

Yucatan peninsula

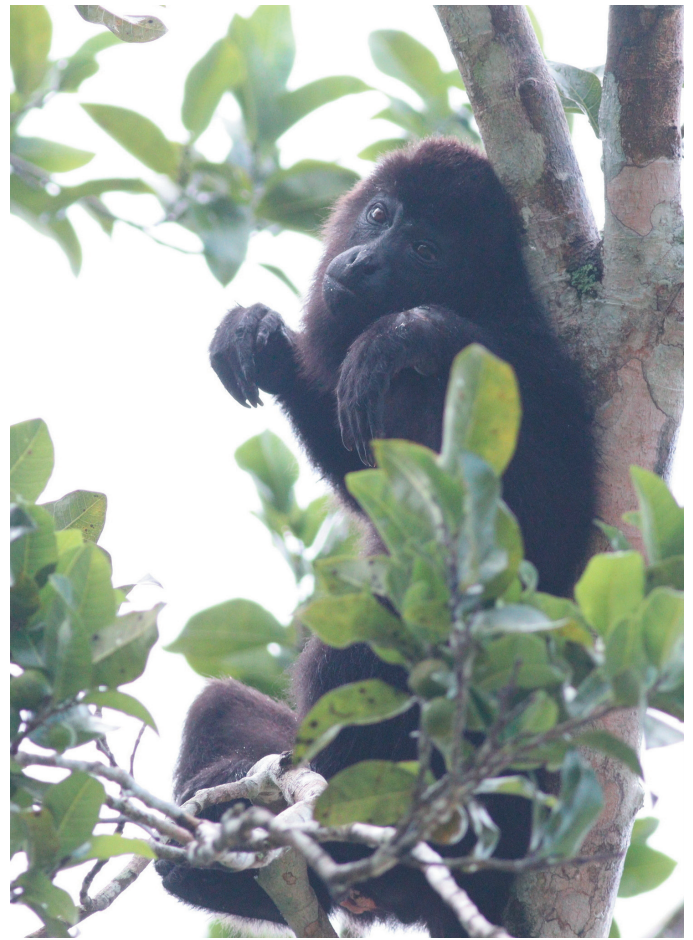
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It's been two and a half years since we unplannedly started snorkelling and ever since then, our mammalwatching efficiency has taken a severe hit. This trip was no different – even though we spent 15 days in Mexico, we have really only looked for mammals for 5–6 of these and thus we only saw 20 species (13 lifers).

We have chosen September specifically as the peak of “hurricane season”, hoping that there would be fewer people and cheaper accommodations on the beaches, which is something we do now because of the snorkelling thing. That worked well, especially because there were no actual hurricanes anywhere nearby and it wasn't even particularly rainy most of the time. On the flip side, it was really hot and humid, some of the worst tropical conditions we have ever encountered.

I have read a lot of unpleasant things about the “Mayan riviera”, including warnings about various scams, but all things considered, it was a really good experience. We rented a car with Enterprise through [rentalcars.com](https://www.rentalcars.com) for an honestly absurdly low price – upon arrival,



Yucatan Black Howler Monkey

we were shown a much smaller car than promised, so we paid up for an upgrade to a nice Nissan Versa, second driver and roadside assistance, but even after that it was still pretty cheap (\$570 for 15 days). Nobody ever tried to scam us at a petrol station or anywhere else and everyone was generally nice and friendly. I have always been a bit sceptical about Mexican food as I knew it from elsewhere, but - with the proper insistence of no cilantro in it - the local offerings were generally fantastic. Also, the snorkelling was pretty good – some places had reduced visibility, there was a lot of sargassum and in some areas it's pretty difficult to actually access any good area, but after a bit of searching, we always found fantastic coral gardens full of life. I was particularly fascinated by the visit to Xcalak, where we had the entire coast basically to ourselves.

During our *snorkelling days around the coast* we haven't seen a lot in the way of mammals: a **Common Raccoon** and a **White-nosed Coati** while driving to/from a beach in Bahia Principe, more coatis while waiting on a car ferry back from Cozumel, **Yucatan Squirrels** in our accommodation next to Cenote dos Ojos and along the coastal “road” 15 south of Tulum, and a **Yucatan Cottontail** briefly from the car while driving towards Xcalak. We did only limited mammal explo-



Kinkajou



Central American Spider Monkey

ration around the coast: a couple hours of night-driving on the **access road to Xcalak** produced just two rodents, but both lifers: **Gaumer's Spiny Pocket Mouse** and **Coues's Marsh Rice Rat**; another couple of hours on an interesting track into the jungle straight from Playa del Carmen (continue straight from Av. Benito Juarez) did not really produce anything tangible – a few quick glances of rodents and something crossing the road in the distance, but no photos. We tried to look for Pygmy Racoons on Cozumel, but had no luck: we did late evening and early morning checks around the wastewater treatment plant without success, so we decided to walk the 1.5 kms to the end of the track another morning. The track was not passable in a car and even walking meant a lot of wading through water – but despite there being a lot of raccoon tracks, we came back empty-handed, just eaten by mosquitoes and drenched in sweat.

We found bats in **Cenote dos Ojos** and in **Grand Cenote**, in both cases **Jamaican Fruit-eating Bats**. As we had to swim to

them, we only have photos from the small compact cameras we used under water, but the bats were close enough for some reasonable shots. We also found another colony of **Jamaican Fruit-eating Bats** in abandoned houses near **Tulum** (20.1075N, 87.5848W). Based on Alex's suggestion, I asked in Rio Secreto whether we could look for the False Vampire bats there, but they basically laughed me off. There are certainly many other places with bats around, but finding information and access seems to be quite difficult and - I mean surely one could simply visit one commercially accessible cenote after another (as there is an endless supply of those) and eventually find something, but it would be a lot of money and time spent with a questionable outlook.

Eventually, we headed a bit inland, starting at **Tres Garantias**. Since the only information about the area comes from reports here and none of the reports is particularly specific about the details of any logistics, we just drove down to the village to see what we could do. While we were basically prepared to wildcamp if needed, we also were (and frankly still are) a bit confused by the safety situation in Mexico, so the plan was to primarily look for some accomodation. That quickly turned a bit comical, upon seeing the reality of the village, which really doesn't seem to expect any tourists at all. After some fruitless driving around, I stopped to ask in a local shop,



White-nosed Coati



Southern Opossum



Virginia Opossum

where the keeper quickly dismissed the idea of there being any accommodations at all – but one of the customers told me that his mother may be willing to rent us a house. We went to visit her and came back with keys to a small house, consisting of one completely empty room and a small bathroom, for just 300 pesos per night. It was a bit stuffy, but when we came back in the middle of the night and opened all the windows and built the insides of our tents on the floor to protect from mosquitoes, it was fine to sleep.

Having our night sorted out, we drove out of the village – right on the edge, we met a **Gray Fox**, then another in a small quarry nearby.. Further out, there is a plenty of forest and a few paved roads going through that forest with some side tracks, however none of those was anywhere near passable with our car. The one nicer track that maybe would be doable, which I presume is the one where everyone goes, was behind a locked gate and a fence (18.0943, -89.0489). We stopped by the road and took a random footpath into the forest, which led to a substantial maze of paths where we spent a couple of hours at dusk and into the night and then we also drove around the paved roads for a bit, but overall we got only a **Kinkajou**, both **Virginia** and **Southern Opossums** and **Central-American Agouti**.



Yucatan Squirrel



Deppe's Squirrel

On the way to Calakmul, we stopped at the ruins in **Hormiguero**, which was the place that finally shattered my remaining premonitions of what to expect from Yucatan – we essentially spent the last couple kilometers of driving through worryingly deep mud pools making jokes about the tourist busses I was originally expecting to meet here – unsurprisingly after having dealt with the “road”, we were the only visitors. For our intrepidity, we were rewarded by both **Yucatan Black Howler Monkeys** and **Central American Spider Monkeys**; Ivana also located a **Deppe's Squirrel** high in the trees and a **Central-American Agouti** was running around. In small chambers inside the ruins, there were several bats, but all **Greater Sac-Winged Bats**.



Hatt's Vesper Rat



Big-eared Climbing Rat

any time. At the gate we also bought the – slightly pricier – tickets for the nature reserve which starts after the 20 kms, but that's only open during the day. If you want to visit the Calakmul ruins at the end (which I wholeheartedly recommend, despite there being very few animals and notably no roosting bats anywhere as far as we could tell), you pay the third time at the entrance to the ruins at the end of the road. In the first 20 kms, there are several random side tracks, a small hiking path around km 15, a “tapir lake” viewed from the road at km 18 and a stupendously beautiful oxbow lake 1.5 km south of Yaax'Che, just a few dozen meters east off the road. In the reserve, there are two marked trails – the well-known circuit at km 27 and a there-and-back hike to a “cenote” at km 38: both have some blabber about having a guide posted at the entrance but nobody bothered us for walking them alone.

We first went to the “**bat volcano**”, which is a few kms east by the main road (you just have to tell them at the gate that you will be coming back). The Yaax'Che guy told us to be there at 6 pm - to our disappointment, we saw large clouds of bats already flying out as we were approaching the site at 17:40. At the parking, we had to pay for entrance to some locals and listen to instructions that included having to wear a mask, ha ha - also no light and flash photography and a maximum stay of 30 minutes. We quickly ran up to the actual place, which is a massive opening in the ground, where an unimaginable amount of bats were circling



Gaumer's Spiny Pocket Mouse



Coues's Marsh Rice Rat

Next morning, we got up early to be at the reserve gate at 6:30 – we could probably have gotten in even earlier by the looks of it. We stopped at the hiking trails, finding just **spider monkeys** and a very unbothered **White-tailed Deer** during the hike and continued to the ruins, finding a **Yucatan Squirrel** from the car along the road. At the ruins themselves, we only found a **coati** – the previously known bat roosts near “Muralla” were empty and we found no other cavities - but the view from the top of the tallest pyramid was absolutely stunning. In late afternoon, we hiked to the cenote, accompanied on the steep descent by a rather aggressive group of **spider monkeys**. There were bats, but we saw only a few briefly in flight as there is no way to actually enter any cave here. We drove back slowly in order to leave the reserve by 7 pm, which was not really productive. However, after that, we stayed around the ejido part of the road and the paths at km 15 and found **Hatt's Vesper Rat** and **Big-eared Climbing Rat**; a **Gray Fox** also crossed the road. In the morning, we searched all the accessible buildings around the campsite, but found only another **Greater Sac-Winged Bat**.

Looking at satellite images, it's clear that there is much more forest around the peninsula than just Calakmul



Great or Intermediate Fruit-eating Bat

around and slowly leaving - at that moment, these seemed to all have been **Broad-eared Free-tailed Bats**. We tried to run a bat detector, but it was entirely overwhelmed by the noise of all the bats - I have no idea how people do any useful detection here. Soon, a lady appeared and tried to convince us that we must protect ourselves from the smell, otherwise we would vomit (which her fabric “mask” was surely enormously effective at); it was getting dark anyway and without light or efficient ultrasound detection, we couldn't have hoped to ID more species, so we went back to the Calakmul road.

During a short night drive, we saw only a **Kinkajou**; a short walk around the campsite and into the adjacent forest brought surprisingly absolutely nothing.



Jamaican Fruit-eating Bat

– the problem however is finding any access to it. We decided to try the road that goes east from San Isidro Poniente towards the **Bala'an K'aax reserve**. The first problem turned out to be reaching San Isidro itself – on the first attempt we ended up in Plan de la Noria, 10 kms to the east and turned around due to road conditions. With no cell phone reception, we decided to drive to Chunhuhub to make more plans – on the way, we stopped for lunch in Kiich Pam Kaax (Selva Bonita) and used their WiFi to investigate more local roads on Google Street View (which inexplicably covers even the tiniest of roads here) and found a better access

to San Isidro from a junction just 3 kms north from Selva Bonita. However, just after San Isidro, the road turned impassable to our car, so our brilliant plan was again thwarted. It was interesting nevertheless: here, away from the tourist areas, we could see the “real Yucatan” in full action, as almost every local we met – including kids – carried a hunting rifle on their backs. And we wondered why we saw so few animals ... We drove back to **Selva Bonita** (Gray Fox on the way) and stayed the night there – the maze of forest trails immediately east of the accommodation had dozens of **Big-eared Climbing Rats**, a **Southern Opossum** and a **Fruit bat** which was either **Great** or **Intermediate**.



Broad-eared Free-tailed Bats

Our final mammalwatching stop between snorkelling was one night in **Xocen**, where we stayed at “Xocen Birding Lodge”, which is just two small concrete cabins right in the middle of forest, with solar electricity. The place is nice, but the houses, with understandably no A/C, are a bit stuffy – why do the locals insist on building



Greater Sac-winged Bat

houses with only tiny windows? We would literally be happier if they only provided the roof and no walls! Here again we were not entirely sure which is the right place where people go, but I think that the track going east of the village (on which the lodge is situated) was the right choice. With some caution, the track, further east of the lodge and then southeast, was driveable all the way to a locked gate at the end, some 7 kms away and there were also additional footpaths around that we explored on foot - from one we had to turn back quickly after being attacked by a swarm of ants though. During the evening and first half of the night, this area produced only another unphotographed **Yucatan Cottontail**, an **Opossum**, two **Hatt’s Vesper Rats** and plenty of **Big-eared Climbing rats** – there were some burrows that looked good for pocket gophers, but we did not see any animals. We also tried to explore the road between Xocen and Chichimila, but even after 10 pm, it still had too much traffic.

Many thanks to Fiona Reid and Venkat Sankar for providing IDs on bats, rodents and opossums!



White-tailed Deer



Central-American Agouti