

Ecuador March 2022 – Charles Foley



Kinkajou staring me down.

When I was a child I lived in Ecuador for a year, before my parents shipped me off to ~~prison~~ boarding school in the UK at age 11. For the next 3 years after that I returned for a few months each year for the holidays. While I was in Ecuador I saw a fair bit of the country as my Dad would take me to some of the Andean National Parks, and he sometimes let me tag along with birders when they went on trips to the Amazon. Heck, I was even trotting behind the famous Paul Greenfield when he saw a new lifer bird (it was a boring looking woodcreeper). And yet, after all that time in the country, my total mammal list was a truly pitiful 7 species; and that included the two pinnipeds in the Galapagos. Ok make that 8 species, as I recently read a trip report that included some photos of bats, and realized that a group of bats I'd seen while canoeing on a lake 43 years ago were Proboscis bats (which has to be one of the longest gaps between seeing and identifying a species ever). Alright, so you might argue that at the time I was only a 10 year old snot-rag who knew nothing about night drives or night spotting, but still, only 8 species!! And it's not that I wasn't looking. I

remember spending hours squinting out of the tiny rear windows of our old Land-Rover while driving through the high paramo, hoping, nay, practically supplicating, to see a Spectacled bear wandering across a hillside. It's just that 40 years ago there was pretty much uncontrolled hunting taking place all across Ecuador and as a result animals were very shy and difficult to see. Back in those days eco-tourism on the mainland was virtually unheard of - it was all concentrated on the Galapagos Islands - and the only lodge I knew of was a small, privately owned reserve called Tinalandia.

I'm not sure exactly when this all changed, but I suspect it was the birders who led the charge. After all, Ecuador is something of a birding Mecca, with over 1,600 species. It probably also helps that Ecuador has long been politically stable and all parts of the country are relatively easily accessible. Whatever the reason, Ecuador now boasts a fine array of lodges, parks and private reserves that cater predominantly or in part to people interested in nature. It no doubt also helped that hunting was banned across the country a few years back (except among some traditional communities), meaning that wildlife is no longer shot on sight. And, as so frequently happens when people leave it alone, the wildlife has started making a comeback. After reading many trip reports on mammalwatching.com, I decided it was time to re-visit the country and start looking for some of the many mammal species that had eluded me all those years ago. With only 10 days available to travel, I decided to stick to the Andean highlands and leave the Amazon to another occasion. I pilfered my trip itinerary from Jon's most recent visit and decided on visits to Bellavista, Papallacta and San Isidro. We were originally planning on renting a car, but it was about the same price to have the various lodges arrange the various transport legs, so we went with that option.

When we looked at the weather forecast for the general high Andes area the evening we arrived my heart sank. The next week was predicted to have rain every day, with rain pretty much every hour for the following two days. In practice predicting the weather in this region turns out to be something of a fool's game. It's mostly cloud forest so mist and rain can appear and disappear at a moment's notice. While it did rain for parts of our stay, and we were hampered by thick fog on some days in Papallacta, in general rain episodes were fairly brief.

Bellavista is an upscale lodge about 90 minutes north of Quito run by an English birder. In keeping with most of the areas we visited, there were humming bird feeders aplenty and bananas set out for mammals. The bird life in these places is quite frankly amazing. There are mobs of humming birds zipping around the feeders and enough brightly colored tanagers, toucans and trogons to make most birders go weak at the knees. The real action starts in the evening though, which is when the mammals typically start coming to the feeders. On our first evening we had a Kinkajou and two Olinguitos at the feeder. The Kinkajou (which is bigger than the Olinguitos) dominated proceedings and monopolized the bananas, and when the Olinguitos attempted to get to the food, they were met with snarls and defiant posturing. Eventually the Kinkajou left the feeder and the Olinguitos were able to get in for a snack. Neither species was particularly good at eating the bananas though and kept dropping them onto the floor, where a small mouse was hyper-actively running after them. I only saw it through the thermal, so if anyone knows how to identify a small mouse from its heat signature, feel free to get in touch. Later that evening when the lights had been turned off I sat on a chair next to the balcony watching the action. The Kinkajou tight-rope walked along the rope leading from the bait to the balcony and stopped right opposite me, about 2 feet away, staring me down. He was a one-eyed brute with the slightly vacant stare commonly associated with Liverpool Football Club supporters. Holding on to the balcony by his tail and

his rear feet, he then reached out towards me with his arms spread open. The thought of him landing in my lap, so close to the family jewels, was highly alarming, and I fled to a safe distance. It later dawned on me that he was probably used to being fed by hand was begging for food, but I decided it was best not to test if my hunch was correct.



Olinguito at Bellavista.

The next day we went to Mindo for the day which is a 40 minute drive from Bellavista. Mindo was little more than a motley collection of a few houses when I lived in Ecuador, but it has turned into an eco-adventure town catering to everyone from the wealthy elite to the Great Unwashed (as backpackers are known in East Africa). Karina and Andre Giljov had posted a report on Jon's site about seeing a Mountain Coati at a birding establishment in Mindo, but the lady in charge told me they it not been seen for some months. However, I met an American birder who told me that another small business in Mindo was being visited regularly by a Western Olingo. This was definitely worth a closer inspection, so I scoped the place out in the afternoon. It was a new endeavour called Punto Ornitológico catering mostly to birders, that had opened up the year before the pandemic. The proprietor, a lovely chap called Alcivar Saragocin, owns about 16 acres that he has steadily converted into optimal birding habitat, with lots of fruit trees, dense thickets, swampland and small pools. While I was there several serious birders came to visit and he took them to see a resident Sun bittern that grew up on the property and hangs around the place all day. I returned later that day at 6.30 pm for the main event which is when Alcivar said the Olingo would usually visit. It arrived at 7 pm on the dot, grabbed a banana, and took it to feed on a nearby tree. It only remained for a few minutes before leaving for the night. Thing is, this Olingo looked suspiciously like the Olinguitos I'd been seeing at Bellavista lodge, so when I got back to the US I sent some pictures to Kristofer Helgen, who was one of the people who had discovered the Olinguito in 2013. He confirmed that it was indeed probably an Olinguito rather than an Olingo. So if you miss the animal at Bellavista, you should definitely look for them here.

Alcivar and I then went for a night walk around his property. He showed me pictures he had taken of a Four-eyed opossum and what I think was a species of Slender opossum that he'd taken on the property, but none were on show tonight. We did get a good view of a 9 banded armadillo which he says he sees most nights, and I saw the hind end of what was almost certainly either an Oncilla or a Margay leaping off the track into the forest. Ahhggg. If only I'd shone the torch down the path a few seconds earlier....!!! Alcivar told me he hadn't realized that people would come to see mammals on his property, and from now on would keep much closer tabs on the mammalian fauna.



Red tailed squirrel.

The next day the guide at Bellavista took me for an early morning walk to look for Oncilla. He said he had located 3-4 resting areas where the Oncilla slept, and if you crept up to them quietly, you sometimes got a sighting of one. Apparently this method had worked quite well for him in the past, but during the rainy season the Oncilla had left and he had not seen it for several months – until two days prior. I was somewhat skeptical about our ability to creep up on a sleeping Oncilla, but he showed me photos of Oncillas curled up in little holes, so who was I to argue. That day the Oncillas had made other sleeping arrangements, although the following day (when we were at Papallacta) Richard texted us to say that the guide and a client had found one in a nesting hole. I did briefly consider turning back and spending another couple of days at Bellavista, but common sense (combined with a penetrating stare from my wife Lara) prevailed. I guess the Oncillas will have to wait for another day.

In Papallacta we had hired the services of the two brothers, Mario and Patricio who many people on the forum have used in the past. They actually work for the Termas Hotel in Papallacta (where we stayed for the first 3 nights), and take people looking for bears during their days off. The Termas hotel borders the Coca-Cayembe National Park which is where most of the bear searching takes place. It took me a while to figure out how Park access works. Basically there are no park entrance fees for any National Park in Ecuador – which makes quite a change to East Africa. There are some areas within each National Park that are freely open to any member of the public. The antennas lookout (you turn-in opposite the statue of the Virgin) is a well-known bear lookout spot and falls under this 'open to anyone'

status. Other areas within a Park are deemed to be more sensitive, and to access these areas you need to write to the Director of the Park and explain what you'll be doing there; e.g. fishing, bird-watching etc. Said Director then sends you a letter giving you access which you then show at the entrance gate – which appeared to be mostly manned by university students doing 'internships'. Thing is, the letter writing proclivities of this Director appear to be on a par with those of my teenage daughters when communicating with their parents... i.e. scarce to non-existent. As a result our letter had not come through, but because Mario and Patricio know all the guards, this was not a problem and they just let us through.

We arrived in Papallacta after lunch, but with everyone else feeling the effects of the altitude, it was only me who went out that afternoon. I was driven by Patricio who turned out to be quite a philosopher. In fact, get any driver or guide in Ecuador talking about politics and you're in for an entertaining ride. Our *modus operandi* was to drive around slowly and stopping frequently to scan for bears. The landscape was high altitude grassland or paramo, with only the occasional trees in the valleys, so visibility was typically good, so long as we could avoid the mist. We had been driving for about two hours when I glanced up a ridge some 400 meters off the road and saw a black spot moving across the grassland. 'Oso, oso, oso' I yelled, as a way of getting the point across. The bear was clearly not used to vehicles and ran for at least two kilometers up the hillside until it disappeared from view. Still, I had finally seen a Spectacled bear, and I was thrilled. Patricio was equally thrilled – not about seeing yet another bear, but by the fact that his client had seen one so early on, and the pressure to find another one was now greatly reduced. Such is the life of a guide. Mind you, I chose that moment to tell him that I next wanted to see a Mountain tapir, which put the furrow firmly back on his forehead.



Finally – a Spectacled bear.

That evening I went for a walk to look for the Stump-tailed porcupine that Jon had mentioned seeing close to the lodge. The lodge own several kilometers of land adjacent to the Park, some of which it uses for cattle. You can walk along either the road or on a series of paths that follow a small river. I chose the road and about 2km from the lodge I saw -through my thermal scope - a large red blob standing by itself in a field. There were a group of animals close to it which I first assumed were deer, but instead turned out to be Llamas. The Llamas were staring at the blob which led me to believe that it wasn't a cow. After about 5 minutes the blob turned and I saw the unmistakable outline of a tapir. Elated, I cranked my torch onto its highest setting, pointed it at the tapir and saw nothing. There was a thin mist between me and the tapir which reflected all of the torch light, meaning I was only able to see about 100 meters ahead of me. I thought of trying to get closer, but that would mean crossing an electrified fence, a barb wire fence and the river, so I decided against it. Feeling both frustrated at not being able to use the torch and amazed at what a thermal imager could achieve, I instead stood and watched the animal through the scope for about 30 minutes before heading back to the lodge. The next morning the whole family came out on the drive with Patricio, and we stopped at where I'd seen the tapir the night before. I figured it had been about 500 meters away, and when I pointed the field out to Lara, she said 'You mean the field with the tapir standing in it?' Bloody hell, it was still there! This time we were able to get a good look at it and see its fantastic white lips. Unfortunately in the daylight we could see that the tapir had a radio collar on it. I've used radio collars on elephants in the past and while they are extremely useful research tools, there is no doubt that a collared animal lacks some of the 'wild' element. I later discovered that this radio collar was no longer working, so it wasn't actually providing any data. In Tanzania researchers need to remove all collars after a certain period of time, which I think is a very good strategy, and hopefully this could be adopted in Ecuador in the future.



Mountain tapir with collar.

That day Lara spotted another bear, this time a young one, which we watched for 20 minutes or so, and we also saw several White-tailed deer and Andean rabbits. That evening we did a night walk/drive with both brothers to look for the porcupine, but we had no luck. We did see one largish animal in a tree that I suspect was a medium sized opossum, but frustratingly we weren't able to get a view of it with the torchlight. The next couple of days we drove around the Park, the main road and visited the antennas area looking for more bears, but without success. On our final evening the Termas lodge was full, so we moved to a recently opened lodge next door called Mamallacta. This was a wonderfully hippy establishment set up by a young couple, where every room has a different theme. I suspect it will be a nightmare to maintain, but it's a reasonable alternative to Termas. If you stay there I strongly suggest you actually taste the beers they have on tap before ordering a pint. Trust me, you'll thank me!

From Papallacta we drove about 90 minutes down the Andean escarpment towards the Hotel San Isidro. This is another upscale lodge that has been around for a long time, catering again mostly to birders. The main mammal species here were the Grey-bellied night monkey, which we saw at dusk on the first day, and the black agouti, a small family of which wandered into the feeding area at regular intervals. They have a salt lick positioned within view of the dining hall and a Mountain tapir had been visiting frequently. I stayed up for both nights until midnight – and missed it on both nights as it came sometime between midnight and 6 am. Oh well. I've encouraged them to get a camera trap to put on the lick so hopefully in the future they'll be able to track which mammals are coming and when. The highlight of the stay was actually the stunning cuisine. They offer an extended evening menu of 8 or 9 dishes that is derived from local ingredients which would not have been out of place at a Michelin starred restaurant. On our final afternoon there we defied convention and went to visit a Cock-of-the-Rock lek. I know, I know, but let's face it, the Cock-of-the-Rock is for all intents and purposes an honorary mammal. And it was rather fun to see my 15 year old daughter's anxiety and desire to see the bird steadily mount the longer it avoided us, sneakily calling in the distance to give us hope, yet remaining tantalizingly out of sight. Eventually, shortly before it got dark, the bird made a grand entrance – or rather the guide grabbed us and pushed us into a position where we could see it, bobbing around with its bright orange body and weird flat head. Certainly a view worth the walk. That night we saw a pair of Kinkajou's having a fight above some of the cabanas, which wrapped up our mammal encounters for the trip.



Black agouti.



Andean Cock-of-the-rock.

All photos by Sierra Foley

Itinerary:

1 night Quito

3 nights Bellavista lodge

4 nights Papallacta – 3 nights Termas lodge, 1 night Mamallacta lodge

2 nights Cabanas San Isidro

Species seen:

Kinkajou	<i>Potus flavus</i>	Bellavista lodge & San Isidro Lodge
Olinguito	<i>Bassaricyon neblina</i>	Bellavista lodge & Mindo
Tayra	<i>Eira Barbara</i>	Bellavista lodge
Red tailed squirrel	<i>Sciurus granatensis</i>	Bellavista lodge & San Isidro Lodge
Nine-banded armadillo	<i>Dasytus novemcinctus</i>	Mindo
Spectacled bear	<i>Tremarctos ornatus</i>	Papallacta
Mountain tapir	<i>Tapirus pinchaque</i>	Papallacta
White-tailed deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	Papallacta
Andean rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus andinus</i>	Papallacta
Colombian Night monkey	<i>Aotus lemurinus</i>	San Isidro lodge
Black agouti	<i>Dasyprocta fuliginosa</i>	San Isidro lodge

