



Dominican Republic

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I vaguely remember that I have considered DR as a destination at some point, solely based on some cheap air-fare, but ultimately decided that there isn't really much to do there. Well, a few years of talking to Alex about mammal families (and also a few years of snorkeling) later, here we are – an island with an endemic mammal family (shared with the unappealing Cuba) and tropical waters around, what can be better?

My preconceptions of DR were however quite naive. Basically I thought “it's a small island and there is really only the Solenodon”, so we could perhaps just pop up for a few days as a side-trip to Mexico? Then I put the driving distances into Google Maps and realized that “small” can be misleading if the roads aren't that good. And then I read the reports and realized that seeing Solenodons isn't a one-night endeavour.

Well, at least, seeing them in any satisfactory manner. Because what I read in the reports was the pinnacle of unappealing! By now, most readers probably know how much I hate being guided, but what has been happening here is a whole another level: people sit somewhere and wait for the guides to catch the animals? Without wishing to offend anyone who did so, I just can't imagine I would ever put an animal seen like that on the list of my “wild animals seen”. I simply fail to see the difference between this and going to buy it in a pet store.

However it has become clear that if we wanted to see Solenodons ourselves, we would have to put in some effort, a requirement that openly clashes with our notorious laziness. Still, I somehow hoped that we would overdo ourselves and booked a whole two weeks for the affair, hoping to split them between mammals, birds and fishes.

My preconceptions about DR were also wrong in an entirely different way. Somehow, due to it speaking Spanish and looking rather rich in photos from the resorts, I expected something like “Argentina with better beaches”. The reality is quite different – more like a slightly upscale Africa. Yes, the country is relatively fine for an independent visit, but I didn't really grow to like it too much: it's loud (locals insist on bringing their portable speakers everywhere, especially in nature), dirty, often dilapidated and mildly dysfunctional when it comes to any services. And while reports are somehow full of praise on the locals, I have often found dealing with people

unpleasant (obviously with some valued exceptions). In particular, very few people were willing to make any efforts to work around my lackluster Spanish. The funniest was our “Uber driver” in Punta Cana (quotes indicate that he flunked the app and charged us 3 times more), who refused to talk slowly for me, but then repeated everything slowly and clearly into his phone for the translator app. I don’t think he understands how brilliantly he summed up the ethos of his entire nation ...

The worst is however seen on the roads – it’s not just that the traffic is dangerous, but the sheer stupidity that you see happening all the time is simply astounding. Nobody in the entire country seems to have discovered the concept of caring about other people: they will stop at the exact place where it’s convenient for them and cause endless traffic jams just to buy a banana. What’s worse, they will invariably push forward if there is 10 centimeters of space to push into, even when just waiting an extra 5 seconds would help dismantle an hour-long gridlock – which they will then voluntarily become a part of instead! Just stupidity ...

Anyway, we rented an SUV from Joel Car Rental for the exorbitant cost of \$1300 for 14 days, because there really weren’t any more reasonable options near Punta Cana, where our flights were. Local companies found by international search engines are cheaper, but the reviews are devastatingly bad and international chains are actually even more absurdly expensive. The Chinese “Geely” worked well and even though I usually go everywhere with a sedan, I was quite happy to have the extra clearance. Getting and returning the car wasn’t the smoothest of affairs, but it worked out eventually. We actually managed to camp for half of the nights (mostly at organized campsites) so even with the expensive rental, we brought the local costs down to about \$90 per person per day for our group of two. We were really missing Eliška on this trip to share the rental costs!

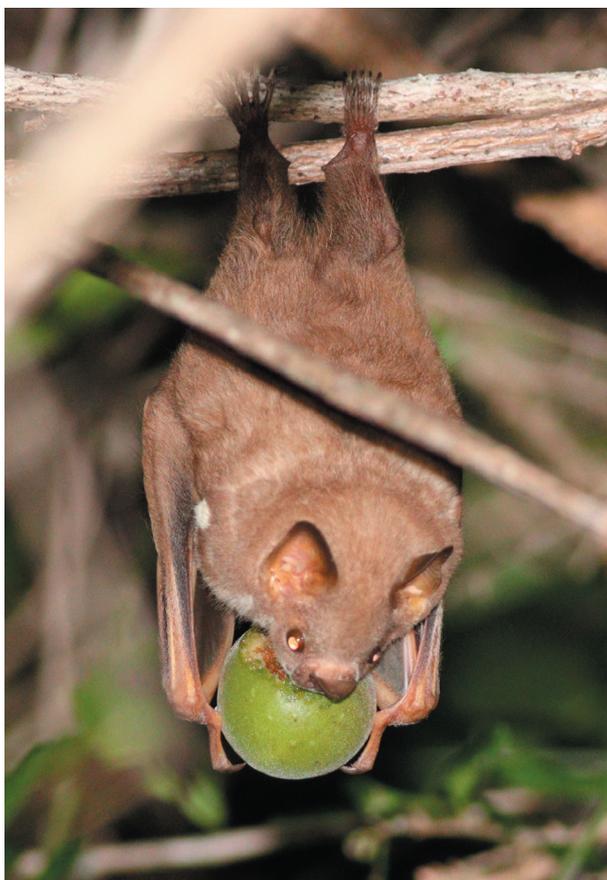
Solenodon search

We have spent over 20 hours searching for Solenodons in the SW corner of DR across 4 nights, resulting in a single roughly 1-second sighting of the animal. On the first night, we walked along the last 2/3rds of the access track to Hoyo de Pelempito (as we camped in the parking at the end). This is maybe not the typical Solenodon habitat, but it’s a really pleasant and quiet area. The second night, we searched near La Mercedes. This small village is easily accessed on a good paved road from the Cabo Rojo junction (the same you take to get eventually

to Pelempito); the direct “road” to Pedernales is in a terrible condition (not passable by our car) and that makes it great for night walks, as there is no traffic and many side tracks to explore – according to reports, this is the habitat where the guides catch the Solenodons.

Since Pedernales is even dirtier and louder than the general DR standard and I was not sure how much I would like to operate at night very close to Haitian border anyway, we moved on to the northern slopes of Sierra de Bahoruco – namely to Villa Barrancoli in Puerto Escondido. Note that the direct way through the park is closed and the road along Haitian border is reportedly impassable to normal cars, so we had to go all the way around through Barahona.

Villa Barrancoli is a fantastic place to stay, no less because the owner is an old American lady – Kate, and it lies at the start of a long trail into relatively undisturbed nature. Kate let us just pitch a tent for very cheap, considering that it included dinner, and told us that just last week someone saw a Solenodon up the trail – and that even her dogs have brought her a dead one before. Combined with the fact that the trail even has Solenodon photos on information boards – and the access road an Solenodon warning sign – this really felt like we found the right place.



Cuban Fig-eating Bat

The first night here, already after midnight, when we were going back, Ivana heard some rustling and I then got a brief glimpse of a **Hispaniolan Solenodon**, about three kilometers up the trail. I tried to pursue it, but the terrain was impassable. We heard more rustling later a bit down the trail and spent maybe half an hour listening to it from pretty close, but never saw even a hint of animal. Most interestingly, we never saw anything in the thermal camera, even when we knew by sound where the Solenodon roughly was. From the acoustic observations, it looked like they really prefer the little ravine along the base of the hills, so we spent a big chunk of the next night there again, combining walking and silent waiting but heard nothing this time.

In hindsight, it may seem that all the scanning with the thermal we did during the four nights was a bit pointless – but it really doesn't stop you from listening, so why not do it? It also brought a **Cuban Fig-eating Bat** roosting with a fruit above the trail and also a **Black rat**. We also always scanned trees up and down in a hope for Hutias, but with no luck.

In any case, if you want to see Solenodon truly in the wild, I guess Puerto Escondido (and especially Villa Barrancoli) is a viable option – it's much more pleasant than Pedernales, the search area is easily accessible on foot and in principle you don't even need a car to get there. Considering that we found it on the first try, anyone with slightly more patience could do even better. And there is really good birding as well, if you are into that kind of thing.

Bat Caves

The cave in Los Patos in the SW is well known and well signposted next to the road. It had the expected crew of **Jamaican Fruit-eating Bats**, **Waterhouse's Leaf-nosed Bats**, **Brown Flower Bats** and **Cuban Fruit-eating Bats** – the last species was present only in a small group between many groups of Jamaican and I only noticed them at home from photos. We explored three more caves near Bayahibe in the SE based on a general guidebook. The "cenote" Cueva Chica just east of Bayahibe (1 km walk one way from parking), in which you can nicely snorkel, had just **Jamaican Fruit-eating Bats**; the nearby Cueva de Puerta (3 kms walk one way) had them as well and some **Waterhouse's** on top. Cueva de Bernard near Boca de Yuma needs no walking, but it's almost an hour away by car – interestingly, it was mostly empty save for a few **Velvety Free-tailed Bats**, which run (not flew!) away quickly when shone upon, but eventually always returned to the exposed roost later.



Jamaican Fruit-eating Bats



Brown Flower Bats



Waterhouse's Leaf-nosed bat



Velvety Free-tailed Bat

Other mammals

Already in Mexico, I was hoping to see a **West-Indian Manatee**, but could not really find any good locations. It seemed to be similar in DR, until I noticed an “Observatorio de Manatíes” while browsing the northern coast on Google Maps – this turned out to be a part of a reserve dedicated specifically to Manatees near Estero Hondo. It was terribly far to drive to from the south, but we wanted to try snorkeling nearby anyway. The rangers did not recommend driving

from the visitor center to the lookout, but it was only a bit over a kilometer walking one way. At first, the view over the lagoon didn't look very promising, as you don't really see well anything underwater, but after about an hour, we noticed that sometimes something is happening. It took us another hour to get any sensible photos – most of the time, only the nose pops up for a split second, but eventually, we saw a few backs, a blurry shape below the surface and then finally, the entire tail. While the species is easily seen in winter in Florida, we are not willing to enter the US at this time – and frankly not sure if that will ever improve, so we were pretty happy to tick this new family here as well.

I already mentioned the **Black Rat** in Puerto Escondido, but that was not the end of introduced mammals. We saw some more **Rattus sp.** at night in Bayahibe (without any gear, as we were heading for a night snorkel), but also a **House Mouse** early morning near Salto de Baignate in Jarabacoa and a **European Rabbit** on the high mountain “road” between Constanza and Ocoa; Ivana saw something that may have been another **Rabbit** at the campsite near Villa Pajon.

Besides Solenodons and Manatees, there were two other potential families for us in DR: Funnel-eared and Moustached bats. We did not find the former, but did, in a way, find the latter – hunting at night above a pond in the forest



Cuban Fruit-eating Bats



Black Rat and House Mouse

near Puerto Escondido. I tried to get some photos, but just couldn't, they were crazy fast – but their echolocation is so unique that it's pretty clear it was Moustached bats. We don't usually count just ultrasound detections, and so we are still a bit on the edge about this, but it may be of interest to people that they are present there (we actually had the same observation already in Mexico in Calakmul, but I forgot to mention it in the report).

Even not counting the Moustached bats, we saw 11 species, with 7 lifers. We also recorded 92 birds (40 lifers thanks to both high endemism and many wintering NA warblers), but snorkeling was relatively lackluster, with mostly dead coral and limited diversity of fish.

Mammals list

- Hispaniolan Solenodon**
- West-Indian Manatee**
- Brown Flower Bat**
- Waterhouse's Leaf-nosed Bat**
- Velvety Free-tailed Bat**
- Cuban Fig-eating Bat**
- Cuban Fruit-eating Bat**
- Jamaican Fruit-eating Bat
- Black Rat
- House Mouse
- European Rabbit



The three stages of seeing West-Indian Manatee: nose – back – tail