

In Search of the Solenodon



Back in February I had the pleasure with my friend Graeme of visiting the Dominican Republic for two tours, birds and mammals, both organised by Royle Safaris. Overall, we saw 12 mammal species (4 new and 4 unidentified) with 2 new families. The mammal highlight, and really the only reason to visit the Dominican Republic, was of course the solenodon.

To handle jet lag after our 20-hour flight from Melbourne, Australia, I had decided we should stop in Florida for three nights and see the Everglades. Our first mammal was an **eastern grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)** at the rear of our hotel in Miami. The next day we saw an **eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)** in front of our hotel in Naples. Disappointingly we missed manatees at the Manatee Park in Fort Myers as they had all returned to sea due to the extreme hot weather. An attempt to find marsh rabbits at sites in Naples identified from iNaturalist also failed.

Our flight from Miami to Santo Domingo arrived in mid-afternoon, so after checking in we had a chance to wander around the Old Town admiring the late 15th and early 16th century architecture followed by dinner at a restaurant on the cathedral square. Next morning we had breakfast in the hotel's roof terrace restaurant, meeting the other participant in the tour, a British botanist, and seeing our first two Hispaniolan endemic birds, the Hispaniolan mango and parakeet. The bird tour, which went for six nights, was a great success. We saw all the Hispaniolan endemics, other than one only found in Haiti, as well as an abundance of other new species.

The first mammal seen on the bird tour was a **small Indian mongoose (*Urva auropunctata*)**, noticed beside the side of the road on the second day. An introduced species, this is the only

one we saw during our visit. On the fourth day, while staying at a lodge in the cloud forest, our guide showed us a **Leech's single leaf bat (*Monophyllus redmani*)**. The only other mammals seen were what I presume were some black rats, which I have not counted here.

The bird and mammal tours were conducted back-to-back, with the same guide, and so flowed into each other. We picked up the 4th member of the mammal tour, a young American herpetologist, and headed to Perdenalis, which is located next to the Haitians border on the Caribbean coast. This was to be our base for the entire mammal tour.

The next morning the others headed off to a site for rhinoceros iguana (*Cyclura cornuta*) and Ricord's ground iguana (*Cyclura ricordii*). As Graeme and I had seen both species earlier in the tour, we elected to relax with a dip in the Caribbean Sea. In the afternoon we headed into the hills for some more bird and reptile watching.

As dusk fell we headed to our first mammal site. It did not take long to find our first target for the evening **Hispaniolan hutia (*Plagiodontia aedium*)**, as well as being a new species, a new Family for me. Three animals were observed moving through a tree at no more than about six metres (20 feet) in height, an excellent observation.

Next was the solenodon hunt. The **Hispaniolan solenodon (*Solenodon paradoxus*)** (another new Family) were first described by European science in 1833, despite, the island first being settled by the Spanish in 1493. A second animal was found in 1907, but the species was presumed extinct until late in the 20th Century after which it was classified as "Endangered" in 2007. In 2020 it was reclassified as "Least Concern". No local we spoke to had ever seen one, outside a catching session and one seen as roadkill. It is not that these animals are difficult to see, they are simply never seen. It seems likely that almost the entirety of the Dominican population are unaware of the species existence.

Researchers developed a method of catching them. It involves listening for them rustling in the leaves on the forest floor and charging after them, running them down and grabbing them by the tail. This method only works in the dry season. Obviously, this is not something for the inexperienced to do. While this was being done, we had to wait in the car, in total darkness and silence. In our case it took five hours and four locations before an animal was caught.

We were then able to enter the edge of the forest where we had a chance to examine and watch the animal, both while in hand and after they are released. This is not a cheap exercise; however, the profit does fund conservation work by the non-government organization that organizes it. About 15 to 30 people per year do this experience.

The next day was relaxed, and we returned to the hills that evening for another opportunity to see a solenodon.

The next day was the final official day of the tour. We headed towards the Jaragua National Park. On the way we passed through a massive new hotel development. Not one massive hotel, but thirteen. It is in an arid area in the middle of nowhere. The hotels will all offer "all inclusive" holidays, and a new international airport being constructed nearby will ensure nobody will have to interact with locals, except maybe as wait staff in the bar.

Further on we entered the national park for some stunning scenery and maybe our best look at a rhinoceros iguana yet. We ended up at another beach where the National Park offered the

services of a Lifeguard. A beautiful swimming spot in the Caribbean Sea, we enjoyed ourselves for about an hour.

That evening we headed back into the hills for the last time to look for a Stygian Owl.

Our final day was the drive back to Santo Domingo. There were a few tourist and birding stops, but the only mammal stop was at a cave in Paraiso for bats. Four species were confirmed, but we have not been able to obtain their names.

On the way back to Australia, we had a day layover in Los Angeles. I took Graeme to a couple of birding spots I have frequented on previous visits. Firstly, at Madrona Marsh, we saw **Eastern fox squirrels (*Sciurus niger*)** while a reliable colony of **California ground squirrels (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*)** was observed at Ken Maloy Park.