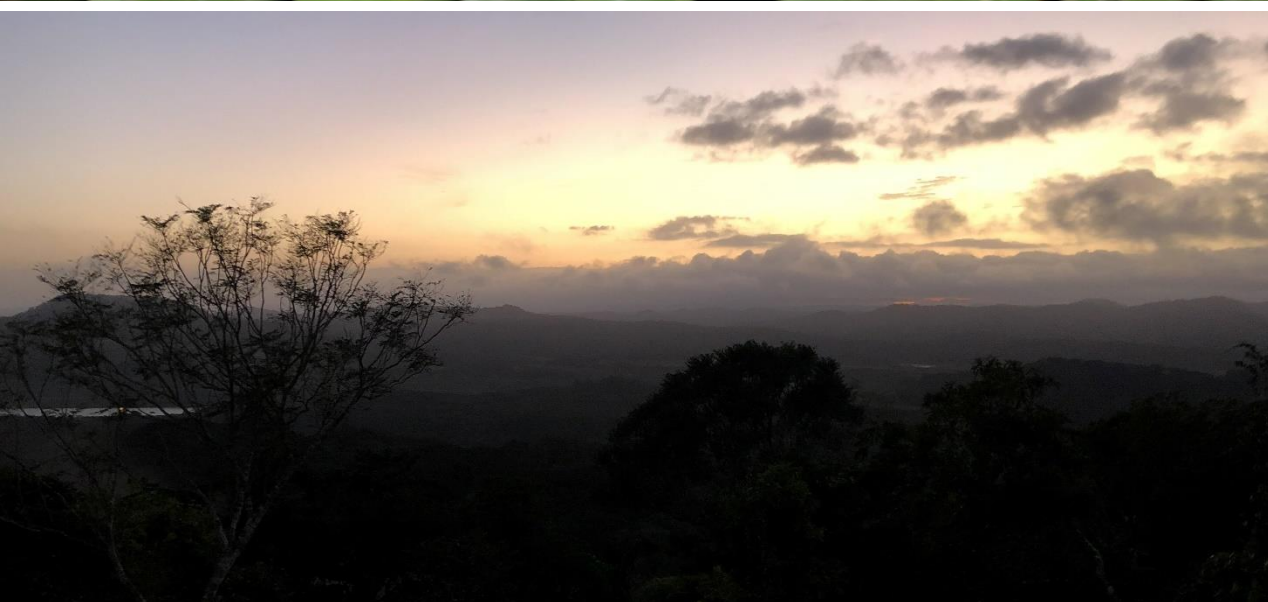
Heller's Broad-nosed Bat



Great Stripe-faced Bat



Thomas's Fruit-eating Bat



Kinkajou

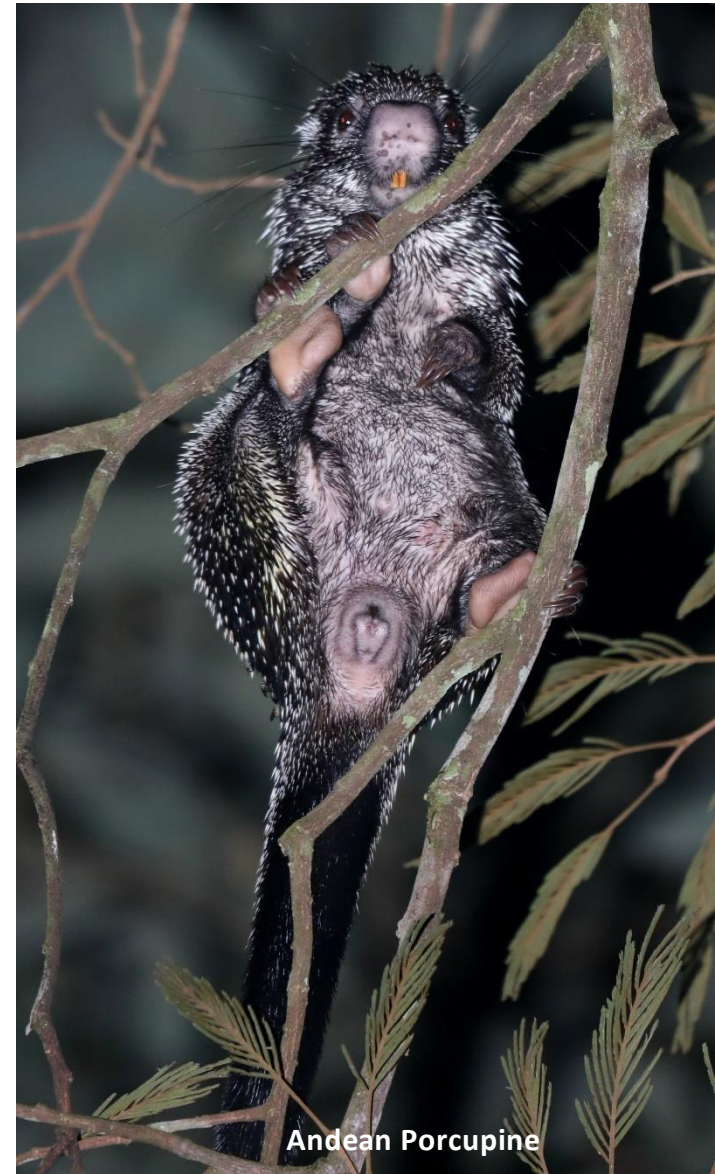
Greater Sac-winged Bat



We could now enjoy a leisurely morning. From the comfort of breakfast, we spied a **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth** through a telescope one of the guides had keyed up. We spent the rest of the morning at the iconic Panama Canal. If you thought sloths were slow, wait until you watch a boat pass through the system of locks that allow passage between two oceans of different heights. In all seriousness, it's a uniquely cool experience and definitely worth a visit. Plus, we picked out our baby's first memento - a Panama Canal onesie. On the drive back to the tower we stopped at a bridge along the entry road known to house **Greater Sac-winged Bats** underneath. Then as dusk approached, we hiked along the Plantation trail, catching a distant view of a retreating **Tayra**.

In lieu of joining (and paying for) a night tour, I offered my services with a thermal imager from our own vehicle while departing in tandem with the safari truck. By 8:30 pm it paid off, as I was able to locate the first and only **Andean Porcupine** (formerly known as Rothchild's Porcupine) for everyone. A crowd-pleasing **Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth** was up next, on the move- ever so gradually. Upon reaching the main road we bid adieu to the night tour crew and pressed onwards for a return to Pipeline Road.

On the way, a scraggly **Common Opossum** bounded along the side of the road. Another failed **Lesser Capybara** attempt preceded the successful acquisition of the night's top target: the **Central American Tapeti**. Two separate encounters with these short-eared rabbits occurred between 10:30 and 11:30 pm, plus a **Jamaican Fruit Bat** for stat padding purposes. Unlike yesterday, this evening's return drive through Semaphore Hill proved very rewarding with **Collared Peccary**, a gorgeous **Lowland Paca**, and another **Common Opossum**.



Andean Porcupine



Common Opossum



Central American Tapeti



Jamaican Fruit Bat



Lowland Paca

Our final morning produced some low priority species around the tower, like **Mantled Howler** and a roof-inspecting **White-nosed Coati**. However, **Panamanian White-faced Capuchins** remained scarce. I decided to make one last ditch effort for **Lesser Capybara** around Gamboa Rainforest Reserve. I spoke with hotel staff and narrowed my search to their suggested areas but still no Capybaras! Instead, only **Central American Agoutis** were found in the surrounding suburbs. As a consolation, I stopped by local zoo, Parque Municipal Summit, for captive Lesser Capybara along with a bonus Harpy Eagle - one of few birds cool enough to be considered an honorary mammal.

One more round of negative Covid tests taken at the tower, and just like that our Panama stopover was complete. We were bound for Chile, seemingly a miracle after a nail-biting couple months. Babymooning adventures to be continued...

Mantled Howler



Central American Agouti



White-nosed Coati





List of Mammal Species Seen:

(wild lifers in bold)

	Common Name	Scientific name	Burbayar Lodge	Canopy Tower	Pipeline Rd /Gamboa
1	Derby's Woolly Opossum	<i>Caluromys derbianus</i>	X	X	X
2	Common Opossum	<i>Didelphis marsupialis</i>		X	X
3	Nine-banded Armadillo	<i>Dasybus novemcinctus</i>		X	
4	Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth	<i>Bradypus variegatus</i>		X	
5	Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth	<i>Choloepus hoffmanni</i>		X	
6	Panamanian Night Monkey	<i>Aotus zonalis</i>	T	X	
7	Geoffroy's Tamarin	<i>Saguinus geoffroyi</i>		X	
8	Mantled Howler	<i>Alouatta palliata</i>		X	
9	Central American Tapeti	<i>Sylvilagus gabbi</i>			X
10	Andean Porcupine	<i>Coendou quichua</i>		X	
11	Central American Agouti	<i>Dasyprocta punctata</i>			X
12	Lowland Paca	<i>Cuniculus paca</i>		X	
13	Armored Rat	<i>Hoplomys gymnurus</i>	X		
14	Red-tailed Squirrel	<i>Sciurus granatensis</i>	X		
15	Greater Sac-winged Bat	<i>Saccopteryx bilineata</i>		X	
16	Orange Nectar Bat	<i>Lonchophylla robusta</i>	X		
17	Seba's Short-tailed Bat	<i>Carollia perspicillata</i>	X		
18	Jamaican Fruit Bat	<i>Artibeus jamaicensis</i>			X
19	Great Fruit-eating Bat	<i>Artibeus lituratus</i>			X
20	Thomas's Fruit-eating Bat	<i>Dermanura watsoni</i>			X
21	Heller's Broad-nosed Bat	<i>Platyrrhinus helleri</i>			X
22	Great Stripe-faced Bat	<i>Vampyroides caraccioli</i>			X
23	Spectral Bat (no photo)	<i>Vampyrum spectrum</i>		X	
24	Western Lowland Olingo	<i>Bassaricyon medius</i>		X	
25	White-nosed Coati	<i>Nasua narica</i>		X	
26	Kinkajou	<i>Potos flavus</i>		X	
27	Tayra (no photo)	<i>Eira barbara</i>		X	
28	Collared Peccary	<i>Dicotyles tajacu</i>		X	

T = Toño only