

As part of our efforts to broaden our children's horizons and world views, when they turn 15 they get to pick a place in the world to visit with mom or dad. My wildlife loving 2nd son turned 15 last summer and wanted to look for jaguars in the wild. Having previously been to Brazil for work and preferring to go somewhere new I learned of Nick's Adventures Bolivia and talked my son into going to Bolivia rather than Brazil to look for jaguars. We booked the trip for the summer of 2020 but like most everything else last year we were disrupted by COVID and ended up rescheduling for the first week of August 2021. Having read trip reports from Nick's tours to Kaa Iya and Jaguar Land I had to remind myself that I can't really expect to have such success seeing cats. But after a year and a half of anticipation the trip exceeded our high expectations.

We arrived in Santa Cruz around 9:30 PM on Saturday July 31st on COPA airlines. The planes were old—it has been many years since I went on an international flight that didn't have individual entertainment screens—at least that meant I could talk my son into reading. It took over an hour to secure our visas, pass COVID protocols and get through customs. We had read before traveling that a yellow fever vaccine was required to enter the country so we spent an extra \$500 but we were never asked about it. Officially visitors are supposed to quarantine for 10 days upon arrival but no one questioned us. It is required, however to provide your hotel reservations and return plane tickets in addition to your negative COVID RT-PCR tests. Fortunately Nick's support team member was patiently waiting outside for us and took us to our hotel downtown.

We departed Sunday morning in an SUV loaded to the gills inside and out. Thankfully our cook was petite as she sat in the back row with gear filling every other space. The roof had coolers, camping gear, and several gas cans as we were headed off the grid. Within a few miles the sightings began—toucans flying over the highway, capybara in water along the side of the road, sloths in the sporadic trees amidst urban sprawl, and even a red howler monkey from the paved road. We stopped for coca leaves to keep the farm staff happy and empanadas to keep the tourists happy. Nick keeps the location of Jaguar Land quiet and understandably so. He has put a lot of time, effort, and money into developing the relationship and access to the property, but despite those efforts the neighboring land is being developed by Campesinas and Colonios supported by the government and precious habitat is rapidly being destroyed. The property is several hours north of Santa Cruz on a paved road followed by a bumpy and dusty 2 hours on a dirt road through massive monoculture farms. As you approach the site it is hard to imagine the diversity and quantity of animals for the relatively developed agricultural area. The farm of 30,000 hectares borders a combination of pampas, mature tropical forest, and a river and lake. There are a number of roads providing near grid like access to the different ecosystems and a series of canals that water crops and provide cover and security to the wildlife.

We arrived around 2:00 PM and entered through a locked gate to an area with a small garden and a couple of out buildings. The only structure of consequence was an enclosed kitchen with hard dirt floors and no electricity. We dropped our gear and got back to the business at hand—finding some wildlife. I had no idea the next 30 hours would rival any such period of time I've spent watching wildlife in Africa, India, Alaska, or Yellowstone. During that stretch we would see 20 different mammal species including 4 different cats! Soya beans are the primary crop in the area

field conditions varied from unplanted dirt to foot tall plants and every height in between. You never knew what would be found walking between the rows of soya. Animals found literally in the fields over the next few days ranged from agoutis, coatis, and armadillos to gray brocket deer, collared peccaries, a tayra, capuchin monkeys, ocelots and numerous others.

By law the farmers are required to leave strips of forest approximately 30 yards wide uncleared between the farm sections. This has had the desired effect of providing nearby cover from almost any point in the fields so the animals are more comfortable venturing out to feed or hunt. I was too slow with my camera when the lone tayra of our trip scurried back to the strip of the forest from the edge of the field. A south wind was blowing up from Patagonia and the temperature was pleasant. Nick said that was good for our comfort but bad for our odds as the capybara and caiman are more active in the heat and their presence brings the jaguars out of the cover of trees. On our way back to camp around 5:45 a tapir walked out into the darkening fields. We set up our tents and then went out for our first night drive. Visibility is best when riding on top of the vehicles so that's what we did whenever practical. We scored 2 ocelots sightings the first night and several crab-eating foxes and a mother crab-eating raccoon with 3 offspring. By the time our evening ended we were chilled, but the crisp air kept the bugs at bay.

A meal tent was set up and our cook, Natalie, worked wonders from the primitive kitchen. She had the difficult task of preparing feasts with no real idea what time we would return each day for lunch and dinner. Nick would teasingly tell her what time, knowing that it could be plus or minus an hour based on animal activity and other factors. The facilities to be fair are spartan. The tents were typical US style/brands with air mattresses, sheet, blanket, and pillow. The portable outhouse that Nick brought wouldn't stay up in the brisk wind. No electricity and no wireless or cell coverage meant complete disconnecting. On a later warmer day I would find the bucket shower refreshing. We were more than ready for bed by 9:30.

At 6:00 the next morning the wind was still blowing and I was glad the last thing I had packed was a light sweatshirt. Nick's experience has been that just after dawn is a less active time for jaguars so he wanted to wait a bit for things to warm up a little. The favored jaguar prey in the area are capybara and caiman which are plentiful wherever there is standing water on the property. The caiman exit the water to sun themselves only after the temperature rises. We ate a bite of fruit and hit the road. As we would approach intersections we typically eased slowly forward until we could see both directions down the other road or sometimes got out and walked to look quietly along the roads. We were soon rewarded with a distant cat walking down the intersecting road. We scanned with telephoto lens and binoculars. The early morning sun was behind the cat so from our view it appeared quite dark and I assumed it was a jaguarundi. We snapped a few quick distant photos and then Nick said to start walking towards it in hopes of getting a better shot. Not surprisingly it slowly walked away, periodically pausing to look back at us as it zig zagged down the road. We soon settled into a routine where every time it turned and walked away from us we would run 20 yards and then stop and take pictures when the cat stopped. As we approached it became obvious that it was an ocelot. I could see through my lens that it was marking the tall grass along the way. Its behavior didn't change and we soon found ourselves within 25 yards of the gorgeous cat getting better pictures than I could have imagined. We locked gazes one last time and it sauntered into the roadside vegetation and disappeared. From my camera time stamps 6 minutes had passed from the first picture to the last.



After lunch we were shocked to encounter a Giant Anteater in one of the Pampas areas further away from the farms. Nick doesn't see them frequently at Jaguar Land so we were thrilled. We watched it calmly wander through the vegetation for 5 minutes. It occasionally looked our way but was either oblivious to our presence or completely unconcerned.



As we congratulated ourselves on our 19th mammal species in less than 24 hours we knew we were still waiting for the big one that had spurred our trip in the first place. Just 18 minutes later our driver slowed the car and in an excited but hushed voice said, “Tigre!” Laying in the forest shade 25 yards off the dirt track a jaguar queen stared back at us. I was on the opposite side of the vehicle so I rushed out on to the road to capture the moment. Sporadic tall grasses were giving my autofocus fits as I tried to snap my first jaguar photo. I walked further down the road to get a better angle with less obstructions. In consequence of our movement she gracefully raised up on her haunches as she surveyed us. After another couple of minutes she wound her way back into the underbrush emerging briefly to walk across a dead log before disappearing.



We took a short afternoon break and then went back out for the golden hour before sunset. The macaws and parrots loudly announced their presence as they flew overhead. Our day was not nearly finished. Just before dusk we encountered a Brazilian Tapir on the forest's edge. It grazed unperturbed for 5 minutes before retreating to the security of the trees.



As the sun disappeared we turned the spot lights on. From the roof-top vantage point we could see over the clusters of grass and down into the fields, canals, and marshes. A 9-banded armadillo crossed the road and we got out to inspect it. On our way back to camp eyes reflected in the soya field and what we first thought was a young jaguar turned out to be an enormous and likely pregnant ocelot. Our 30-hour mammal fest was wrapped with by a jaguarundi crossing in our headlights. With the weather warming the mosquitos came out in masse.

The next day and a half were a bit quieter but we spot-lit margay to bring our cat species count to 4. We added marsh deer, and red and gray brocket deer to the list as well. We also saw the political and economic challenges that Bolivia faces. The roads through the forest afford uncommon wildlife viewing in the forest ecosystem but the roads also provide access for people and development. The government in far away La Paz is giving land to destitute natives from the altiplano highlands to encourage them to settle and relocate in the lowlands to shift the political dynamics and majority. We passed a couple dozen acres that had been clear-cut. Shanties and small farms were being developed and we saw carcasses hanging that not days before had been part of this wildlife paradise. Nick views these unfortunates as pawns in a political game. The areas they cleared and developed would be entirely submerged in the rainy season just a few months away—the grounds are not permanently inhabitable, yet they've been deforested anyway. When the floods come river dolphins are a common sight on the property.

We had wonderful views of three monkey species, sometimes all at once. The Bolivian Red Howler Monkeys were most impressive but Squirrel Monkeys are just adorable. The Tufted Capuchin Monkeys wandered at times out into the open fields. They have to be careful out there because Nick has seen Harpy Eagle on a couple of occasions.





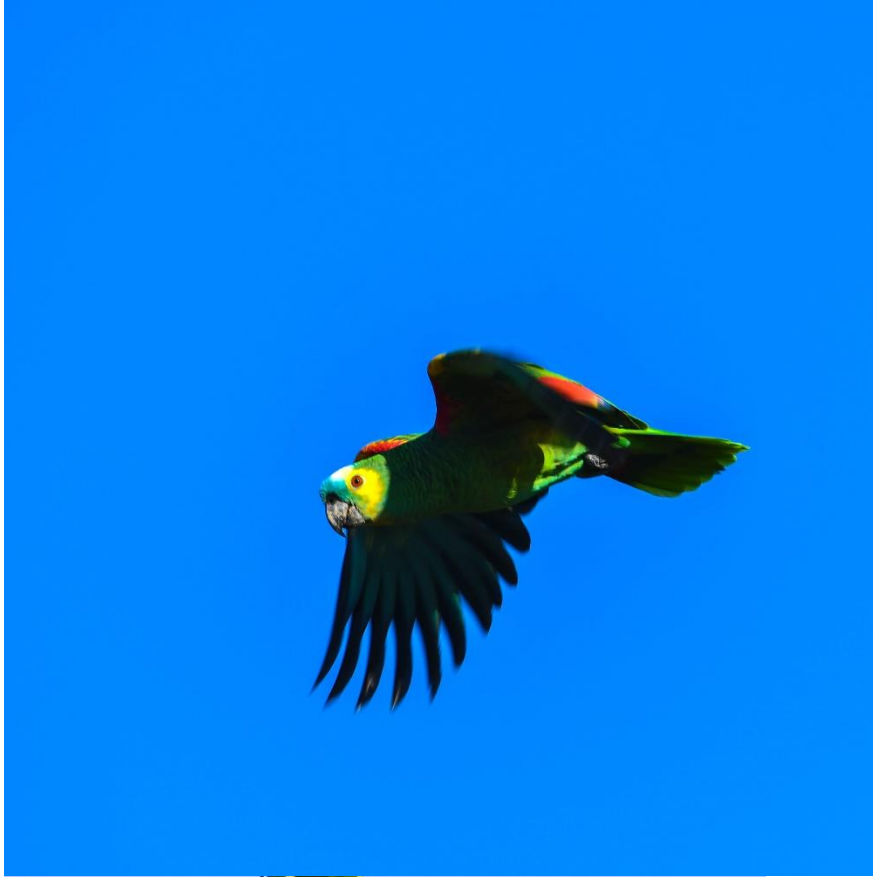
On the 4th morning we broke camp after a long morning drive and still managed 10 mammal species by the time we left the farm. The long drive back to Santa Cruz paid off with an excellent hotel stay at the Tryp Wyndham and great burgers and wings at The Aviator.



Friday morning we had to get a COVID test before we could enter Kaa Iya National Park. Nick said we were the 9th and 10th tourists to visit the park in 2021. So why a COVID test if there's no one there? The only significant access to the park is along a 100km dirt road that parallels a natural gas pipeline built in the late 1990's and there are a pair of gas company workers at a permanent station just inside the gate. The COVID tests were for the protection of the two workers. They were clearly more interested in the bags of coca leaves Nick brought than whether or not we had tested negative. Nick told them merry Christmas. We had met a park ranger in San Jose de Chiquitos on our way to the park and had picked up the key to the unmanned park entry gate. The Gran Chaco is truly unique. An extremely dense dry forest the locals call "the green hell," it is impenetrable on foot. Most of the plants and trees have thorny protection that would easily pierce clothing or shoes and some were threats to the car tires. Somehow the Bolivians and Paraguayans fought a war in this most inhospitable place decades ago. Nick repeated over and over that we couldn't walk 5 meters off the road, and in most places I think he was right. He argued that if we made it that far off the road we would probably be the first gringo to ever step foot on that ground. And somehow this place is filled with cats and other mammals? I'd seen plenty of picture proof from other trip reports.

The accommodations were in upgrade from camping, but it was just simple beds in dorm rooms with running cold water for showers and toilets. A generator provided light and the ability to charge electronics. I forgot to mention that when we finished lunch in San Jose de Chiquitos we walked out to an entirely flat car tire. That set us back nearly 2 hours, but we were fortunate not to get the flat tire on the lonely dirt road to Kaa Iya as that would have been disastrous. The sun was setting at our arrival so we went straight out on a night drive. 14 km out and back from the next substation yielded a single gray brocket deer. Driving at night feels like you are in tunnel, almost like the Frog and Toad's adventure ride at Disneyland because you are averaging about 10 miles per hour with no visibility beyond the few yards in front of you and nothing at all on the sides. We fell asleep dreaming of cats. We got an earlier start at Kaa Iya, leaving before 6:00.

We didn't make it back for breakfast until 11:30 AM. It was a quiet morning with only a Chacoan Titi Monkey until on our way back Nick spotted a pair of endangered Chacoan Peccaries through the underbrush. We climbed down from the roof and tried in vain to get a clear picture. They were so close, but the brush was so thick I took several pictures that later gave no indication of their presence. I turned to manual focus and got the images below. They watched us warily turning to face us. Nick warned us they can be quite aggressive so we held quiet and still. For how dry the ground and trees were, I was not ready for the color and variety of bird life. We saw numerous striking Amazon Turquoise-Fronted Parrots among many other species. At 1:00 we took one of the few walkable trails in the entire massive park to a lagoon a few hundred yards off the road. It is a good spot for tapir and we saw signs, but were unlucky. We did a marathon afternoon and evening drive covering 100km from 2:00 until 9:00. The high lights were actually low lights. Nick casually hates birds and we learned why when we spotted a pair of Greater Rhea on the road. Nick cursed and said we were stuck. They would not leave the road and ended up running in front of us for more than 10 minutes before they finally turned off. We felt horrible, but it didn't matter what we did, they just ran in front of the car. We were all ready to shoot the dozens of nightjars who hang out on the road so that there's always eyeshine in the lights and then wait until the very last moment to fly up only to poop on the car. We did finally see our first Tapeti or Brazilian Rabbit.







Our last morning in Kaa Iya was more of the same, which I guess meant less. Just rabbits and birds. While we walked to another lagoon, our driver saw a tapir walk across the road in front of the parked car. On the long drive out of the park we saw nothing else. It was a quiet end to an amazing trip. Nick has the passion, knowledge, and relationships that enable phenomenal sightings and adventures. We picked up a few Australian words for our vocabulary and admired and laughed at the way he wore flip flops through thick and thin. In the end we appreciated his candor on the politics and environment of Bolivia but were impressed by his humanity as we gave a ride to an exhausted Campesina who was in the midst of a 30 mile walk without water in the scorching heat. Nick smiled and told us he would probably be the Campesina protesting next year and keeping him from the park. For a land and country full of contradictions and splendor, having an Australian guide (he's married to a Bolivian) brought humor and perspective that added to the experience.

Mammal Species List (not so technical or scientific, 27+):

- Jaguar (1)
- Ocelot (6)
- Jaguarundi (1)
- Margay (1)
- Tayra (1)
- Crab-Eating Fox (39)
- Crab-Eating Raccoon (4)
- Brazilian Tapir (2)
- Marsh Deer (9)
- Red Brocket Deer (1)
- Gray Brocket Deer (12)
- Collared Peccary (26)
- Chacoan Peccary (2)
- Common Squirrel Monkey (70)

Chacoan Titi Monkey (8)
Brown-Faced/Large Headed Capuchin (27)
Bolivian Red Howler Monkey (57)
Brown-Throated Three-Toed Sloth (8)
Giant Anteater (1)
6-Banded Armadillo (3)
9-Banded Armadillo (4)
Capybara (too many)
Azara's Agouti (13)
Tapeti or Brazilian Rabbit (6)
Brazilian Cavy or Cuy (1)
Common Opossum (1)
South American Coati (128)
We also saw a few unidentified bats and small rodents

Reptiles:
False Cobra
Yellow-Bellied Liophis
Tropidurus Lizard
Unidentified legless lizard
A small unidentified frog

We are fairly casual birders but identified the following even though Nick "hates" birds (104):

Cocoi Heron
Capped Heron
Striated Heron
Whistling Heron
Agami Heron
Rufous Tiger Heron
Boat Billed Heron
Black Crowned Night
Heron
Snowy Egret
Cattle Egret
Great Egret
Sunbittern
Maguari Stork
Jabiru
Bare Faced Ibis
Green Ibis
Buff Necked Ibis
Limpkin
Rosette Spoonbill
Greater Rhea
Toco Toucan
Chestnut Eared Aracari

Blue and Yellow Macaw
Red and Green Macaw
Chestnut Fronted Macaw
Dusky Headed Parrot
Turquoise Fronted Parrot
Miltred Parakeet
Green Cheeked Parakeet
Blue Crowned Parakeet
Dusky Headed Parakeet
White Eyed Parakeet
Monk Parakeet
Yellow Chevroned
Parakeet
Wattled Jacana
Black Necked Stilt
Neotropical Cormorant
American Anhinga
Amazon Kingfisher
Ringed Kingfisher
Green Kingfisher
Green and Rufous
Kingfisher
Orinoco Goose
Comb Duck
Muscovy Duck
Black Bellied Whistling
Duck
Brazilian Duck
Ringed Teal
Southern Lapwing
Southern Screamer
Bare Faced Currasow
Spix's Guan
White Throated Piping
Guan
Speckled Chachalaca
Chacoan Chachalaca
Purplish Jay
Flush Crested Jaybird
Crested Oropendolla
Yellow Rumped Cacique
Guira Cuckoo
Squirrel Cuckoo
Greater Ani
Smooth Billed Ani
Turkey Vulture

Lesser Yellow-Headed
Vulture
Black Vulture
Souther Caracara
Yellow Headed Caracara
Roadside Hawk
Savannah Hawk
Black Collared Hawk
Great Black Hawk
Crane Hawk
Gray Lined Hawk
Snail Kite
Swallow Tailed Kite
Osprey
Laughing Falcon
Barn Owl
Burrowing Owl
Great Horned Owl
Tropical Screech Owl
Nacunda Nighthawk
Great Patoo
Little Nightjar
Common Pauraque
Spot Tailed Nightjar
Scissor Tailed Nightjar
Pale Crested Woodpecker
Chequered Woodpecker
Lineated Woodpecker
Crimson Crested
Woodpecker
Tataupa Tinamou
Undulated Tinamou
Gray Necked Woodrail
Giant Woodrail
Red Crested Finch
Tropical Kingbird
Great Kiskadee
Vermilion Flycatcher
Rufous Hornero
Glittering Bellied Emerald
Black Fronted Nunbird
Orange Backed Troupial