

**A TRIP TO THE ANDES OF COLOMBIA:
Finding the Mountain Tapir
A Trip with Rob Smith – Wild About Colombia
August 28, 2022 to September 8, 2022
John and Karen Shrader
Centerville, Ohio
Date revised: October 22, 2022**

This trip report is primarily about the Mountain Tapir, which we found in the Andes of Colombia in September 2022 with Rob Smith (“Wild About Colombia”). However, it is also a tale of the three other widely known tapir species: The South American (or Brazilian) Tapir, the Malayan Tapir, and the Baird’s Tapir. Coming out of all of the COVID-19 travel restrictions, our latest goal was to see the last of the four of the tapir species, the Mountain Tapir. Of course, as with birding, one is never really “done” with mammal watching, because the science behind what is a species is always changing. There is another recently described (about 2013) and “disputed” (2016) tapir known as the Little Black (or Kabomani) Tapir that lives alongside its bigger brother, the Brazilian Tapir, in the Amazon basin.

See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_American_tapir for details about the possible fifth species of tapir. We don’t know if we will ever manage to find that smaller tapir or not.

We saw our first tapir, the South American (Brazilian) Tapir, back in 1996, long before we had access to digital cameras or before we had discovered there were other people actually keeping lists of mammals. By 2011, we had started keeping a world list of mammals, so we were excited (by chance) to add the Malayan Tapir to that growing list. This year, while on a birding / herping trip to Costa Rica with Jorge Gabriel Campos, guide, organized by Juan Diego Vargas Jimenez of Birding Costa Rica (now “Birding with Juan Diego”), we got a brief but good look at a Baird’s Tapir. See: <https://www.birdingwithjuandiego.com/home>

After we added Baird’s Tapir to the list, based on the obvious hole in our tapir life list, Karen decided to explore finding the Mountain Tapir before the year was over. This report outlines our success with the four species of tapirs, and mostly covers a very recent trip to Colombia to find the Mountain Tapir.

South American or Brazilian Tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*) - 9/17/1996 – Cristalino Lodge, Rio Cristalino, Mato Grosso, Brazil

We saw our first of the four tapir species 26 years ago along the Rio Cristalino in Mato Gross, Brazil. The Rio Cristalino is a tributary of the Rio Araguaia in the southern Amazon basin. We stayed at the famous (at least in the birding world) Cristalino Lodge while on a birding trip with Kevin Zimmer and Andy Whittaker (Mato Grosso Brazil tour by Victor Emanuel Nature Tours.) We arrived at the Lodge in the afternoon, and later in the afternoon we took a group boat ride on the Rio Cristalino, and we saw the tapir along the bank of the river. It was the only one we saw on this trip. At that time, we were really focused on birds but saw over two dozen species of mammals, which we recorded in our records, not knowing how valuable they would become later! We have no digital photos of that sighting, but we did take a lot of videotape during the trip, which is difficult to view at the moment.

Per the current Cristalino Lodge website, the Brazilian Tapir is the “largest land mammal in South America,” and “attracted to water.” It also notes that they “are most commonly seen along the river banks in the period from July to October.” Regardless, the Cristalino Lodge is a fantastic place to look for wildlife – it was 26 years ago, and reviewing their website, it has only gotten better . . .

<http://cristalinolodge.com.br/en>

<http://cristalinolodge.com.br/en/the-southern-amazon/mammals/>

Malayan (Asian or Asiatic) Tapir (*Tapirus indicus*) - 9/25/2011 Multiara Taman Negara Eco Park Resort, Pahang, Malaysia

In 2011, we were working on seeing the last few bird families in the world, and so we set up a trip with Sam Woods (“Tropical Birding”) to find the Malaysian Rail-babbler, a rather strange rail-like bird that lives in the primary forests of Malaysia and Indonesia. That bird is a monotypic family, and it is very shy and secretive. Normally it takes a lot of looking to find one. Fortunately, we did! Mark off another bird family! By the way, if you like leeches, this part of Malaysia is an excellent place to study them! We recorded more than 100 on us during our couple of days in Taman Negara.

We had just returned from an evening of exploring along one of the trails by the resort and we were getting ready for bed when Sam came to the door. He told us that the guard had just seen two tapirs outside the cabins. We immediately put our boots and headed out. We ended up getting excellent looks at the tapirs, a mother and a baby.

Multiara Resort is the only resort inside the Taman Negara National Park boundary which allows quick access to explore the surrounding rainforest.

<https://www.mutiaratamanegara.com/>



Baird's (Central American) Tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*) – 2/22/2022 Tapir Valley Nature Reserve, Bijagua de Upala, Alajuela, Costa Rica

This year, after having a trip to Morocco cancelled because we tested positive for COVID-19 (PCR positive several weeks after having COVID-19), we were struggling to find a place to go to salvage our vacation time. We decided to head back to Costa Rica to find a few birds that we were still missing in the country, as well as to look for herps – reptiles and amphibians. A good friend and outstanding guide, Juan Diego Vargas Jimenez, who we have traveled with multiple times in Costa Rica, was, unfortunately, busy, but offered to set up a private trip with another guide. He asked Jorge Gabriel Campos if he would guide us, and he agreed. We headed down to Costa Rica for a week and spent some 14-hour days looking for birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. We ended up with seven bird lifers (out of 213 seen/heard) as well as some great lizards, snakes, and frogs. One evening Jorge booked a “Jungle Night Tour” at the Tapir Valley Nature Reserve in Bijagua de Upala. These tours are held in the evening for about 2.5 hours or longer, and the naturalists will look for any nocturnal creature alive on the property. We saw multiple species of frogs and snakes, including the amazing Eyelash Pit Viper. It is apparently possible to see Baird's Tapir here, although we didn't see one on the tour.

Jungle Night Tour <https://www.tapirvalley.com/inventory/jungle-night-tour>

However, just a short distance down the main road as we left, a Baird's Tapir crossed the road right in front of us. Like all such sightings, we weren't really prepared, but John managed to snap a couple of rather blurry photos to document our sighting.

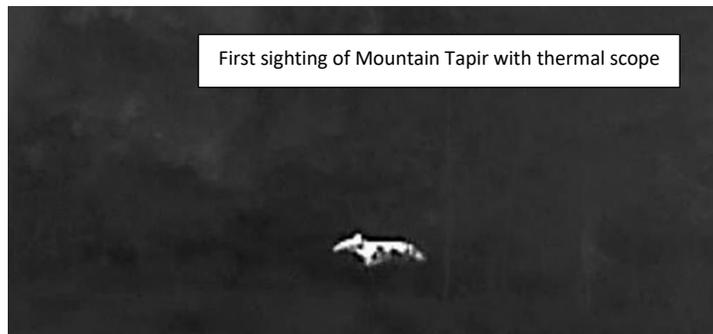


Mountain (Andean or Woolly) Tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*) – 9/1/2022 Otun Quimbaya National Park, Risaralda, Colombia (Western Slope of the Central Andes)

Shortly after returning home from Costa Rica, Karen noticed there was one more tapir species to see. She googled “Mountain Tapir” and learned that it is found only in the mountains of Colombia, Ecuador, and northern Peru. More searching led her to the conclusion that Otun Quimbaya National Park on the western slope of the Central Andes is where the tapir is most commonly reported, and her searches also led us to Rob Smith and Claudia Diaz (“Wild About Colombia”) who design and lead both group and custom birding (and mammal-watching) tours. It didn’t take long before we were seriously exploring a custom mammal-watching trip with Rob to find the Mountain Tapir.

The best place to stay is Cabana El Cedral. It is a very basic guest house, but the staff are incredibly friendly and provide very good Colombian food. Staying there allows quick access to the appropriate cloud-forest habitat is located at the end of the road east of La Florida (trailhead to Lake Otun and other mountain destinations.)

The first sighting was on our first night. Rob had hired a jeep and driver that can navigate the very rough, rocky roads, with an open flatbed in the back allowing us to spotlight as we wished. Karen owns a thermal imaging scope (Pulsar Axion 2 XQ35 Thermal Monocular) and it didn’t take her too long to spot a Mountain Tapir at a distance. Using the scope really made a difference, and she spotted multiple mammals and sleeping birds, including multiple Rufescent Screech-Owls (*Megascops ingens*) and a Moustached Antpitta (*Grallaria alleni*), right over the road, both lifers for us! Given that the goal of using the scope is to simply find warm bodies at night, the 2x power is more than adequate for the task, and allows a wide scanning range, speeding up the task of finding mammals at night.



Over the next few days, we found multiple tapirs at night using the scope as well as in the late afternoon, by chance, as we walked along birding the road.

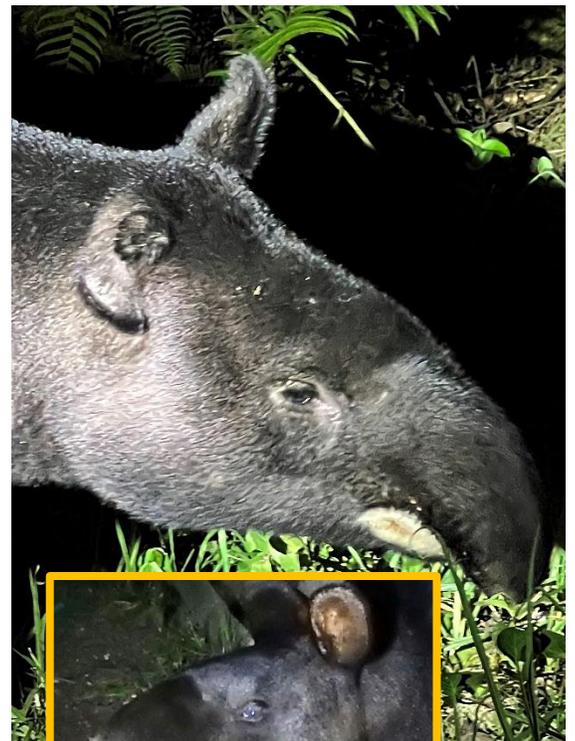




One highlight was seeing a female tapir with a baby. According to Rob, it is extremely rare to see a young tapir. Apparently, the mother's keep the young tapirs hiding until they are older. The staff at Cabanas El Cedral agreed. They are used to seeing tapirs along the road and said they had never seen a young tapir. Googling "Young Mountain Tapir" seemed to confirm this – all the photos appear to be captive animals



We had really good luck with the Mountain Tapir, seeing them repeatedly – six different sightings. The most Rob had ever had on a single trip was four! Based on our prior experiences with tapirs, we thought that we'd probably see one crossing the road, and maybe we'd get another rather blurry photo of one. We were ecstatic to get the great views that we did.



We also found a number of other mammals and birds, including . . .

Multiple Lemure Night Monkeys (also known as Gray-bellied or Colombian Night [or Owl] Monkeys)



Brown-eared Woolly Opossums and Hoffman's Two-Toed Sloth (which Rob had not seen here before.)



Using the thermal scope, Karen found several Rufescent Screech-Owls and a Tropical Screech-Owl.



Kinkajous (a type of raccoon) were common. We've seen them before but never this well! The thermal scope made a huge difference in being able to watch their behavior. We could see them running up and down the trees very well, even through the leaves! We also found an Olinguito, although didn't manage any photos.



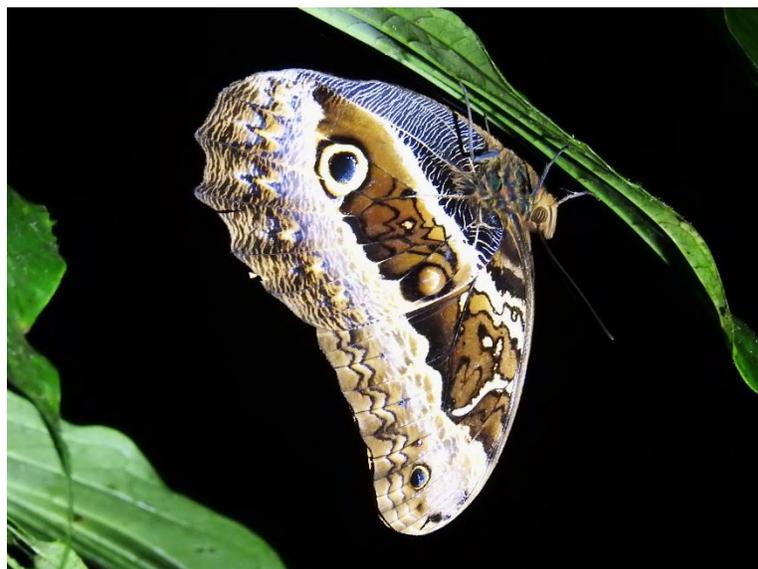
Rob arranged for one evening to spend with Colombian Biologist Alejandro Grajales Echeverri looking for reptiles and amphibians. Alejandro knew exactly where to look and it didn't take him long to find some interesting creatures, including five different Speckled Anoles.



Thanks to Alejandro we also got great looks at both Robber and Glass frogs, as well as lots of other “night” creatures.



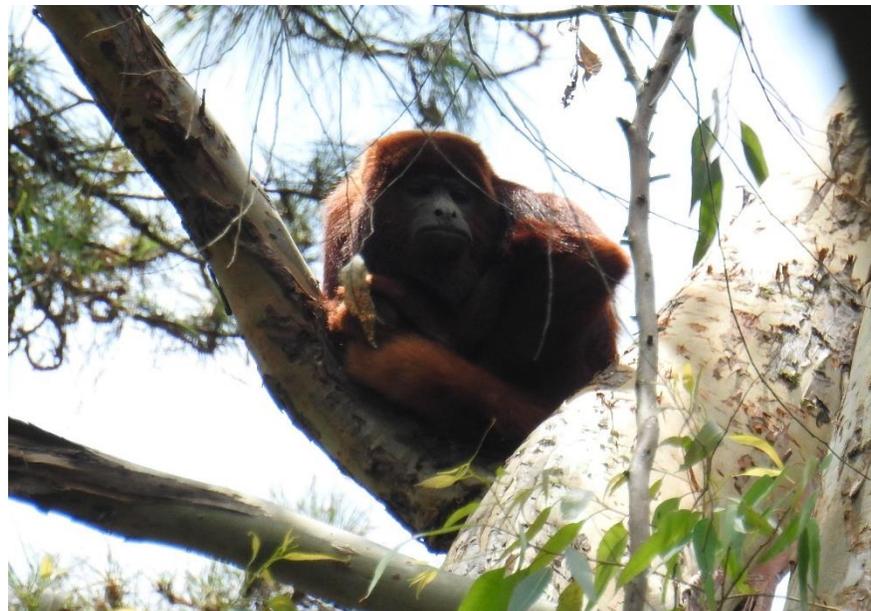
Other night creatures including an Owl Moth (*Brahmaea wallichichii*) – it has well-developed “eye spots” and is nocturnal.



Otun Quimbaya is full of birds as well, although we slept through the best part of the day for birding, since we were out late at night. In fact, we slept through daily rooster cacophony each morning! This is a great place to see the Cauca Guan (we had 11 sightings), Emerald Toucanet, and the Andean Cock-of-the-rock.



Fortunately, the Red Howler Monkeys kept quiet each morning!



One morning the sun came out and we stopped what we were doing to look at all the beautiful butterflies!



Our base for the first part of the trip was at the end of the road. Cabanas El Cedral was the name of the little establishment where we stayed.



The accommodations were a bit basic, and the electricity was out for half of our stay, but the location simply can't be beat!



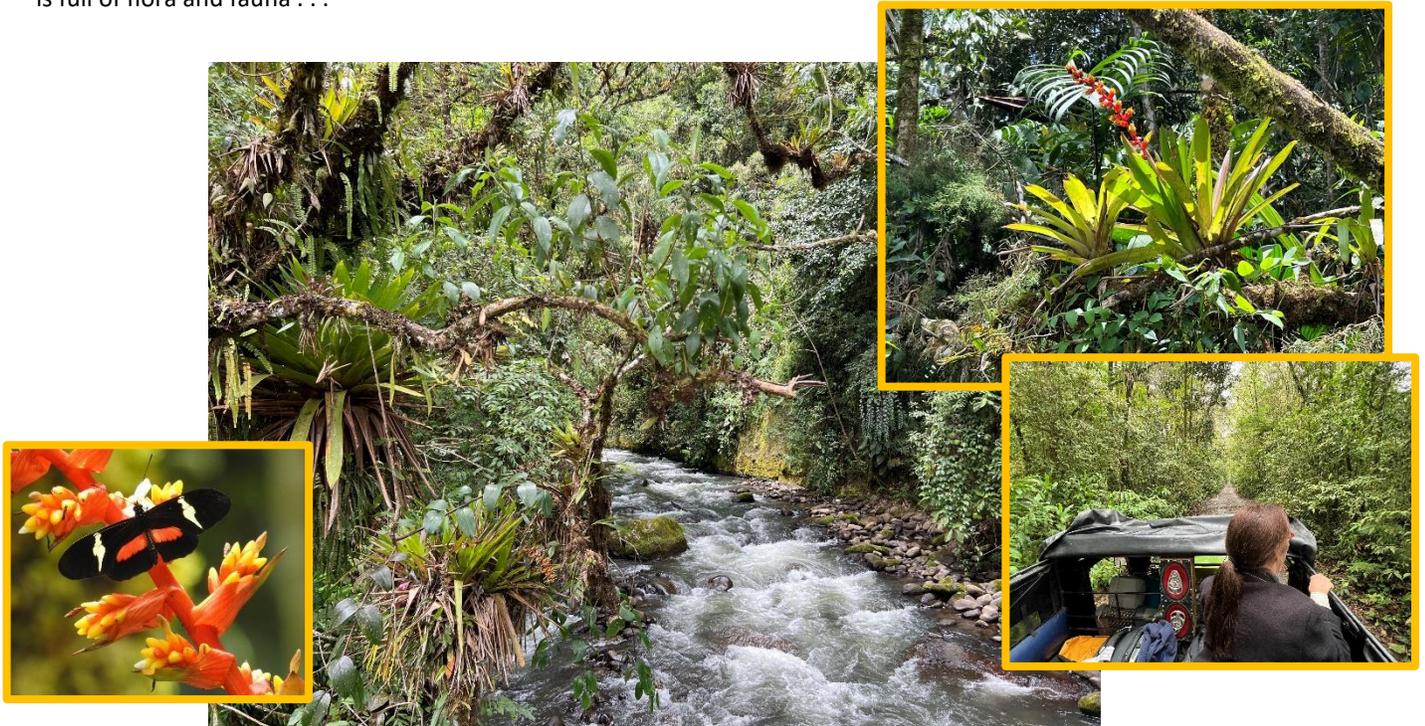
The food was also “basic Colombian” – rice and beans (we are vegetarian!) – but clearly prepared with love!



We even ended up with a candlelight dinner, thanks to a prolonged power outage. None of that mattered, given our amazing success with the tapirs and other creatures!



It goes without saying that the mountains of Colombia are incredibly beautiful, and the Cloud Forest in the Andes is full of flora and fauna . . .



The second part of our trip was on the Western Slope of the Eastern Andes less than an hour west of Bogota.



Rob took us to Chicaque Natural Park, a magnificent cloud forest. The Refuge (a hostel) is the “heart of the park” and included cabins that Rob had booked for us. It is about 1300 feet down-slope from the famous (again, in the birding world) Arboloco Restaurant – an excellent place for lunch and a great place to see the range-restricted hummingbird, Golden-bellied Starfrontlet. To get to the hostel requires reservations, and the staff will come pick you up at the restaurant and take you (and your luggage) down an extremely steep road.





Our goal at Chicaque Natural Park was to find a Brown Hairy Dwarf Porcupine. Rob had done a lot of research on this extremely rare mammal and had decided this would be a great place to look. Only a handful of people (per Rob, about five people including us!) have seen this mammal in recent times. We spent eleven hours searching for this little mammal, over two nights. Finally, at the “eleventh hour,” just as we were about to admit defeat, using Karen’s thermal scope, Rob found one high up on a branch. Although not very close to the trail, without the thermal scope, it would have been completely impossible. We were very luck the animal was out on a branch in “plain sight” to the scope. John managed a few photos with his Nikon P900. Considering how far away it was and the lighting depended on our flashlights (torches), it was a wonder we got any photos at all!



We also found several Moustached Brush-Finches (a lifer, finally!), Great Fruit-eating Bat (with a fruit), and a couple Black Agoutis.



Also, see a trip report from Colombia, January 3-17, 2022, by Justin Brown:

<https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/JB-Colombia-2022.pdf>

If you are looking for mammals and birds in Colombia, we highly recommend Rob Smith / Claudia Diaz (“Wild About Colombia”.) Both Rob and Claudia are very accommodating, pleasant, and knowledgeable about where to find the mammals (and birds) as well as excellent with setting up logistics that work. See:

<https://www.wildaboutcolombia.com/>

If you are looking for herps (reptiles and amphibians) in Colombia, check out Colombian Biologist Alejandro Grajales Echeverri! He is also very accommodating, pleasant, and knowledgeable about herps, birds, and mammals.

www.birdingandherping.com

https://www.facebook.com/AlejoPhotographyColombia/?ref=page_internal

https://www.instagram.com/alejo_grajales_echeverry/

LOCATIONS

Bogota Savanna = Bogota valley with large Metropolitan Area of Bogota

OQ = Otun Quimbaya Fauna and Flora Sanctuary (Sanctuario de Flora y Fauna – SFF)

CNP = Chicaque Natural Park

MAMMALS (14 SPECIES)

COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	9/1/22 OQ	9/2/22 OQ	9/3/22 OQ	9/4/22 OQ	9/5/22 2 CNP	9/6/22 2 CNP
Brown-eared Woolly Opossum	<i>Caluromys lanatus</i>		2			2	
White-eared Opossum	<i>Didelphis albiventris</i>			1			
Hoffman’s Two-toed Sloth	<i>Choloepus hoffmanni</i>		1				
Lemurine (Gray-bellied or Colombian) Night (or Owl) Monkey	<i>Aotus lemurinus</i>	2				10	8
Columbian Red Howler	<i>Alouatta seniculus seniculus</i>				3		
Brown Hairy Dwarf Porcupine	<i>Coendou vestitus</i>						1
Black Agouti	<i>Dasyprocta fuliginosa</i>						2
Southern Spiny Pocket Mouse	<i>Heteromys australis</i>	3					
Colombian Small-eared Shrew	<i>Cyrtotis colombiana</i>		2		1		
Great Fruit-eating Bat	<i>Artibeus lituratus</i>	1			2	1 (JAS)	
Southern Red Bat	<i>Lasiurus blossevillii</i>	4	4				
Olinguito	<i>Bassaricyon neblina</i>	1					
Kinkajou	<i>Potos flavus</i>		2	2			
Mountain Tapir	<i>Tapirus pinchaque</i>	1		1 (F)	3 (M,F,I) – 4 sightings		

OTHER POSSIBLE MAMMAL SPECIES (Seen by Karen)

Colombian Forest Mouse (*Chilomys instans*) – KAS

Oncilla (*Leopardus tigrinus*) – KAS

Weasel species – possible Colombian Weasel (*Neogale felipei*) – KAS

BIRDS (70 SPECIES)

Torrent Duck (*Merganetta armata*) – 3 (OQ)
Cauca Guan (*Penelope perspicax*) – 11 (OQ)
Chestnut Wood-Quail – 4 (OQ)
Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)– 10 (Bogota Savanna)
Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) – 5 (Bogota Savanna)
Buff-necked Ibis (*Theristicus caudatus*) – 31 (Bogota Savanna, OQ, and CNP)
Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*) – 4 (Bogota Savanna and CNP)
Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) – 38 (Bogota Savanna and CNP)
White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) – 1 (CNP)
Roadside Hawk (*Rupornis magnirostris*) – 1 (OQ)
Gray-necked Wood-Rail (*Aramides cajaneus*) – 3 (OQ)
Southern Lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*) – 2 (OQ)
Band-tailed Pigeon (*Patagioenas fasciata*) – 2 (CNP)
Eared Dove (*Zenaida auriculata*) – 64 (Bogota Savanna and CNP)
Ruddy Ground-Dove (*Columbina talpacoti*) – 11 (OQ and CNP)
Tropical Screech-Owl (*Megascops choliba*) – 2 (OQ and CNP)
Rufescent Screech-Owl (*Megascops ingens*) – 2 + 3 H.O. (OQ)
White-throated Screech-Owl (*Megascops albobularis*) – 2 H.O. (CNP)
Mottled Owl (*Ciccaba virgate*) – 2 H.O. (OQ and CNP)
White-tipped Swift (*Aeronautes montivagus*) – 5 (CNP)
Green Violetear (*Colibri thalassinus*) – 1 (CNP)
Sparkling Violetear (*Colibri coruscans*) – 5 (CNP)
Tourmaline Sunangel (*Heliangelus exortis*) – 1 (CNP)
Speckled Hummingbird (*Adelomyza melanogenys*) – 2 (OQ and CNP)
Collared Inca – (*Coeligena torquata*) – 2 (CNP)
Golden-bellied Starfrontlet (*Coeligena bonapartei*) – 1F (CNP)
Andean Motmot (*Momotus aequatorialis*) – 1 (OQ)
Emerald Toucanet (*Aulacorhynchus prasinus*) – 6 (OQ and CNP)
Speckle-faced Parrot (*Pionus tumultuosus*) – 1 (OQ)
Bronze-winged Parrot (*Pionus chalcopterus*) – 2 (CNP)
Slaty Antwren (*Myromoterula schisticolor*) – 1M (CNP)
Jet Antbird (*Cercomacra nigricans*) – 2 (OQ)
Moustached Antpitta (*Gallaria alleni*) – 3 OQ – Found with thermal scope roosting over the road twice! (OQ)
Black-banded Woodcreeper (*Dendrocolaptes picumnus*) – 1 (CNP)
Montane Woodcreeper (*Lepidocolaptes lacrymiger*) – 1 (OQ)
Torrent Tyrannulet (*Seropophaga cinerea*) – 2 (OQ)
Rufous-breasted Flycatcher (*Leptopogon rufipectus*) – 1 (OQ)
Cinnamon Flycatcher (*Pyrrhomyias cinnamomeus*) – 1 (OQ)
Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) – 5 (OQ)
Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*) – 6 (Bogota Savanna, OQ, and CNP)
Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) – 1 (at Pereira airport)
Pale-edged Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cephalotes*) – 1 (CNP)
Andean Cock-of-the-rock (*Rupicola peruvianus*) – 1M (OQ)
Red-ruffed Fruitcrow (*Pyroderus scutatus*) – 4 (OQ)
Brown-capped Vireo (*Vireo leucophrys*) – 2 (OQ)
Green Jay (*Cyanocorax yncas*) – 1 (OQ)
Blue-and-white Swallow (*Pygochelidon cyanoleuca*) – 35 (Bogota Savanna and CNP)
Brown-bellied Swallow (*Orochelidon murina*) – 90 (Bogota Savanna and CNP)
Southern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*) – 20 (CNP)
Gray-breasted Wood-Wren (*Henicorhina leucophrys*) – 4 + 4 H.O. (OQ and CNP)
Andean Solitaire (*Myadestes ralloides*) – 2 H.O. (OQ and CNP)

Great Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*) – 26 (Bogota Savanna)
Flame-crested Tanager (*Tachyphonus cristatus*) – 2 (OQ)
Blue-gray Tanager (*Thraupis episcopus*) – 1 (Bogota Savanna)
Palm Tanager (*Thraupis palmarum*) – 3 (Bogota Savanna)
Black-capped Tanager (*Tangara heinei*) – 2 (CNP)
Beryl-spangled Tanager (*Tangara nigroviridis*) – 2 (OQ)
Metallic-green Tanager (*Tangara labradorides*) – 1 (CNP)
Bay-headed Tanager (*Tangara gyrola*) – 1 (OQ)
Flame-faced Tanager (*Tangara parzudakii*) – 1 (CNP)
Golden Tanager (*Tangara arthus*) – 4 (OQ)
Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*) – 8 + 1 H.O. (Bogota Savanna)
Moustached Brush-Finch (*Atlapetes albofrenatus*) – 4 (CNP)
Hepatic Tanager (*Piranga flava*) – 2 (OQ)
Tropical Parula (*Setophaga pitiayumi*) – 1 (CNP)
Black-crested Warbler (*Myiothlypis nigrocrystata*) – 2 (CNP)
Slate-throated Whitestart (*Myioborus miniatus*) – 2 (OQ and CNP)
Carib Grackle (*Quiscalus lugubris*) – 1 (OQ)
Thick-billed Euphonia (*Euphonia lanilirostris*) – 1F (OQ)
Orange-bellied Euphonia (*Euphonia xanthogaster*) – 1 (OQ)

HERPS (4 SPECIES) – All on 9/3/22 OQ with Alejandro Grajales Echeverri, Herpatologist)

Speckled Anole (*Anolis ventrimaculatus*) - 6
Savage's Glass Frog (*Centrolene savagei*) – 2
Palmer's Robber Frog (*Pristimantis palmeri*) – 1
Chocolate Tree Frog (*Hyloscirtus larinopygion* / antioquia) – 2 tadpoles