



Oncilla – Tandayapa road, close to Bellavista Lodge

Ecuador

The Amazon – Cloud forest - Papallacta –
Antisana reserve

18 July – 02 August 2023

Introduction

Two weeks in Ecuador with the main target to find an Oncilla.

But also 4 other targets which I really wanted on this trip, Mountain Tapir, Spectacled bear, Olinguito and Pygmy marmoset.

It felt like I was the last person on earth to visit Ecuador for mammals but now the time had come. The time for finding an Oncilla in my eternal quest for every feline species on earth.

The tour was planned for a lot of time for Oncilla searching, with 5 nights at the wonderful San Isidro Lodge <https://www.cabanasanisidro.com/> in the cloud forest on the eastern slopes of the Andes and 3 nights at the Alambi reserve <https://alambi-reserve.com/en/index.php> on the Western slopes of the Andes.

As an add on to this I stayed 5 nights in the Amazon, at the Sani Lodge <https://www.sanilodge.com/> and 2 nights at Guango Lodge <https://guangolodge.com/> for visiting the Papallacta area.

After one night in Quito at an airport hotel I took the 25 minute morning flight over the Andes to the small town of Coca who is the starting point for many lodges in the Amazon. I had booked a personal guide with Sani Lodge. Little more expensive than doing the ordinary program but very much worth the money if you focus on specific targets. I got picked up at the airport and then a 2½ hour boat trip takes you to a lovely Amazon rainforest full of life!



Sani Lodge is a wonderful place

This area along the Napo river is a heaven for primates with 11 possible species. Of which I saw 10, only missing the hardest one, Napo Saki monkey. On one of the days we saw a stunning 7 different species of primates!

It was also incredible hot and humid. I literally was floating in my own liquids during my stay... and on top of this it was long walks in the forest with mud, water and overall doubtful conditions. Once again I was thinking “what the hell am I doing here?”

But with excellent guiding and some effort we managed to see all except one primate species and some other cool creatures and in the end, it was all worth it, as usual 😊



My guide and me in the canoe along the river during a peaceful evening

After Sani Lodge they helped me organize my transport with a taxi to San Isidro Lodge on the eastern slopes of the Andes some 2½ hour driving away from Coca.

My plan here was to just walk around on the trail system and road by night in search for the Oncilla. I'll spent 5 nights in this great lodge without a glimpse of any Oncilla...

They are seen every now and then in the lodge area, on the road and on the well marked trail system, as stated in some of the trip reports. But it was a difficult work. Felt like a needle in the hay stack. The trails is also quite narrow which makes it even more difficult to see in the distance. Add to this some mud and wet conditions and it was very hard to walk unnoticed in the forest...

The last two nights I gave up the trail strategy and tried the road for more open area and longer visibility. No success though.

The Lodge and food was the best of the whole tour and I really enjoyed my stay here despite no Oncilla. I got some other nice creatures though which you can see down below.



My nice room at San Isidro Lodge. I could almost do mammalwatching from my bed...



Cloud forest

For the last 5 nights I had a guide: Nelson Apolo Jaramillo <https://www.facebook.com/EcuadorNatureToursNA>

You can reach him with Email: apolonelson@gmail.com

He is a well known birding guide in Ecuador but know his mammals very good. This was his only second tour with focus on mammals he told me but he knew where to search and how to find all my target species such as Mountain Tapir, Spectacled bear and Oncilla. Plus alot more.

If you want a mammalwatching/nature/birding- guide in Ecuador I can recommend him.

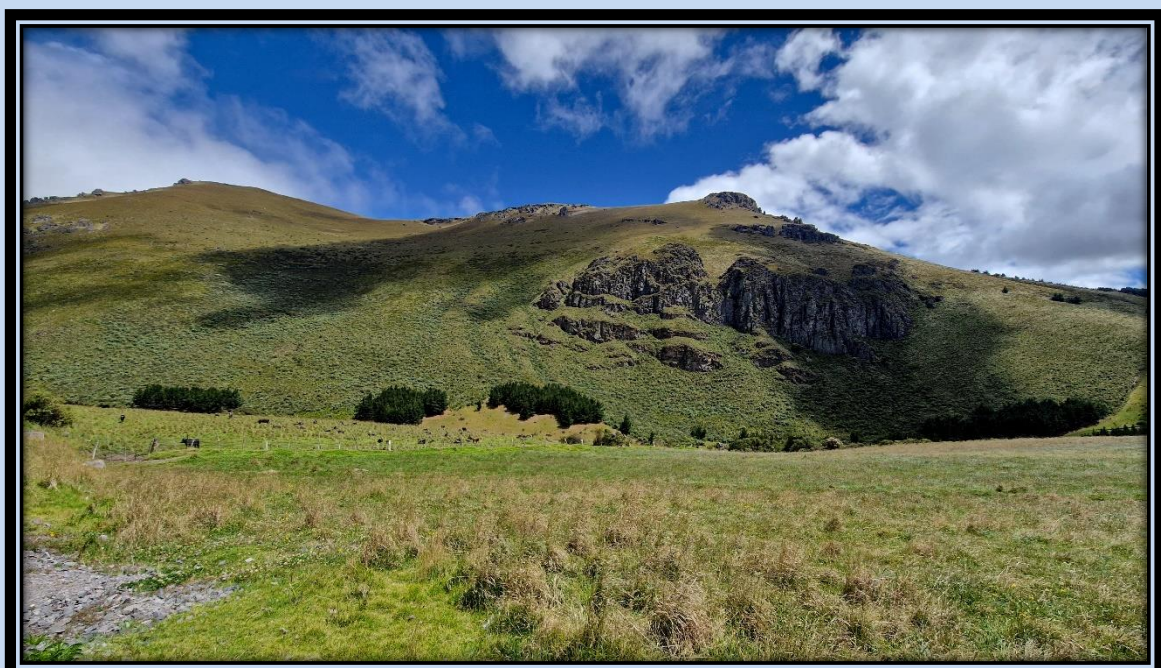
For the Papallacta area with Spectacled bear and Mountain tapir as targets, I stayed at the cosy Guango Lodge.

Who has a hummingbird garden and even some Mountain tapir visiting every now and then close by which Nelson has seen many times. Despite searching we didn't find them here but on the slopes above Termas de Papallacta Hotel towards Cayambe reserve.



Well known place for Mountain tapir along the road above Termas de Papallacta hotel

The Spectacled bear we searched for at the Papallacta pass at around 4000m without success. Sometimes they are seen close to the road in this area. But Nelson had another hot spot for them on the other side of the pass towards Quito and we quickly found a Bear on the hills in this area.



Hot spot for Spectacled bear on this hills and we saw one here



Me scanning for Spectacled bear with Thermal scope on the Papallacta pass 4000m

After 2 nights it was time to move to the western slopes of the Andes and another try for the Oncilla. On the way we spent the morning in Antisana reserve with the possibility of another Spectacled bear, Culpeo, Andean rabbit and White tailed deer.

We reached the western slopes in the afternoon with the main mission to do spotlighting at night along Tandayapa road close to the famous Bellavista Lodge.

Even though it is very much possible to stay at Bellavista Lodge I found it a bit too expensive and Nelson had a very good choice to stay in Alambi guesthouse just at the junction where the Tandayapa road begins. They have a wonderful hummingbird garden and it's a peaceful place.



Antisana reserve

Our Idea was to do spotlighting along the Tandayapa road in the evening and early morning. But also to visit the Bellavista Lodge for Olinguito and whatever who choose to visit. We also had one dinner and one breakfast at the Lodge and spent some time birding at the first light in the morning. It is very much possible to do day visit without staying here.

We were very successful with this mission and had two *Oncilla* sightings in four drives! So successful that we skipped the last two and looked for new species at some other places nearby close to the town of Mindo.



*Tandayapa road. Quiet road and perfect for spotlighting at night. This is *Oncilla* territory.*



The small guesthouse at Alambi reserve



View over the cloud forest from Bellavista Lodge at sunrise

Overall an interesting mix of habitats. From the Amazon to the high plateau of Antisana and mountainous Papallacta via the cloud forest on the Eastern and western slopes of the Andes.

Cosy accommodation, great food and a nice company with my guide Nelson made it a successful trip.

In the end I saw **36 species** of mammals of which **26 were lifers** and this is the story about them...

My species list

1. **Oncilla --- (Lifer)** The absolute highlight of the trip. Two different sightings along the Tandayapa road close to Bellavista Lodge. First one at around 22:00 a few kilometers down from the Lodge. A quick glimpse of an Oncilla who quickly crossed the road. He was harassed by an Olinguito just beside the road on a tree who was doing a lot of crazy warning sounds against the cat.

Oncilla harassed by an Olinguito. Not a everyday sighting...



The second cat was just above Bellavista Lodge. There is another dirt road going to the right (if you come from the lodge) and only a few hundreds meters on this road my guide Nelson suddenly stopped and told me "Oncilla!". I didn't see anything...

We went out of the car and used our torches in the direction where the cat went in the bush. Nothing. Then I used my thermal scope and saw a big red image on the screen just beside the road. There he was! Looking at us all the time. Very relaxed and according to himself invisible 😊

We spent around 7-8 minutes with him until he decided that the show was over and he went further inside the forest.

The time was 05:00 in the morning (this was a morning drive)

My feline number 31 and the main goal of the whole Ecuador trip – Checked!

Both me and Nelson (who has seen Oncilla before but not this good and long sighting) couldn't believe our eyes and we had a little celebration in the middle of a cloud forest just after 05:00 in the morning...

After this extraordinary sighting - couldn't ask for a better sighting of this elusive, shy cat – there was no point of searching for a third one...

Despite time for more drives we focused on other things from this moment.

Finally my hunt for "Oncilla" is over as I have now seen both Southern tigrina (Brazil) and Northern Oncilla.



Oncilla decided that the show is over and went into the forest

2. Kinkajou --- One seen along the Tandayapa road when spotlighting.



3. Olinguito --- (Lifer) One very angry along the Tandayapa road who scolded the poor oncilla and one visiting Bellavista Lodge for Banana...

Not very easy. They hadn't seen an Olinguito for 4 nights before we got there. This one visited on my first night at 19:30. The second night at Bellavista lodge, nothing. So only one time in the last 6 nights. You better spend at least a couple of nights if you really want to give this cool creature a fair chance.



Olinguito at Bellavista Lodge

4. Central American agouti --- (Lifer) We visited El Descanso hostel in Mindo for this species when we were done with the Oncilla as it was a lifer for me. They had a nice patch of forest where they use to hang around and we saw one. Also one crossing the mountain road *Via a Las Cascadas* above Mindo.



5. Common opossum --- When searching for Andean porcupine at a place Nelson knew about close to Alambi guesthouse we found this guy instead...



6. Thomas's broad-nosed bat --- (Lifer) We searched for bats in an abandoned house close to Alambi guesthouse and we found some interesting things. I identify these as Thomas's broad-nosed bats because of the visible white stripes on the back together with the brownish (not whitish) stripes on the head. The habitat with forest and altitude of 1500m.

If anyone have a different suggestion please inform me.



7. Seba's short tailed bat --- In the same abandoned house close to Alambi guesthouse at 1500m. I identify these as Seba's short tailed bats. If you have another suggestion. Please inform me.



8. Common vampire bat --- (Lifer) In the same abandoned house close to Alambi guesthouse at 1500m.

There was a big group of this species.



9. Tschudi's slender opossum --- (Lifer) *Marmosops impavidus*, also called *Andean slender mouse opossum*.

One crossing the road during spotlighting at night on Tandayapa road. Nelson had seen this species only one time before at Bellavista Lodge. Too quick for any photo unfortunately.

10. White-tailed deer --- Subspecies *Andean white-tailed deer*. Very easy to see in Antisana reserve where they are numerous.

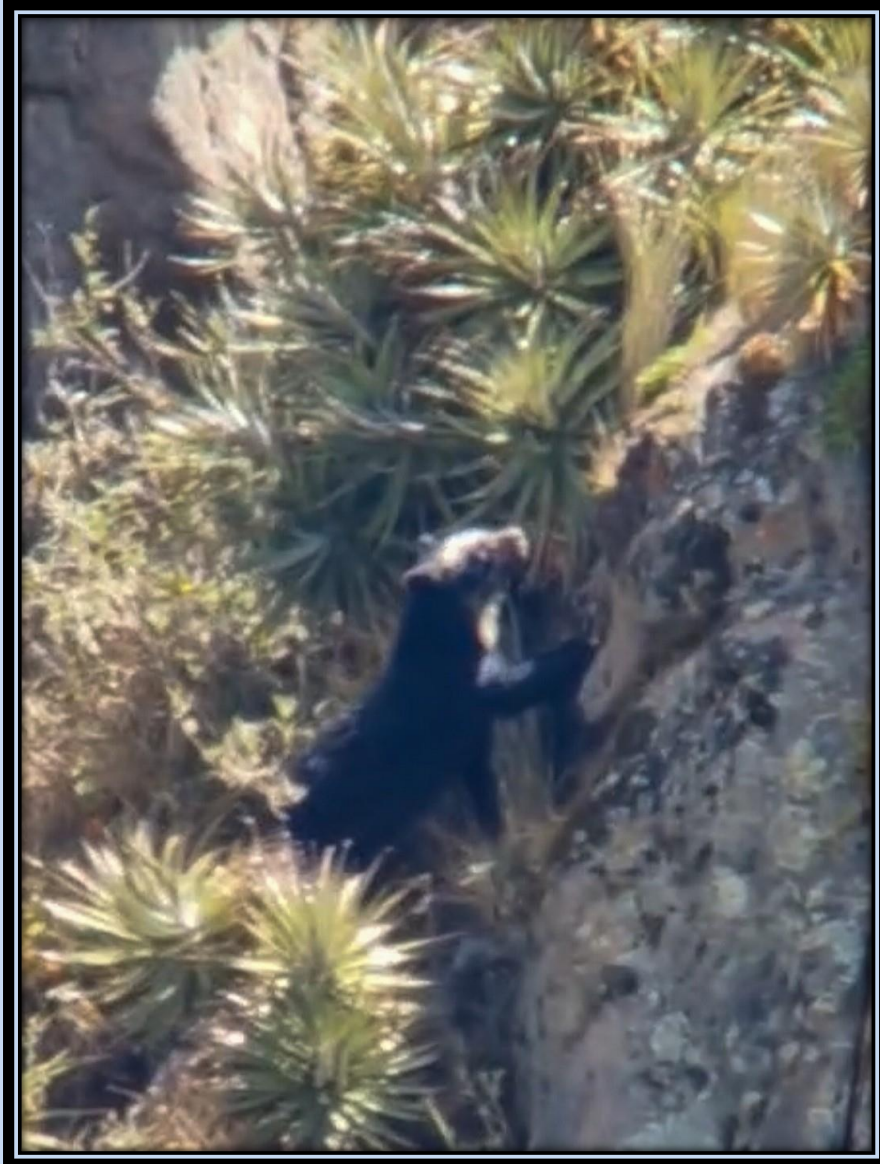


Antisana reserve - Like an East African savanna

11. Andean tapeti --- (**Lifer**) or Andean cottontail. Easy to see at the visitor center at “*La mica lagoon*” in Antisana reserve, where they probably feel safe close to people.



12. Spectacled bear --- (Lifer) One was seen at a great distance below the Papallacta pass. This is the coordinates for a hot spot for them **-0.281389, -78.255333**
The area from this point and 1 kilometer towards the pass is a good one.



Spectacled bear – Photo from a video filmed through the scope



Spectacled bear on the cliffs

13. Mountain tapir --- (Lifer) Fairly common visitor at Guango Lodge where we stayed but failed to see this target species here. But the fields above Termas de Papallacta hotel was a success. This is the coordinates where they are seen sometimes: -0.354861, -78.152056

Very lazy. We waited for an hour or so for him to move but nothing and we left him.



Mountain tapir with mobile photo through scope

14. **Striped hog-nosed skunk --- (Lifer)** Unexpected sighting at Guango Lodge. We went to see if any rodents visited the bird hide at night but found him instead.



15. **Montane myotis --- (Lifer)** Some 30 minutes hike from Guango Lodge there is an abandoned small hut on the hills. Inside and very hard to see in the roof there is a colony of this species.



16. Red-tailed squirrel --- (Lifer) Common at San Isidro Lodge and easily seen around the restaurant area.



17. Black agouti --- (Lifer) Common at San Isidro lodge and you will bump into them every now and then in the Lodge area.



18. Gray-bellied night monkey --- (Lifer) Also called Lemurine night monkey. Easy to see at San Isidro Lodge. They have a dayroost in a big tree close to the restaurant. Just beside the boot wash. Every night I was here they left their hiding place between 18:30 – 19:00, just after dark.



19. Andean white-eared opossum --- (Lifer) Seen with thermal scope at San Isidro Lodge when searching for Oncilla at night.



20. Destructive pygmy rice rat --- (Lifer) Seen at San Isidro Lodge with thermal scope. Every night on the same place doing his business at the entry road.

Venkat Sankar helped me out with identification and I copy/paste his work down here:

“With these tiny mice it's a little easier as there's not too many options, like you say. Reithrodontomys mexicanus milleri (which might be split to R. milleri soon) is one contender, but I think it might be an Oryzomyine instead as the tail doesn't look quite long enough for Reithrodontomys, the coloration is less tawny, and most of all the long toes and very dusky foot coloration is quite different from harvest mice which generally have quite whitish feet.”

My guess would be Oligoryzomys destructor. I don't think it's Microryzomys minutus, the other top option that came to mind as the ventral fur seems clearly paler and whitish compared to the dorsal fur.”



21. Humboldt's squirrel monkey --- (Lifer) Subspecies *Ecuadorian squirrel monkey*.
Common monkey at Sani Lodge.



22. White-bellied spider monkey --- (Lifer) We struggled a lot to see them at Sani Lodge. But on the last day we finally encountered a group after many kilometers of muddy, wet walk in the worst part of the Amazon...

They like the most wet and muddy habitats, where the palm tree grows that they like.

We were both equally interested in each other.



23. Marañón white-fronted capuchin --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. This became my 500th species of mammals on earth. Only seen one time. Shy monkey and we lured this young individual in with a call. My guide sounds EXACTLY like a Marañón white-fronted capuchin...



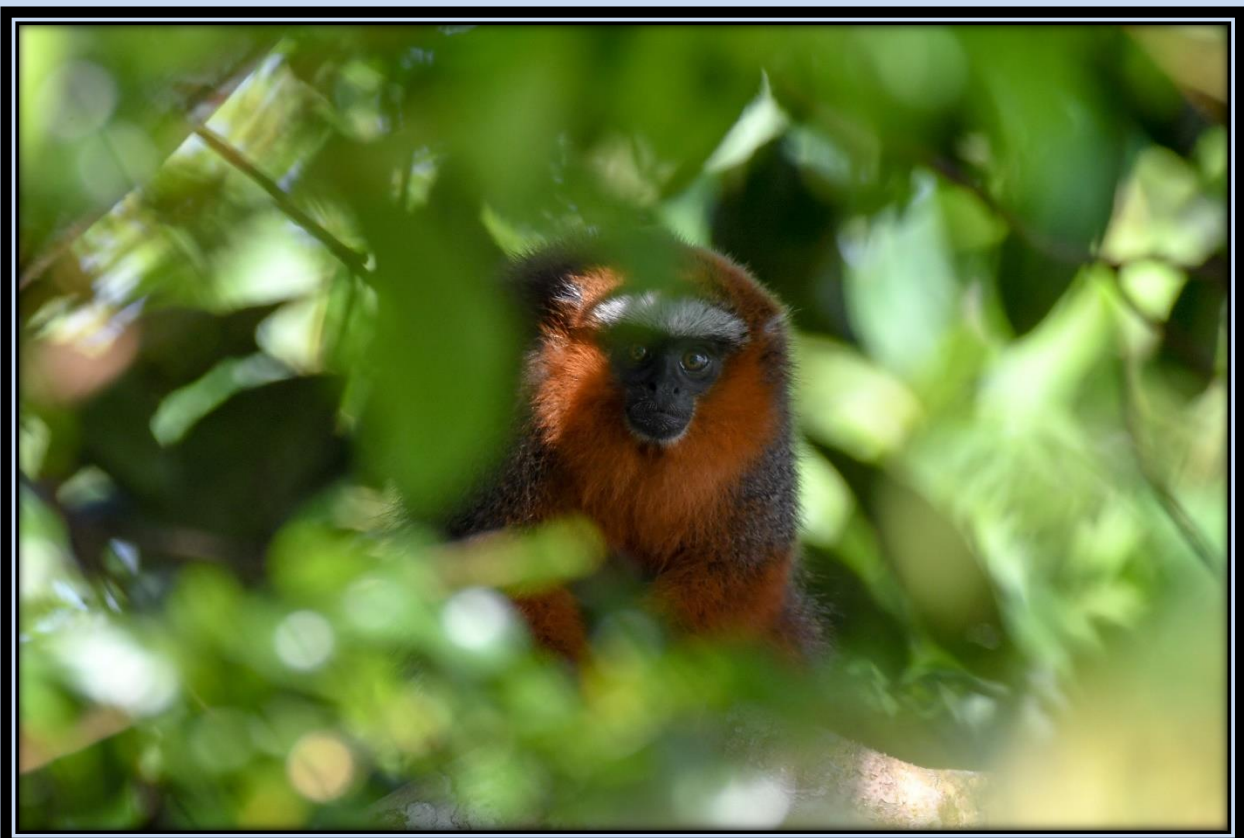
24. Golden-mantled tamarin --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. Terrible picture of this beautiful primate. Seen only one time.



25. Western pygmy marmoset --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. The worlds smallest monkey and my most wanted species in the Amazonian part. Easily found in the Sani community village where they use to hang around.



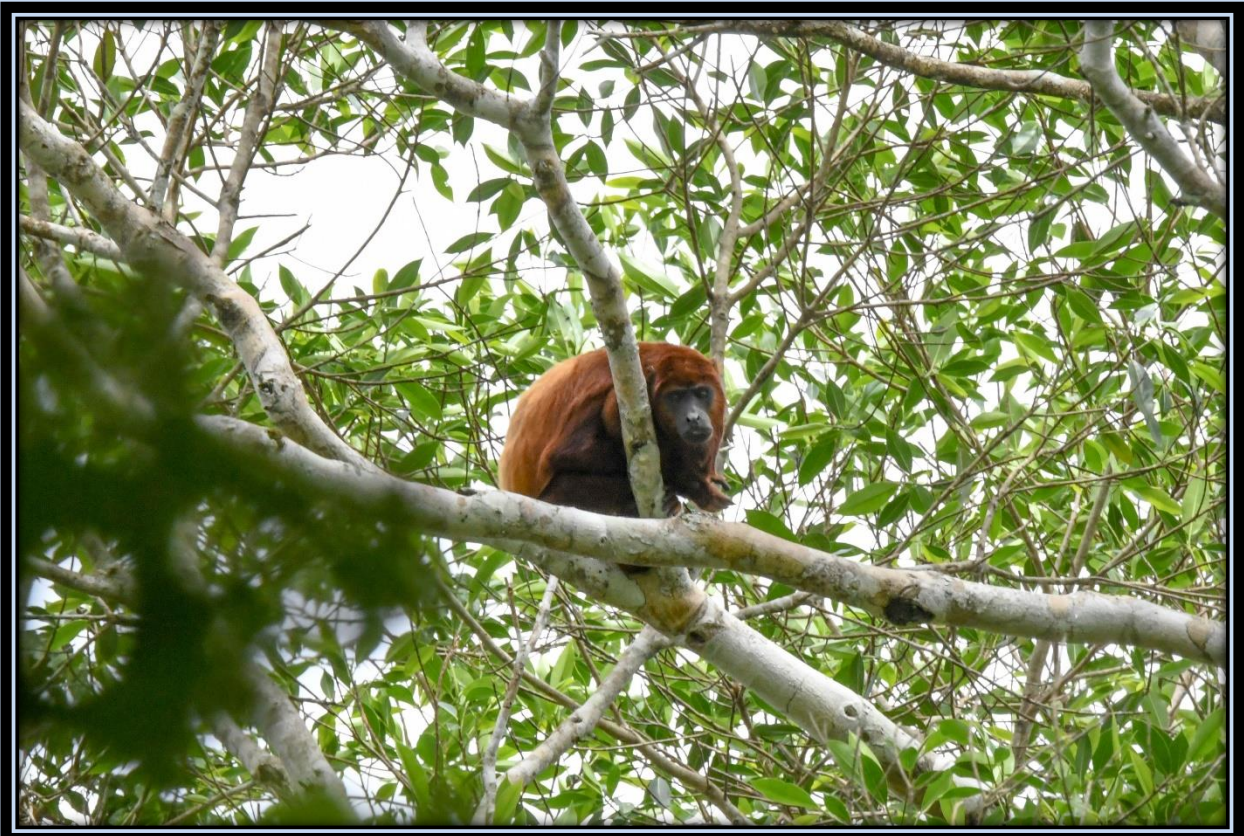
26. White-tailed titi monkey --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. Also called *Red titi monkey*. Easily found close to Sani community village where they use to be.



27. Black-mantled tamarin --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. Common in the area and seen on several days.



28. Colombian red howler --- Sani Lodge. Didn't searched for them as I have seen this species before. But we saw them on several occasions.



29. Common wolly monkey --- Sani Lodge. Didn't searched for them as I have seen this species before.
But we saw them on several occasions.



30. Spix's night monkey --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. My guide knew about two different roosting places for this species. One was empty but the other one was inhabited by a family.



31. White-lipped peccary --- First mammal seen on this trip. One seen crossing the Napo river on the way to Sani Lodge. Then also ha HUGE group of +100 in the Amazon forest. They were very, very shy.



32. Northern amazon red squirrel --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. One seen when searching for Spider monkeys.
Very good eyes from my guide!
Hard to distinguish from it's cousin *Southern amazon red squirrel* but according to Inaturalist (if it's correct) most sightings in this area are the "Northern". Also head shape leans towards this.



33. Brown-throated sloth --- Sani Lodge. One seen from the boat on the river. Doing what Sloth's use to do, nothing.



34. Linnaeus two-toed sloth --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. One of my targets here and on the second last day we managed to see one from the boat along the river. My guide knew a fairly regular place for them but we failed on this spot everytime we checked.



35. Proboscis bat --- Sani Lodge. Close to the lodge there is some branches in the water where they are regular.



36. Red brocket deer --- (Lifer) Sani Lodge. One seen when walking in the Amazon forest. Of course I didn't take any photo immediately but would sneak even closer, which resulted in the animal disappearing like so many times before...

That you never learn.

Also some unidentified bats flying around at night on +2000 meters at San Isidro Lodge and bats who used the nectar feeding at Alambi reserve. Also rodents crossing the road which is impossible to ID.

Stuff I missed

I didn't miss very much on this trip. The only missing primate in the Amazon was **Napo Saki monkey** which is the most difficult one here. I have yet to see any Saki monkey in the wild...

Andean fox (Culpeo) was seen by my guide Nelson at Papallacta when we found the Mountain tapir. The fox was chased away by two dogs. I missed it.

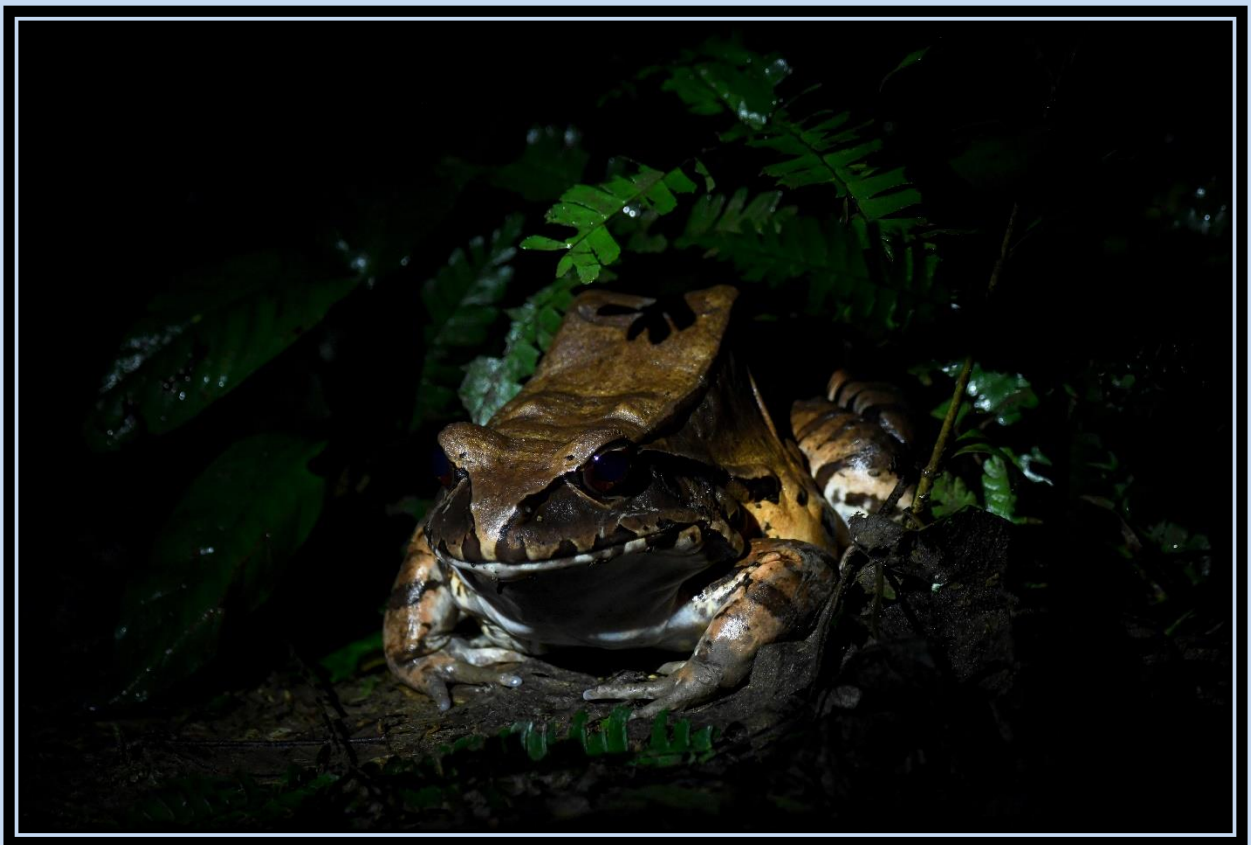
We missed the **Tayra** at Bellavista Lodge. They are very common here in the morning looking for stealing the bananas from the birds.

We did some search for **Stump-tailed porcupine** at Termas de Papallacta hotel, a well known place for them but failed. We also looked for the **Andean porcupine** at a site close to Alambi Lodge but equally failed.

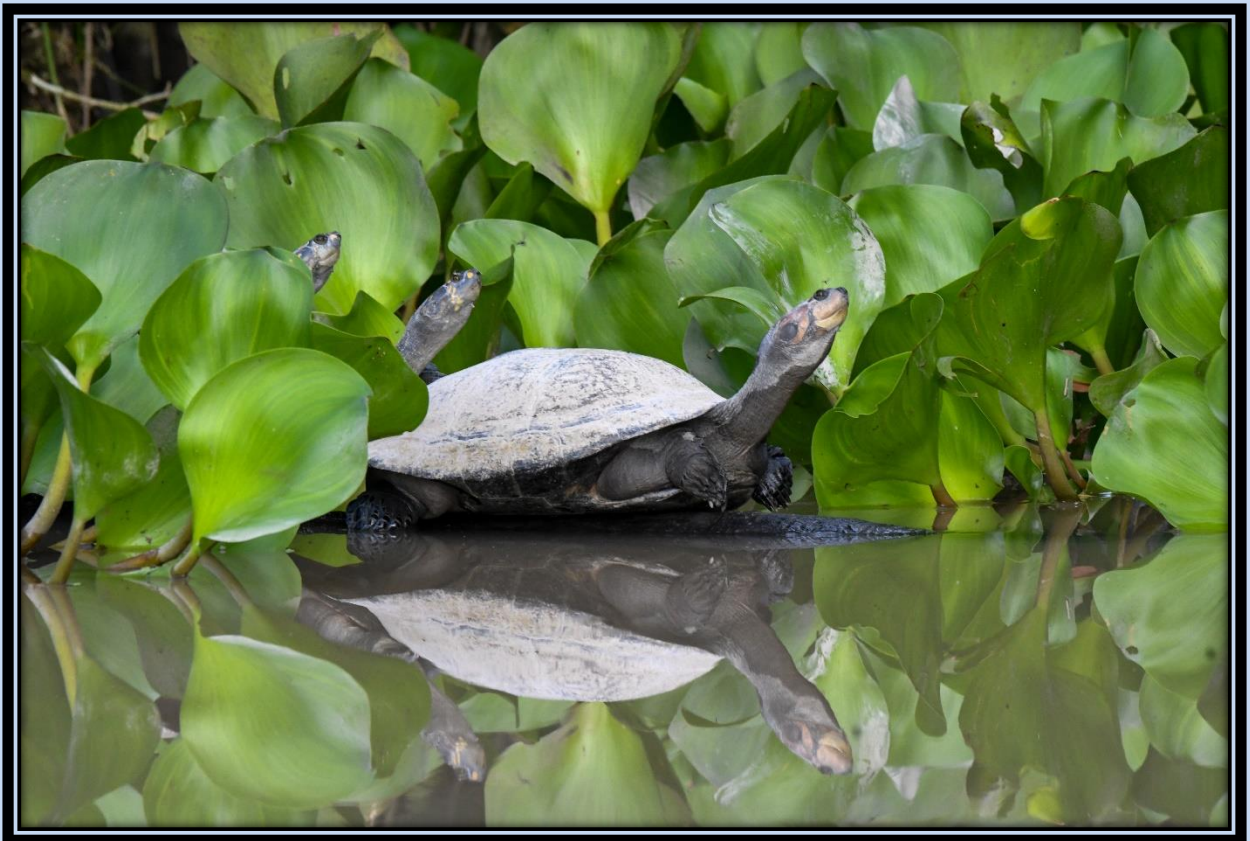
The last morning before my flight home from Quito, me and Nelson tried for **Ecuadorian capuchin** outside the town of Mindo. This critically endangered species is sometimes seen along the mountain roads above Mindo. But no luck.

All in all 26 new lifers for me with top four sightings of **Oncilla, Spectacled bear, Mountain tapir and Olinguito.**

Random photos from my time in Ecuador



Smoky jungle frog – the Amazon. HUGE frog!



Yellow spotted river turtle – the Amazon

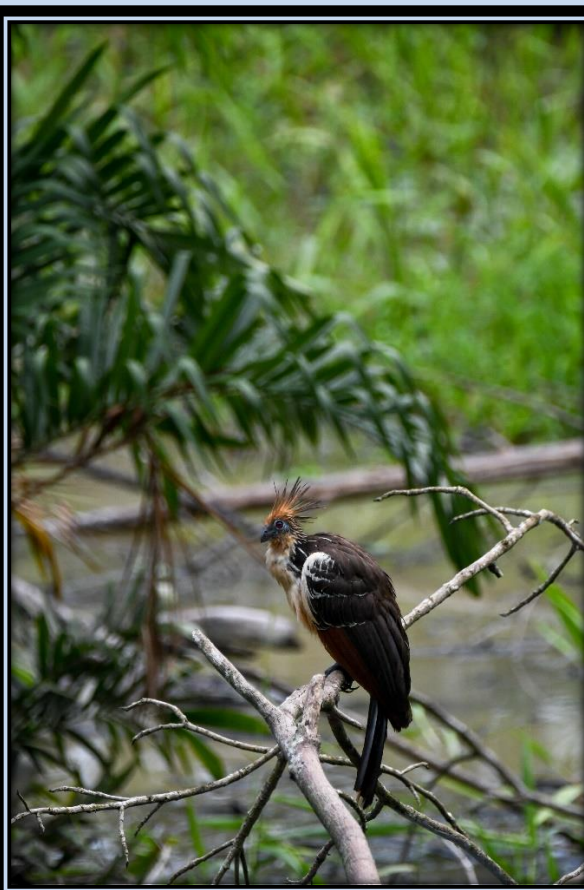


The view from Sani Lodge with the lagoon in front. A very nice place and good value for money.

Beware of the rain because there is a lot of it.

If you are into mammalwatching, pay extra for a personal guide with focus on this.

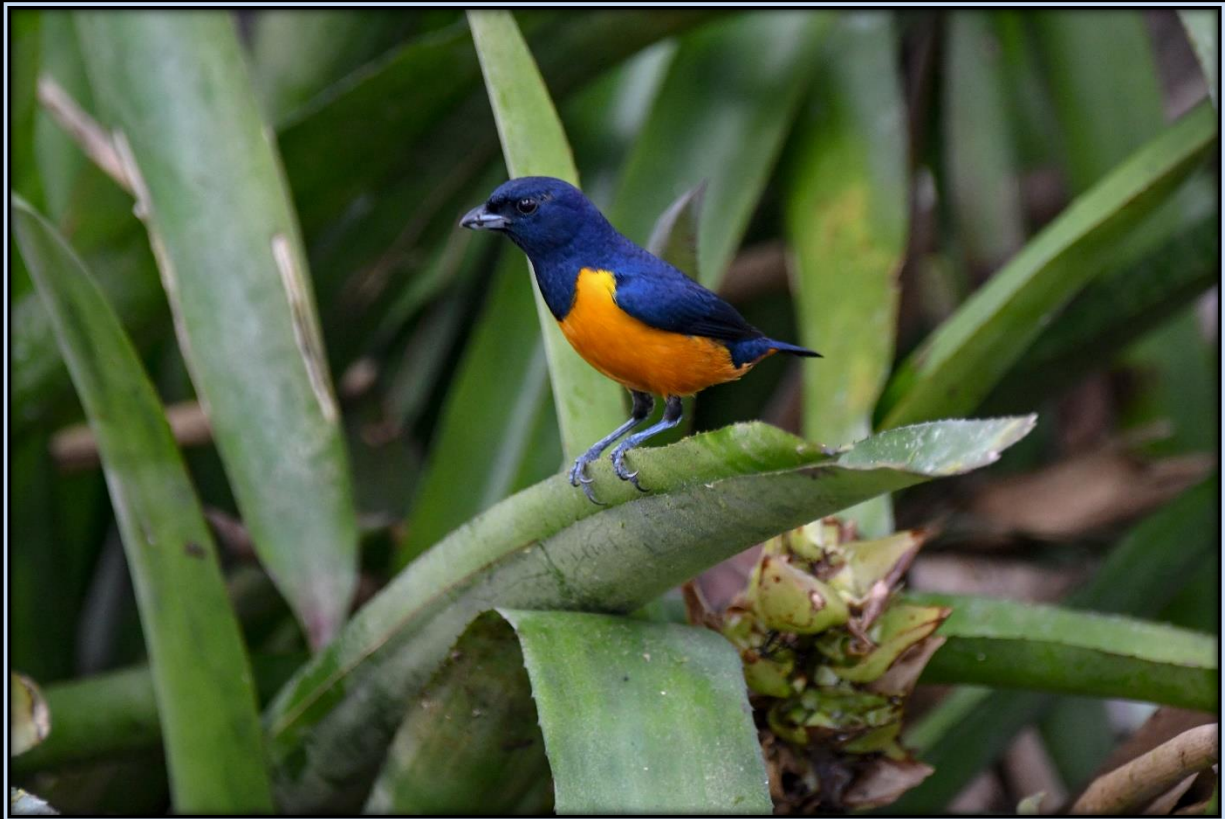
It's a heaven for primates.



Hoatzin



Some Ecuadorian snacks - the Amazon



Rufous-bellied euphonia – the Amazon. Seen from the watchtower at Sani Lodge. I can recommend to make a visit here.



Chestnut-breasted coronet – San Isidro Lodge



Andean cock-of-the-rock – San Isidro Lodge. A great bird even for a non-birder.



Masked trogon – San Isidro Lodge



Inca Jay – San Isidro Lodge



San Isidro Lodge. Best lodge on the trip and the best food as well.



Sword-billed hummingbird – Guango Lodge. Crazy bird with the longest beak compare to the body in the kingdom of birds.



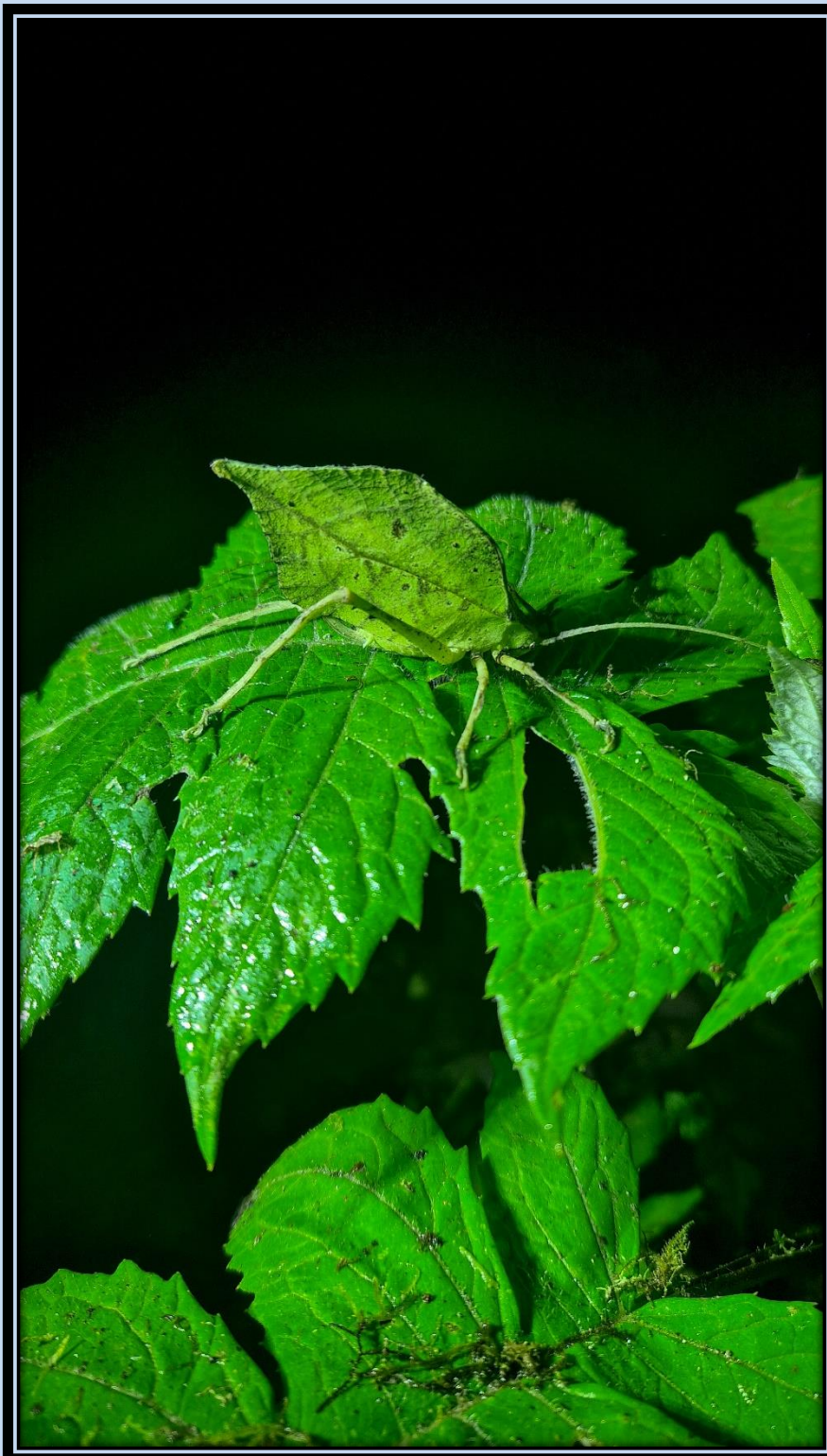
Andean pygmy owl – Guango Lodge. Suddenly he was also here to watch the Hummingbirds...



Tawny-bellied hermit – Alambi reserve



White-necked jacobin – Alambi reserve



You have to like those leaf insects. Such a camouflage. Cloud forest at Bellavista Lodge.

Big thank you from me to...

My guide for the last part - Nelson for a great time and for a fantastic Oncilla!

My private guide in Sani Lodge and the whole staff there which is fantastic.

Thanx also to the staff at San Isidro Lodge which helped me and who gave me such good food.

Species list – Sani Lodge , the Amazon

Western pygmy marmoset
Common woolly monkey
Humboldt's squirrel monkey
Marañón white fronted capuchin
Colombian red howler
Golden-mantled tamarin
Linnaeus two-toed sloth
Spix's night monkey
White tailed titi monkey
White-bellied spider monkey
Proboscis bat
Black mantled tamarin
Red brocket deer
White lipped peccary
Brown throated sloth
Northern amazon red squirrel

Species list – San Isidro Lodge

Grey-bellied night monkey
Black agouti
Red tailed squirrel
Andean white-eared opossum
Destructive pygmy rice rat

Species list – Guango Lodge/Papallacta/Antisana reserve

Spectacled bear
Mountain tapir
White-tailed deer
Andean tapeti
Striped hog nosed skunk
Montane myotis

Species list – Alambi reserve/Bellavista/Mindo area

Kinkajou
Olinguito
Oncilla
Central American agouti
Tschudi's slender opossum / Andean slender mouse opossum
Common opossum
Common vampire bat
Thomas's broad-nosed bat
Seba's short tailed bat

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