

Colombia
Justin Brown
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Brown Hairy Dwarf Porcupine – a mega Colombian endemic that few people have ever seen

I had three primary mammal targets for this trip: pacarana, mountain coati, and brown hairy dwarf porcupine (endemic to Colombia with only a handful of recent records). Rob Smith of Wild About Colombia organized and guided the tour. We knew from the outset

that finding pacarana was a slim possibility, as it seems to be a very difficult species to see in the wild, but we wanted to try.

Nobody, after all, is really searching for pacarana. Rob knows a few spots with confirmed sightings, and we did a combination of spotlighting by vehicle and on foot. The first four nights were vehicle-based along a road that cuts through a reserve popular with birders. Each night we stayed out until dawn, slowly going back and forth on this road, and although we dipped on the pacarana, we did get some other nice species, including three sightings of mountain tapir, several common opossums and brown-eared woolly opossums, a paca, two nine-banded armadillos and two crab-eating foxes, and many lemurine night monkeys and kinkajous.



Brown-eared Woolly Opossum was a great addition to our night drives (Image: Rob Smith)



Several excellent sightings of Mountain Tapir proved to be real highlights of our night drives (Image: Justin Brown)

The next three nights were spent looking for pacarana on foot around private fincas, the caretakers of which had each seen and photographed a pacarana in the last year or two. The fincas are primarily open pasture for cows and horses, but they do contain forest fragments within which small populations of pacarana presumably reside. We didn't find a pacarana on these fincas, nor did we have much luck with mammals in general, getting only an olingo and a few armadillos.

Our next stop was a reserve where Rob had seen mountain coatis on two occasions while guiding birding groups. We hiked a lot here and ended up with two sightings.

Our first sighting was a lone coati that got startled as we turned a corner, and it quickly ran into the undergrowth. Our second sighting occurred right after dark, as a group

of coatis was settling for the night in some trees next to the road where we were spotlighting. We went back to the same trees the following morning before light, and we heard the coatis vocalizing and squabbling as they were rousing for the day, but they wandered off into the forest before we could see them because we had decided not to disturb them with our flashlights.



The cloud forest habitat was spectacular (Image: Rob Smith)

Through a friend of a friend who had heard we'd been searching for rare mammals, Rob received a tip-off about a place with habituated, but still wild, mountain coatis, and we made a plan to visit one morning, as luckily it was close to the reserve where we were staying. We didn't know what to expect because details were vague, but the experience was awesome! There were two coatis, both full of personality and vigor, and they were a joy to watch. They kept us totally entertained for several hours.



Watching these charismatic mountain coatis was a real highlight of the tour (Image: Rob Smith)

Our last stop on the tour was a reserve in Colombia's eastern Andes where we hoped to find the endemic brown hairy dwarf porcupine. We did two long nocturnal sessions on foot, staying out until about 2:00 am each night, and managed to get one really nice sighting of the porcupine on the second night. We also saw common opossums, kinkajous, and lemurine night monkeys in this reserve.



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Brown Hairy Dwarf Porcupine – finding this rare and little-known Colombian endemic species was a huge thrill

We spent the entire trip in cloud-forest habitat, which is definitely rather sparse in terms of mammals, and I think we did really well to see two of the three targets.

Somehow, despite so many hours in the field, we didn't find a single Hoffman's two-toed sloth. We kept hearing about its presence everywhere we went, but it totally evaded us (or perhaps it just wasn't around).

We thought it would be a certainty on this trip, and not finding it became funnier and funnier with each passing night. In any case, Rob is awesome--as a guide, as a tour operator, as a person--and I highly recommend booking with Wild About Colombia (www.wildaboutcolombia.com / email: rob@wildaboutcolombia.com)