

PARAGUAY - 20-29 MAY 2021

Paraguay. It had always been a country that I told myself I would get to someday. I had read the trip reports and my interest had always been there, but finding the time was the problem. When my Saiga watching trip in May was cancelled due to Covid, the thought of going there resurfaced as I was looking for an open destination to fill the spot.

Like everyone else I contacted Paul Smith from Fauna Paraguay (www.faunaparaguay.com) about the possibility of a Chaco based trip in May. Paul was quick to answer and gave me many options of what we could do. We only had two obstacles which in the end were not a problem at all. 1. The National Park offices and lodging opportunities were still not re-opened and 2. I had picked dates that coincided with a large Mennonite gathering in the central Chaco called "Pioneers Exhibition" which Paul told me could make finding hotels difficult.

I told Paul my main goals were to see the Pale Titi Monkey and to beat Jon Hall's 26 mammal list in Paraguay with no trapping or mist netting (I figured putting myself in a friendly competition with the mammal Grand Master is always healthy on a trip). My travel companion Deb also wanted to look at some birds as well. Paul was more than willing to help on all counts.

He broke it down into the following areas to visit during our email conversations -

1. Loma Plata - located in the Central Chaco. This would be a hotel stop in a Mennonite town to break up the trip.
2. Bahia Negra - located in the Humid Chaco, this would be a "pit stop" as lodging was basic, but the long dirt road in had a promising list of mammals to see, and the roads around the area were good for Ocelot, a species I had yet to see in the wild.
3. Estacion Tres Gigantes - I had figured that we would visit Cerro Leon to see Pale Titi Monkeys initially. Paul had told me that the sightings at Cerro Leon were no longer good and recommended this lodge as a back up. The station gets its name from the three mammal giants in the area. The Giant

Otter, the Giant Anteater and the Giant Armadillo (the latter of which Paul told me there is no record of anyone seeing there). It is located about 40 km from Bahia Negra and to access it involved us taking a boat ride. After I did some internet research, the area looked good for the Pale Titi Monkey, as well as my favorite mammal on the planet, the Black and Gold Howler Monkey.

4. Fortin Toledo - to see captive colonies of Peccary as well as the possibility of seeing wild Chaco Peccary, Chaco mara, and Yellow Toothed Cavy.

5. Laguna Capitan - this was the base to explore the central Chaco Lagoons. Initially on reading trip reports I was worried this part of the trip would not produce many mammals. In the end, this was one of the highlights of the trip for me.

Paul had recommended to be flexible with the itinerary as we may make some last minute changes based on what we were seeing. This also ended up being sound advice.

We flew into the capital Asuncion late at night and after clearing customs and getting visas on arrival, Paul was waiting for us with Franci. Franci would help with wildlife sightings, especially while spot lighting, and was there to cook for us on the trip. Franci does not speak English, but communicating was never a problem and he was a great travel companion to have around. We opted to stay at the Sheraton for the start and the end of our trip as they would organize a person to come to the hotel to do our trip departure Covid test.

Day 1 - A long drive to Loma Plata. We stopped half way on the trip to eat lunch and to semi crawl underneath a bridge to look at Diminutive Brown Bats that were roosting underneath the beams. Franci after mid day saw an armadillo on the road, but when we turned around it had vanished.



We then drove to Loma Plata and since it was already dusk we decided to do some spot lighting on the roads near Laguna Capitan on the way into town. We ended up seeing our first very relaxed Pampas Fox, which would turn out to be the most common mammal we saw on the trip dead or alive



(I may not even end up listing all the ones we saw), a Molina's Hog Nosed Skunk, and a lone capybara on the side of the road.

Day 2 - this was an all day drive to Bahia Negra. We did both day spotting and spotlighting when we got close to town. One of the mammals that Paul had told me that he sees on quite a few trips was the Lesser Grison. This was a mammal that was high on my wanted Neotropical List, and ended up being the first mammal of the day after we took a wrong turn. When Paul called out Grison I jumped out of the car and started squeaking my little heart out at a pair of Grisons that were running down the road. To my shock the male stopped, turned around and starting running directly at us. That pair definitely responded to squeaking better than any mammal I had ever seen. They weaved in and out of the grass and onto the road right in front of us for an extended period of time. It was a fabulous sighting.



We also ended up seeing both Red and Brown Brocket Deer on this drive. We stopped for lunch outside an estancia and along both sides of the road were numerous small cat pug marks in the dirt, most likely from Geoffroy's Cats. We ended up driving along Line 2 the majority of the day. In the afternoon I was watching on the side of the road and a Tayra was running at full steam towards the road. I called out initially "big F\$#ing Brown Weasel" to which Paul responded ..tayra. We stopped the car and while three of us were looking in one direction, Franci watched as the tayra ran behind the car on the road in the opposite direction.

There had been a large amount of rain recently and parts of the road were difficult to pass, even with four wheel drive. At one point a tractor, belonging to a Mennonite named Helmet, was stuck in the road in front of us. We had to wait for Helmet to get his truck, drag the tractor, then drag our vehicle a length through some mud.

Once darkness fell Paul had told us the road section we were on was a great place to look for Geoffroy's Cat. Franci positioned himself standing on the back of the truck bed and in what seemed like seconds after turning on the spotlight, called out "Gato" . We reversed and a Geoffroy's Cat was sitting by the side of the road right out in the open. I turned to grab my camera and in a classic cat move, as soon as I lifted my lens it walked off. Deb was able to snap this award winning photo below before the cat disappeared.



We ended up quickly seeing a second more distant Geoffroy's Cat walking in a field near the road, our first of many Crab Eating Fox, more Pampas fox, and our first Southern Three Banded Armadillo. Franci was able to catch the armadillo and while we were talking about the species, Paul heard a kitten meowing along side the road. We all went to investigate as the meowing sounds became louder, but despite four of us looking we could not locate it in the tall grass. Based on the location we were in we doubted it was a feral cat which are sometimes listed as seen on trip reports in Paraguay. That night we stayed at Hotel Nacho in Bahia Negra which probably is not even a one star hotel, but was the best option in the area.

Day 3 - we took a 2.5 wish hour boat ride to Estacion Tres Gigantes. Along the way we went through a large gathering of water hyacinths in the river that the day before the lodge had hired a person to cut out a trail for us to navigate the boat through. We passed Brazil and Bolivia along the way. Giant otters are often seen on this trip, but not by us. When we arrived we walked around the main lodge building and were told that a lone male Black and Gold Howler Monkey had been hanging out in the trees behind the rooms. They brought us to him and we quickly noticed that the monkey had a large bite wound on his left thigh, probably from another howler monkey who was trying to take over his family group. I spent an extended period of time watching him while I was there.

There are three main trails around the lodge. We concentrated our time mainly along the Sendero Arirai trail and the Sendero Jurumi trail both of which started from a large clearing where the lodge is. All the walking was flat and very easy. Both trails had family groups of howler monkeys and the first thing we did was watch a family close to the entrance of the Arirai trail, and a second family close to the Jurumi trailhead.





I asked Paul to inquire with the lodge workers about locations where we could find the titi monkeys. We were told that there were two main family groups of the Pale titi Monkeys that were easily visible. One about half way into the Arirai trail, that Paul was familiar with the location, and the second that could be seen and heard most mornings on the outskirts of the forest along the lodge ground clearing to the right of the Arirai trailhead. My friend had recent surgery on her foot so walking for long periods of time was not on her trip plate. So she opted to rest for the afternoon. I wanted to spend the afternoon looking for the titi monkeys. Paul, the ever constant trooper, decided to walk the Arirai trail back and forth with me to look for the monkeys. On the way we watched a pair of Crab Eating Foxes digging in the lodge compost pile. While I pointed out that the walking was easy, what made the walk a gauntlet of sorts was the sheer number of mosquitoes that were there. Despite long pants and sleeves and covering myself in insect repellent, those blood suckers were relentless. I don't think I have ever been bit through clothes and on any exposed piece of flesh as I was there. At one point when I looked at Paul, with a small gathering of mosquitoes gently nursing blood from his left cheek, I thought he might pass out from blood loss. After the third back and forth along the

area of the trail where he had seen the monkeys in the past, we decided to go back to the lodge clearing and look at the perimeter to see if we could find anything. Sure enough as we were coming out of the trail head, a family of three was making its way to a palm tree to feed. We had fabulous views of them for about 30 minutes until they had finished eating and went back into the forest.



We had planned to spend two nights here initially. We had also planned to spot light along the trails around the lodge at night, but were told that the policy had changed and night walks were no longer allowed because of 'snakes'. When we told them "snakes" were on our list of things we wanted to see, they would not budge as the person who made the directive was not there. Because we had seen the titi monkeys the first day we decided to head back to Bahia Negra the next afternoon. At dusk there were a large number of bats flying by the river.

Day 4 - We got up early to see if we could hear and see the titi monkeys calling. We were able to do neither as they decided it was a quiet morning for them. Since our boat back was not until after lunch, Paul and I ended



up taking a walk around the lodge grounds. We saw the Crab Eating foxes again as well as a male Brown Brocket Deer running through the grounds right at us. We could not see anything chasing him. After that we waited

outside while watching the lodge howler monkey. At one point the monkey left the tree he had been in and walked along the ground to another tree to



grab some fruit. This was the first time I had seen a howler walking on the



ground. Just prior to leaving we saw a female Brown Brocket Deer standing in the lodge cleaning.

After lunch we took the boat ride back to Bahia Negra. What should have been an easy boat ride was made much more difficult when thirty minutes out from the lodge we encountered a large wall of water hyacinths. With no way to get through it, we had to go back to the lodge and get two of the workers to come back and help cut out a path.

After dropping out stuff back at Hotel Nacho, we shifted out attention to the dirt road outside of town called Line 1 to spotlight. Along the way we saw multiple Southern three banded armadillo, Pampas Fox, a Crab Eating raccoon, Deb saw a Tapeti, and Franci saw a lowland tapir. After about two hours on the road we made our way back to town and in the final length a Ocelot was crossing the road. It quickly eluded us by running through a drainage pipe under the road.

Day 5 - this was another long car drive to Fortin Toledo. Back on Line 2 the mammal watching did not disappoint just as it had on the way in. We saw a Crab Eating Fox with a squirming (unable to ID) rodent in its mouth crossing the road in the morning. We saw a Giant Anteater on the road close to where Helmet helped us, as well as some Collared Peccary on the side of the road which quickly ran when they saw us. Our best sighting was a young Southern Tamandua that was crossing the road. We got out of the car to look at it and we almost, almost got it to stand out with outstretched arms at us. The picture below shows his best



attempt to intimidate us.

Before getting back onto the main road we drove past a police station to find a spot to eat a picnic lunch. Right before stopping a large group of White Lipped Peccaries were in the road. We stopped and watched them for a bit, until one spotted us, made an alarm call, then we watched a mini stampede of the peccaries as they ran across the road.



While we were eating lunch one of the police officers from the nearby station stopped to asked us why we were watching “his peccaries”. It was nice to see that someone was trying to protect them from potential poaching.



On the way to Fortin Toledo we stopped in Porto Lomo to gather supplies and also to catch a glimpse of the urban Capybaras that live there. The picture above was from a grassy area right next to a busy road.

We ate dinner at a hotel close to Fortin Toledo, then on the drive in saw more Pampas Fox, a Molina's Hog Nosed Skunk and a distant Geoffroy's Cat next to the house where we would be sleeping.

Day 6 - In the morning we decided to do a walk on the Fortin Toledo trail that is close to the Peccary Breeding Center. On the way we stopped at the house where the center workers live. There are rows of aloe and agave in front of the house where Yellow-toothed Cavy live. We were told dawn and dusk were the best times to try to see them, so opted to come back later in the day. Along the trail we saw multiple Chaco Mara, but they were too quick to photograph.





After the walk we decided to do a drive along the dirt roads around the breeding center. We saw a lone Chaco Mara that froze long enough for a picture, a Crab eating fox, and a Greater Hairy Armadillo that quickly ran across the road into its burrow.

After lunch we decided to go back on a drive and we attempted in vain to hang out by the Greater Hairy Armadillo's burrow to see if it would come back out. While we were

waiting we saw three different Southern three banded armadillos cross the road. Paul was able to catch one and we got our first daytime sighting of the species.





We also saw another Brown Brocket deer during our armadillo stake out. Before going back to the workers house, there was a Lowland Tapir clumsily making its way through a fence on the side of the road. We waited outside the Aloe and Agave plants until nightfall and no covies came out.



After dinner we did a night drive on the Fortin Toledo trail where we had hiked earlier. In the middle of the road was another Southern Tamandua. When we got out of the car it climbed a small tree then sat and stared at us at eye level. While we were looking at the Tamandua, Paul spotted another Pampas Fox, and before leaving that area Franci saw a Giant Anteater.



Before calling it a night we drove back to the area where we had seen all the armadillos and saw three Chaco Maras by the road.



Day 7 - We spent the morning again trying to locate the Cavies, but were unable. Franci told us that as soon as we left, one ran out into clear view. Afterwards we did a tour of the Peccary Breeding Center. It is run by the Chaco Center for Conservation and Research in Paraguay. The center breeds, rears and studies the three species of Peccary, and has released captive bred Chaco Peccary back into the wild. There are also several





groups of wild Chaco Peccary that live close to the center. Unlike the other species, the Chaco peccary only lives in small family groups, mainly 6 or less animals. They are very susceptible to poaching, as entire groups can be wiped out at one time. As a defense mechanism they will line up in a semi row, making them easy targets. When I was there there was a lone male Chaco Peccary that was being kept behind the workers house who mother had recently been hit by a car. We also were allowed to go into areas of some of the pens of the Chaco Peccary which was a great experience. After touring the center we headed out towards Laguna Capitan. On the drive we saw another Three Banded Armadillo and a Capybara near a small body of water.

On the way into the lodge there was a Molina's Hog Nosed skunk right by the house. We did a night drive and saw two distant Geoffrey's cat, Pampas Fox, and our third Southern Tamandua. Prior to dinner Deb and I did a short walk on a trail behind the lodge. Fresh puma foot prints were on the path which made us turn around early. The Mennonite couple that

ran the lodge told us there were armadillos they see frequently (they did not specify species) and a Lowland Tapir.

Day 8 - We did a short walk to one of the lagoons behind the lodge and did not see any mammals. After this we drove to the Chaco Lodge. The area has two small buildings, one that is dilapidated and has Common Vampire Bats living in an old bathroom. The other house is sometimes



occupied by the owner Norbert Epp who was not there when we went. There are lagoons here are often occupied by Chilean Flamingoes. There was a small flock there we went. Giant Armadillo have been seen in the area, and Paul has also seen Chacoan Naked-tailed Armadillo after a rainstorm here. The “lodge” now is used as a camping area and there were a group of tourists there when we went. We drove the main road along the

lodge grounds twice and saw multiple small armadillo burrows and saw three Tapeti. We also did a drive along the road leading to the lodge property and saw Pampas and Crab eating Fox, and watched two Crab



Eating raccoons hunting in small water ditches by the side of the road. Everyone but me (I was in the back looking out the side window) saw a distant shape jump over the road that they thought could be a Puma, but was too far to call it. On the way out we also saw multiple small rodents on the side of the road.

When we got back to Laguna Capitan, France, Paul and I did another night drive. We saw the skunk again and figured out that it was living in a drainage pipe by the lodge. We got out and positioned ourselves at either end and while I was too wimpy to risk my camera getting sprayed, I had wonderful views of the skunk in the pipe (and luckily did not get sprayed).

We saw more Pampas Fox and just before we were going to call it a night a Lesser Hairy (aka Screaming) Armadillo ran out in the road.





Paul was able to quickly catch it and I had wonderful views of one of my most wanted mammals on the trip. We also were stopped twice by Mennonite land owners who saw us spotlighting and in very passive aggressive ways drove up to us to find out what we were doing. Yet again happy to see people were making sure poaching was not happening.

Day 9 - This was an up for grabs day. Paul had arranged for us to stay at the Estancia Iparoma, a working cattle farm outside the Mennonite settlement of Filadelfia. The owner, Marilyn, was also the sister of the owner of the Chaco Lodge. She was an avid wildlife lover and wanted to make her ranch more eco-friendly for wildlife watchers. Currently the ranch

still has a lot of fragmented patches of forest, so mammal watching was not as high as at the other places. But she did have a family of Azara's Night Monkeys that day roosted in some tree vines by her chicken coop. It was also great to listen to all the things she had done and had tried to do to help wildlife. Paul decided to last minute help me increase my mammal number for the trip. We drove to Iparoma, dropped off our stuff and made the 3.5-4 hour drive to Enciso National Park to look for Plains Viscacha. Just after leaving the ranch I had to go to the bathroom so Paul had to make a detour to a nearby gas station. This was the best detour ever because as we pulled out a brown furry mammal was walking down the side of the road. We initially thought it was an armadillo until Paul called out tuco-tuco. This was also in my top five of mammals I wanted to see, and as they usually do not come out above ground often, we were lucky to see one. This Connover's tuco-tuco also was an adorable ball of fury as it tried to take pot shots at all of us to get out of its way. Definitely the cutest mammal that has tried to chase and attack me.





After our encounter with the Tuco-tuco, we made the long drive to the national park. We saw many armadillo burrows which Paul told us are mainly Greater Hairy. We stopped at the ranger station and asked a worker if we could look through the aloe by the closed to tourists station for Yellow-Toothed Cavy while we waited for it to get dark. Yet again, I failed in seeing this species.

Franci in the meantime found a small field near a fence that had active viscacha burrows. We positioned our car and waited until it was pitch dark. During this time I was also slapped in the face repeatedly by bat wings, but felt good about them taking out any biting insects that were





near me. Franci then led Deb and I in the pitch dark to the middle of the field before we turned a spot light on. Once he did the field by the fence had about 15 Plains Viscacha out in the open. Also once the light was turned on they all ran into a large burrow in a very orderly fashion.

On the drive home we saw a very relaxed Pampas fox by the ranger station, then had another Pampas fox running slowly in front of our car for an extended period of time. After the fox finally figured out how to move to the side of the road, a Lesser Hairy Armadillo shot out in the road. This was a much younger and less hairy individual than the first one we saw.

We then made our way back to the Estancia. We saw multiple small rodents on the road, including one large individual that Paul thought was a Chaco Leaf Eared Mouse, but was it too quick to make a definitive ID. We did a brief look for the night monkeys around the rooms when we got back but could not find them.

Day 9 - We woke up early to look for the Night Monkeys again and were rewarded with views of the family as they were getting ready to sleep for the day. We then left to make the long drive back to Asuncion. Along the



way we saw a Jaguarundi crossing the road close to the Estancia, and a Nine Banded Armadillo crossing the road in the Humid Chaco.

Day 10 - this was our last day and Paul took us to two areas in the capital to look for mammals. The first was the Parque Guasu Metropolitano to look for Pampas Cavy. Paul had a friend who gave us areas to look for them and would be “surprised” if we did not see them. The second place

was the botanical gardens to look for Hooded Capuchin. We started first on a cavy stake out in the morning and saw nothing. We then turned our attention to the monkeys. Paul has a friend who researches capuchins in Paraguay and she recommended that we check the back of the zoo. Because of Covid the zoo itself was closed, but we were able to access an area behind the zoo where Paul found some wild monkeys for us. We then



turned our attention back to the cavies. Despite multiple walks up and down and up and down paths and even walking into a field we could not find one. At one point we heard something rustling in some tall grass, but could not locate an animal. Cavies are my new nemesis.

To sum up the trip, amazing and incredible are not enough. We saw 31 species of mammals, 185 species of birds, 8 species of amphibians and 8 species of reptile. My only real dip of the trip was not getting to see a wild Chaco Peccary and we definitely tried again and again. Paul is also just a great guide to be around. I think I haven't laughed as much on a trip as I did with him in a long time. He is a constant engaging storyteller and his knowledge base of everything in Paraguay was top notch. He is one of those guides that I wished would lead trips everywhere.

Paul is also involved with many of the wildlife researchers in Paraguay. We talked on the trip about other opportunities for mammals, and he wants to plan something to help support the researchers as well as see mammals that few if any people have seen in the wild. This includes the Pilar Tuco Tuco and a newly identified species of Tuco-Tuco. He also has a contact in the San Rafael area where trapping possibly could be done as well. Chaco Mouse Opossum and White Eared Opossum are possibilities and there are urban Howler Monkeys that live in Pilar. A trip in this area could possibly generate 25-30 species and could be added to the trip I did. I am hoping to do this in 2023. If anyone is interested in doing this let me know. The country is great, the people are friendly and again Paul is a top notch guide.

Mammal Trip List

1. Pampas Fox - *Lycalopex gymnocerus*
2. Crab-eating Fox - *Cerdocyon thous*
3. Molina's Hog-nosed Skunk - *Conepatus chinga*
4. Capybara - *Hydrochoeris hydrochoerus*
5. Diminutive Brown Bat - *Eptesicus dimunutus*
6. Common Vampire Bat - *Desmodus rotundus*
7. Southern Three Banded Armadillo - *Tolypeutes matacus*
8. Greater Hairy Armadillo - *Chaetophractus villus*
9. Lesser Hairy Armadillo - *Chaetophractus vellerosus*
10. Nine-banded Armadillo - *Dasypus novemcinctus*
11. Geoffroy's Cat - *Leopardus geoffroyi*
12. Ocelot - *Leopardus pardalis*
13. Jaguarundi - *Herpailurus yagouarundi*
14. Lesser Grison - *Galictis cuja*
15. Tayra - *Eira barbara*

16. Brown Brocket - *Mazama gouazoubira*
17. Red Brocket - *Mazama americana*
18. Black and Gold Howler Monkey - *Alouatta caraya*
19. Pale Titi Monkey - *Plectrocebus pallescens*
20. Hooded Capuchin - *Sapajus cay*
21. Azaras Night Monkey - *Aotus azarai*
22. Lowland Tapir - *Tapirus terrestris*
23. Brazilian Cottontail (Tapeti) - *Sylvilagus brasiliensis*
24. Giant Anteater - *Myrmecophaga tridactyla*
25. Southern Tamandua - *Tamandua tetradactyla*
26. Crab-eating Raccoon - *Procyon cancrivorus*
27. White-lipped Peccary - *Tayassu pecari*
28. Collared Peccary - *Pecari tajacu*
29. Chaco Mara - *Dolichotis salinicola*
30. Conovers Tucotuco - *Ctenomys conoveri*
31. Plains Viscacha - *Lagostomus maximus*