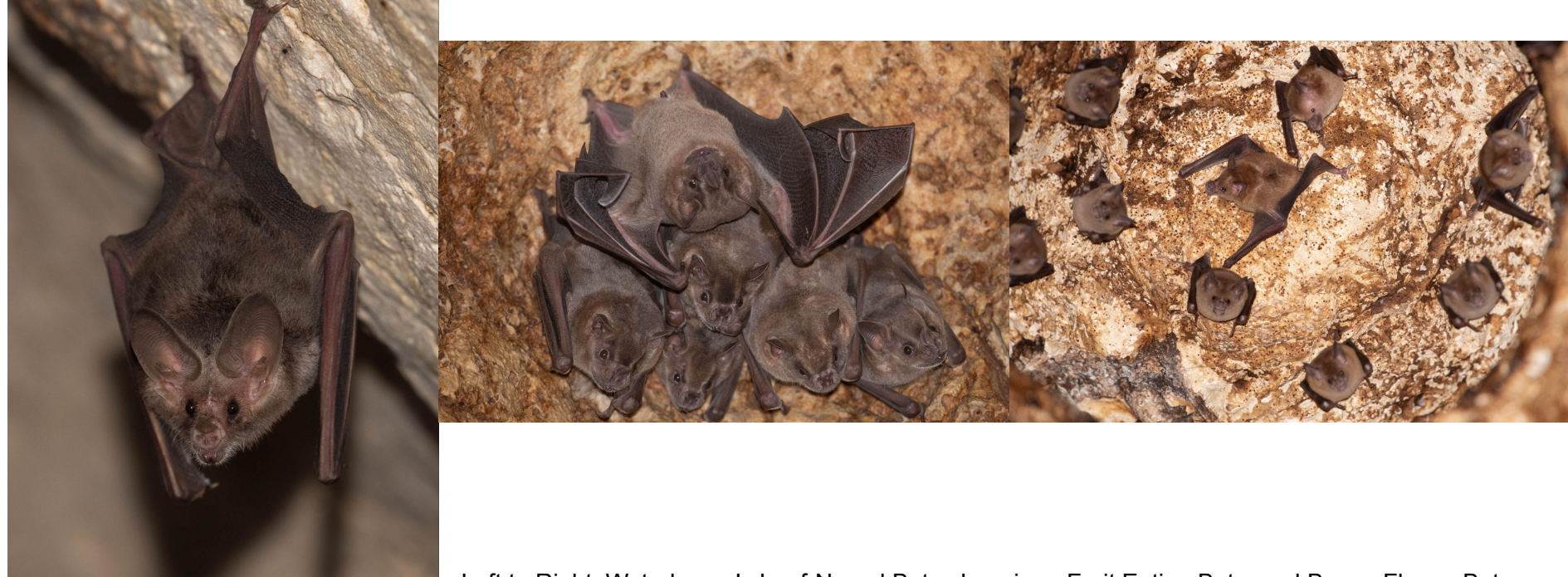


came to the Dominican Republic on a whim. I had one month of break after my first semester at college. I chose to go to the Dominican Republic because it had the cheapest flights. My main goal quickly became to find the Hispaniolan Solenodon, and I planned to spend my trip exploring the southwest corner of the country. I'm not old enough to rent a car and my lack of experience with motorcycles would make leaving Santo Domingo a death sentence. So I had to settle with relying on public transportation and a lot of hitchhiking. When I landed in Santo Domingo, I took the guagua, or local minivan buses, from the airport (they are waiting to the right once you exit the main door, with their destination on a sign in the windshield.) I rode to the transportation hub called Parque Enriquillo. Here you can find bus terminals to get all over the country. As far as I can tell the only bus terminal that services Barahona is here: (18.4859122, -69.8895560). I had to argue for several minutes to let me squeeze into the last spot on a bus bound for Barahona. I was able to get on but I had to spend the 5 hour bus ride with my backpack cramped on my lap.

The southwest corner of the island is disproportionately biodiverse, holding strong populations of most of the endemic birds, Solenodon, and Hutia. The Sierra De Bahoruco have immense numbers of endemic anoles, frogs, and orchids, many of which are undescribed. Barahona is the last large city before you enter the mostly remote and rural southwest. It's also the last place with a bank, so do any money exchanges here (Pedernales has an ATM). Besides stocking up on food and water I bought denatured alcohol from a hardware store here that I would use to cook all of my food. By about 10 am I hopped on another guagua and arrived in the village of La Cienaga, from there I hitched a ride on the back of a motorcycle up to the mountain village of Cachote. Cachote is a beautiful cloud forest in a perpetual sheet of fog. I camped in the forest for two nights, mostly birding (found three Eastern Chat Tanagers). At night while shining for anoles and frogs I found several **Black Rats**.

Next I began to make my way to Pedernales, where in the dry forest along the Haitian border I would search for Solenodon. On the way I stopped in Los Patos. This is a fun town to hangout in, locals from all over the country come here to swim in the river (the ocean has dangerous currents), and in typical dominican fashion blast music from "kitipo" or speaker vans. Los Patos Cave is easy to find, it's right by the road (17.959680, -71.183278), and accessible by a paved path. The cave is quite deep, but most of the bats are in the first couple of large chambers. I found **Jamaican-Fruit Eating Bats** to be the most common with several thousand present. There were also a few hundred **Brown Flower Bats** as well as maybe fifty **Waterhouse's Leaf-Nosed Bats**. Some local boys I met exploring the cave pointed out the location of a Hispaniolan Boa for me.



Left to Right: Waterhouse's Leaf-Nosed Bats, Jamaican-Fruit Eating Bats, and Brown Flower Bats

I spent the next couple days birding the Sierra De Bahoruco National Park from Alcoa Road. On the descent I walked through the village of Las Mercedes planning to spend the next couple of days searching the dry woods below the village for Solenodon. While passing through the town square, a group of men called out to me asking what I was doing. I told them I was looking for Solenodon, and one man, Martín, explained that his cousin was a biologist studying Solenodon and he would make arrangements for me to meet up with him. So the next morning after spending a night on the concrete floor of the church I found myself on the back of a motorcycle heading to the town of Mencía. Here I met Nicholas Corona, I ended up spending the next week and half living with his family. I can't thank him enough for his hospitality and knowledge of the forest. We searched for Solenodon all across the Sierra de Bahoruco, every night it didn't rain. Nicholas is quite the character, he greets all of his friends by graphically cursing them out in spanish, refuses to enter the forest without his shotgun, and smokes about three packs a day. Walking around with him is like being with a celebrity, he seems to know everyone even in the most remote parts of the forest.

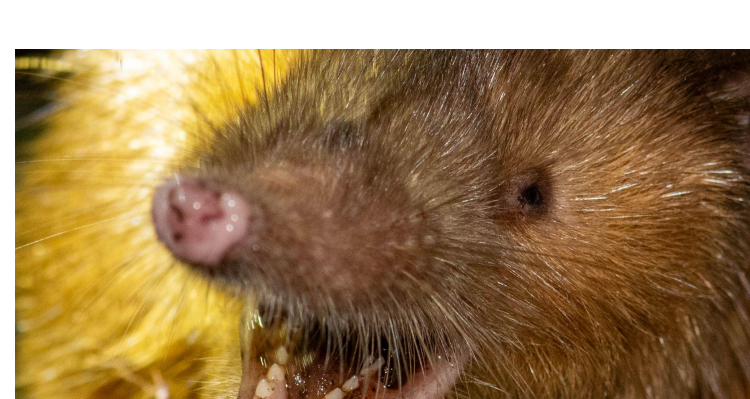
Typically we would go out at 9:00 pm staying out until 3-4 am. Solenodon are easiest to find by listening for the rustling they make in dry leaf litter. I visited at the beginning of the dry season, but this year was unusually rainy, and much of the leaf litter was wet making it difficult to hear the animals. Solenodon are widespread and still fairly common (although obviously very difficult to find), found from sea level dry scrubby forest, to high elevation cloud forest. But they are most easily found in the dry open karst forests of the foothills. Nicholas would lead and I would follow as quietly as possible through the forest, we would stop every couple hundred feet and crouch in silence for up to fifteen minutes listening. Fairly regularly we would pass small scratched holes and he would whisper: "solenodon 3 days old". This is the sign the solenodon makes when searching for their arthropod prey. Several times he pointed out Solenodon dens, which looked identical to the hundreds of small caves we passed. Nicholas even claimed he could track a Solenodon by smell, I couldn't tell if he was joking. On the third night of searching we found a **Hispaniolan Hutia**. Hutia leave small fecal pellets and fallen chewed up leaves on the forest floor below the trees they feed on. Hutia particularly like the leaves of *Clusia rosea*, and indeed in this species of tree is where we found one. On the sixth night at around 11 pm Nicholas ahead of me broke into a run, and charging down a hill caught a large female **Hispaniolan Solenodon**. After photos we released her and she bounded off back into the forest.



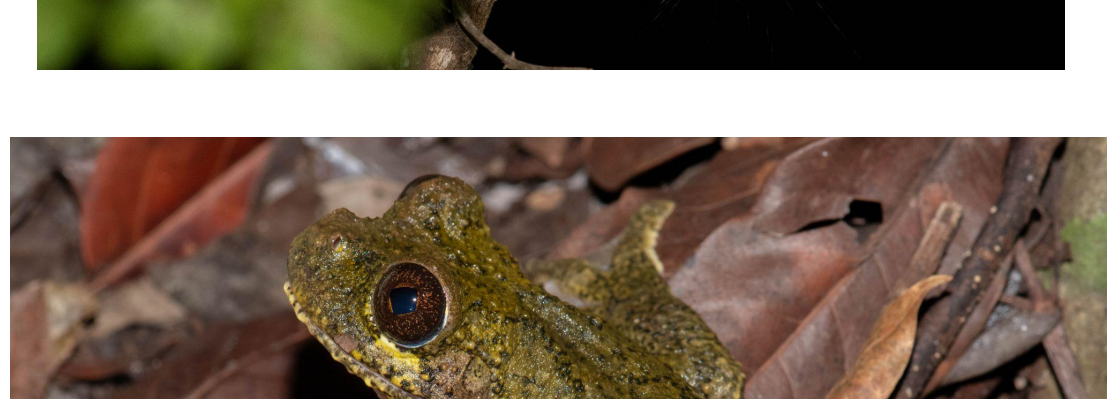
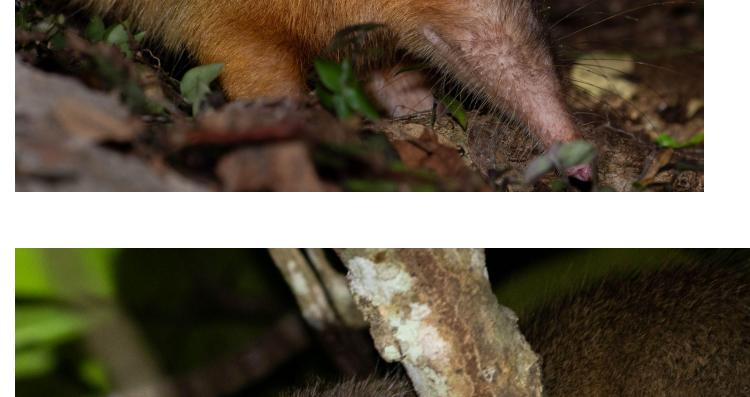
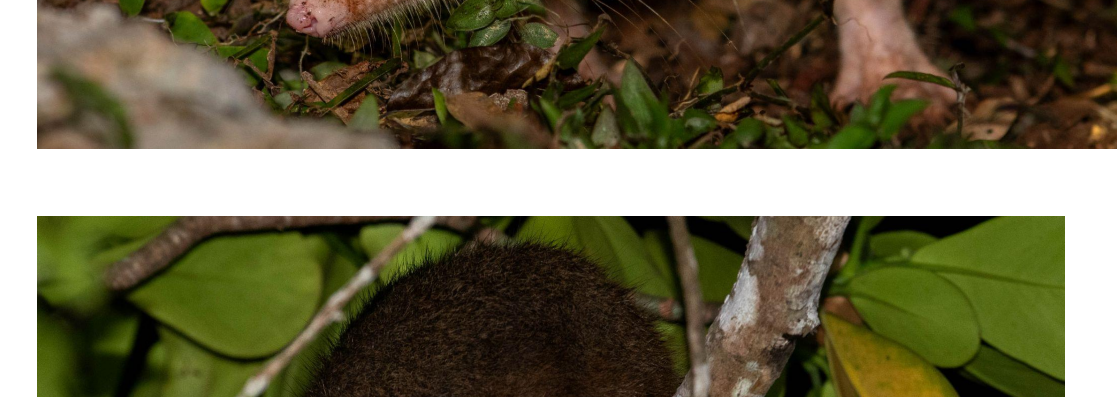
Unfortunately during my time at night in the forests of Hispaniola we often discovered large patches of primitively cut forest, and circles of burned ground. This is from Haitians illegally crossing the border and cutting down Dominican forests, burning it and then selling it as charcoal back in Haiti. Nicholas hates the Haitians, and everytime we came across one of these camps we would destroy it. Burn all of the charcoal, break the tools, and dump out their food and water. Dominicans in the area call him the "Sentinel of the Sierra de Bahoruco". A fitting nickname as he has worked for the last 20 years to protect his beloved forests. Haiti is a country in stark contrast to the Dominican Republic. The people of DR are happy, proud, and in most cases all the children appear well fed and taken care of. Haiti is now the poorest country in the western hemisphere, and without change people desperate for work and money will continue to spill into DR and threaten all of its wildlife and forests.

After saying goodbye to Nicolas and his family, I hitched a ride with some park rangers up to Zapoten and spent my last couple days camping outside the ranger station. This area is incredible for birding (listen for Black Capped Petrels flying into their nests at night if you camp), but I did not see any more mammals.

The Dominican Republic is a beautiful and diverse country filled with happy, friendly people. At least for now the Southwest is very far off the tourist path (Didn't see any other gringo's except for 2 peace corps volunteers in Los Patos). This may change in the near future as Pedernales has just opened as a cruise port and several resorts are in the process of construction in Cabo Rojo. All of the locals are very excited by this news, believing it will boost the economy. Traveling here is cheap and fun, and you rarely have to wait long before being offered a ride. In the end I spent around \$600 USD on this trip. There is still much to discover as many of the mountains have not been thoroughly explored by biologists. I would love to return and do a more dedicated trip targeting the herps and orchids.



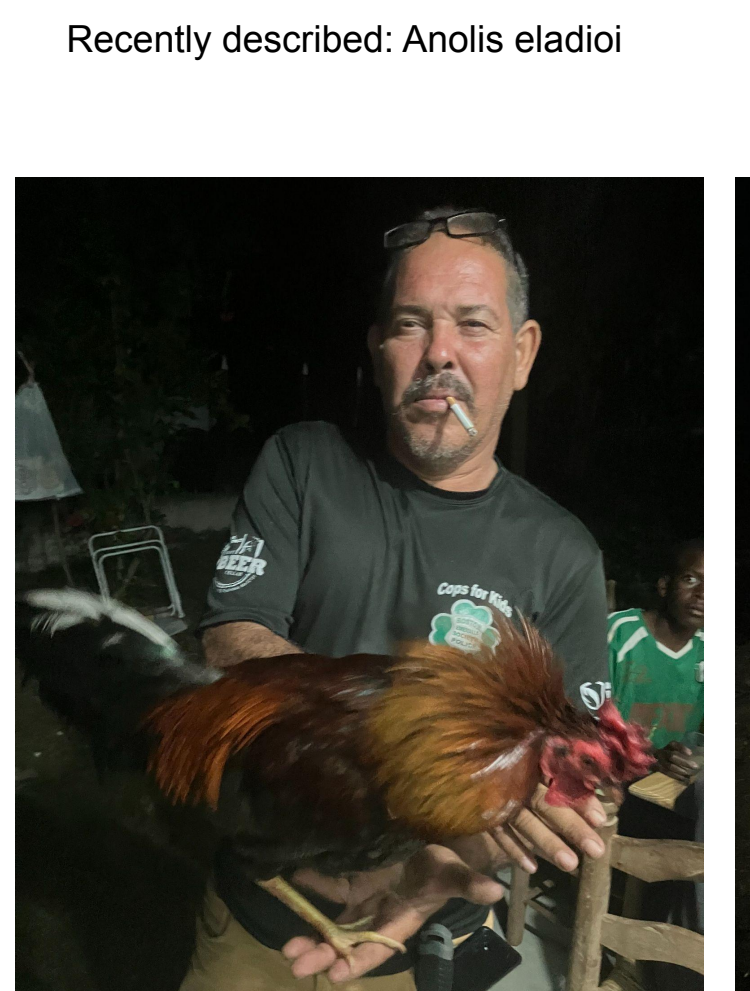
Solenodon means "grooved tooth", these are used to inject venomous saliva into prey.



Recently described: Anolis eladii



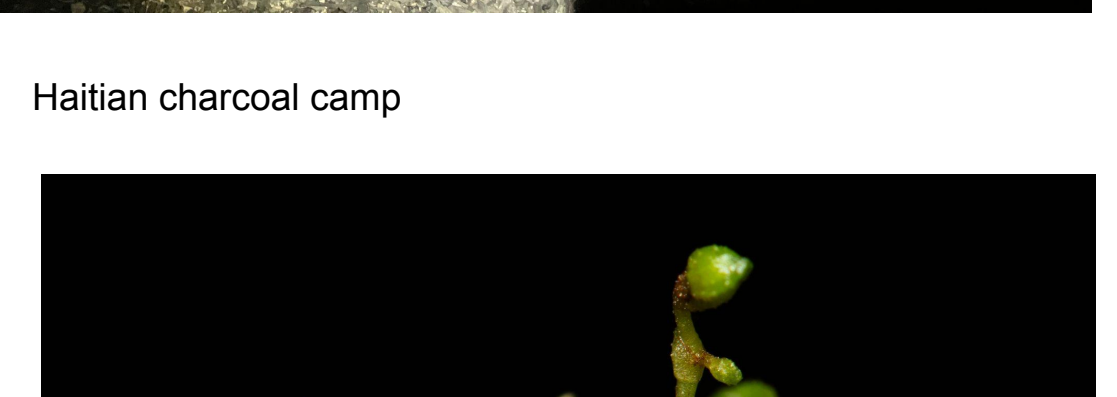
Hispaniolan Giant Tree Frog (Osteopilus vastus)



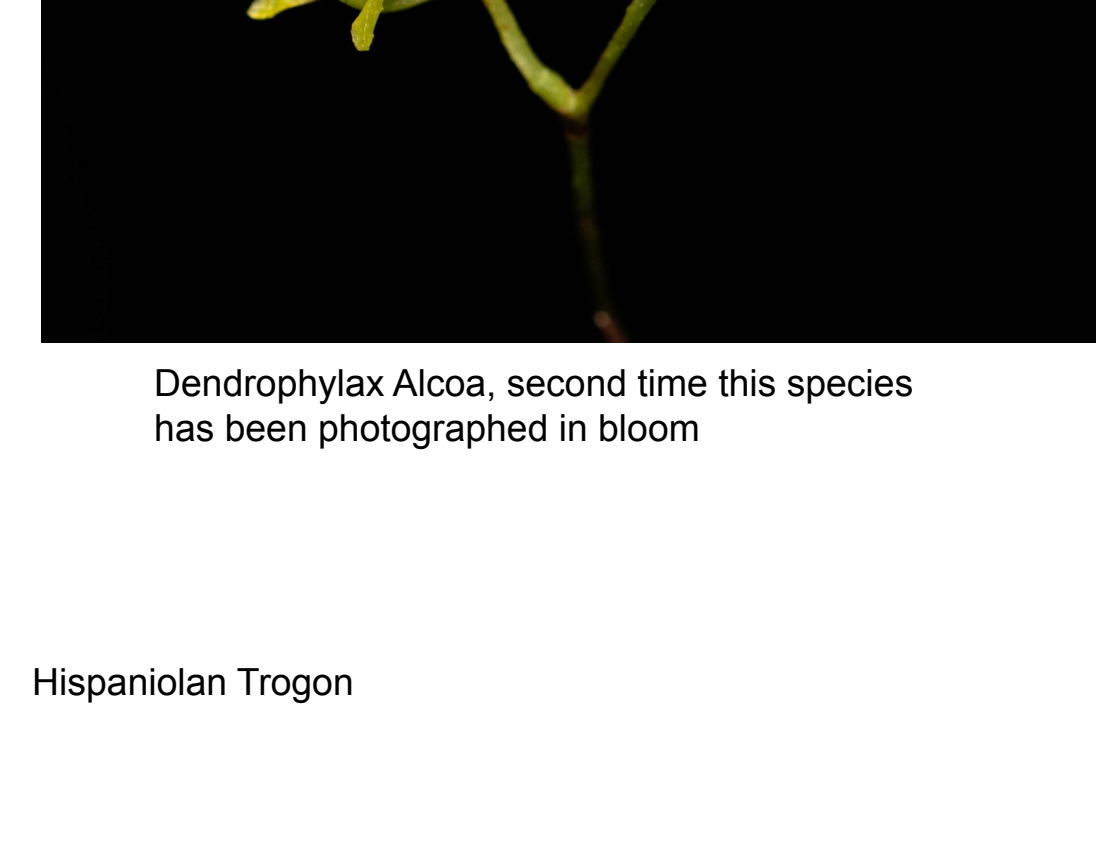
Nicholas with his prizewinning cock, trained for 6 months to be a champ



Haitian charcoal camp



Dendrophylax Alcoa, second time this species has been photographed in bloom



Hispaniolan Trogon