

Northern Peruvian Amazon wildlife trip report
May 28-June 3, 2021

We had an ambitiously large group of 18 consisting of my wife and 6 children, my mother, and my sister's family of 9 for our adventure in the Northern Peruvian Amazon.

We flew United from Boise to Houston and then on to Lima spending the entire day of Friday May 28th traveling. As we arrived after 11:00 PM and had a morning flight to Iquitos we stayed at the Wyndham Costa del Sol literally across the street from the airport. It could not have been more convenient for our schedule and had a good cook to order breakfast the next morning. Travel in Peru in the time of COVID is not a simple matter. To exit the plane upon arrival we had to wear face masks and face shields in addition to having a negative COVID test within 72 hours of departure and completing a health affidavit. Our temperatures were taken as well. The next morning to enter the airport we again had to don 2 layers of protective wear, have our temperatures taken and have sanitizer sprayed on our hands and luggage. Another health affidavit was required for each domestic flight and masks and shields had to stay on for the duration of the flight until you exited the airport at which point we just wore masks. COVID has decimated the country with far too many cases and deaths so you can understand why they take such precaution. We were fortunate to have been vaccinated in advance so traveled with confidence.

We booked our trip directly with Amazonia Expeditions after finding their website. My initial email inquiry was quickly replied to by Paul Beaver, the owner and founder of the company. Paul, as I would later learn by reading his book, *Diary of an Amazon Jungle Guide*, is PhD Biologist by education and experience who fell in love with both the Peruvian Amazon and a Peruvian gal and decided to start his own travel company. It began as an adventure travel guide service but evolved into a first-class lodge and a research center as he partnered with the local folks to provide opportunities for employment and to preserve the surrounding jungle. It isn't often that you get to work directly with the owner but it made a tremendous difference in getting quick answers and feeling comfortable with the important choice to book with Amazonia Expeditions. For more info, see their website <https://perujungle.com/> Paul began his adventures in Peru in the early 1980's and now works from Tampa, Florida. He has built a wonderful business with talented, dedicated, and friendly staff who deliver a phenomenal experience. As Peru has suffered greatly from the COVID pandemic, tourism largely disappeared. We were among the small, early wave of tourists in the months after the Peru re-opened their borders. We had the good fortune of being the only guests at the lodges for our 5 night stay and we didn't see another tourist once we left the Amazon for the Tahuayo River.

We were met at the small airport in Iquitos by staff from Amazonia Expeditions and transported by private bus across the bustling city of Iquitos to their office on the banks of the Itaya River. Iquitos is the largest city in the world that can only be reached by plane or boat—the only road to or from town simply connects it to another smaller remote inaccessible city. With nearly 500,000 residents the city is densely populated and it wasn't hard to imagine how 87% (per our guide) of the residents have contracted COVID in the last year. We filled out some paperwork, picked up a sack lunch and loaded into a covered motor boat for the long trip up river. The Itaya is a black river whose color is driven by the endless supply of plant matter that leaves an almost perpetual dank scent. Within a few minutes still within sight of numerous vessels and the shore

side city we reached the merger of the black Itaya River with the monstrous brown Amazon. We stopped to view the distinct line where the colors changed. While watching the water, our guide Wellister called out, "Dolphin!" I assumed he was teasing us, but he responded in earnest and seconds later we saw it surface. The Pink River Dolphins of the Amazon rarely jump out of the water so a typical sighting consists of a few seconds glimpse of the top of the head, back, a fin and if lucky a tail before they disappear again into the murky water. We could discern no pattern or way to predict when or where it would next surface but did catch a couple more brief sightings before we gave up and continued our journey.

The river's width made any boat traffic seem incidental but we passed numerous craft going up and down river, most carrying local passengers on the watery highway. The river carried innumerable logs and branches downstream in what could have at times passed for the inspiration of the Frogger video game. The Captain and crew kept a sharp eye out to avoid any large enough to damage the boat. As we progressed up stream the villages became shrank and the distance between them grew. Construction changed from a mix of cinderblock and wood to traditional raised huts with thatched roofs. We made a single pit stop for restrooms or snacks and then stopped again at a check point to deliver our permits to enter the protected Tamshiyacu Tahuayo Reserve. We left the mighty Amazon and turned up another black river, the Tahuayo. The forest increased in density, age, and stature and from this narrow river we could closely watch the shores. Locals spear fished from their wooden canoes in the shallows and others played and worked at the water's edge. The last village before the lodge is El Chino, named after the presence of Chinese immigrants who lived and worked in the area during the Amazon's rubber boom that lasted from about 1880 to 1910.

The river traffic was sparse beyond El Chino and our primary company were birds flying from, over, and along the river. As sun quickened its late afternoon tropical descent we reached a broad bend in the river and the Tahuayo lodge. While the rainy season had ended a month or more ago, and the water level had dropped 8-10 feet, it obviously had long ways yet to drop as we approached the dock, a story below the main buildings that were all elevated on stilts. We gladly stretched our stiff legs and backs and were welcomed with smiles by the remaining staff. A traditional chilled fruit juice hit the spot as we rested in the common dining area and were oriented for our stay. The internet was down so I didn't have to pretend to my kids that I didn't know the password. Walkways snaked out in multiple directions from the dining area leading to a hammock room over looking the river, the kitchen, a working area for the staff, a learning/technology room and of course to our quarters. Beneath the walkways water remained and numerous visible fish swam in the shallows. I think there were nearly 20 units of various sizes some with 2 stories. Most still had bedding enclosed in bags after months without use.

Given the location the accommodations were fantastic. Full bathroom suites in each room, mosquito drapes over comfortable beds, a couple of chairs to recline in and ample space for luggage and other things. The water was hotter than needed given the ambient temperature and electricity from solar panels and generators provided light though fans were limited to the common areas. I'm still not sure how they ever dry the sheets and towels in the humidity and rain but they kept everything clean and dry. Laundry racks could be moved around to make the most of the sun as it moved during the day to try to dry any of our damp clothes.

Our kids quickly learned that each evening at 6:00 hot salty popcorn was set out in the dining room to whet our appetite for dinner at 7:00. All meals were served buffet style with enough options for all courses to satisfy all 13 kids in our party. They catered to our interests or needs and we were more than satisfied with the chef's handywork. Our kids made friends with Siomi who helped serve the food and never missed a chance to talk or play with her during our stay.

At 8:00 we went out for our first night excursion with Wellister and Fernando taking turns in the front and rear of the boat. As we pulled from the shore they spotted the red eye shine of white or spectacled caiman along flooded shore behind the other boats. Later we found a brown-throated three-toed sloth exposed on a tree along the river's edge. We identified several nightjars, a few other birds, and a yellow-crowned brush-tailed rat before heading back to call it a day.

We were off at 7:00 the next morning heading back downstream in search of active morning birds. Again we were in luck as we pulled off the dock. At the very top of the tallest tree next to the lodge our guides pointed out a bright Orange-Backed Troupial. We quickly checked a dozen birds off the list including mealy parrots, a great black hawk, and ringed kingfishers but the highlights were clearly a group of blue and yellow macaws that loudly announced their presence as only they can. They flew overhead and landed twice where we could take pictures. We found another three-toed sloth in what would prove to be the most frequently seen mammal of our trip.





After breakfast we loaded up to journey another 10 km upstream to the Amazonia Expeditions' Amazon Research Center (ARC). We were clearly leaving civilization behind as the forest transformed quickly. The size, variety, and density of the forest increased dramatically and we began to realize that along most of the river's edge, the shore was not only not visible, but largely non-existent as the water continued as far as we could see, in some cases hundreds of yards into the forest. We passed a lone boat headed downstream and the passenger made arm excited arm motions above his head. My mom joked that he was making the moose antler signs but we truly had no idea what he was trying to communicate but our hopes were rising. As we rounded a bend we looked back into one of the many protected inlets that only the locals know whether or not they can be entered by motorboat. In this case we could see another boat that held Javier, the lodge manager, and Claudio, a guide and photographer. They waved us into the inlet and our guides excitedly translated their urgent calls—Red-faced Uakari's the most rare of the 15 or so primate species that inhabit the preserve. For the next ten minutes we craned our necks to look almost straight up where several Uakari's traipsed high above us in the canopy. One paused on an exposed tree limb overhead but was set against white clouds leaving too many shadows to appreciate his vibrant orange coat. What a treat for our first primate of the trip. While we excitedly watched and took pictures the guide pointed to the side of the boat and called out, "Tamandua!" We spent 10 minutes alternating between the Uakaris above us and the

Tamandua climbing up and over nearby trees. He was deliberate, but never quite held still as he explored for a breakfast snack. I was surprised at the Tamandua's significant size.





(Thanks to photoshop for bringing out the vibrant orange coat!)



Before reaching the ARC we were treated to our first troop of Common Squirrel Monkeys. These small adorable critters are on the opposite end of the cuteness spectrum from the Uakaris but they stayed back in the thick foliage and seemed unable and uninterested in holding still long enough for a good picture. The ARC is a bit more primitive than the Tahuayo Lodge but was comfortable other than the oppressive heat. The shared bathrooms and showers left one a bit more exposed to the mosquitos but the staff and food were at the same high level. We settled in relaxed on the patio chairs before lunch. I spied a likely Dusky/Copper Titi Monkey from chair but it didn't stick around long enough for identification. Lunch was at 1:00 daily and then we headed out for an afternoon excursion further upriver.

This time we pulled 3 canoes behind our boat to give us more flexibility to explore beyond the main channel. The next mammal to be crossed off was the Monk Saki Monkey, another truly unique looking primate with shaggy dark black fur, a long tail that could have passed for a duster, and a weathered gray face that could pass for that of an extra-terrestrial. After a paddle through the flooded forest we emerged to the main river just in time to watch a shy family of Dusky Titi Monkeys head deeper into the forest. The last highlight of the morning was a

spectacular Paradise Tanager, a small bird with a bright green head, near turquoise breast and under belly, black back and tail with a deep red spot in the middle of the black back.

That night we took our headlamps out on the river again. We saw a couple of small skittish caiman, a couple of gladiator frogs, and a white-bellied mouse opossum on a low tree branch along the river. A heavy rain cooled things off a bit before bed which was greatly appreciated.

After an early breakfast we started our next adventure at 7:30. We took the canoes with us so we could spend the morning in the seasonally flooded forest. It felt other worldly as we glided silently through the dimly lit forest. A white-faced tree rat (known locally as a jungle guinea pig) peered out at us from a tree hollow. Our guides repeated the Giant River Otter's cry and cough with amazing skill but to no avail. Though the water was only a few feet deep, we pushed deeper and deeper into the forest, what felt like a mile or more from the main river. Wellister raised his arm for silence and attention and then there was a splash off to our left. I saw the water ripple but can't say I saw flesh. He said it was a solitary neotropical river otter. One of the big draws of the ARC for me is the 2km x 2km trail grid system. Unfortunately the water had not receded sufficiently to make it easily accessible. We canoed through the forest until we reached terra firma where we got out and walked on clearly marked trails for an hour while our guides taught us about the many different uses for the native plants from a vine that holds potable water to a monkey comb, an umbrella leaf, and an iodine like substance for cleaning wounds. There are surely more important discoveries to come from the Amazon flora's wealth. We "retraced" our path back to the parked motor boat in the canoes, but honestly I'm not sure I would have been able to find it paddling deep through the forest without any fixed reference land points. The guides at the prow of each canoe carried machetes that were used repeatedly to remove vines and small branches to allow our passage. In our drive back to ARC we found yet another three-toed sloth, a mother Monk Saki Monkey with its child on its back, and a reclusive Dusky Titi Monkey



(mother and baby Monk Saki Monkey)

My sister's family finally caught up with us after missing their connecting flight to Lima in Dallas and having to fly to LAX, wait a day and then catch a red-eye to Lima. In the afternoon they canoed through the flooded forest and hiked as we did and were fortunate to see a small group of Giant River Otters briefly.

Our afternoon exploration yielded our best views of Common Squirrel Monkeys and another sloth performing a high wire act more than 75 feet off the ground.



At the conclusion of dinner that night the chef brought out a multi-layered gorgeously frosted birthday cake to celebrate for a couple of cousins with recent birthdays. We took a short night walk behind the research center and were rewarded with a couple of giant Smoky Jungle Frogs, a Common Opossum, a Red Acouchy, and a Paca which the guide said he hadn't seen for 2 years. We paused at one point and turned our headlamps off to experience the utter darkness under the canopy at night. We could not see our hands in front of our faces or any sign of stars or the moon.

Our last morning at the ARC we explored upstream again vainly searching for the Giant River Otters that frequent the area and are typically seen. We took solace in close views of a band of Brown-Faced Capuchin Monkeys.



We pulled the canoes back into the flooded forest to an area where the guides knew a pygmy marmoset resided. They rarely move beyond a 100 meters from their home tree and within 5 minutes the guides had located the hand-size creature high up in a tree. Remarkable!



On our way back to the Tahuayo Lodge we encountered a female Common Woolly Monkey that had been released from the local black market a few years back. A male was subsequently released and a son was born to the couple. Traditionally they live a little further from the river's edge but appear to be thriving.



In the afternoon we cooled off by swimming at an oxbow lake that is frequented by dolphins. A few members of our group caught glimpses in the distance but the water felt great and we were content to cool off and stretch our legs after many hours in the boat during the week. That night the guides got a well deserved break from evening activities.

In the morning our groups split with one half enjoying the zipline canopy experience while my group canoed to another lake in search of large black caiman and hoatzin. We struck out on the black caiman but could see the paths that marked their passage through the long grass and watched a flock of hoatzin with awe. They truly look prehistoric with claws on their wings and spiky head feathers. My daughter spotted a motionless chick hiding in a tree after the adults scattered at our arrival. The water lettuce was so thick that some routes proved impassable and our guide eventually broke his oar trying to muscle through it. The manatees feast on the lettuce but are only very rarely seen in the area.



In the afternoon the other group learned how to weave crafts from village locals while we did the zipline. In route to the zipline we stopped at tree known to host a family of night or owl monkeys. They seemed to be waiting our arrival and peered down at us with their oversized eyes from the shadow of the hollow.

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The zipline was a great break for the kids and provided a new perspective on the forest after we climbed 100 feet up a ladder to the first platform. The breeze felt great and the view was unmatched. We shared a tree with a collared tree runner (12+ inch lizard) and saw a few parrots fly by. After our final dinner we did one last night excursion by boat where the guides told us traditional native stories after we spotted a Great Potoo (nocturnal owl like bird). We enjoyed a good view of an Amazon Tree Boa as well.

The next morning our guides gave one last valiant effort to help us find a Giant River Otter but we had to settle for enjoying the moment and a few more monkey sightings. We departed midmorning for Iquitos and stopped where the Tahuayo merged with the Amazon. We once again saw Pink River Dolphins but they teased me and completely avoided my camera. The Amazon was choppy and we had a good rain shower on the way back downstream but arrived safely in Iquitos in time to enjoy an ice cream treat before being transferred to the airport. What a magical experience! I could not more highly recommend the team at Amazonia Expeditions, they were truly exceptional.

From Iquitos we flew back to Lima and on to Cusco where we hiked the short Inca Trail (1 day version), marveled at Machu Picchu, wandered through Cusco on the day of the Presidential elections and did a day trip to Palccoyo (astounding scenery at 16,000 feet!) one of two “rainbow mountains” in the surrounding area. We struck out on Viscachas and Vicunas and missed a Spectacled Bear at the Winay Wayna ruins on our hike by a couple of hours but did luck into a family of Southern Coati at Mach Picchu.



The Urubamba River and Machu Picchu from the Sun Gate



Palccoyo or Rainbow Mountain with Ausungate a peak of 20,954 feet in the far left corner

Mammal Species List (not so technical or scientific, 20):

Pink River Dolphin

Red-Faced Uakari

Common Squirrel Monkey

Monk Saki Monkey

Dusky/Copper Titi Monkey

Brown-Faced/Large Headed Capuchin

Pygmy Marmoset

Night/Owl Monkey

Common Woolly Monkey

Brown-Throated Three-Toed Sloth

Southern Tamandua

Paca

Red Acouchy

White-Faced Tree Rat

Yellow-Crowned Brush-Tailed Rat

Common Opossum

White-Bellied Slender Mouse Opossum
South American Coati
Long-Nosed Bat
Greater Bulldog/Fishing Bat
We saw numerous other bat species we were unable to identify
My Sister's group saw Giant River Otters
I saw the splash were my guide saw a Neotropical River Otter

We are fairly casual birders but identified the following (86+):

Undulated Tinamou
Andean Goose
Tarrant Duck
Sun Grebe
Speckled Chachalaca
Andean Guan
Andean Parakeet
Neotropic Cormorant
Cocoi Heron
Agami Heron
Cattle Egret
Great Egret
Boat-Billed Heron
Capped Heron
Black-Crowned Night Heron
Snowy Egret
Striated Heron
Horned Screamer
Puna Ibis
Green Ibis
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Lesser Yellow-Headed Vulture
Swallow-Tailed Kite
Snail Kite
Plumbeous Kite
Slate Colored Hawk
Great Black Hawk
Black Collared Hawk
Roadside Hawk
Black Caracara
Mountain Caracara
Yellow-Headed Caracara
American Kestrel
Andean Coot
Wattled Jacana
Large-Billed Tern

Plumbeous Pigeon
Ruddy Ground Dove
Blue and Yellow Macaw
Red-Bellied Macaw
Dusky Headed Parakeet
Cobalt-Winged Parakeet
Blue-Headed Parrot
Mealy Parrot
Squirrel Cuckoo
Greater Ani
Hoatzin
Great Potoo
Common Pauraque
Black-Throated Mango
Masked Trogon
Collared Trogon
Green-Backed Trogon
Violaceous Trogon
White-Eared Jacamar
Amazon Kingfisher
Ringed Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher
American Pygmy Kingfisher
Green & Rufous Kingfisher
Yellow-Billed Jacamar
Bluish-Fronted Jacamar
Black-Fronted Nunbird
Scarlet-Crowned Barbet
Chestnut Woodpecker
Lineated Woodpecker
Crimson-Crested Woodpecker
Plain Brown Woodcreeper
Strong-Billed Woodcreeper
Tawny-Breasted Flycatcher
Great Kiskadee
Tropical Kingbird
Spangled Cotinga
Plum-Throated Cotinga
White-Tailed Manakin
White-Winged Swallow
Great Thrush
Masked-Crimson Tanager
Paradise Tanager
Red-Capped Cardinal
Russet-Backed Oropendola
Yellow-Rumped Cacique

Shiny Cowbird
Orange Backed Troupial
Yellow-Hooded Blackbird
A few Hummingbirds...
We saw dozens of additional species that weren't identified

Reptiles:

Amazon Tree Boa
South American or Brown-Banded Water Snake
Rusty Whipsnake
White/Spectacled Caiman
Smoky Jungle Frog
Gladiator Frog
Cane Toad
Crested Forest Toad
Another species or two of frog
Collared Tree Runner
Plumed Basilisk
Spiny Whorltail Iguana