

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 22 APRIL - 28 APRIL 2024

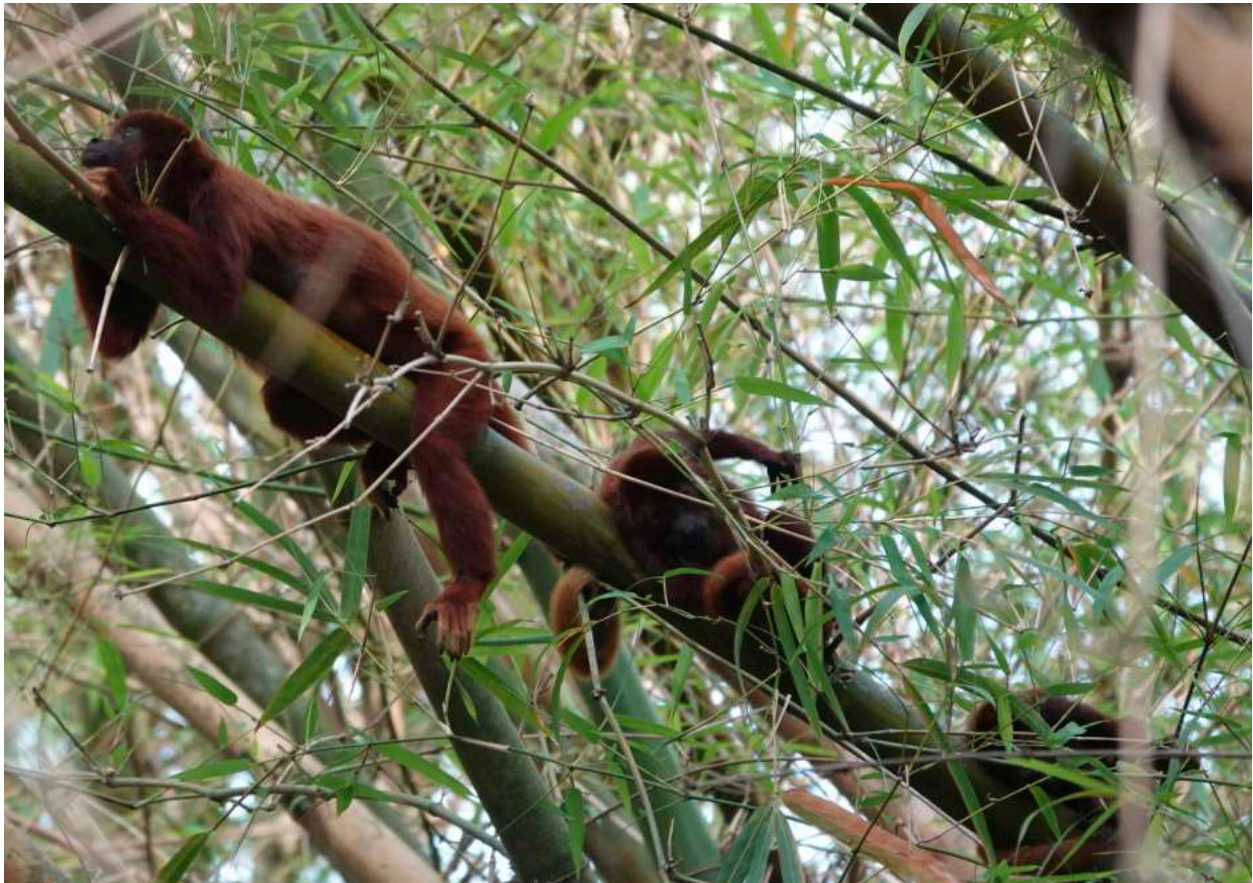
The year is 2016 and I had rented a private boat tour in the mangroves outside Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica to try to see a Silky Anteater. However, even after requesting multiple times someone who was a wildlife guide, the tour company I used sent an individual who told me first thing that he wasn't a wildlife guide and was more of a generalist. Long story short I did not see an anteater and my money for the boat was returned later..... So after a conversation with Fiona Reid about this, she mentioned Trinidad as a place to also try. I put the location in my back pocket, and when the Trinidad White-Fronted Capuchin was split to full species I knew I had to visit.

My friend Deb Bradley had told me that she had used a guide to do a nocturnal tour in Trinidad years before and put me in touch with him when talking to her about my plans. Roger Neckles, who runs Avifauna Tours for bird photography and expeditions (roger_neckles@yahoo.com), was intrigued by my request to go to Trinidad and Tobago on a mammal watching trip with the headliners being the Silky Anteater (one that is now split into 7 species I think) and the Capuchin. I also requested a chance to go to one of the beaches where Leatherback Sea Turtles come to nest every year.

Roger, born in Trinidad but spent his later formative years in England, and I went back and forth a few times with trip itineraries on what would work best. My first itinerary was 97% birding, then 3% mammals. Take two was 83.7% birding, then came an email about was I sure I did not want to go to Colombia for a mammal watching trip instead of Trinidad. While I love Colombia I convinced Roger that what I wanted to see did involve a trip to Trinidad. Finally Roger came up with a nice itinerary to see my target species, as well as him sneaking in a few of the more special birds on the island.

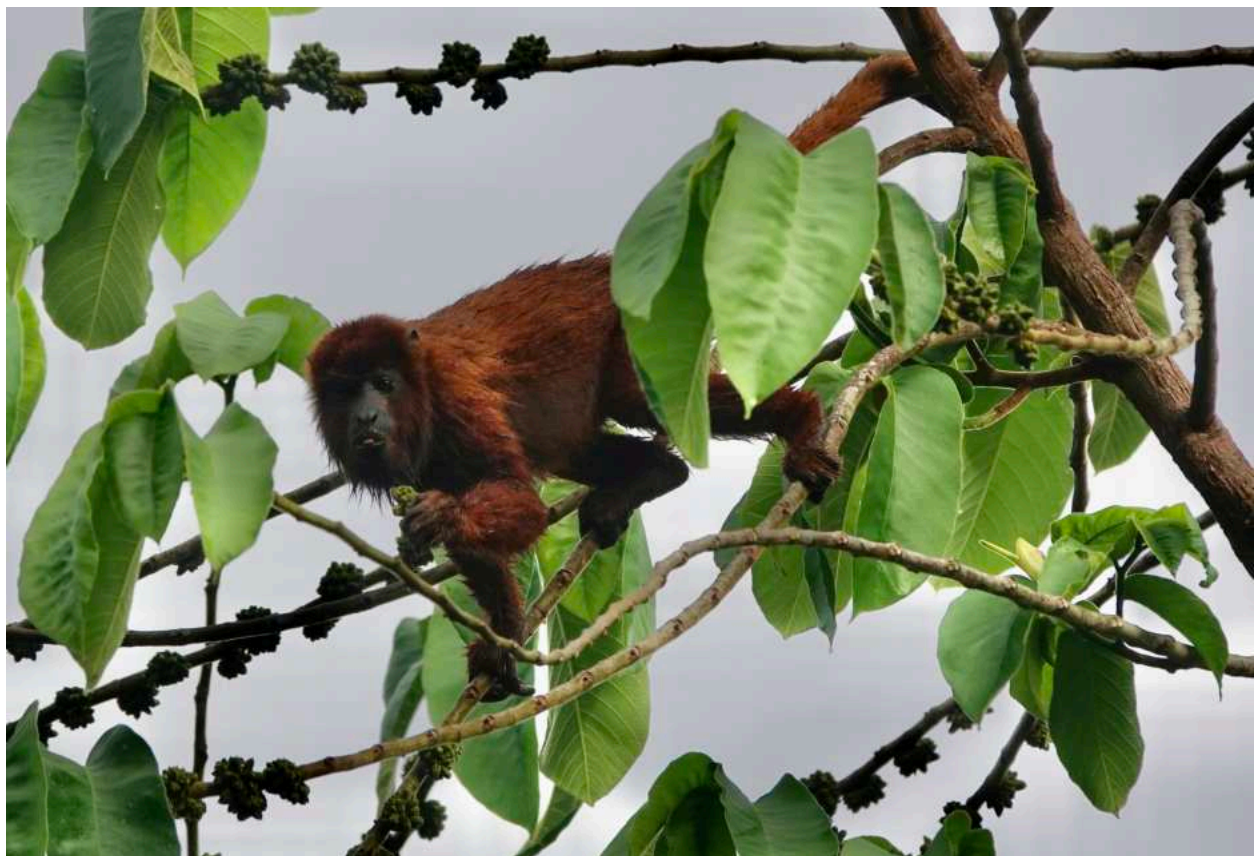
Day 1 - After a five hour delay on an American flight coming out of Richmond, Virginia and having to spend the night in Charlotte, North Carolina, I met up with my trip companion Julie Krajewski who works for the wildlife side of the Denver Zoological Society. Roger met us at the airport in Port of Spain then drove us to the Brix Hotel where we deposited our belongings. He then took us to the Chaguaramas National Park about

13 km outside of the city center. The park has a healthy population of Guianan Howler Monkeys, as well as Tufted Capuchins (which are unfortunately an invasive species to the island and were released from the pet trade). We hiked the Bamboo Cathedral Trail and it did not take long to find the capuchins. They were however some of the shyest Tufted Capuchins I have been around as they did not stick around long when we stopped to look at them. The Howler Monkeys on the other hand, were laying on a large piece of bamboo and were busy doing what they do best, relaxing. We ended up watching the Howlers for an extended period of time then Roger took us back to the Brix to spend the night.



Day 2 - Roger picked us up early and we headed back towards Chaguaramas National Park, but this time we drove around the margins of the Chaguaramas Golf Club close to the entrance of the Bamboo Cathedral trail. Multiple family groups of both the Tufted Capuchins and

the Howlers live in the forests surrounding the club. When we got there it had been raining, but as soon as the rain stopped we were rewarded with the beautiful chorus of roaring howlers. We saw the tail end of a troop of capuchins on the move, then found a family group of four howlers that were busy rubbing themselves on trees and shaking the rain water off. They proceeded to then go to a fruiting tree right over the road to start feeding,





At the same time the dominant male of the group was on the other side of the road. After multiple times of us backing up until he felt satisfied he walked onto the road and casually stopped to glance at us before joining his family. Roger was able to get the shot above as I was taking video.

From the National Park we then drove to the Yerette Hummingbird Center for some “down time” to look at some hummingbirds and have lunch. The center is basically the back of Theo and Gloria Ferguson’s house in the Maracas Valley. The Ferguson’s had set up a bunch of feeders around an outdoor seating area, similar to what I have seen people do in other countries. Theo then gave a talk about hummingbirds that made me feel like I was back in University as the talk included lots of questions about hummingbirds biology and behavior (I now consider myself a quasi-expert on the subject). Theo first made everyone that was there introduce themselves and tell him why they came to Trinidad. Of course when it came to my turn I started talking about how much I love primates and my main target was the Trinidad White-Fronted Capuchin. After staring at me for an awkward few seconds sort in disbelief that I was not there to birdwatch, Theo told me he had photographed the capuchins then yelled at Roger “leading mammal-watching tours now Roger , eh” only to the delight of the other guide that had brought tourists. Theo did tell us that

Red-Rumped Agoutis frequent the hill behind his house and we did do an unsuccessful search looking for one.

The next stop was the Caroni Swamp. When I told Roger about wanting to see the Silky Anteater he recommended that I hire the entire boat so that we could focus on looking for one, just as I had in Costa Rica. He had a friend Rauí Kalpoo who along with his brother runs Kalpoo's Bird Sanctuary Ibis tours (kalpoonavin83@gmail.com). Most people go to the swamp to see the Scarlet Ibis that come at dusk in the hundreds to a sleeping spot. People can also go early in the morning to watch them leave. We drove to the visitor center and Rauí was waiting for us. He quickly asked us if we were bird watchers, then he must have seen the "look" on my face and laughed telling us that he had been looking for anteaters over the last week and sending Roger pictures. He said finding them is a competitive thing with all the boat drivers, and that it can be tricky as they do not sleep in the spot every day. After getting into the boat, Rauí started looking for Neotropical Pygmy Owl which he found quickly. He then started talking about some cardinal that lives in the area and started trying to whistle it in with Roger also whistling. I started flash backing to my experience in Costa Rica, then looked at Roger and said I did not mind looking at birds as long as the bird was a Silky Anteater. He just laughed and told me nah, lets look at birds, then laughed more and told Rauí then we were on a complete anteater patrol from there on out. Rauí took us slowly along some of the best spots he had seen them. Finally after about 15 minutes he called out "Got one but it's far". How he managed to see the anteater nestled up looking like dry leaves was amazing to me, especially as it was easily 10-15 meters into and up in the mangroves.

After seeing the first one, he asked how many more we wanted to see....



It did not take long for Raui to again call out found one, but this time he said it was close. By close I mean right at the edge of the water, and 2 meters above our head. It had wedged inside into the nook of a tree and had its tail extended like the first individual to cool itself off.



After seeing the second anteater, Raui took us to two spots with Brazilian Long-Nosed Bats and showed us several Cook's Tree Boas (a reptile lifer for me) curled up in trees. Finally we made it to the spot to watch the Scarlet Ibis and Raui served us Pineapple chow he made (highly recommended) a Trinidadian fruit dish made with chopped pineapple, garlic, cilantro, lime juice, chilis, salt and pepper. There were three other boats that afternoon and none of them besides our boat saw an anteater.

So..... if you really want to focus on them hiring a private tour is recommended. That night we went back to Port of Spain and slept again at the Brix Hotel.

Day 3 - when I booked the tour, I told Roger I wanted two shots/days to try for the White-Fronted Capuchins as sometimes I had read (and was later told) they are not always found. So around 4 am in the morning, Roger picked us up and drove us about 2.5 hours to the Nariva Swamp to meet local guide Bobby Narine for the first try.



Bobby was unable to join us that morning, so one of his guides Charamoo (who was the first deaf guide I have ever been with but who did amazing) took us on a short boat ride in the mangroves to Bush Bush Island where the monkeys often stay. There was also the chance for Cappybara and West Indian Manatee which we did not see. We got off the boat and it was game time! Roger mouthed to Charamoo that we had to find the capuchins and we could not leave until we did. As soon as we left the exit trail from the



boat we turned right and not long after a Trinidad White-Fronted Capuchin was slowly making its way above us. This was then followed by dozens and dozens of monkeys and turned into one of my favorite capuchin experiences of my life. We watched them break open palm stalks looking for food, rough housing with each other, and trying to intimidate us by throwing things at us (cue me almost getting hit by a non ripe mango twice) and shaking trees above us. Some of the teenager males just sat above us staring at us like they had never seen a human before and an adult mature male did the same behavior. This species is critically endangered and supposedly there are only about 50 breeding adults at this time left. Much smaller and lean bodied than their invasive Tufted cousins, hopefully the population can thrive. We saw what I imagine is every age group of capuchin in that troop. We were told the government is trying to protect them especially after a past Yellow Fever outbreak.



We then proceeded to walk in a circular fashion around the island. We saw several Howler Monkeys, much shyer than the ones we saw before, and some quills on the ground from a porcupine. Some of the younger capuchins preceded to follow us during part of the walk. The island was a previous release site for Blue and Yellow Macaws that were re-introduced

from captive populations. There was the remains of a release cage as well as a small shack that people stayed in. Inside Lesser sac- winged bats were seen.

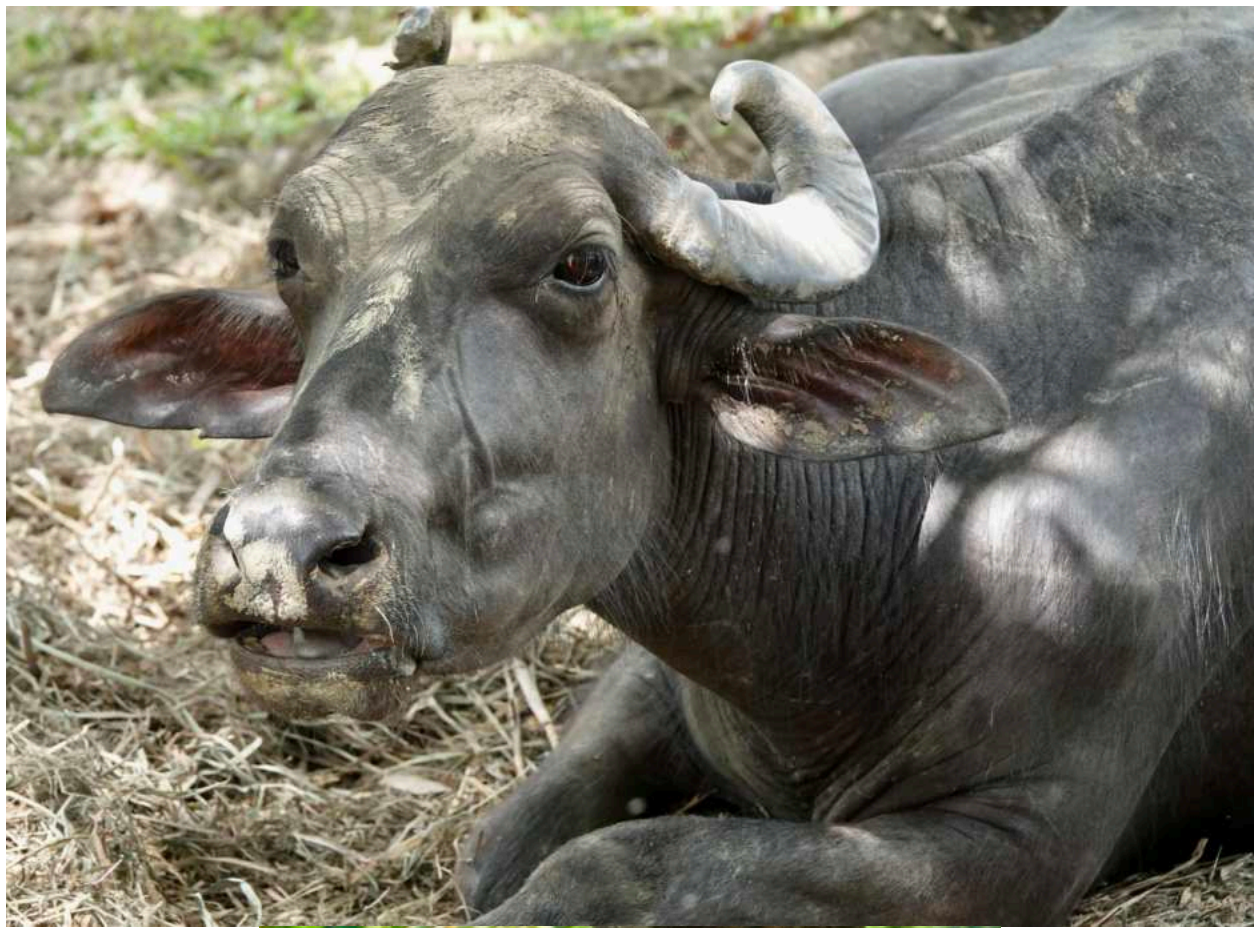
After the tour ,which lasted about 3 hours, we then drove to the small town of Mayaro where we spent the night in an air b and b. In the afternoon Roger took us to a spot to look at macaws , then we relaxed in the pool for the rest of the day.

Day 4 - Back to the Narivo Swamp early in the morning for the second go around for the capuchins. This time, they were not right at the trail entrance, but in some fruiting palm trees behind the macaw release cage. We watched them for over an hour taking turns feeding, including several females with babies. Again some of the juvenile males came closer to us to see what we were doing.





From there we then drive about three hours to the north of the island to the small beachside town of Grande Riviere. Along the way we passed through the town of Matura and Roger asked me if I wanted to see a Buffalypso. The Buffalypso was created by Trinidad veterinarian Stephen Bennet in the 1960's and is a cross between Carabao and Murrah, Surti, Jaffarabadi, Nili- Ravi and Bhadawari buffalo. Supposedly the breed is resistance to tuberculosis and is a hardly meat and milk domestic species. The name comes from the word Buffalo and Calypso, a type of music that originated in Trinidad and Tobago. So when one asks if you want to see a Buffalypso, the answer is always yes.



The claim to fame in Grande Riviere is the stretch of beach there has one of the highest populations of Leatherback Sea turtles that come each year to lay eggs on the beach. We checked into the Le Grande Almandiere Hotel right on the beach, had lunch, then Roger took us to an area in the Matura National Park to show us a Trinidad Piping Guan. Unsuccessful, we went back to the hotel to rest. At 6 pm each night during nesting season (usually March until the end of August) the beach closes to tourists and locals and does not open again until 6 am. The Turtle Village Trust employs local tour guides to take tourists out on the beach to watch turtles and sometimes to see some hatching. So around 8 pm we headed out with a group of ten other tourists to the beach. We were directed to a female that was getting ready to lay eggs, then the guide talked about different things with the turtle. After she laid her eggs we walked back and saw multiple other turtles coming out of the water and also already on land. My group had some somewhat rowdy children which does not make a pleasant wildlife watching experience for me. So I was determined to wake up early and get back on the beach around 6 am to see if any turtles were still nesting.

Day 5 - Luckily for me, a turtle just happened to be on the stretch of beach directly in front of my hotel at 6 am. Along with Julie and Roger, we



watched her for about an hour until she went back into the ocean. Only a few other people showed up, and only briefly to watch her.



From the turtles, we then went back to the guan spot and watched a male and female guan briefly. From there we drove back to Port of Spain and Roger took us to a food truck to try Trinidad Doubles and Baiganee. After this we took a 20 minute flight on Caribbean Airlines to Tobago. Tobago despite not being a mammal highlight part of the trip was beautiful and lush and a peaceful spot to end the trip. We stayed at the Cuff River Nature Retreat and Lodge and had the entire place to ourselves. In the afternoon we drove up to the Main Ridge Reserve to look unsuccessfully for agouti.

Day 6 - In the morning we went back up to the Main Ridge Reserve and did not see any mammals. We then did a driving tour of the island, ate some delicious Trinidad Roti, looked at some canons at Fort King George, and took a boat trip to Little Tobago for a few hours then back to Cuff River for the night.

Day 7 - we flew back to Port of Spain then went to the Santa Margarita Neighborhood where Roger had a tip that there were agoutis. Despite a complete neighborhood swipe we came up empty handed. After eating more Doubles and Baiganee, we went back to the airport and flew home.

Roger was a great guide and always had a smile on his face. He kept telling us he never thought about mammal watching options before and will in the future. He seemed very excited when we saw the Howler Monkey on the road, something he had never seen one do, and a Silky Anteater so close. I mentioned to him several times that changing his company to “birding and mammal watching” seemed more legit.

Species seen -

1. Tufted Capuchin (introduced) - *Cebus Apella*
2. Guianan Red Howler Monkey - *Alouatta macconnelli*
3. Silky Anteater - *Cyclopes didactylus*
4. Brazilian Long Nosed Bat - *Rhynchonycteris nato*
5. Trinidad White-Fronted Capuchin - *Cebus trinitatis*
6. Lesser Sac-winged Bat - *Saccopteryx leptura*