

## TRIP REPORT – COLOMBIA - 16/3/2022 – 31/3/2022

When the pandemic lockdowns began in March 2020 I rapidly became stir crazy. My wife Alison, young son Freddie, and I maintained our sanity in 2020 taking many auto trips to various nature areas that I had always meant to visit in our home state of Illinois. In 2021, encouraged by reading scores of trip reports on MammalWatching.com, the urge to go farther afield grew stronger and stronger. Our family had vague discussions about visiting Colombia about a year before we started planning in earnest. Jon Hall's glowing trip report of 20/2/23 about his trip with Wild About Colombia had served as motivation and guideline, so we contacted Wild About Colombia, and after a long period of indecision on our part, Alison, Freddie and I signed on to meet my brothers John and Bill and visit one of the world's great wildlife-watching destinations.

The first thing Rob Smith of Wild About Colombia asked was: "Is this a mammal watching trip, or a bird watching trip?" After some internal discussion we said we would like to see nice wild habitat and look for both birds and mammals. Rob prepared a plan that sounded great for the whole family and we set a date. One learning experience; as I learned from a regular tourist guidebook, the practice in Colombia is that pre-payments are made by bank transfer. My bank made an error of one wrong digit, which I did not catch and that one mistake caused the transfer to fail. Rob was very understanding and I was able to correct it the next time I tried.

### ITINERARY:

16/3/2022 – Fly from Chicago to Cartagena through Miami

17/3/2022 – Non-nature day in Cartagena (but...)

18/3/2022 – Drive from Cartagena past Tayrona National Nature Park to Palomino

19/3/2022 – Tour of Tayrona National Nature Park

20/3/2022 – Drive from Palomino to Santa Marta, and then fly from Santa Marta to Bogotá, meet with brothers from Colorado and Rob Smith, and then drive to Canon Del Rio Claro in Antioquia Department

21/3/2022 – Tour of Canon Del Rio Claro, and then drive to El Paujil in Santander Department; Alison and Freddie remain one more night at Los Colores

22/3/2022 – Full day at El Paujil in Santander; Alison and Freddie rejoin in time for night walk

23/3/2022 – Second full day at El Paujil including night walk

24/3/2022 – Morning at El Paujil, and then long drive through ranch country to Southern outskirts of Medellin with many birding stops

25/3/2022 – Another drive through coffee country to Jardin

26/3/2022 – A bird tour at Ventanas in Central Andes above Jardin; Alison and Freddie go horseback riding with Rob at bee farm.

27/3/2022 – Alison and Freddie split off to Medellin with Ramon and return to Chicago by way of Miami. John, Bill and Jim bird their way to Tatama National Nature Park in Risaralda Department

28/3/2022 – Birding tour of highest altitude of Tatama National Nature Park in Western Andes

29/3/2022 – Birding tour of mid altitude of Tatama

30/3/2022 – Birding at Tatama, and then drive to Pereira for Covid testing at hotel

31/3/2022 - Early flight to Chicago from Pereira through Miami

NARRATIVE:

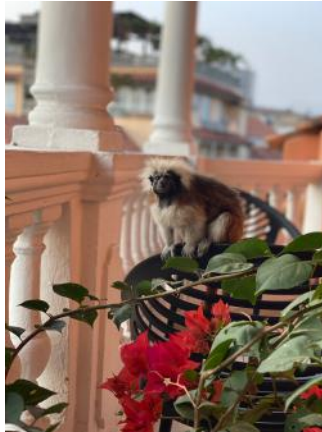
Cartagena -

Our first two days in Colombia were intended to be the relaxing, cultural part of our trip; and Alison, Freddie and I very much enjoyed the delicious food, lively street life, and colorful architecture of this historic city. It actually turned out to be a pleasant surprise for wildlife. The balcony of our room faced a leafy square, and we saw some nice birds including a lifer tanager and a pair of Yellow-crowned Parrots. A hotel employee saw our binoculars and asked if we had seen the titi on the balcony. She suggested we look for it early the next morning, so the next morning at 6:30AM we were on the balcony enjoying a delicious cup of coffee watching the many morning birds and sure enough, we saw movement on the balcony next door—it was a Cotton-top Tamarin and it slowly crept onto our balcony and crossed to the foliage on the other side of the room. This was the mammal I most wanted to see on this trip, so this removed any pressure of getting skunked on the trip.

## Cartagena Decoration



## Cotton-top Tamarin



(Image by: Alison Vanderpoel)

## Tayrona National Nature Park –

After a very scenic drive along the Caribbean coast and a very peaceful stay at the Hukumeizi beachfront resort we met our guide, Cristian Sierra, for a tour of this beautiful park. Within minutes of entering we saw our first of several Central American Agoutis. Soon after, we saw a Red-tailed Squirrel. I had seen this squirrel before but this specimen was uniquely colored—the entire head and body were bright tawny—almost orange, but the tail was like fire.

Then Cristian got laser focused on spotting monkeys. We heard a strange grunt behind us and Cristian said, “That’s a monkey!” We turned and sure enough we saw a White-fronted Capuchin tearing through the foliage the way capuchins do best. Cristian explained that this population had recently been split into its own species the Santa Marta White-fronted Capuchin.

## **Santa Marta White-fronted Capuchin**



(Image by: Cristian Sierra)

This sighting led to a fun conversation with Rob later into the trip. I told Rob that North American nature lovers of the Baby Boom era grew up with a series of compact field guides introduced in the early 1980's called the Golden Guides. They were comprehensive for North America and were very innovative and popular at the time. For whatever reason, they have not been updated and still contain the obsolete taxonomy accepted at that time. Since splitting has become more frequent than lumping there are generally more species listed in a modern guide than in a Golden Guide—so I rated the Santa Marta White-fronted Capuchin a “Golden Guide lifer” because I had never seen any White-fronted Capuchin before. Rob got a chuckle out of this description and told me he described animals that he had seen and later split as “Armchair ticks”. I will definitely use that phrase again!

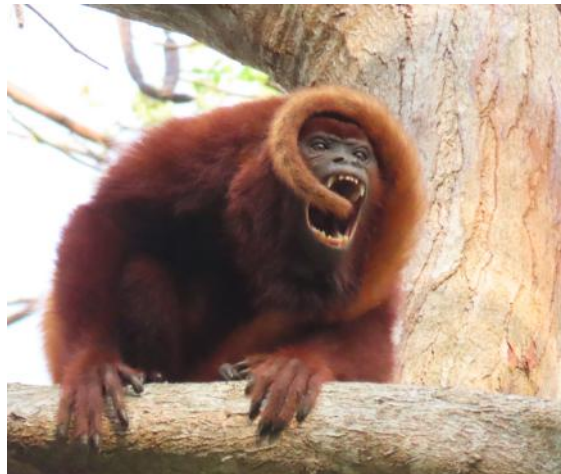
The next spot was a troop of **Colombian Red Howlers**—we watched their mellow relaxation for ten minutes

DIGNIFIED

NOT SO DIGNIFIED



(Image by: Cristian Sierra)



(Image by: Cristian Sierra)

The first two monkey species were easy compared to the final one—a small troop of Cotton-top Tamarins. Cristian worked so hard, talking to park rangers and other guides, traversing one road or trail to the next and he finally spotted a very mobile troop of these extremely handsome beasts. Our pictures did not turn out very well, so I have included the following picture that Cristian sent us from an earlier sighting in the same spot.

### **Cotton-top Tamarin**



(Image by: Cristian Sierra)

The next day we drove to Santa Marta along the Caribbean Coast, and while I saw no new mammals, I enjoyed one of the most remarkable scenes I had ever witnessed. Our driver Oscar exclaimed, “Look, you can see the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta!”

I crawled to the left side of the van and looked up...and up, and up. The mountains, which had been shrouded in clouds when we drove by them on our eastbound trip, were in full view. The tallest peak in this range is 18,947 ft. (5,775 m), taller than the Colorado Rockies or California Sierras in the USA or the tallest of the Alps and I was seeing their snowpack and the above-timberline grassland from a sea level road! At that moment I understood why ancient people so often believed the gods lived on top of the tallest mountain. It really seemed to me like I had a brief peek at another world shining in the sun.

### Reserva Natural Canon del Rio Claro -

Our flight from Santa Marta was uneventful and my two brothers and Rob Smith met us at the Bogotá airport. After driving through some ferocious traffic, we made it out to the very pleasant cattle country of Santander and Antioquia Departments. We arrived at our resort-like Eco lodge Los Colores in the evening and enjoyed dinner with Rob Smith and the new guide from Wild About Colombia, Ramon David Ruiz Correa. The next morning, John, Bill and I went with Ramon for a very early birding walk in the reserve, while Alison and Freddie had a more leisurely tour with Rob. We saw some great birds like Cinnamon Becard, three species of trogon and Broad-

Billed Motmot. We missed our target mammal, the Silvery-brown Barefaced Tamarin, but we did see the handsome Santander Dwarf Squirrel.

### **Santander Dwarf Squirrel**



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)

We moved to a spot outside the preserve in search of the tamarins, and again we dipped. There was a great consolation prize when John spotted a pair of Grey-cheeked Nunlets. Our experienced guide Ramon had never seen this species. It's always a highlight on a wildlife-watching trip when you join the guide in the excitement of ticking a lifer. We briefly reconnected with Rob, Alison and Freddie and Rob said "Don't give up on the tamarin yet, because we can drop by again on our way to the Central Andes and take another swing without going much out of the way."

### El Paujil -

We drove to El Paujil in the heat of the day, and made a few stops and saw a few interesting birds, like Northern Screamer, but no mammals. When we arrived at the Proaves preserve El Paujil, we were dropped off at the preserve entrance a mile or so short of the lodge, because the rain had made the road impassible. The lodge moved our luggage by motorbike and we birded along a ridge top trail. Right away, Bill called out "Primate!" I looked in the direction he was facing and instantly had a perfect view of another of my top targets, the Variegated Spider Monkey sitting on a horizontal limb. We were able to observe these fine-looking primates and moved on down the slope to the lodge. Unfortunately, they moved away too quickly for anyone to get a photograph.

While cooling down with an ice-cold beer we had close-up views of the super-endemic Blue-billed Curassow, the namesake in Spanish for the eco-lodge. This spectacular bird seems to have served as the model for modern illustrators of feathered dinosaurs!

### **Blue-billed Curassow**



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)

The next day we learned that the Gray-Handed Night Monkeys we had hoped to see had left their nesting home. We searched the area to see if we could locate them in the vicinity of their recent lair. We failed but we did get great looks at a large troop of Varied White-fronted Capuchins. We watched them assault a huge crop of ripe fruit, disproving the adage that there is no waste in nature—one bite of the fruit and they threw the remainder to the forest floor. More good news was that Rob, Alison and Freddie returned from their second day at Los Colores, went on an afternoon walk on the river trail and saw the Variegated Spider Monkeys. After dinner we all enjoyed good success as we continued the walk after sunset. We saw several interesting frogs and toads and then got a decent view of two courting (fighting?) Western (Brown Eared) Woolly Opossums.

### **Varied White-fronted Capuchin**



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)

The next day was more of the same, good food, great birds, and capuchins from both the observation platform and the river trail; but the real excitement was our second spotlighting walk. We had more good success with herps; baby Spectacled Caiman in the pond, the Green Basilisk, the aptly named Lovely Treefrog (Ramon was very interested in Colombian reptiles and amphibians). We all got a great view of another Western (Brown Eared) Woolly Opossum, but the excitement picked up even more when Rob spotted a pair of a second species of opossum, which tore through the branches together at breakneck speed. We tried with modest success to track them, and we were able to snap this not-so-good picture. Jon Hall was kind enough to suggest identification; a Mondolphi's Four-eyed Opossum—I'd welcome a comment if anyone has a different opinion. All I know is that I had never seen it before, so it has to be a lifer for me.

### **Green Basilisk**



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)



**Western (Brown-eared) Woolly Opossum**



(Image by: Ramon David Ruiz Correa)

**Mondolfi's Four-eyed Opossum  
(*Philander mondolfii*)?**



(Image by: Ramon David Ruiz Correa)

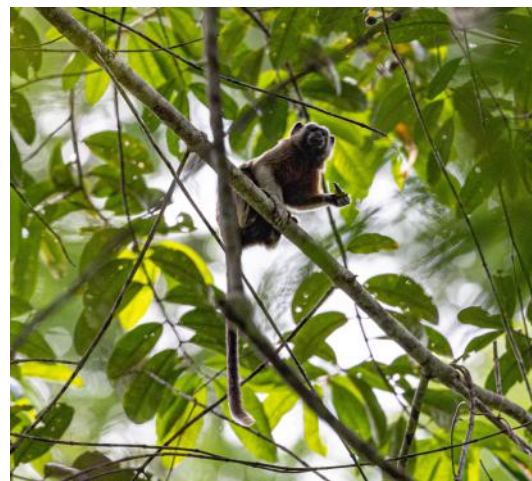
Return to Reserva Natural Canon del Rio Claro and drive to Antioquia -

We started our long drive through Antioquia with another attempt to find the Silvery-brown Barefaced Tamarin. Just when we were getting a little frustrated and Rob was saying we would need to move on soon, I saw from the rear seat of the van a shape on a tree trunk just above eye level: "Monkey!" I shouted and we all enjoyed good views of a troop of this interesting mammal with its ugly face but beautiful fur and tail.

**Silvery-Brown Barefaced Tamarin**



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)

We continued to Medellin, stopping frequently for good bird action, including a huge flock of hundreds of migrating raptors like Swainson's and Broad-winged hawks and Mississippi and Plumbeous Kites, some of which would dive straight down to their nighttime roosting trees in the forest. Rob did spot the first predator of the trip—a Tayra. It was trotting through a non-descript open woods on the left side of the bus, and after a brief look eight-year old Freddie and his mom stood up completely blocking my view from the right side of the bus; I chuckled when Alison turned to me and said, "Did you get a good look?" Well, no, but I was happy for them since it was a lifer for both.

The next day we checked into a great hotel in the coffee-country resort town of Jardin. We enjoyed two days of excellent birding including a visit to a Cock-of-the-Rock lek, which afforded close-up views of this bucket-list bird. Again Rob split off with Alison and Freddie and took a horseback ride to a native species bee farm. Ramon, John, Bill and I had another great day of birding. The only mammal we saw was the Red-tailed Squirrel, which looked nothing like the ones we had seen at Tayrona—this species seems like a potential candidate for an "armchair tick" some day. While not a great mammal-watching location, this was one of the most pleasant towns I have ever visited. Lively, but relaxed, great restaurants and a perfect town square. I most enjoyed the demonstration of fancy fast-step horse riding put on by friendly men and women around the square.

Rob and Freddie at bee farm



(Image by Alison Vanderpoel)

## Red-tailed Squirrel



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)

## Horse riders in Jardin



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)

## Tatama National Park - Western Andes in Risaralda Department -

At this point Alison and Freddie rode back to Medellin with Ramon to fly back to Chicago. John, Bill and I drove to this National Park in the Western Andes, met with expert bird guide Joel Such, who John had known as a very young birder in Colorado, USA.

Picture of Davis, Joel and John from roughly 20 years ago.



(Image by Joel Such)

John, Bill, Rob, Joel and I engaged in hard-core birding on the slopes of these impressive mountains. On the first day I caught another fleeting glimpse at a Tayra. I am beginning to notice a pattern that all my glimpses of Tayra are fleeting (four for four). Each morning we drove two vehicles up the mountain and on the second morning John in the first vehicle saw a crab-eating fox, confirming my belief that if you are ascending a rocky, densely forested mountain road in a caravan you need to be in the first vehicle! While birding John and I had a long look at a Western Dwarf Squirrel, which was a lifer for me and we had recurrent views of Central American Agouti around the patio so Tatama was not a total wash for mammal watching. We spent the final night of the trip in a nice business hotel in center-city Pereira (the room rate included a lavish and delicious breakfast buffet) and did Covid-testing in our hotel room as arranged by Wild About Colombia. The final leg of the trip was an uneventful flight from Pereira to Miami, stressful wait for immigration in Miami and then a late nighttime flight to very chilly Chicago.

## Central American Agouti



(Image by: Bill Vanderpoel)

### SUMMARY:

Our trip to Colombia was a huge success—beautifully conceived and planned by Wild About Colombia. All of the guides and drivers were efficient, very helpful and great fun to be with. All of the vans were roomy and comfortable. The food was consistently tasty, and I would recommend without hesitation all of the accommodations on the trip.

### Learning experiences:

- (1) Colombian food was not as spicy as I was expecting. We had the best ceviche of our lives in Cartagena.
- (2) There are a lot of birds in Colombia (I personally saw 288 species, 131 were new for me).
- (3) The more I see wild monkeys; the more I want to see more wild monkeys!
- (4) Cotingas are such a cool bird family; they should all be deemed honorary mammals!

### Regrets—I had a few:

- (1) I wish I had spent more time looking at the coastal birds between Cartagena and Tayrona.

(2) Again, in my sixth trip to the neotropics I failed to see three-toed sloth, king vulture and kinkajou—oh well, that just gives me incentive to return and try again!