

Bearly Believable – Birding Bolivia

6-7 August: Next time I say let's go someplace like Bolivia, let's go to Bolivia!

This trip started as an alternative to a failed attempt to assemble a team of four to go to Mongolia for Snow Leopard and Pallas's Cat. Steve Babbs had been to Bolivia 20 years previously and in several trips to South America had racked up a good bird list and some tasty mammals – but still needed a bunch of cats which seemed from trip reports to be almost routine for Nick's Adventures visiting their exclusive access Jaguarland reserve North of Santa Cruz de la Sierras and Kaa Iya National Park, to the South-east of Bolivia's most important city apart from the capital.

Never one to waste any part of an opportunity Steve devised an itinerary divided into four basic parts: an initial four nights in Santa Cruz recovering from the long series of flights and visiting the Botanical Gardens and Curichi la Madre reserve; then five nights at the Yungas location of the Refugio los Volcanes followed by two excursions with Nick's Adventures to the aforementioned Jaguarland and Kaa Iya. Between each element we had a night in Santa Cruz, plus two nights at the end, when we paid another visit to the Botanical Gardens. In addition to recovery time this gave us a reasonable chance of not being hampered by the occasional roadblock demonstrations by which the citizenry indicate their opinion of the government: in particular the extra day at the end made it unlikely we would miss our flight home.

Route out and back was London City – Frankfurt – Sao Paulo – Santa Cruz.

The security staff at London City Airport decided to do a full search of my hand luggage which profited them nothing. We'd left plenty of time so it didn't bother me either. The Embraer E195 of Dolomiti Airlines had more leg room than any other aeroplane we travelled on but no other amenities: for an hour's flight it didn't need any.

At Frankfurt, as transit passengers we had no need to go through immigration and our baggage was through-ticketed – allegedly! With two connections and three airlines involved although ticketing was all Lufthansa we were very conscious (from bitter experience) that not all luggage reaches the destination and not only did we have emergency clothing along with absolutely all our birding gear in hand luggage but we had cross-packed, with half my clothes in Steve's case and vice versa. Asking various people in the airports we passed through whether or not we could rely on the through-ticketing we received answers as follows: yes, no, maybe, I don't know, you'll need to get it back at Sao Paulo but otherwise OK..... We crossed our fingers at Frankfurt and had a beer before boarding a Boeing 747-8 for the long overnight flight to Brazil. Then we crossed them again for two and a half hours in the company of GOL in a Boeing 737-8 MAX (yes, the one that developed a very bad reputation a few years ago). We landed safely at Santa Cruz and recovered both our cases – no probs.

Nick's Adventures actually picked us up as a current banking crisis in Bolivia had led them to offer us a discount for cash payment of our trip balance and then to protect it by giving us a lift to our hotel, which was useful. As we left the airport (first two birds on the Bolivia list Feral Pigeon and House Sparrow, with the native and universal **Rufous Hornero** a close third and my first tick of the trip) we swept past grasslands with half a dozen **Greater Rheas** ambling about and some **Southern Lapwings** standing tall amid a few splatters of rain that increased as we headed into the city. I'll try and remember to embolden ticks for me

(mammals in red) and mention ticks for Steve, who didn't need a whole lot whereas the only non-new stuff for me had been ticked in North America or the Falkland Islands.

Southern Lapwing was a bird I'd waited 37 years for after missing a vagrant in the Falklands that was present when I reached the islands but left before I discovered how easily I could have hitched from Mount Pleasant to Stanley. Though fully expected on this trip it was still a satisfying get-back.

On the way into the city our driver pointed out a **Guira Cuckoo** on a power line that was big and close enough for me to tick, but that was the last identifiable bird before we reached the Hotel 7 Calles, our base for the initial phase as well as the overnights between subsequent episodes (but not the last two nights). Room 107 was to become almost home-like and I have to say after initial ambivalence (the water temporarily running out soon after our arrival didn't help) our returns involved increasing enthusiasm for its reasonable spaciousness, air conditioning and quiet.

Culture shock: finding the Bolivian notices in bathrooms everywhere instructing that used toilet paper was to be placed in the bin, not the toilet. Bigger shock: forgetting once in a while and having to decide whether to recover it or just flush it.....

Having paid our trip balance and booked in, scoring a familiar Black Vulture from the room window, we went for a walk. We had to grab some lunch in a café, scout the local shops, get some bottled water and then set off again to check out restaurants and visit the cathedral with its small leafy park holding Yellow-chevroned Parakeets – upgrading my feral Florida tick from 1988 to wild birds. The weather had improved and we enjoyed views of the cathedral and parakeets in warm or even hot sunshine.

Our eventually selected restaurant was the El al Jibe and we found ourselves back there on each visit to Santa Cruz, partly because it was good, friendly and welcoming and had cold bottled beers as well as nice food and partly because it was straight up the same street as our hotel for half a mile limiting the chances of getting lost.

8 August: Raindrops keep falling on my head

Breakfast was an omelette. There were rolls as well but this early in the trip I managed to withstand their appeal and stick to my low-carb diet. Steve asked the hotel receptionist to call us a taxi to the Botanical Gardens (70 Bolivianos or about £7) and having bombed up with water we set off into increasing drizzle on a forecast of drizzle with dry spells or increasingly wet with downpours depending which forecast you believed. It turned out the downpour one was right and as we entered the Gardens (10 Bolivianos each on this occasion) the sky unleashed its worst. We found a bench under a shelter and birded from there until it slacked off, when we ventured out to see what we could find. In very poor light under heavy cloud and thick canopied trees we'd seen **Purplish Jays, Chopi Blackbirds, Creamy-bellied Thrushes** and **Thrush-like Wrens** whose vocabulary seemed quite wide and inclined to keep making us think we'd got something different! In addition to whatever birds, we had some primate targets with White-eared Titi and Azara's Night Monkeys, Bolivian Horned Capuchins and Black-tailed Marmosets all theoretically possible – though whether other primates would feel as inclined as us to brave the weather was anyone's guess.

Our first stop was the lagoon near the gate, in which we could see the head of a caiman – we believe **Yacare Caiman** is the resident away from the Pantanal – and a few basking

turtle sp as well as a bunch of water birds: familiar Great White, Cattle and Snowy Egrets with Black-crowned Night Herons, Limpkin that I'd seen in Florida and a Cocoi Heron, a species I'd found as a vagrant in Port Stanley; new **Neotropic Cormorant**, **Yellow-headed Caracara** and **Crested Oropendola**. On the beach a **Red-capped Cardinal** hopped about, red cap brilliant in the dull light.

As we passed numbers of feeding Yellow-chevroned Parakeets along the lagoon rim, Steve reassured me they were common and there was no need to strain taking pictures on a duff day. In return one of the parakeets accurately aimed a stream of white excreta onto his trouser leg, an avian souvenir he didn't appreciate. After a bit of a chuckle I provided some tissue to clean it off. Well most of it anyway...

We started off into the less formal area of the Gardens via the nursery and compost heaps, both haunted by birds exploiting the attracted invertebrates and any seeds fallen from nearby trees. **Sayaca** and **Silver-beaked Tanagers** showed immediately and a showy Woodcreeper foraged on tree trunks. I wasn't sure about it then and I'm not absolutely positive about it now but I think the photo shows Ocellated Woodcreeper. The only other possibility seems to be Buff-throated but I think the bill isn't strong enough and the bird too small and compact. (Afternote: discussion on BF revised the identification to **Black-banded Woodcreeper**.)

As the rain faded to drizzle and we plodged along on increasingly clingy mud we saw **Tropical Parulas** and our first **Blue-crowned Trogon** as well as **Scaly-headed Parrots** and more Oropendolas. A venture down a side track resulted in retraced steps when it faded into woodland but a brief cut through to the far side of the reserve produced **Masked Yellowthroat** and **Red-crowned Ant-tanager** before another out-and-out cloudburst led us to occupy another roofed bench we found by a birding tower to which access was forbidden.

Once the weather again improved we encountered a small troop of **Bolivian (aka Azara's) Horned Capuchins** and watched these too for a while until they moved into dense cover and became very difficult. Back on the main drag down the centre of the reserve and glancing down a wide but very muddy side track we saw a **South American Coati** foraging in the open, though not particularly close. We watched it and took some pictures over about ten minutes before it ambled into the woods and disappeared.

It wasn't all that long after that we found a few **Black-tailed Marmosets** feeding their way quite quickly through some fairly open tree branches and managed to watch and photograph them – we never saw any more so that was quite lucky.

Towards the bottom end of the reserve we ran across a **Crimson-crested Woodpecker** which obligingly sat for pictures and a **Rufous-tailed Jacamar** that was great to see but was camera-shy. Returning up the track along the reserve fence we found some more monkeys and to our astonishment it was three **Azara's Night Monkeys**! They are so named because they are nocturnal so we felt very lucky indeed to encounter them in admittedly dull daylight and speculated the poor weather was what had tempted them out.

Soaking wet and with shoes clumped with mud we made our way up the reserve border and added **Red-crested Finch**, **Grey-necked Wood Rail**, **Picui Ground Dove** and **Wattled Jacana** to the day list and of course my life list. Unfit and with a damaged left ankle playing up I may have been a bit of a trial to Steve in the latter stages of this march but unlike me he made no complaint. Arriving back at the gate we realized that to catch the bus back to the city centre we would have to cross the dual carriageway that passed the Botanical Gardens. Bolivian traffic acknowledges few rules but we were actually helped by the very close

presence of a toll booth which meant everyone had to slow down, giving us a good chance of surviving the crossing: a raised concrete central reservation offered useful refuge halfway.

Once we were across it was a short tramp to the nearest bus stop past a long queue of trucks hoping for diesel at a filling station: the bus fare of 2 Bolivianos each seriously undercut the outbound taxi price albeit leaving us with an acceptably short walk back to the hotel at the other end. Hot showers without the water failing part way through restored us to the point of heading for the El al Jibe and a couple of Prost beers to accompany a solid dinner. Our verdict was that despite the weather we had managed to have a pretty decent day, with particularly some great mammals.

9 August: Curichi la Madre

Breakfast was Mandarin juice followed by a ham omelette and finally yoghurt. Afterwards reception ordered us another taxi (actually the same one giving us a sneaking suspicion someone's brother/nephew/father/boyfriend was getting some bonus business) this time to a smaller reserve within the city boundary called Curichi la Madre. This was reputed to also have our wishlist White-eared Titi Monkeys as well as Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths and a bunch of good birds.

The taxi driver had a little difficulty finding which side of the reserve had the entrance but after a few blind alleys he managed to get to the right place where helpful staff sounded for a while as if they were going to insist on guiding us. Either we'd misunderstood or they looked at our appearance – typical birder gear-behung slight dishevelment – and decided we probably knew what we were doing, because they released us onto the trails without accompaniment.

Almost immediately we were into a feeding flock moving through thick bush below the main canopy from which we managed to sort a pair of **Bolivian Slaty Ant-shrikes**, a pair of **Moustached Wrens**, more Tropical Parulas and Silver-beaked Tanagers and Thrush-like Wrens. Steve had a piculet that I missed and from the Bolivia field guide weighing down my waistcoat pocket reckoned it was Ocellated Piculet. That turned out to be wrong and all the piculets we saw were **White-wedged Piculet** – according to one of our Nick's Adventures guides, Hugo.

Strolling on Steve found a **Fork-tailed Woodnymph** perched up and despite a continuing shortage of light (though dry the day was cloudy and quite windy: in the woodland the wind wasn't a big issue apart from the rushing sound of leaves not helping with listening for calls, but it wasn't all that warm) we managed to get some shots of it. There were a couple of wide vehicle track trails through the reserve and various loops off them that were narrower including one that involved a low but precarious cable-supported boardwalk in need of a bit of maintenance.

Before we reached the cableway we found a reserve signboard showing cartoon representations of some animals that one might see: a sloth, a toucan, an Armadillo and a Red Fox. Hang on – what??? Someone tasked with artwork must have gone to the internet and either googled cartoon fox directly or just looked for "fox" – it's a pound to a penny such a search would yield Red Fox at the top of the list. Whoops.

Teetering along the aerial boardwalk, avoiding the odd broken board, we came across a showy female Blue-crowned Trogon and another Rufous-tailed Jacamar escaped my lens. Various butterfly species were less evasive and a male Blue-crowned Trogon also sat for its

portrait: a big flock of 50 or so Chopi Blackbirds worked frenetically past us without ever really giving a decent opportunity for a good picture.

We found a large-headed flycatcher with yellow underparts, an absolutely stonkingly massive hook-tipped bill and bold black-and-white striped head. After some discussion and reference to the guide we decided eventually that it was a **Boat-billed Flycatcher**. A **Squirrel Cuckoo** flitting through the upper branches was easier to identify but more than equal to staying out of the way of my camera. Coming downhill round a bend in the track I found a small animal legging it across the track and disappearing into the bushes: luckily a second then followed it by emerging from reeds on the other side and happily it paused in view long enough for photos: **Brown Agouti** onto the list and into the can.

Further on another largish Woodcreeper had us once more thumbing through the field guide to decide this time we really did have a **Buff-throated Woodcreeper** and I have photos which I've since compared with both the Botanical Gardens bird and internet pictures. It's always a conundrum: do you watch and try to record features in your mind's eye, get the guide out and look back and forth at the bird and plates or whip the camera up and rattle off shots for later perusal? I don't think there is a single right answer, it depends on circumstances. I do know the feeling of having got it wrong no matter which option I've gone for: on this occasion perhaps I got it right.

Another small bird gave us a similar opportunity and for me the sub-optimal result: an ID but no picture, this time of **Little Woodpecker**. Above the canopy Turkey Vultures, familiar from both the USA and Falklands, wheeled in the open sky across gaps in the tree cover. A Black Vulture, high among the Pete Postlethwaite-standard uglies of the bird world, perched against the light on a tree branch over the track for a silhouette shot.

Steve saw a movement at ground level and it turned out to be a mammal that had come down from a tree for a moment: the first **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth** of the trip was slowly making its way behind a very small clump of shrubs. Slow though it was it had chosen its path well enough to frustrate our initial attempts to get pictures and as we manoeuvred round the clump it seemed it had managed to disappear altogether! How did that happen? We weaved and bobbed our heads trying to determine where the sloth had managed to conceal itself and eventually found it about three feet up a six-foot stick in the middle of the clump where after a bit of patient waiting looking at it sunk in slumber we were rewarded with close views of it awake and looking at us.

Having got the photos we craved we left the animal in peace and returned to circulating the network of trails. Last tick of the day was a **Golden-crowned Warbler** that simply moved too fast for pictures but gave decent binocular views. As we neared the reserve centre two staff on a quadbike came past us pointing upwards and shouting something that was obviously meant to be helpful: we sort of figured they meant something good was up the trees near the centre and we found two Azara's Horned Capuchins there showing well. Watching and picturing those with dry fur in fairly open branches topped off an enjoyable day at Curichi la Madre with some real highlights.

We walked back to the main road to catch a bus but ended up flagging down a taxi that dropped us back at the hotel for 20 Bolivianos, a very reasonable price for a quick and easy finish to the excursion leaving me with a little energy for the walk up to the El al Jibe.

10 August: Botanical Gardens in the sun

A fried egg was followed by rolls with butter and jam and I completely cracked on the diet. Then into the taxi on a sunny morning for a return fixture at the Botanical Gardens, where once again we were let in for 10 Bolivianos a head. At this point I realized I hadn't handed the key in at the hotel which raised worries about cleaning our room, in particular emptying the toilet paper bin..... too late now.

As soon as we had our cameras and bins unpacked (Santa Cruz feels a safe city but there's still no need to advertise just how much expensive kit you are carrying until you reach your objective) a very rapid **Southern Amazon Red Squirrel** tested our reactions with a lightning fast dash across a lawn, pausing with a nut on the base of a tree before hurtling off again and vanishing for the rest of the day. My shots are not competition winners!

Oropendolas, Chopi Blackbirds and Rufous Horneros added their bit to the liveliness of the morning: it was immediately apparent that the lightness of spirit we felt from the weather extended to the wildlife. Rufous Hornero is made special by the fact that it is the only bird species we saw on every day of our stay in Bolivia. Others got close but only the Hornero had the endurance and adaptability to be in every environment we visited. Good show!

We went for another look at the lagoon and found that the single Caiman we'd seen yesterday had multiplied into at least a dozen, some basking on the banks while others hung in the water or motored slowly along with tails waving gently to provide power without noticeable disturbance to the surface.

Around the edge there had been some changes to the birds present. In particular a **Green Ibis** was probing the mud along one edge, a nice addition to the list: but **Lesser Kiskadee** and **Tropical Kingbird** sitting up were also good to have prolonged views of in the open, flycatching from naked branches and what was presumably the Limpkin we'd seen on our previous visit was showing rather better than it had been. The Lesser Kiskadee had caused us some serious thinking, having originally assumed it was Great but noting that it had no yellow gape line, the bill was quite small and the bird generally appeared slim.

We managed to photograph Yellow-chevroned Parakeets without them bombarding us with a short sharp shower and then the first new birds we ran into were a group of **Green-cheeked Parakeets** which hung around long enough for identification and a couple of photos but then departed screeching for somewhere else, probably a preferred feeding area. We made off into the wilder parts of the reserve, leaving the formal gardens behind.

A Piculet then gave itself up and after getting pictures and having a long session with the field guide we decided it was Ocellated Piculet (the one Steve had seen but I hadn't the previous day). However, we happened to mention it in front of our guide on the last part of our trip who had been mentioned to us by the Jaguarland team as being something of a bird expert and he reckoned it was more likely to be White-wedged Piculet, necessitating a review post-trip. I've now reviewed my pictures against the field guide again and attempted to compare with pictures on the internet. I concluded that it must indeed be **White-wedged Piculet** as the breast feathers are white-centred, not black as described in Birds of Bolivia: but I also concluded that there are a lot of misidentified pictures on the internet!

As we made our way down the dry but not yet dusty central main path (much nicer when not wet with sticky clumpy mud) butterflies were everywhere. I've often remarked that on foreign trips it's impossible to do everything: if you are concentrating on mammals and birds you need to just ignore butterflies and dragonflies. This applies doubly at the start of a trip before you get a grip on what's common and what's special: but our first sunny day had us

snapping away at the different highly coloured insects anyway. I even took a couple of minutes to photograph an emerald-shining fly that hovered near us, partly because Steve said “Good luck with that!” when I first raised my camera.

Overhead the better weather resulted in a lot more vulture action and among the BVs and Turkey Vultures eventually we spotted a **Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture** circling. It wasn't easy because the birds kept disappearing behind the trees and with changing angles the light on the head could be very difficult, but we were satisfied we had one bang to rights.

Investigating a side track we ended up at the reserve border fence roughly where we'd seen the Azara's Night Monkeys on our previous visit. Almost immediately we found a feeding flock of assorted birds working through the bushes and canopy and got to work sorting through Tropical Parulas, Silver-beaked Tanagers and new treats like **Chivi Vireo**, the resident brown-eyed Red-eyed Vireo lookalike of Bolivia, Guira Tanagers and a flycatcher that sat up for pictures but couldn't be immediately identified. Post-trip after looking at photos and the guide I believe it is **Slaty-capped Flycatcher**. We also had brief views of **Orange-headed Tanager** and another Squirrel Cuckoo flitted through without ever sitting anywhere remotely open.

Suddenly all the small bird action ceased and what seemed to be alarm calls sounded. We noticed a smallish raptor sitting up in a nearby tree presumably after a dash through the foliage hoping for an unwary victim. Steve identified it immediately as **Roadside Hawk** and within a few days it was a familiar bird to me as well. It remained long enough for us to get some pictures through thin screens of twigs.

For some while we had had semi-distant company, with a young local nature enthusiast seemingly following us as we wandered from one track to another. Eventually he came up and bid us “Buenos días” before asking about each of our gear. We had a bit of a chat about it before being distracted by more wildlife. All quite innocent but I was certainly happier once he went more obviously about his own affairs.

Meantime Steve had spotted the blue flash of a Morpho butterfly flapping along the track and mammal trip or not we spent some time hunting it down, eventually getting both under- and upperwing pictures of this huge insect perched in the sun. Over the trip we saw several of these massive butterflies (of course in different places they may have been different species!) and that blue flash as one approached remained a thrill throughout – they have real presence!

Having reached the bottom end of the reserve via the border fence we started back up the central track, encountering mainly birds we had seen already. Reaching a cross-track with benches by the junction (hurrah – the world needs more benches!) I flopped thankfully onto it while Steve continued to prowl about and suddenly called me back to action having found a perched **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl** a matter of feet above his head on a naked branch. It was awake and alert, rotating its head to look seemingly in any direction that wouldn't make a good photo, but patience won out and we had not only fabulous views but got decent pictures. To get all the angles we wanted it was necessary to step off the track into the woodland and Steve frankly had no need to remind me to look where I was putting my feet in case of lurking snakes or other nasties: two of my rules abroad are definitely look where you are stepping and don't step where you can't see.

After that we strolled along a narrow track through the bush to the no access tower by which we'd sheltered from the rain during our previous visit and Steve found another Ferruginous Pygmy Owl perched up! This one was more intensely coloured and since it was only about

150 yards from the first in a straight line we wondered if they were a pair. More photos ensued.

Something I'd been struggling to photograph was Creamy-bellied Thrush: we'd seen plenty but they seemed camera-shy, giving good views on open ground, occasionally giving a Redstart-like tail flutter, till the lens went towards them – then off into the nearest cover. Finally one sat up on a branch and I got something that would do.

Back in the more formal gardens we found not only the still elusive Purplish Jays but also bångingly weird-looking **Plush-crested Jays** with their luminous-appearing contrasting blue eyebrows over bold bright yellow eyes. These also had a fairly long flight distance despite foraging around a picnic area and I felt there was more to do. I was however distracted by a finch with the same array of colours as the Red-capped we'd had in the wet: this one however had a tall crest and paler grey back and was obviously **Red-crested Cardinal** – tick! It preferred feeding in the shade – the heat of the day made me agree and I was seeking out shadows to lurk in – but I got a shot of sorts and moved on as Steve was calling me to a **Yellow-rumped Cacique** (tick again). I struggled to get a clean shot of this, which teased from among orange blooms on a splendidly flowering tree. Perfectly adequate bins views but just not quite there with the camera.

Before long we were off around the reserve again to make the most of our time. Steve found monkeys in a tree near the nursery and compost heaps: a family group of **Black-and-Gold Howler Monkeys** was enjoying the afternoon sun and for once we had good light from behind us. The adult female promptly decided to evacuate its bowels and judging from the amount descending must have just about turned herself inside out. I have no pictures of that.... I do have some of the adult with a very small infant as well as a yearling or older juvenile. We didn't see a male on this occasion: it's the adult males that are black while females and young are a goldy-blond more likely to be seen on a bad hairpiece than a genuine head of hair.

Eventually they retreated into shade and we moved on, once again down the central track occasionally investigating side trails, some of which narrowed and petered out into impenetrable scrub. Occasionally we found birds feeding through the scrub, many of which gave too brief or occluded views for identification but including a pair of Bolivian Slaty Antshrikes and another honking-billed Buff-throated Woodcreeper: then Steve spotted a male Blue-crowned Trogon sitting in the open and after a short period of that desperate inability to get on an obvious bird (being "bird blind" was a birder's description of the affliction that I liked) I spotted it and with relief got pictures of a fabulous bird. It did seem however that we went long periods without seeing anything at all, prompting a sarcastic remark from Steve that "the thing about tropical birding is they way you are overwhelmed with the avalanche of birds all the time" – which became something of a running gag for the remainder of the trip.

At some point in the day a Brown Agouti crossed our paths but it was a brief view in scrub and I don't remember it clearly enough to place it in sequence with everything else. Sometimes the notebook takes second place and things get remembered while calling the log (where you at least have a systematic list to check against albeit ours wasn't the full 1440 species Bolivia list – I'd edited that down to something under 600 on the basis of the field guide's distribution maps, recognizing there would be write-ins to add back) so they aren't missed, just hard to time accurately in some cases. Incidentally it is not helpful to have maps in a guide on different scales, showing different areas, rather than a standard country map easy to compare between species. I do recognize there are some advantages for restricted range species....

Returning eventually towards the formal gardens we were surprised by a sudden eruption of quite large bats from a tree roost ahead of us. There wasn't time to either get good views or photos: they just piled past us and veered off mostly in a flock into the woods. A couple that seemed to have landed proved impossible to locate and may have gone straight through the trees they had made for. They were over a foot in wingspan and quite broad-winged, appearing generally to be light grey-brown: but we got no details.

Spotting an icecream seller's tricycle Steve decided to enjoy a choc ice but I bottled out of buying from such a seller at the end of a long hot day, which was probably over-prudent. I admit to feeling jealous not very long afterwards.

Crossing the dual carriageway without incident we missed one bus while I withdrew more Bolivianos from an ATM at a filling station (still diesel queues there) but caught one soon after. At one point I thought the machine wasn't going to give my card back but I think it was just unfamiliarity with the particular equipment and all was well after a few moments panic.

The trip back into the city was uneventful except for a crutch-wielding individual who boarded and began a harangue/begging speech/request for investment in his crutch factory and passed up and down being resolutely ignored by all, before hopping lightly off, forgetting to make use of said crutches in his dismount. He remembered before we left that stop (btw he hadn't paid his passage and the driver didn't pressure him for the fare) and leaned operatically heavily upon them. Yeah, right.

For dinner I reprised the pulled duck in rice with what I now recognized as deep-fried plantains at the El al Jibe.

11 August: You crazy – the fall will probably kill you!

First thing in the morning a family group of five Sayaca Tanagers was hopping about on the spaghetti of wiring on the powerline post opposite the window of Room 107. I didn't want to photograph them in such a setting but watched with interest until they flew off to a more likely foraging area.

Breakfast was sophisticated and for once didn't involve los huevos: ham and cheese toasties!

We just had time to check out before our driver to the Refugio appeared with his 4WD. It was to be good roads all the way to the Refugio entrance track so although the car was not spacious it was an easy trip: every filling station we passed in or out of the city had trucks, tractors and diesel cars queuing for fuel.

Ruben Beltran, our driver up to the Refugio, had the resort's logo on his car so was clearly not just a taxi driver but a Refugio employee or contractor. He drove us up the steep 4WD track to the mirador at the top of the ridge (Steve began to say something as we proceeded up the first long straight but I told him at once not to say anything and he obliged, for which I was grateful as I clamped my jaw on my nervousness even when the wheels got a little squirrely on a damp patch). Then we changed to Refugio's Mitsubishi 4WD truck to go down the steeper track to the Refugio with lots of tight hairpins – scary! Happily the driver undertook his three-point turn backing towards the several hundred foot drop before inviting us to board, for which I was extremely grateful. However, he was then going to slide the back bench seat forward to make room behind it for all the bags, inevitably making me sit just behind him – I told him I was going to sit right in the back where I couldn't see out very well! I was not helped by Steve, judging his gagging order over, helpfully warning me not to look at

the road.... Updated by our taxi driver's translation the Refugio man shrugged and left the seat where it was, heaving a suitcase in next to where I would sit. Much appreciated, gracias.

Actually I continued to find that concentrating on the surface of the track just ahead of the vehicle controlled my irrational fear with perhaps the exception of going into a few hairpins where the chap had to swing wide towards the edge to get round smoothly – oh Lord.....! After only about twenty minutes we were on the flat floor of the valley and I was hoping there would be no rain before we left – I had no ambition to try that track in the wet.

We disembarked and looked around at one of the most stunning views I've ever seen from a hotel. We were in a complete bowl surrounded by wooded slopes leading up to huge sandstone cliffs (not sure where the "volcanes" aspect comes in) on mostly rounded peaks, some of which were wide and flat enough to have grasses, scrub or woodland on their summit plateaux. The sky was brilliant blue and the sun shone in almost friendly fashion.

Our en suite room was on the corner of a single-storey block with wide shallow roof projecting far enough beyond the walls for a tiled veranda with a low retaining wall from which rustic wooden columns supported the eaves. Very Spanish New World architecture. Inside was not as large as Room 107 but it had three beds, making one of them a natural suitcase shelf for those intending to live out of the case (for less than a week, that definitely means me.) Part of the bathroom floor was wet and as we came in and out over the afternoon we noticed this was spreading: there was a leak somewhere below the floor tiles. But was it from the clean or foul water system? Perhaps our room had been empty and untended for a couple of days because the staff took the news without surprise, despatched someone to immediately dry it up and thereafter it didn't really recur.

The local long-haired domestic cat checked out the new arrivals and ignored our suggestion that it should go somewhere else. We soon afterwards found it playing with a lizard that was skidding about on the tiled outdoor area and no doubt annoyed it by shooing it away and removing the lizard to a safer place out on the lawn. Despite this blatant interference with its habits the cat seemed to take the long term view that any company was better than none and continued to seek us out as well as accompanying us on any trips from accommodation to the dining area and back. While looking around on our own we found a **Lineated Woodpecker** on a tree growing out of the open lawn, not part of the surrounding forest, not far from our room.

A little later Steve, outside while I was rearranging kit indoors, called that he had a **King Vulture** and I got out just in time to get sufficient on it for a tick. I was definitely hoping for a return match later in the week though, with this one of the birds I especially wanted a decent view of due to its wonderful head colours.

We added **Military Macaws** – Steve's key species at this location, though not his only target – flying across the face of one of the great faces of red rock looming over us, as well as **Black-billed** and **Rufous-bellied Thrushes** bouncing around the short turf along with the now familiar Creamy-bellied.

We were introduced to Rocky, our guide for the week. He was a lean, wiry bloke a bit shorter than me (and I'm not tall) but possessed of great energy and in combination with his phone and its apps, more than capable of finding us the birds of the area. However, his tendency to reach a known stakeout and immediately resort to playback to attract the bird definitely wasn't Steve's thing and to be honest it's not how I bird normally either: I'd rather find as much as possible by human senses and if something needs a little encouragement then perhaps give it a burst. Still, there's no denying that the technique works and with limited

time in thick forest with not great light, it was generally effective. Where individuals didn't respond you did have to suspect they were hearing the recordings and going "Yeah, heard it all before, that's track No. 3 from Xeno canto"!

Anyway, after lunch Rocky walked us round the lawns of the Refugio before leading us towards the entrance track. He darted off left just as we reached it, beckoning us to follow, and promptly called in an **Amazonian Motmot** (tick) – one of those classic South American species that is a mixture of neutral camouflage colours and explosively bright blues and greens making for species recognition in the subdued forest light. I had a bit of a panic due to really wanting it but eventually calmed enough to see what it turned out I was already looking straight towards.

Then we were off up the Loro trail (Loro = parrot, though it was a couple of days before we found that out from Rocky). It was quite steep initially and fortunately Rocky found an Ocellated Woodcreeper and stopped to get us onto it. I wasn't going to tell him we'd seen a couple in Santa Cruz, not seeing the speed with which he'd gone off uphill. However I hadn't really got my breath back before he was off again: the trail turned out to be a series of switchbacks in its early phase so I had some chance to settle my breathing and get into a proper walking rhythm, after which everything became a little easier, especially with stops for such delights as **Red-necked Woodpecker**, our third large woodpecker (this one, like Crimson-crested, *Campephilus* as opposed to the Lineated *Dryocopus*) with a vibrant scarlet head and more orangey throat, breast and belly.

Brief views of the pale blue back and scarlet cap of a **Yungas Manakin** were tickworthy but unsatisfactory. A **Two-banded Warbler**, possibly the commonest bird in the entire forest, gave better views and could thereafter be safely dismissed quickly: good because it had to be done often!

The track began to head upwards again having followed a stream for some time past boulders, waterfalls and occasional fallen trees. In places it wound back and forth across the hillside but it was almost all thickly forested and there were almost no unprotected drops to kick off my fear of heights: one exception was an awkward step over a peak in the gradient where the path surface leaned outwards and had some quite loose gravel to slip on. I got round it after a short remark to the other two about not stopping where I had no decent stance to also pause, that I hope was the only snappy criticism I made. The guys were extremely solicitous of my ability to meet my fears whenever they realized I was struggling but sometimes they wouldn't realise a spot was even likely to cause an issue: I could understand that as I don't always know myself and in differing conditions sometimes I react differently to the same place.

We reached a slightly better place to stop and look, with a window in the tree canopy outwards and upwards towards the cliffs now looking much closer above us on the far side of the valley. A large black silhouette glided above the void and I asked Steve "What's the vulture?" before getting my bins settled on it and realizing there was a white ruff at the base of its naked neck: "Condor!" was my answer to my own question and I gazed enthralled at the gigantic scavenger wheeling above us. With my own fear of heights having caused Steve to leave the high Andes off the itinerary I'd hoped but not been sure that the Refugio's list stating "Uncommon and irregular, mostly in dry season" meant we were in with a shout for the absolutely iconic **Andean Condor**. Key target for me and megatrick - woohoo!

The track headed briefly downwards to arrive at a crossing point near the head of the stream's valley. From there we roughly followed the base of the enormous vertical mass of sandstone with Military Macaws squawking as they paralleled the cliffs some way above us.

Looking up we could see where the frequent and rapid heat-cold cycles had made the rock friable and great lumps had scabbed off to plunge to earth about where we were standing. Hopefully not today.

We made our way along the track with Rocky pointing out places where the local Spectacled Bears had pulled bromeliads from the cliffs and eaten the roots, leaving the great broad-bladed leaves loose in our path. What? That hadn't been on our radar at all! And – er – presumably that means we could round a corner in the path and walk slap into a bear? Ooh-er.... Rocky then pointed out unmistakable bear clawmarks on the cliff face where they had been scrabbling upwards to rip away the bromeliads they desired.

Just beyond there a **Black Lava Lizard** perched on the steeply sloped cliff long enough for a few pictures before running effortlessly upwards on the grippy sandstone and out of sight behind some of the vegetation lodged in small cracks and where some soil had accumulated on ledges.

More to the point for me we came to a place where the path got right up to the base of the cliff and followed it before a very small switchback took it out of sight. Rocky calmly walked along a narrowing ledge, jumped across onto an embedded flat rock in a sloping fall of pulverised sandstone slanting down into the forest below and stepped up onto the upslope of the path's continuation. I balked, vociferously and with a good deal of basic Anglo-Saxon, before gritting my teeth while hugging the cliff and edging along the ledge to find it narrowed to nothing "---- me there's nowhere to put my feet and it's too narrow to change feet around for the next step: if I get out of here alive I'm going to move to Norfolk and never leave again!" was the least of it. Jumping was out of the question for me and when I tentatively put a foot on the nearest rock in the fall it began to slide downwards at once. Bereft of ideas and options I took an unstylish desperate dive towards a further rock, arriving on my knees and scrabbling for a handhold among exposed roots at the path's side: I accepted a hand from Rocky for an assisting pull up to standing on firm ground with relief.

Steve followed without fuss.

Rocky then pointed out a hummingbird perched on a branch above us: **White-bellied Hummingbird** he said – new and once I got onto it (not that easy to spot a small still bird against the strong light), very quickly into the can with the camera.

Making our way over the small ridge we could then see the path continuing to wind among fallen boulders generally long the cliff face before splitting, one half heading right and perhaps down into the forest (I thought hopefully) while the left arm struck up towards another switchback peak at a point where the cliff turned a corner away from us: it was clear that at the top of that path would be a serious drop-off. Guess which one we followed....

That's right. The left path was broader but the vegetation around it was lower and something about its upward sweep made me feel a bit vulnerable though if the same geography had been in the South Downs I would have been blithely unconcerned. In addition, of course, once your fears have been activated by one incident the activation level for the next one is very much lower and I was now primed to react badly to almost anything that made me worry about falling.

At the top of what turned out to be just a spur path was a mirador with a log bench at the near end overlooking the path dropping away back whence we had come, and a well-trodden red earth platform with a plank bench overlooking a very steep drop to the canopy of the forest. Very uncomfortable with the feeling of a drop all round me (except where the cliff towered above us at the base of the tiny ridge on which we stood) I crept uneasily to the

bench and plonked my backside on it. I didn't feel much better but knew I couldn't fall off anything there.

One of the other two pointed out a **Cliff Flycatcher** hunting from a branch projecting from the cliff a little way above us: not so far as to make the horizon reel from looking up which by now was almost as bad as looking down. Concentrating on getting photos distracted me from our situation and I looked around for other possible targets: I also remembered the phone in my pocket and used it to photograph the approach path and peaks beyond: across the valley Rocky found and directed us to a couple of Military Macaws perched up and I took a couple of very long range shots of them.

The afternoon was progressing and it seemed the macaws made roosting flights early, with pairs and small flocks coming past us at varying distances quite frequently. As my equanimity returned I managed to stand up and follow some of them with the camera and get one or two acceptable pictures of the big parrots in flight in the sunshine, including the odd topside! Speaking of pairs it really was very noticeable how pairs of Military Macaws stuck closely together as they moved around their territories: typically only a few feet separated them at any time.

Eventually we returned down the spur track and turned onto the return part of the Loro Trail. Only it seemed there were still two options, one of which continued to another mirador while the other headed more immediately downwards into the forested stream valley. I chose down and Steve kindly assented.

The day wasn't quite finished because in the depths of the valley, with what little light remained beginning to fade in the late afternoon, we had a good view but no chance of pictures of a **Brown Tinamou** firtling about in the streambed before stalking off into the undergrowth; and a **Slaty Gnateater** brought in by more playback to yield views.

Dinner was a tray-baked pizza and loads of wonderful vegetables both cooked and salad – we judged the hygiene was Western-standard and waded in after days in Santa Cruz of (admittedly very nice) menus with mainly carb-based meals lacking greens. We had no digestive emergencies throughout the trip, though the Imodium was always at hand in case of disaster.

Spotlighting the lawns and forest edge on the way back to the accommodation after going through the log we had our first **Crab-eating Fox** of the trip (my first ever of course). A very satisfying end to a good day, with much promise for the rest of this episode of the trip.

12 August: Sure you used enough exposure comp there, Butch?

First thing in the morning I found a flock of quite large birds in a flowering tree up one of the hills viewable from outside our room and Steve identified them as **Blue-throated Piping Guans**. He commented that they are quite cool-looking and we needed – and should get – better views in due course to really appreciate them. Purplish and Plush-crested Jays were on morning patrols scouring the Refugio clearing edge and a House Wren showed quite well in a nearby tree.

After breakfast Rocky met us and despite pleas for a bear hunt we ended up on an obviously pre-planned walk on a different trail that generally followed the river that ran past the Refugio with side trips into various bits of forest: all at low level, hardly any climbing on slopes and nowhere near where we'd been the day before. In a huddle while Rocky checked out

something we agreed this was not our idea of customer service (although I was knocking out new birds at quite a rate).

Before that he had taken us on another circuit of the Refugio clearing during which we encountered a **Yellow-olive Flatbill**, **Giant Cowbird** and overhead a flock of about a dozen **Andean Swifts** that swept through calling but kept going.

Once into the walk proper we almost immediately encountered another thrilling new bird for me, a **Sunbittern** that quickly flushed from where it was foraging along the river's edge but luckily landed not far upstream allowing me an open-wing shot and then some indifferent snaps of it walking along. The not-so-great photos didn't take away anything from seeing a spectacular bird well at close range.

An even briefer encounter gave us **Black-chested Buzzard-eagle** with no pix and only just sufficient bins views to confirm the ID: sometimes you just have to take what you get. You can hope for another encounter later in the trip but sometimes that just doesn't happen and unfortunately that turned out to be the case with this bird. While we paused in the clearing that had given us the flight view, a couple of Condors wheeled round overhead. Nice.

A **Mitred Parakeet** sat directly overhead eventually moving its head from behind the broken twig blocking it and giving good views. However, it was an example of the one issue with this morning's birds: an awful lot of them were straight up, often underneath the canopy in the shade and always with bright sunlit sky beyond: I was kept busy dialling exposure comp in and out. Which I don't practice enough so I occasionally whizzed the shutter speed dial round instead of the one I wanted..... the view through the electronic viewfinder gave me an immediate sense of having done something wrong which was very useful.

A **Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner** provided not only this issue but also that of focusing on small birds in among a lot of twigs and leaves, often with multiple layers in the way. A **Sepia-capped Flycatcher** escaped the lens for precisely this reason after giving reasonable bins views and a **Black-goggled Tanager** – which I really wanted a picture of – was just too quick especially given the difficulties. Latest in a line of Ocellated Woodcreepers sat up on a tree-trunk while a **Slate-throated Redstart** just about yielded an identifiable picture, once again after the features had been properly observed with bins.

Some of the birds were in the lower storeys of leafery, down to ground level, and with these just getting enough light to take pictures could be a challenge. **Western Fire-eye** escaped due to the camera just giving up on locking on but **Olivaceous Woodcreeper** on another open tree-trunk was not so difficult (we saw a few more of these during the trip as well) while a **Plain Antvireo** got clean away without being clicked at (but was captured on a subsequent walk, aha!)

A quick word about Woodcreepers: to a South American tyro like me some pages of field guides can look immensely boring, a parade of almost identical birds often with few identifying or exciting features. Woodcreepers on first glance seem to be in this category but in practice in the field they turned out to be quite visible, interesting and distinctive birds – which probably means I missed all sorts of subtleties but meant I enjoyed them much more than I had expected to.

We got into a feeding flock and birds whirled past on every side and at every height. Rocky was calling the identifications quickly, enabling us to switch onto birds we actually needed and not those we'd already seen. **Guira Tanager** even allowed a few quick snaps in sunlight while a Slaty-capped Flycatcher also sat up. **Sclater's Tyrannulet** did not, nor did

Chestnut-eared Aracari a bit later although the pair moving loosely together through the woodland did give brief full views that I enjoyed.

Back at the riverbank Steve found a pair of **Riverbank Warblers** foraging in beached leaf-litter that gave us nice views for as long as we wished before the rather plain **Palm Tanager** and dagger-billed **Streaked Xenops** rounded out a bird-filled morning walk.

After lunch as we met up again with Rocky I was facing the fact that my left ankle, which is inclined to give trouble occasionally but which I'd caused to flare up in a stupid accident the day before the start of the trip, was hurting enough to prevent me doing the uphill Loro Trail that afternoon to look for Spectacled Bear. Rather than hamper Steve I decided it would do me good to have an afternoon off, upload pictures via my tablet to a portable hard disk for safety's sake, wash my long hair (doesn't need doing very often but when its due it does let me know) and let him have a run off the lead with Rocky.

The other two headed off and I headed for our room to start the camera file transfer, which takes some time.

The next bit is definitely Steve's tale and I'll let him tell it his own way.

Steve:

So a quick summary of the afternoon.

We still seemed to be going the wrong direction, but I didn't trust my sense of direction and at least we seemed to be in an area where I could imagine seeing bears. After a while Rocky met another guide and a couple of tourists. It was clear they'd had a sighting! A fairly rapid walk/trot ensued. The thin ledge was rather worrying when you don't know where bears are! Before long we were watching a young ANDEAN BEAR at less than 10m range. Superb. Sadly I didn't get to see an adult but a fantastic experience and I thought I'd make up for that on another day. John was clearly going to be looking for them and, although part of me did think it would be a good excuse to be able to go off without a guide, my desire to see an adult trumped my desire to do unguided birding. Even Rocky said he was shaking - it was only his second sighting. Rocky was clearly excited as he then spent the time on his phone - probably telling people and didn't notice the NINE-BANDED ARMADILLO that he nearly walked into. Luckily I did! The day was now even more amazing. It was right in front of us and dithered for some time before trotting off. Nine-banded armadillo is a wide-spread species but it was one I'd never connected with so amazingly I'd had three mammals ticks on a part of the trip that I thought there was no chance of any. The main 'attraction' was still to come and I was feeling very chuffed.

We then saw a thrush that Rocky admitted he had no real idea about. We pondered Merlin and an imm. ANDEAN SLATY THRUSH seemed the best bet. On return to the UK my research revealed something of a lack of information on this species, when not adult, but what there was matched as did the one person to offer an opinion. I am happy to have any opinions in this.

When Steve and Rocky returned I was having a wander round the Refugio clearing picking off pictures of some birds that I felt could be improved. Obviously they had to break the news which Steve did with a warning I was going to be severely gripped. Equally obviously I was, but against that I had to set the fact that every mammal we saw was new for me whereas

Steve, who had set up the trip and was very much taking the lead on the ground, was only on for a few new mammals if he was lucky: so I was very glad for him while hopeful that over the next couple of days I could get it back.

While we discussed this Rocky spotted **Channel-billed Toucan** in the trees beyond the dining room and cookhouse and I got some quite long-distance images of this additional new bird. Rocky pointed out Blue-headed Parrots flying to roost overhead but we'd both seen orange flashes on the wings and some work with the field guide a little later proved to us we'd been looking at **Turquoise-fronted Parrots** and not Blue-headed. *Moral: always confirm your own sightings and don't just take the guide's word for it no matter how good they are or you think they are.* Rocky went off to his evening activities but Steve was keen to do a dusk walk up the entrance track and it was apparent that part of this was getting away from the idea of calling in every bird with playback – and maybe from people too – so since my ankle wasn't yet under control pain-wise I decided not to accompany him, just warned him not to get eaten. He returned a while later having got great views of **Short-tailed Ant-thrush** in the open on the track just by normal birding: sneaking along quietly looking at anything that moved.

That concluded a remarkable day apart from dinner: the world's toughest beef, sweetcorn with cream cheese, loads of veg. We called the log over a couple of beers and got an early night.

13 August: More Loro Ledge

First thing while waiting for breakfast to start Steve and I had a couple of **Blue-headed Parrots** fly past, presumably coming out of roost and heading off to their feeding areas. So they were in the area: but we saw a heck of a lot more Turquoise-fronted Parrots during our stay. Blue-headed were very much in the minority.

There wasn't any argument from Rocky after breakfast (which was scrambled eggs, salami and cheese rather like mild Wensleydale) about where we were going and we wanted to get on the road before anyone else. My ankle was now well under control with the combined effect of paracetamol and ibuprofen so I was fit to set off up the hill. However it seemed Rocky still hadn't really appreciated the importance of the Spectacled Bear (despite repeated insistence in Steve's slow but understandable Spanish that our real mission was mammals and everything else was secondary to getting me that bear as well as him) and he not only kept stopping to try to attract some of the Loro track residents we hadn't yet seen but not going as fast as I was now capable of doing. The result was that other groups caught us up and went past us on upwards, which we found really annoying despite picking up **Moustached Wren** on the way up.

Up at the base of the cliffs and in the bear area we were able to watch, some way below us in the canopy, **White-winged Tanagers** like unbent-billed Two-barred Crossbills and a male plus two females of **Blue Dacnis** which despite the distance glowed with colour, even the females which were an amazing and surprising intense bluish-green.

We spent some time working our way through the area below the cliffs, without finding the bears. Then we went up to the mirador (incidentally this morning I had no issues with crossing the narrow ledge at all, which perhaps surprised the other two and gratified me) where a **Dusky-green Oropendola** was foraging through the tops of the trees not far below us and very nice to see that well. It was one of those birds that just won't quite pose the way

you want but I managed to get something on it with my camera before it disappeared round a corner.

A Mitred Parakeet sat up on the branches that in the next few days proved popular with the smaller parrots (smaller than the Military Macaws that were again flying above us frequently, that is!) enabling me to get pictures of Turquoise-fronted Parrot and Steve's nemesis the Yellow-chevroned Parakeet at the same place.

On the way back down we had a second view of the Brown Tinamou in the streambed but it once again eluded our cameras after giving us brief excellent bins views in the open.

Back at the Refugio there was a Black Phoebe flycatching from a variety of low perches including a tap in the middle of the lawns presumably for a sprinkler to keep the lawns in condition: they didn't need mowing due to the constant presence of four horses cropping it to an even short length. Black Phoebe was familiar to me from North America and Steve had seen loads all over the Americas. Rocky warned us that the white-blazed chestnut, Ninja, had a tendency to kick, but I didn't need the warning, I don't like horses anyway. I suspect they can tell, animals are good at reading body language.

Before the afternoon session we had a fair bit of downtime which Steve used to catch up his photo-back-up and have a shower while I spent much of it taking pictures of the local birdlife in nice bright sunlight. While sitting about waiting for thrushes to come my way I kept an eye on the sky and was rewarded with a great view of a King Vulture circling overhead for several minutes and more distant views of Andean Condors, with occasional flashes of topside wing panels that proved impossible to capture with the camera but were enjoyable through bins.

Another bird that circled overhead, luckily rather lower than the huge vultures, was a **Bat Falcon** that gave me plenty of time to both watch it and photograph it. There are a couple of confusion species but we were not in range for either and in any case the views were decisively in favour of Bat Falcon. Very nice indeed!

When Rocky joined us after lunch he immediately pointed out a pair of Chestnut-fronted Aracaris feeding on fruits in a tree just across the river from the dining area which allowed us to get some pictures and obtain prolonged views of these small highly colourful toucans. These are the sort of birds that leave you in no doubt you are somewhere different from home and whether scarce or common, high on the list of birds you want to see on a trip.

Then it was off to the Loro Trail again. On the way up we had a White-bellied Hummingbird sitting in incredibly deep shade so that although it was easy to get in the frame it was impossible to get anything like a decent photo.

We also renewed acquaintance with the Red-necked Woodpecker, offering views prolonged enough for pictures. One nice thing about big woodpeckers is the way they all sit up and show well fairly close so they are easy to photograph.

I was thrown for a minute by the appearance of the female, which has a very different face pattern that I was sure must belong to a different species, but with both Rocky and Steve being patient enough to wait while I got the field guide out and proved they were right all along we were soon able to move on. With the female photographed as well.

Our second sweep today of the upper reaches of the Loro Trail did not produce bears but on the way down another playback session (at least our second for the species in question) yielded a **Bolivian Recurvebill** sighting which Steve struggled with while for once I got straight on it.

Dinner that night was everything with cheese, so plenty of protein though no actual meat.

14 August: Who are those guys?

Rocky recommended a walk up the access track for our morning exercise. I was fine with this, walking it was not scary, unlike being driven on it. Plus, regardless of the possibilities, I was beginning to know the Loro Trail too well. So after toast with jam and honey, plus a bowl of strawberries in condensed milk, off we went. It was a sunny morning that quickly became hot: we were thankful for the odd exposed bend where a rising breeze cooled us off a bit. Birds included **Black-capped Antwren** (tick) and a showy Plain Antvireo; more Red-necked Woodpeckers and a Roadside Hawk overhead that momentarily flummoxed Rocky. **Slaty Gnateater** went onto the list as well as giving itself up for photos, and the Refugio driver came past and offered us a lift further up the track than I think we had planned on going: we would walk down, which was OK and I guess that overall we did no more distance on foot than originally intended. Unfortunately we didn't see the bird he'd given us a lift up to but that's life. We did find a Bat Falcon in a tree that gave nice bins views but legged it at the sight of a camera.

After lunch and a pair of severe grips from not only another group that had scored the bears but one that the previous day had encountered a Harpy Eagle up the Loro Trail (who are those guys?!), guess where we went in the afternoon! Not that it helped, and it was very windy indeed by this time. I insisted on sticking to the "safe side" – going up and down by the same route and not attempting the ledge. On the way down we finally got to grips with **Bolivian Tapaculo** which had been giving us the runaround for the duration of our stay. Tick.

Dinner was the toughest beef in the world with the usual loads of proper veg. Nice but a bit testing for the teeth.

15 August: Back to Santa Cruz

After a round of finishing off photos of the common birds round the Refugio we headed up the Loro Trail again. It was still windy but not as bad as the last time: we spent a full hour scouring the canopy for perched Harpy Eagle and the cliffs and surrounding bushes for Spectacled Bears, without success on either count.

We enjoyed further views of Military Macaws and some good local birds like Red-necked Woodpecker and Mitred Parakeet, but returned to the Refugio for the last time without a major score. We enjoyed a good lunch and then clambered into the establishment's 4WD bus for the ride to the top mirador to meet our driver back to Santa Cruz.

I was not too scared by the up-track drive, except when the driver stopped near the top for no apparent reason – I thought the bus had overheated or something – and showed Steve something on his phone: unfortunately Steve couldn't follow his Spanish and only got the sense that there was a nest of something. Going down the far side with a different driver from our inward journey was also not scary: I was very happy to be back on main road though! The drive back to the city was not too bad with still no sign of any citizen protests blocking our way. So it was back to Room 107 at the Hotel 7 Calle, dinner at the El al Jibe and wine in our room before an early night.

16 August: Jaguarland!

Breakfast reset to omelette: perhaps that's what they do with all guests, first morning of the stay is omelette and to get other stuff you stay longer. Presumably that means it's not too busy, or I'd expect the cyclic menu to be driven by what day it is.

0830 pick up by guide Nicolas, drive Jose. Nicolas was a tall, broad-shouldered athletic young-looking enthusiastic guy with a bit of a coca-chewing habit while Jose was a khaki vest-wearing somewhat pot-bellied, goatee-bearded shrewd-eyed chap (in fact Hollywood would cast him to place the action in South America in a heartbeat) who understood a hell of a lot more English than he spoke – he laughed at even some of my more abstruse jokes before Nicolas did! Cook Natalie was travelling in a separate vehicle with an American couple (we decided to avoid discussing politics for the next few days!) Nicolas inquired as to our kinds of music and I mentioned AC/DC – guess what, his favourite band! Steve slumped with his hands over his face as we were treated to wall-to-wall AC/DC for the next hour.

A stop for a comfort break proved useful for listing as a **Toco Toucan** flew past (fortunately not while we were otherwise engaged.) This remarkable looking bird with its huge glowing golden-yellow bill is familiar to older Brits from adverts for Guinness Irish stout and was something I particularly wanted to see – excellent!

We stopped at a roadside diner for lunch where the resident dog (which looked very roughly Shih-tzu in origin) gave us considerable unwanted attention as holiday healthcare Rule One is don't engage with local dogs... I'm sure the dogs know this and think it is a great joke. Lunch was peanut soup followed by braised beef and assorted veg. The beef wasn't too tough which was a pleasant surprise.

Eventually the asphalt ran out and we had a couple of hours of dusty track driving (to the surreal sound, with the temperature well in the thirties and dust hanging in the dry atmosphere, of Wham's Last Christmas after a radical change of playlist!) before reaching the ranch that constitutes Jaguarland.

Having negotiated the gate we were immediately engaged in wildlife watching as we passed river channels and small lakes with Snail Kites and Roseate Spoonbills familiar to me from Florida long ago. The vehicle pulled up by a wider pool within a channel and Nicolas immediately remarked: "there it is!" as a swirl formed on the water surface. Following his lead we leapt out of the car, returning to it quickly for our cameras as we were getting point-blank views of a **Bolivian River Dolphin** surfacing to breathe. Before long we had managed to get pictures as well as great views of the full length of the dolphin from long narrow beak to flukes – I must admit I considered adding a cetacean to my list in one of the two landlocked countries of South America something of a coup.

Moving on we added Neotropic Cormorants, Greater Rheas (photos at last) and Southern Lapwings to the day list but proper new birds were also all about us (well me, Steve had seen them all on previous trips): **Savanna Hawk** departing from us across the fields; **Large-billed Terns** patrolling the channels and waterbirds galore including the enormous **Jabiru**. I'd hoped we might see one or two of these huge storks but here flocks of ten or twenty stalked through and past dozens and hundreds of Wood Storks and egrets with Cocoli Herons dotted everywhere. The channels were full of Caiman of assorted sizes as well. As we passed a block of taller forest Jose braked to a stop and 2 **Bolivian Red Howler Monkeys** were in the trees watching us with suspicion (or maybe it's just the way they look normally!) Despite being able to see them clearly in bins they were quite difficult to get a

clear photo of and after a while they moved off – not quickly but inevitably into places where they were less easy to see.

I can't quite remember and stupidly didn't write it down but I think from my notebook that after this introduction to Jaguarland we made for camp and sorted out tents. We were not the only guests, the vehicle that had brought our cook had also brought two Americans whom we had met briefly over lunch. Without any idea of their leanings Steve and I resolved to avoid politics in conversation: no need to court trouble and we already know it can be a touchy subject in this day and age. In fact we didn't see much of them and they didn't stay very long, though long enough for us to hear them muttering about the lack of luxury or private facilities such as a lounge area. Welcome to the wilderness....

The tents were substantial plastic creations with decent headroom and in my case a nice big double bed. Steve got only a mattress on the floor (still better than the lilos of my camping youth) but once the Americans left he moved into their tent which was as well equipped as mine and had electricity run in on an extension lead to boot!!

Again my recollection is shaky but I think we left for an evening into night drive with a late dinner to be ready on our return. This second drive started in daylight and added to our experience yard-long **Blue-and-Yellow Macaws**, **Speckled Chachalacas** (Nicolas said they were Chaco but Hugo later said not at Jaguarland they aren't, they are Speckled) and a couple of familiar migrant shorebirds from North America (and for that matter vagrants to Britain): Solitary Sandpiper and Greater Yellowlegs.

One particular bit of wetland seemed a magnet for **Rufescent Tiger-Herons**: not just today but every time we passed, multiple adults and juveniles launched themselves from the pools below our embanked roadway. **Southern Screamers** were another new shape to me as an embryonic South American birder: large and boldly patterned, often found as closely associating pairs. Another species we frequently saw as couples was **Whistling Heron**: by contrast the **Black-collared Hawks** sitting up over the channels were invariably on solo patrols, as were individuals of the next species to drop onto the list, the mighty **Ringed Kingfisher**.

Least Bitterns also leapt up from the river channels as we passed and the odd Striated Heron glanced up but returned to fishing. Why do these two behave differently?

As the light failed we switched from bins to spotlights and thermal imagers. A couple of hours roaming the tracks through reserve's wetlands, woods and fields produced quite a lot of Crab-eating Foxes including one that posed for pictures, a distant **Marsh Deer** and numerous male **Scissor-tailed Nightjars**, easily identifiable by their long split tails: for tonight we didn't bother with trying to sort out what was evidently more than one species present.

Back at camp we encountered a massive toad that sat unconcernedly as cameras flashed around it. We began to get into the habit of going through and closing doors after dark quickly so the insects attracted by lights wouldn't get in. We were warned to always use torches moving around at night in case of snakes, scorpions and any other nasties that might be about (photos of e.g. Coral Snake in the camp area reinforced this, quite unnecessarily in my case at least!) Dinner was washed down with a couple of small cans of Bolivian beer – drinkable but when we agreed a couple of beers a night was OK we hadn't realized they would be 330 ml cans or even smaller! We scooted through the log and turned in to be ready for an early start in the morning.

17 August: Heat and Dust

Breakfast was before our first drive of the day (unusually) and the main event was eggs, poached in beans and tomatoes fried up into a beany sauce. Very nice. I've seen Indian variations of this as well. Mind you I love eggs, but after this holiday even I took a couple of days off.

An early start meant being in the car about an hour before daybreak so as to get the last of the real dark plus the growing light on the road looking for cats heading for their day-beds. So far as cameras were concerned this meant leaving the night rig set up overnight but being ready to remove flash, torch etc as soon as there was enough light for normal photography.

The vehicle was a 4WD with a very solid roof-rack that Nicolas occasionally went up to spot from as we went along. Steve also tried it at least once but the dry dusty tracks threw up enormous clouds that didn't just trail behind us but seeped in through the open windows and absolutely covered anyone sitting on top. We were recovered from the colds we'd both had soon after arriving in Bolivia but at Jaguarland we developed persistent coughs that were mostly about the dust. It got everywhere, on lenses, on and in clothing, mouth (gritty, yeuch), nose, ears....

Early in the morning we sat inside the vehicle: it wasn't cold but it wasn't yet hot either. Later in the day it certainly was – Jaguarland was by some way the hottest phase of the trip. Our pre-dawn efforts yielded only more Crab-eating Foxes, but once the light came up we encountered a group of **Chestnut-fronted Macaws** for my first tick of the day. These were (relatively) small macaws, much bigger than the parrots we'd seen but not near the size of Blue-and-Yellow Macaws.

We photographed Roseate Spoonbills and some Blue-and-Yellow Macaws feeding on palm nuts before finding an **Amazon Kingfisher** sitting up on a dead branch on our side of a wide channel and not in a hurry to go anywhere: until we'd grabbed some pictures and waited for it to turn its head into a good pose neither were we. After a colourful sunrise we also got photos of Capybaras and ticked as well as photographing an adult **Great Black Hawk** sitting up close to the track and a **Spix's Guan** perched on a leafy branch before disappearing into woodland.

Despite the size of the reserve and only two vehicles being in it we eventually encountered the Americans with their guide by the biggest wetland we'd seen the previous day, dotted with dead trees and crisscrossed with low bunds and chains of islands. In addition to the hordes of waterbirds of the species we'd been seeing there were Black Skimmers doing their thing with lower mandibles trawling the water surface ready to snap shut on any fish they encountered, White-tailed Kite briefly and Snail Kites everywhere, plus flocks of **Black-bellied Whistling Ducks** (tick) and a Black-necked Stilt.

Moving on we found a pair of **Brazilian Teal** hanging out by a small pool at the foot of the track's embankment and stopped to grab some quick pix: we proceeded to see the same birds in the same place every day throughout our stay. I noted them down saying the name aloud as I wrote and mentioning to the open air that they were recognizable by the dark stripe down the middle: a couple of minutes later Steve's brain caught up....

Stopping at a crossroads with views over a weed-covered channel so loaded with fish that the weeds heaved constantly, we had flyovers from macaws and also wild **Muscovy Ducks!**

It was nice to be excited by these things for once – grisly farmyard things at home but small groups going over flying as powerfully as Eider. Hunting from small twigs above the channel a **Black-backed Water Tyrant** was also new but too quick and too inclined to perch behind more twigs to let me get pictures on this occasion.

We moved on but soon came to another halt to look at two more large macaws: this time Red-and-Green, yard-long splashes of colour on exposed branches showing well.

After this we spent some time driving through open fields, a drier habitat even where crops were growing. We encountered monkeys traversing the fields between areas of woodland and the first one was a Black Spider Monkey halfway across a low broad-leaved crop. It wasn't a great view (and certainly not typical Spider Monkey habitat!) but we got reasonable bins views and some record shots of it walking erect with tail held up. Although it was moving away from us it helpfully looked round to show its face.

A deep but dry irrigation ditch between field-edge hedges held a Marsh Deer a little closer than the last one and more record shots were taken: a Vermilion Flycatcher supplied eye-searing colour but only for a few seconds.

Lunch was an invasive river fish breadcrumbed and fried – ecotourism conservation action and quite tasty!

As we left camp after lunch there was a Black Vulture sitting at eye level on a fence by the track, so I asked to stop and photograph it. This seemed to surprise the guide and driver but they complied. I explained that I hadn't got a decent picture of one and photos of birds were also a target of the trip notwithstanding that the main object was finding cats.

Then it was back to driving the tracks, through fields and woodlands, along embankments flanked by wetlands or water channels, hoping for a cat sighting. And we got one – an **Ocelot!** It wasn't in all honesty much of a view but it was better than a couple that the guide had called but moved so fast we saw only a disappearing blur. This one I was prepared to tick.

We encountered a troop of about ten Azara's Horned Capuchins strung out in a long line crossing a field as the Spider Monkey had been during the morning. They weren't close but again it was interesting to see the behaviour including the fact that they moved on all fours but when stopped stood erect to get a better view of their surroundings.

At a very bare wetland of lakes and sand we saw a large group of turtles stacked like plates in a drying rack. They were there every day from quiet early in the morning so presumably fed at night. I wondered whether they would always be in the same order. Could be a PhD in researching it. Elsewhere, in a more jungly bit, we finally had really nice views of a Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture in flight, close to and with the light behind us so we could see every detail and so could our cameras.

The final field-crossing troop we saw was of South American Coatis, mostly dark but with at least one really russet individual among them.

It was during this afternoon's drive that I realised that the ibises I was looking at weren't the Green Ibis we'd ticked in Santa Cruz. They had pinkish/reddish skin on their faces and a quick look in the book revealed they were **Bare-faced Ibis**. I then had qualms about Green Ibis but quickly discovered I had pictures that definitely showed Green. Phew.

Dinner was pork belly which was as tender as you could want with the rind just stickily chewy. Great stuff.

On the night drive we majored on Nightjars and confirmed we were seeing **Common Pauraques** as well the easily identifiable Scissor-tailed. We also encountered a **Great Potoo** hunting from a vertical bare branch: it just sat there while we drove up and photographed it from as close as the vehicle could get! Mind you, so did the next one, and the next.... We didn't bother after that. We had ten Crab-eating Foxes and another Marsh Deer as well.

Still waiting for the cat bonanza though....

18 August: Tracking on foot

Our pre-dawn efforts produced only more Crab-eating Foxes but once the light came up we found a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth lodged in the fork of a tree looking at us with that benign smile they always wear below the incongruous bandit mask. It moved little while we hopped out to take pictures and was still in the same place once we had remounted and headed off. We also found tracks of either Jaguar or Puma but the cat wasn't around to confirm which.

A return visit to the Bolivian River Dolphin's pool got us more close views and a bonus juvenile Striated Heron looking for prey from a branch sticking up from the pool's surface. On the way there I'd had brief views of a Little Blue Heron juvenile among egrets fishing in another channel.

We motored on, racking up the day list with the usual collection of large obvious waterbirds, then found ourselves parking in a place we hadn't previously visited and informed we were going on a short hike. Hmm – I've been on "short walks" before. I loaded up with enough water for some time and we headed off along a broad channel with plenty of tracks along our path.

The object of the hike was tracking Jaguars, whose tracks were present in abundance to give the space between one's shoulders that itchy feeling: other less ominous tracks included Crab-eating Raccoon and Fox; Tapir, Greater Rhea, Ocelot, deer sp. At the furthest point we found a drag from a kill, first with a trailing leg then with the back marking the dust as the Jag dragged the kill between its legs, probably by the throat. It led off into bushes where even Nicolas was not prepared to follow, an attitude with which I entirely agreed.

A very large tree near the river that went up without branching for perhaps sixty or seventy feet then split into a bushy crown, held a Jabiru nest with a large chick in that cradle of dividing branches. We had flybys from Chestnut-fronted Macaws and found a **Spectacled Tyrant** flycatching from short perches in the sandy open area atop the river banks. A particularly laid-back Capybara regarded us from its basking spot on the far bank and a pair of **Gray-breasted Martins** were catching flies up and down the river.

It was hot, dusty and to be honest although tracks are interesting what we really wanted was sightings. I was losing focus and although I heard the thin screaming of what Nicolas said was probably a frog being eaten by a snake I was looking around for birds and didn't notice him go onto his knees and begin digging at the crack in the ground where he thought it was. I was therefore considerably surprised and alarmed, which came out in what Conan Doyle would certainly have described as an ejaculation: "Juliet Foxtrot Charlie!" Nicolas was flinging lumps of dug out earth away and one had hit my unaware shins squarely. So far as I was concerned it could have been anything up to and including a viper strike and I jumped a mile. He failed to find the animals he was looking for.

At the stacking turtle wetland two **Orinoco Geese** were ambling across the sand for my latest tick.

Back at base we had a bit of downtime after lunch and Steve noticed that a Rufescent Tiger-heron was giving a great photo opportunity on the slightly muddy paddock just behind our tents. The local flock of **Shiny Cowbirds** also gave themselves up nicely.

We headed back out for our afternoon into night drive and paused to check a wet channel for possible cat activity along the edge of the adjoining woodland. I admired the waterbird flock feeding and photographed them as they flew up, unnerved by our proximity. Just after leaving that spot we found a couple of Capybara cooling off in another channel, each facing in opposite directions to cover 360 degrees for possible threats – eminently photographable and another quick stop. Next up was a flock of Guira Cuckoos that I just managed to take pictures of before they decided to go elsewhere, and a Black-backed Water Tyrant that was as helpful as its fellow had been unhelpful.

And finally, on a stretch of track our guide and driver agreed was a good one for Ocelot – an Ocelot. Almost in the open and not hurrying away (at which they are very good!), but really quite a long way off. We advanced upon it and perhaps halved the distance, with a couple of check stops, before it turned towards us and began to advance on us in its turn. We stopped and crossed our fingers (we didn't really, our fingers were busy with cameras). It came closer, switching its thin tail with annoyance at flies. We began to notice some curious things about the animal (perhaps prompted by the thin tail): instead of rosettes of spots it had filled in large dark spots; the face markings appeared reduced, and the animal overall was very thin. Perhaps age might reduce facial markings; maybe that would also explain the presumed poor condition – but those spots...

The guides began to doubt their own identification and consulted colleagues by the magic of smart phones. The answers returned stuck with Ocelot. Consulting Richard Webb's guide later we noted that Ocelots can have the rosettes filled in as large dark spots (as seen on this animal) so it is a known phenomenon. Finally we'd seen a new cat properly and got pictures of it: now if we could do the same with a fit individual we'd be really happy! Picky? Yes.

Darkness fell, and after an hour of driving around we found a deer on the far side of a water channel, in a small clearing in one of the wooded blocks. After a bit of watching and inspection of some pictures the consensus was that it was **Red Brocket**. That was new for me and a decent view as well as pictures wrapped it up well.

A brief Coati followed and then I found some eyeshine under the edge of a hedge. It looked like a predator and with brief study we determined it was another Ocelot: in fact the guide and river thought there were two mating but there was no evidence of two on my photos. The one that does appear is a "proper" Ocelot with clear rosettes, head and neck stripes and a nice thick tail as well as a glossy sleek muscular appearance. Pretty good being able to see all that in the dark: it wasn't completely in the open but you can't have everything, apparently.

During the remainder of the drive we had brief but clear spotlight views of Azara's Night Monkeys (nice to see them at night), the usual collection of nightjars, about ten Crab-eating Foxes, another Great Potoo and an Owl we got nothing on.

During the evening drive Nicolas had borrowed my Thermal Imager for a while to try it out and it took me some time to work out how he'd cocked up the settings (in fact it was next

morning before I sorted it out). Don't let other people use your gear, whoever they are. Not when results matter.

19 August: Base camp butchery

The very early morning part of our first drive of the day didn't produce anything but a Grey-necked Wood Rail that gave us a good view but scurried away into the bushes before we could whip the cameras out. Once the sun was rising and the night gear was put away things improved, starting with a group of Blue-and-Yellow Macaws eating palm nuts close to the track and in full view. As we made our way through the open fields a **Collared Peccary** gave distant views and another near a field-edge ditch showed closer and allowed our first photos of them.

Several flockettes of Muscovy Ducks showed well at the same crossroads where we'd seen them previously. We then made our way to the area where we had been tracking the day before for another short hike. Nicolas reassured me that it would be shorter than the previous day – I was more concerned that he didn't do any more impressions of snakes striking my legs! This time we were coming in from the other end of the river channel and in this quite large (by British standards) river were three more Bolivian River Dolphins: they weren't showing quite as well as the first one but it was good to see a group together.

There were hirundines feeding over the water and I initially thought they were the same as previously seen, However prolonged watching convinced me they weren't and photos showed they were **Southern Rough-winged Swallows** – tick. The short hike actually wasn't all that long and back in the car we notched up a Gray-lined Hawk (which was probably a Crane Hawk – I don't have a photo to confirm one way or the other) and got lucky with a Marsh Deer that was photographable but distant along another irrigation ditch.

Along a wooded edge a Ringed Kingfisher sat up in the sun providing a splendid photo-opportunity that we took eagerly, as did a Snail Kite later, resulting in another request stop.

After lunch, Steve wanted to get a nap in the afternoon down time but a crew turned up and occupied the insect-meshed cage right next to his tent and began butchering beef carcasses with a chainsaw, which put paid to that. The rapidly increasing collection of flies outside the cage and around his tent wasn't a great thing either!

Once more out in the fields, I asked for a stop as I'd seen a bird perched up that I wasn't sure about but thought looked interesting. It turned out to be a **White-browed Meadowlark** similar to the Long-tailed Meadowlarks I'd seen in ancient times on the Falkland Islands ("What are these big Robins outside my office, John" was a frequent question from new arrivals) and a tick, just close enough for pix as well.

We encountered one of the ranch tractor drivers standing disconsolately some way from his machine, which despite its big drive wheels was hopelessly bogged in deep mud at the end of one of the hedge-side irrigation/drainage channels. All the drivers are netted up so help was already on the way and we couldn't help anyway, so on we went after a couple of pictures of the stranded tractor.

Next up an adult Great Black Hawk went into the can from its perch in the open on a high tree branch and a Bare-faced Curassow managed to avoid my lens at least – still a work in progress. During the drive I got around to photographing Crested Caracara, Bare-faced Ibis and Picazuro Pigeon, all of which we'd seen plenty of but not stopped for previously.

To try to shake our success up a bit we had a later night drive starting at 2100 and going on until 2330. I managed to grab an hour's sleep between dinner and the restart. Just after the drive started a nightjar crashed into Steve's hand holding his torch at the open window. Luckily he didn't drop it, but he did shout!

A **Gray Brocket** (after some discussion) was a new mammal for the trip and for me personally: I saw a Great Horned Owl fly up from so close to the track and by my rear-seat window that it was away into the darkness before we could slow to a stop (a crash stop meant being immediately enveloped in an impenetrable cloud of dust) and get any further views. Not long after, Nicolas said he had another Great Horned Owl perched up and drifted the car up next to it, only feet away from us and seeming settled. We quickly deployed our cameras (using flash I was enjoined to wait while Steve photographed it just with the torchlight but as usual it wasn't bothered when I started anyway). Even a quick look aroused my suspicions – after all I'd just had a brief reminder of how big a Great Horned Owl is – and the bird reminded me more of Long-eared Owl. Reference to the field guide confirmed we had a **Striped Owl** giving fabulous views.

The other mammal highlight was a pair of **Crab-eating Raccoons** by a small pool and a perched male Scissor-tailed Nightjar that allowed a close enough approach for pictures polished off another fairly successful but catless day.

20 August: Alarm Cock

Each morning we hoped to sleep through to our watch alarms' insistent rhythms but long before that were left woke by Dandy Madcock, the local cockerel, who thought 0300 was a good time to start crowing incessantly and who spent each day strutting about our camp after his collection of hens.

After our later night drive we had a lie-in of sorts once Dandy shut up, before starting a morning drive from 0730. Even starting this late we still encountered a homing Crab-eating Fox trotting across a field, though the nightjars had all knocked off. The usual waterbirds were in their usual places and we had brief views of some Azara's Horned Capuchins before they moved deeper into the woods out of sight. A Bolivian Red Howler Monkey similarly evaded us quickly. The morning drive was rescued by a male Marsh Deer showing close to the track where it (the track that is) ran along one of the embankments: great views and some decent pictures as it moved slowly but without apparent nervousness. Very nice!

I got photos of an adult Snail Kite on a horizontal branch eating some sort of crayfish before juvenile Rufescent Tiger-herons sat up on a bund in their regular bit of marsh and allowed us pictures instead of flying off at our advent, which was a pleasant change. Other than that it was a quiet drive and all our concentration couldn't pull a cat out of the landscape.

Back at camp a couple of Southern Lapwings had dropped onto the marshy paddock behind the facilities building and I took the chance to finally close the book on the species with some photos. What we had thought was a Tropical Kingbird was sitting up on wires flycatching and grabbing prey from the ground, but looking at my new photos of it I realised eventually that it wasn't quite right and with the Bolivian bird guide reidentified it as **Cattle Tyrant** and a tick. I admit we hadn't really looked carefully at it prior to this.

The camp guard dog, a soft and friendly mutt with a deep booming bark that may have kept the cats away, wanted our attention whenever we were about but his principal daytime occupation was seeking out the coolest shade and collapsing in it. A couple of times that

meant right across the front of my tent but he always moved promptly when I made it clear I wanted to get in. It probably would have been safe to pet him but Rule One of foreign animals applied.

Another new guest, a British birder called Ben, arrived with tales of having been frustrated in the Pantanal by smoke from wildfires: it was so thick they couldn't get out on the water let alone see wildlife for a couple of days – not what he'd anticipated. Fires were burning near to Kaa Iya which was a real concern for us as it was our next destination.

We were told that due to a petrol shortage (thought it was just diesel but apparently not) we couldn't do two more drives during the day so instead the offer was a long afternoon into evening drive, arriving back maybe 1930 for dinner. OK I suppose.

After driving various tracks without success we ended up at the hiking channel but this time drove along the track we had hiked, to take up stakeout positions in the hope of getting views of the Jaguar whose kill drag we'd previously observed on the ground. An hour's vigil yielded nothing but a young Yacare Caiman hanging at the water surface and with the light beginning to fade it was time to be back in the vehicle.

Resuming driving we ran into a problem with the estate management as they had decided to open a gap in one of the tracks to move water from one area to top up another – rendering the track impassable! Jose executed a neat three-point turn on the minimally wide embankment and we took another route, finding several Anhingas that we photographed and then a **Black-fronted Nunbird** that sat up long enough for us to take pictures despite really not much remaining light. Another Ocelot showing not too well and the customary Crab-eating Foxes (my notebook says 6 on this drive) rounded out the evening.

Dinner panini with chips and Tomato Ketchup!! Slightly larger beer cans (330 ml) heralded the beer actually running out – we shared the last can...

21 August: Back to Santa Cruz again

We had an early morning drive before packing up for the return to Santa Cruz. It was a belting drive on which we took time out to photograph some of the birds we'd been hacking past trying to cover ground and find cats. Before it got light we had two more Crab-eating Foxes.

We had a couple of Collared Peccaries in the fields but distantly. Request stops finally got me photos of both juvenile and adult Wattled Jacana that I was happy with: a Great Black Hawk immature sat up for its portrait. Jabirus and Roseate Spoonbills finally got the attention they deserved, as did a pair of Bare-faced Curassow. Perhaps best of all a Toco Toucan sat for us in a tree, showing off its ridiculous bill, before flying off and looking even more improbable. It wasn't point-blank but better than nothing.

Not only that but on the way out we stopped at the main tractor shed to refuel. While that was going on Nicolas pointed us in the direction of some habituated Burrowing Owls that sat amiably while we rattled off many pictures and we were also able to finally nail Buff-necked Ibis with our cameras after days of driving past loads that flew off honking loudly.

During the drive back to Santa Cruz we saw an enormous drum – cable or something fluid, not sure – fall off the pickup whose rear cargo deck surround it was perched on. How the car behind avoided it I don't know, his reactions must have been exceptional. Fortunately it

rolled away from our side of the road and didn't hit anything else. We didn't actually see the carrier vehicle stop so maybe he got to his destination to find it was a wasted trip!

The El al Jibe was quite crowded today but we got our usual table and plenty of cold beer with our meal.

22 August: This is the Chaco, and anything can happen in the Chaco!

A new crew of three from Nick's Adventures picked us up from the Hotel 7 Calles at 0830: a lean wiry driver named Cesar, Hugo the guide who was an older chap than Nicolas and had a vaguely studious look about him that was not entirely due to his glasses, and Yetsi the cook who had a definite Amerindian look about her and a bubbly personality. Between tours she was a firefighter and volunteer at a wildlife sanctuary for animals displaced by wildfires. Her phone was full of in-the-hand pictures of Ocelots and sloths!

On the way out of Santa Cruz we paused by a resort that we couldn't get into but which Hugo said was good for sloths and White-eared Titi Monkeys. He was right because we saw three Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths without even getting out of the car and I was lucky enough to spot one of the **White-eared Titi Monkeys** on an open branch before it ran off into cover as well! Amazing.

The day was hot, humid and there were odd spots of rain occasionally. There was smoke in the air in some places and after Ben's warnings we were hoping sincerely that our visit to Kaa Iya wouldn't be troubled by visibility issues due to wildfire smoke. This became even more of a worry as we passed several roadside fires and burns from previous fires, all illegally set by the locals according to Hugo.

En route we crossed the Rio Grande (one of many so-named rivers across Latin America I suspect) – it was perhaps half a mile wide but at this stage of the dry season only a couple of small channels held water, the riverbed being mostly sandbanks.

We lunched mid afternoon at a classy French hotel/restaurant a few km before the asphalt ran out. Hugo pointed out a Cattle Tyrant in the garden but photos were frustrated by thick window glass. A **Gilded Hummingbird** (tick!) was beautiful but too quick for the camera. The meal was very nice.

The road turned to track just outside the town where we had lunched and then made the only hill ascent, no worries at all for me on this one. On the plateau at the top the track was quite rough and the vehicle lurched about somewhat. Some way ahead of us the driver spotted two **Red-legged Seriemas**. We managed to get closer but the birds made off into tall grass and dense bushes so the photos left a lot to be desired! At least they show the red legs.

Our next stop was for a pair of soaring raptors, slim, elegant, very deeply forked tails: Swallow-tailed Kites. Seen in Florida but a lovely bird to watch and one of the highlights of the day. **Blue-crowned Parakeets** were the next thing onto the list and they allowed pictures too. A **Tawny-bellied Seedeater** was less exciting to see but useful list fodder and our second hummer of the day, **Glittering-bellied Emerald**, was hard enough to see as it zipped about between flowers without worrying about pictures. The last new bird of the day was an **Undulated Tinamou** showing at the edge of the track for long enough to get a good look, before it vanished into the boondocks.

Having arrived at the ranger station we were to make our home for the next few nights, dumped the gear and organised our kit we were off on a night drive along the near part of the Pipeline Road, seeing our familiar friends the Common Pauraque, Scissor-tailed Nightjar, Ocelot and of course Crab-eating Fox. Having noted with delight the aircon unit in our room, it turned out the South wind was making the whole place so cold we not only didn't want cooling but experimented with trying to set a temperature above ambient, which didn't seem to work.

23 August: The Pipeline Road

We headed off into the darkness of early morning for our first drive of the day on the Pipeline Road. This is the only really accessible part of Kaa Iya National Park: it tracks a gas pipeline that used to export Bolivia's natural gas to Brazil but with reserves exhausted now imports natural gas from Brazil, contributing to the poor economic performance of Bolivia. Scissor-tailed Nightjars were still about and Hugo called a large white-bellied nightjar as **Nacunda Nighthawk** – new for me and something we would see more of during our stay. The last new creature before the dawn light came up was a **Tapeti** (Brazilian Forest Rabbit) that loitered in the road until I reached for my camera, whereupon it hopped away into the bushes.

Continuing in the growing light we found a family of **White-coated Titi Monkeys** huddled together for warmth (couldn't blame them!) with their long tails entwined. This behaviour provides them with an instant indication of disturbance affecting any one individual. They were among twigs and branches but we nonetheless managed to get some pictures of them, improving when they woke up and turned their heads to face us.

A fairly distant Ocelot on the track provided only a record shot before it too made off into cover and disappeared for ever. Our attention was then taken by Red-crested Finches, attractive small birds with generally dull reddish plumage but a lurid scarlet crest. These were very typical of the Chaco and we saw lots over the next few days: there were some feeding around our accommodation when we returned for breakfast. There was also a shorebird feeding on the dry sandy area in front of the accommodation which I quickly identified as Baird's Sandpiper due to its long wings, dark legs, wheaty mantle and wash on a streaked upper breast. Somewhat unexpected in this dry environment! A House Wren bounced about in the bushes bordering the camp – I'll get around to determining which one it must be at some point: I've seen them in Florida and the Falkland Islands but I think they may have been split more than somewhat since. The FI one is certainly now Cobb's Wren.

Another new bird then appeared in a nearby bush: a **Fork-tailed Flycatcher**, one of those birds with overdeveloped tail feathers giving it a very elegant look. Breakfast was briefly postponed while we photographed it. A flock of swifts overhead were quickly identified by Hugo as **Sick's Swifts**. Imagine going through life named Sick.... "Hi, I'm Sick." "You're Sick!"

Post-breakfast it was back on the Pipeline Road heading West on the long bit. In total the pipeline cuts through the national park for about 150 kilometres and the Ranger Station where we were staying was about 40 Miles West of where it entered the park, leaving approximately 110 km to the West of us. The flatbed of the long cabin pick-up was loaded with water barrels and plastic sheet to create a new drinking pool by the track many kilometres from our base. We were not involved in this working party but it did deny us the open back of the truck due to the amount of gear stashed there, which was disappointing.

Hugo found us a **White-winged Black Tyrant** and then a **Barred Antshrike** while the pool was being worked on by Cesar the driver, both of which were new for me. A Crab-eating Fox was wandering about a pumping station compound but nipped off as soon as we arrived. We also occasionally encountered Gray Brouckets but they didn't hang about as we approached and we failed to get pictures. Even worse was an **Orange-backed Troupial** that went past in a blur of bright orange but didn't stop, leaving a just-about tickable view but not chance to savour it.

Back home again for a late lunch we also had some downtime and while wandering about the compound I disturbed a pair of Nacunda Nighthawks that proceeded to fly about in a tailchase, occasionally passing me for flight photo opportunities that I took eagerly.

Dinner's central feature was breadcrumb chicken and very nice too.

Early evening and back in the vehicle again, driving up the long end of the Pipeline Road (typically we would do about 50-70 km of this, not the full length to the end of the park). There was a real sense of anticipation as well as an increasing feeling that we were running out of time: lots and lots of Ocelots but of other felines, not a lot. So the concentration level as we made our way along the arrow-straight track for kilometre after kilometre was high: the light was going down fast.

Suddenly our driver said something to Hugo in Spanish and drifted to a halt. Far ahead of us a big cat was padding down the track towards us. It was so far away that it was difficult with bins to tell what it was and on the straight track judging size or perspective was not easy either. We could see the slow deliberation with which it placed each foot: watch any big cat walking and they have this deliberate rhythm, makes me think of the boom, boom, boom of an approaching Tyrannosaurus in Jurassic Park. I stuck my head out of the window and with difficulty levelled my camera to take a couple of shots and blow the image up on the screen. The images were not the best but in my judgement showed a **Jaguar**. Apparently the etiquette of the tour was to sit tight if a cat was heading for the vehicle so we made no attempt to get closer. Accordingly it was disappointing when the animal turned off into the bush! We continued to sit tight in case it came out again and by the time we did move up to its position we found that this bit of track was too firm to take tracks. Absolutely not the view I'd hoped for but equally, no doubt in my mind that we had seen a Jaguar. Tick.

When we moved on it was not long before the darkness was complete. We surprised a Crab-eating Fox in another pumping station compound (those seemed to be preferred hunting areas for the foxes – or perhaps they were just where we found it easiest to see them in this environment) and ticked off the customary Scissor-tailed Nightjars for the drive.

Hugo found an owl high in a tree to the left of us and I could see it well from my seat apart from the rather critical bit – the head. A branch was right across that and I couldn't from my seat get around it. As Hugo had said it was a Striped Owl and we'd had mega views of one at Jaguarland I wasn't worried and when it flew off we perforce gave up on it. When we got back to the camp and Hugo confessed he'd made a mistake and it had been a Spectacled Owl we were crushed. No way was I ticking it on the view I'd had.

The remainder of the drive involved three Tapetis that didn't hang about for photos and a Burrowing Owl that perched distantly and we didn't worry about after the Jaguarland posers.

24 August: The Pipeline Road (extended version)

Our early morning drive yielded more views of White-coated Titi Monkeys but no cats. In the compound, on our return, we had a couple of Blue-crowned Parakeets and a Scaly-headed Parrot before finding a **Southern Beardless Tyrannulet** flycatching and gleaning in the tree the Fork-tailed Flycatcher had previously adopted. The House Wren teased from a dense bush, staying always with too much twiggage in front of it for pictures.

Today was our day for the Big Pipeline Road drive: Westward to the edge of the National Park, 107 km away. We took with us a picnic lunch to eat at the far end ranger station, which turned out to be disused and partly locked up: the toilets had been drained down, slightly disappointing! But I'm getting ahead of myself....

On the outbound leg we stopped for a **Red-legged Tortoise** that was stumping along at the side of the track. We dismounted for a better look and to take pictures before it could run off. Speedy things, tortoises, go like hell, I've missed out on pix of them before because of it. We stopped to install another drinking trough and while the work was going on Hugo found us more birds: A **Great Antshrike** and then a **White-fronted Woodpecker** that both allowed photos and a **Suiriri Flycatcher** that didn't.

Moving on again we saw several Gray Brockets, Steve saw a Black-tailed Marmoset briefly and we also encountered more Crab-eating Foxes one of which was photographable, unusual during the day from my limited experience. Just as we arrived at the ranger station another Gray Brocket walked into the open and paused before continuing slowly across the wide clearing around the compound right in front of us. It was a superb photo-opportunity and we made good use of it. Then it was lunchtime, with chicken wings, salads and pastries enough for all of us.

After lunch we continued along the track and stopped by the airfield that serves the pipeline employees quartered on this section. Hugo wanted to check on occupancy of a known Jaguar breeding tunnel under the airstrip. Our gallant guide lay down at the entrance and shone a torch up it. I stood on top of the concrete revetment surrounding the pipe entrance on the basis that any angry cat would come out at Hugo and would have to do a 180 to get to me. In the past Hugo had twice found a female Jaguar in this way, once with cubs. After he got back up from his check I asked him what the Jaguar felt about that. "She was quite angry," he admitted. Flippin' heck! Mind you, if he'd got back up and said there was a Jag up the tunnel I'd have got down and looked.....

We crossed the airstrip, encountering three Nacunda Nighthawks that obligingly flew around after we'd got roosting pictures, allowing us to get flight shots as well. The other end of the tunnel was also empty of big cats. We heard Peccaries in the woods but didn't get views. There was also a Gilded-bellied Emerald that gave us good views but unfortunately the light was poor due to cloud cover.

Back in the vehicle we continued towards where the Pipeline Road left the national park, scoring a **White-barred Piculet** on the way. As we reached the gate there was a Seriema on the road and in the half second before it ran off I thought I saw black legs and a crest. We debussed and Hugo asked if we'd like him to call it back in. Oh yes please! He deployed his phone and speaker and after a short burst of Black-legged Seriema calls it came out onto the track on the far side of the gate and stood right out in the open watching us before beginning to pace about. To our surprise a Crab-eating Fox also appeared on the track and moved towards the **Black-legged Seriema** cautiously, never getting very close to it but pacing about nearby as the bird did much the same. Dances with Foxes!

Returning the way we had come we found a group of three **Monk Parakeets** sitting up on cactus and giving excellent views. This was another upgrade from a previous feral tick and

much appreciated. Just after that we began to see more and more Bare-faced Curassows strutting about the track in small groups. By the time we'd passed the last group we'd seen over twenty!

Back at the airfield we stopped because there was another fox sauntering across it and it wasn't a Crab-eating Fox! We took hurried pictures of it in motion before it sat down near the bushy edge of the strip and allowed us to take our time recording it looking at us in an interested but wary way. Hugo told us it was "Yellow-legged Fox" which later googling identified as the local term for Pampas Fox but the markings seemed spot on Culpeo, which was bizarre. Steve kindly put his photo out there on Mammalwatching.com when we returned and the congregation confirmed it was a **Pampas Fox**.

The return drive was singularly uneventful.

25 August The Pipeline Road (Eastern edge)

We had a morning drive to the pumping station at the East side of Kaa Iya, seeing little of note (Crab-eating Foxes and Tapetis). Back for breakfast I got some nice pictures of the local Yellow-headed Caracara. Talking to Hugo by the vehicle later I asked him if he was now going to remove the water barrels etc from the flatbed at the back of the truck so all of us could get up there if conditions were favourable. He dithered and I pressed my case: "I'll put that another way – we've got tonight, tomorrow and tomorrow night and we now need unfettered access to the flatbed where the views are best."

He and Cesar removed their equipment from the flatbed. Had he objected I would have started to make points about them working for paying clients here now and not for notional ones turning up next week – but he wisely didn't.

So off we went on the afternoon drive, standing up on the back holding onto the surrounding railings with an excellent view in all directions and able to swing our bins and cameras into action in any direction without craning out of the window or trying to see past other bodies in the cab. I did feel that to justify my earlier firmness I had to spend as much of my time up there as I could stand – with the South wind still in command it was still not very warm!

We stopped to check the integrity of the plastic lined pool our team had put in earlier in the week (it was fine) and Hugo found us a **Stripe-backed Antbird** (tick but no photo). We birded the area while Hugo and Cesar were working in the bushes and were surprised to turn around and see Hugo coming towards us with his left foot suddenly awkward and turned up. As he reached us he explained that he had a tarantula perched on one boot, which he was carrying in his hand so we could see it and, once he put it down, photograph it on the track. Excellent work! He then identified a **Pale-crested Woodpecker** as it flew over the vehicle as a silhouette and before it pitched in a nearby tree allowing us views but not enough time to deploy the cameras. Impressive!

Having reached the limit of our patrol we turned and started back. As we passed through one of the small pumping station compounds Hugo shouted Cesar to stop and called "**White-bellied Nothura!**" as a partridge-sized bird sprinted from the inner fence towards the edge of the compound. Opening fire almost without aiming I was lucky enough to get a couple of frames in focus of this new bird for me but Steve missed it as he was on the wrong side (inside) and it was behind the vehicle. Fortunately we saw another a day or two later which he got.

A stop and wander at another pumping station yielded a female Great Antshrike and later in the drive we encountered a showy Bat Falcon sitting high on a dead tree as well as another group of White-coated Titi Monkeys typically reticent when it came to allowing pictures. A Gray Brocket with a fawn made its way across the track but too far away for photos: after the fab views of the one at the far West end of the road we weren't all that concerned.

The afternoon drive extended into the darkness of the early evening and we were lucky to find a **Tropical Screech Owl** sitting up before reaching base for dinner prior to another night drive. We were unlucky that it flew away before we could get pictures.

This was our second-to-last night drive and we felt things were coming right down to the wire as far as sightings of the key species were concerned. Still – every day is different.

Before we even left the ranger station Hugo managed to spot a Great Horned Owl atop a tree by the track and this one sat for photos, making it seem almost like a tick as I'd seen several in Florida in 1988 and one for a couple of seconds at Jaguarland but none this close and this well.

Finally I managed to get a usable photo of a Tapeti that hopped along the edge of the road rather than straight off into the bushes. The first ones we'd seen (when I wasn't ready) had showed well but then we had a whole series of unco-operative ones, so it was about time.

We were keyed up throughout the drive, most of which I spent up on the flatbed. Accordingly I got the full benefit of the mighty crash in the bushes right next to the road that caused a crash stop (instant dust cloud) and debussing of the remainder of the crew. Torches were swiftly deployed for trying to see into the bush. I put mine on red and kept a bit of an eye on sectors where the others weren't looking, including up and down the road. Being stopped in the dark in wilderness you know contains Jaguars and Pumas makes you want full 360 degree situational awareness.

For a while we heard nothing and, you've guessed it, saw nothing. Then we heard the clip, clop of a large animal's hooves departing on a trail the beginning of which, let alone the part within the bushes, we also couldn't see – and that was as close as we got to Lowland Tapir. Neither of us tick on hoofbeats, however certain.

Last day at Kaa Iya tomorrow. Definitely down to the wire.

26 August: The Road goes ever on and on (Over the Edge)

A bit of a change this morning with a drive not just to but beyond the Eastern pumping station to the very Eastern edge of Kaa Iya. Beyond the pumping station the National Park was only on our right, with cattle stations on our left. There were gates to go through occasionally and nobody seemed to have told the cattle that the park ended at the track so they were on both sides of us and some areas were much more open than we had become used to. We thought some of these areas would reward exploration on foot but of course our main targets were best looked for by covering ground and that meant mainly driving along the track.

Movement in a bit of thicker bush turned out to be peccaries and investigation found they were Collared Peccaries. They didn't seem bothered by our presence and as they wandered about we managed a few shots through gaps in the trees and bushes. I saw a hawk flash past the right hand side of the vehicle and pitch in a thick bush. I got a shot of its back end

perched up and believe my identification as **Bicolored Hawk** on tail banding, thickness of legs and rufous breast is correct.

By the time we reached the metal gate barring exit from the park and further exploration along the pipeline no cats had appeared though a group of three Crab-eating Foxes had wandered across and away from the track: we saw another on the return trip. The highlight of that return trip was a stop and walk through the bush on an animal trail to one of the remaining lagoons at this end of the dry season. It was a small but lush pond (well, say small lagoon but large pond, if that helps) surrounded by tall trees.

On our way to it we came across a **Cream-backed Woodpecker** (another of those large woodpeckers that are always easy to see and photograph), only moving on once we had the results we wanted. The obstacle was more waiting for it to pose just right so cream back and head pattern were on view in a pleasing way than difficulty seeing the bird. When we reached the pool Hugo invited us to pick a log and sit waiting in silence for animals to appear to drink. As it was now the middle of the day we were sceptical, it seemed likely to us that very early morning or late afternoon would be the time to do such a stakeout, but perhaps the risks involved in walking so far through the bush were too high for that.

Anyway if it wasn't much cop for mammals it was pretty decent for birds and in quick succession we ticked off **Flavescent Warbler** and **Great Rufous Woodcreeper** (which does exactly what it says on the tin) as well as obtaining further views of Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Black-backed Water Tyrant and a really nice photo-opportunity with a plug-ugly Turkey Vulture.

Before the end of the drive, mid-afternoon, we got decent views of **Ruddy Ground Doves** on the track but they were too quick for us to also get photos.. We spent a little time packing and birding the compound, finding and photographing a **White-lined Tanager** as well as a couple of Blue-crowned Parakeets, before having an early meal and heading out for our very last night drive.

When dinner was served it included a Key Lime Pie and chocolate cake (with candles) in honour of Steve's birthday! Of course we further embarrassed him by singing Happy Birthday. A highlight of an up-and-down day!

We absolutely flogged the Pipeline Road West with no great surprises apart from another brief view of Tropical Screech Owl. Heading back disappointed, we had one last highlight when an Ocelot jumped out from the left side perhaps a hundred metres or so ahead, with a Tapeti kicking its last held firmly in the cat's jaws. We tried to creep forward in the vehicle but the cat unfortunately made off in a leisurely way into the vegetation presumably to find somewhere to enjoy its meal.

27 August: Return to Santa Cruz

We still had a half-chance on an early morning drive before departure on the morrow. Desperate stuff and desperation does not often improve performance: we saw nothing that wasn't utterly familiar to us. Even the Crab-eating Foxes were fed up to the back teeth with us and stayed away: no late win for us before game over.

The drive out of the area only yielded more Broukkets: due to opening hours issues we lunched at a Brazilian-style diner not the posh restaurant of the drive into the area. In full daylight and with hope gone we had time to view the progressive devastation of the area outside the national park by cattle stations, gradually encroaching closer and closer in what

should really be a buffer zone between the wildlife and the human population. It was difficult to be hopeful about the eventual outcome for the area, let alone our own chances as we drove out.

Back on the main road we had an unusual sighting of a Great White Egret walking across the carriageway – bone dry and no water nearby, very odd.

Coming into Santa Cruz we hit some bad rush hour traffic but eventually reached our new location of the Hostel Travella (a backpackers' favourite) where unfortunately, tired, hot and wanting to get out for beer we got off on the wrong foot with the manager when he couldn't find our room key, destroying the effect of his put-on London matey accent and Tony Blackburn-quality jokes. The rooms not being en suite was also a surprise but very much a first world problem we weren't going to kick about: not only that but the showers turned out to be the best ones of the trip. Steve took it as his fault anyway for not checking the prospectus well enough.

The manager sensibly gave us a different room – a double which was worrying – to unwind in while he dashed about trying to locate the key, and he also spoke to the owner who even more sensibly advised him to give us a room each once he had located it, so we got great sleep opportunities each of the two nights we were there given that both of us snore habitually - despite the salsa club next door.

Dinner was at an alleged Japanese/Korean diner only fifty yards away, Bolivian food with below the bare minimum of spicing to make it seem Asian. They had cold beer though – and we had wine stashed for a nightcap back at the ranch afterwards.

28 August: Botanical Gardens Finale

Steve found the Lufthansa on-line check in system wasn't working, which wasn't great with our three-leg journey home and wanting our luggage through-ticketed. Trying to check in via the office of BoA (a short walk away) – failed, but they did book us seats next to each other on their flight from Santa Cruz to Sao Paulo – we took a taxi to the Botanical Gardens for a last thrash round, going via the resort with the sloths and White-eared Titi Monkeys. The taxi driver didn't initially understand the mission and tried to get us to the gate of the place but eventually we managed to get him to understand that we wanted to walk along the main road and look in while he waited for us. During our efforts I found a Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth doing the proper hanging from a branch and feeding on leaves but the monkeys didn't show, which was disappointing for both of us.

Then it was on to the Botanical Gardens where suddenly as foreigners we were charged 30 Bolivianos each to get in – what? It was 10 last two times (we didn't say out loud)! You don't question such things especially by analogy with previous, in case they want to recover the undercharging, so we had to stump up from our dwindling store of Bolivian currency.

Once in we had another brief view of the Southern Amazon Red Squirrel which repeated its frustrating disappearing performance right in front of us. We made our way through the wilder parts of the woodland checking out a couple of trails that according to the map led right through the blocks they were in but actually petered out in the middle, forcing in each case a retreat to the main drag and a different route around. At least we got more views of Black-and-Gold Howlers including a black adult male, though he didn't want to sit for his portrait and instead presented the camera with views of his plums as he moved off to a big shady tree where he could keep out of our way.

This turned out fortuitously to be the best move we could have made when a massive owl launched off a tree in front of us and glided away down the middle of the track before a couple of brisk flaps and a swoop up to land in plain view facing us on another tree. Our first instinct was Great Horned but as we looked at it I became convinced the face pattern was all wrong and hauled the field guide out of my rucksack. Sure enough what we had (incidentally we had immediately taken record shots) was a **Stygian Owl!** We stalked it and took closer photos, revelling in the great views of a fantastic bird as a highlight of our final day in the field. Sidling closer eventually resulted in the owl making off away from the track, which was perhaps best for it and us as it was very difficult to tear ourselves away from its majestic presence.

Continuing on we found a **Golden-green Woodpecker** showing off its contrasting finery before becoming aware of a flock of parrotlets. These proved very difficult to identify, partly because they kept high in trees against the strong sunlight and partly because all the species look very much alike – overall bright green with detail differences that can be hard to see! Persistence and inspection of progressively better photos eventually demonstrated that they were **Blue-winged Parrotlets** and our final tick of the trip.

Notwithstanding this the birding continued to be good, with nice views of Ocellated and Olivaceous Woodcreepers, Bolivian Slaty Antshrikes and other familiar species. My last species photographed was the only bird seen on every day of the trip: a Rufous Hornero sitting up nicely near the Botanical Gardens gate as we headed back to catch a bus into town.

29 – 30 August: For a moment I thought we were in trouble

We had a taxi booked for 0530 to get us to the airport in plenty of time for our flight. The driver seemed to be in training for the next F1 season but we arrived alive and managed to check in with just a few minor issues, mainly still not being able to download e-boarding passes to our phones, so ending up with some rather fragile looking till-roll paper copies. The check-in folks assured us that the luggage was through-ticketed and we headed off for a breakfast of paninis and coffee. While waiting at the gate for our flight we were able to watch our last Bolivian birds, Gray-breasted Martins, which were nesting in numbers on the undersides of the airport jetways and occasionally perching on the ledges just outside the thick slightly tinted windows through which we were watching.

Our flight from Santa Cruz to Sao Paulo was without incident. Even as transit passengers we had to pass through security (though we didn't have to recover our hold luggage) but we got lucky immediately after that as one of those electric buggies airports use for less mobile passengers was just picking one up and invited us to hop on for the indoor trip to the end of the terminal building (T1 to T3 are in fact all one building) from which our flight to Frankfurt would be leaving. It was smugly satisfying to be driven past all the people who had been ahead of us in the security queue and were now toiling along with their hand baggage or in some cases, full suite of luggage.

We had about five hours to wait for our next flight and we broke up the afternoon with coffees and the odd snack. The airline broke up the afternoon further by announcing my name on the PA system (luckily Steve heard it, I would have completely missed it). For a moment I thought we were in trouble. Fortunately when we obeyed their summons to the check-in desk it turned out they were just providing us and all the other passengers hampered by the system issue preventing our use of smart phones for e-boarding passes with proper card versions.

Bored with coffees we had a couple of rounds of beers to pass the time. Steve picked cans of Amstel but with my wider experience of American beers when it was my turn I came back with a couple of bottles of Lagunitas, a fine US real ale. Steve acidly asked how I was going to open the crown-tops at which point I flourished the bottle-opener on my key-ring. Don't leave home without it!

Eventually it was time to board the Lufthansa 747-8 for the transatlantic flight. If anything the aircraft was even more geriatric than the outbound one: my entertainment system now wouldn't entertain the idea of sound at all and I perforce watched English language films by means of subtitles. The jet seemed too warm and of course travelling cattle-class in the centre of the aircraft with unknown people outside each of us in the aisle seats we had no room and felt awkward about asking to get out too often despite a fierce attack of restless leg which prevented sleep for ages.

The food was dreadful, once again I got stuck with the vegetarian option which I regard as completely inappropriate: not only that but even if I had been vegetarian I would not have regarded badly cooked pasta with a minimum of indeterminate sauce and one small bit of tomato as any kind of meal.

As part of not getting caught out by missed connections we had another long wait at Frankfurt and though we hadn't gone through security outbound here, this time we did have to. The detector succeeded in spotting the laser pointer mounted within my thermal imager and they decided to make me take everything out of my hand baggage and run the lot through again with me itemizing each piece of equipment. For a moment I thought I was in trouble... Fortunately after the second scan they were satisfied and I got the lot back. However, I don't know why they thought it was an issue or why they didn't continue to consider it an issue – and I wasn't going to ask, just took my gear and legged it!



The aircraft for our onward Dolomiti flight was late but the staff turned it round with astonishing speed. In fact they were so fast that we were convinced that despite our long wait our luggage wouldn't have made it onto the plane. We climbed at max chat all the way to cruising altitude instead of reducing to climbing power as airliners usually do and in consequence arrived at London City Airport pretty much on time, at 1625. Good effort. Off we went to the baggage return.

Bags began to come through, were lifted off in turn by their owners who then set off homewards or onwards. We were dismayed when the last bag notice came up and the conveyor stopped – but a quick look at the information screen revealed that was for the previous flight and ours hadn't started arriving yet. Both bags came though together and our respective runs for home began. DLR, Jubilee and Waterloo to Farnborough got me to Marion's well-timed arrival and we were in the Prince of Wales by 1830. Endex!



Farnborough John and The Ipswich Kid
The End

Mammal Pictures

South American Coati	Black-tailed Marmoset
	

Azara's Night Monkey



Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth



Brown Agouti



Azara's Horned Capuchin



Black-and-gold Howler Monkey



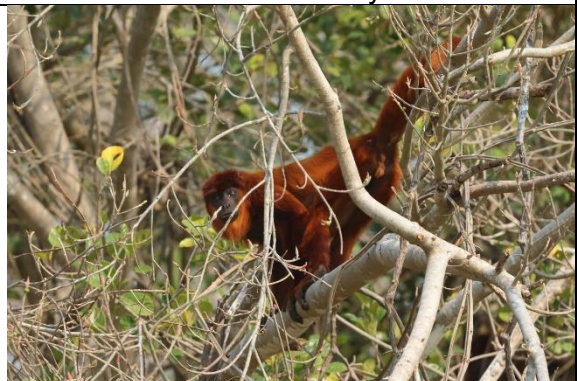
Brown Agouti



Bolivian River Dolphin



Bolivian Red Howler Monkey



Crab-eating Fox



Greater Capybara



Black Spider Monkey



Ocelot



Red Brocket



Ocelot



Marsh Deer



White-coated Titi Monkey



Gray Brocket



Pampas Fox



Tapeti



Collared Peccary



Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth



Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth

