

Panama: Canopy Lodge and Tower



Trip dates: January 26 - February 8 2021

Trip participants: Karina Karenina and Andrey Giljov, a couple of zoologists who started to think about committing suicide after a no-travel year and decided to take all the possible risks and inconveniences (crazy PCR test rules, limited flight options, curfews, national park closures, etc.) and finally make a first post-Covid trip abroad.

Trip highlights: a fantastic prolonged encounter with **silky anteater** (still cannot believe we were so lucky...), multiple close day and night encounters with **Northern tamandua** (never thought it would be so easy and so good), multiple great views of **Rothschild's porcupine**, nice 20-minutes long view of **Western pigmy squirrel** feeding on moss (we can watch a squirrel eating moss endlessly...), and a lovely encounters with a cooperative **Robinson's mouse opossum** and less cooperative but gorgeous **lowland pacas**.

Intro

We had a number of places in our Panamanian wish list including the island with pygmy sloths and a forest cabin with cacomistle visiting the banana feeder (see previous mammalwatching reports for details). After reading the current movement restrictions in Panama carefully we decided to limit our trip to privately owned locations - the Canopy Lodge (we wanted to visit it mainly for birds) and the Canopy Tower which is a well-known mammalwatching spot. It was actually the right decision as all the national parks appeared to be closed at night and on the weekends, and going out of Panama city required a tourist voucher.

We contacted the Canopy Family via their website. The communication was easy and they were happy to organize everything from the transfers to the PCR tests during our stay. Their rates are steep, actually painfully steep (especially for those who are getting paid in Russian rubles). Besides accommodation and transfers, they also have 'a la carte tours'. They are expensive but we still booked some to visit Summit Garden for tent-making bats, have guided night walks, etc. You don't have to pay for the tours in advance and can add or cancel them during the stay. The most important is they confirmed that they can drive us to the Pipeline road and bring us back to the Tower without guiding (it costs only 21\$ two-way).

The KLM flights we booked were not particularly convenient with a 14-hours long stopover in Amsterdam. All together we have spent 40 hours on the way from our home to Tocumen International airport. At first, we thought that PCR test requirements to enter Panama are complicated (they give you only 48 hours before arrival). However, two days before the departure we've got a lovely notification that we have to take a test within four hours before departure to be allowed to board the flight to Amsterdam. Dutch government wanted this to be a rapid test but this type of test is not available in Russia! With a lot of brain cells dead forever we managed to make a PCR test in four hours before the flight (which appeared to match the KLM expectations), reached Amsterdam (customs staff were very surprised that Panama is already open), slept a bit on a bench in the almost empty airport near a few Chinese travellers in full-body suits supposed to protect against any biological hazards, boarded the flight to Tocumen and successfully reached our destination. We had a kind of euphoria when we went out of the airport as we had many doubts before the trip that this will actually happen.

Locations

The Lodge

A huge advantage of the Canopy Lodge is its relatively large property available for guests to walk day and night without a guide. Free movement has become a precious thing during pandemic...There are two different parts of the property. The first one, in front of the main buildings, is a garden-like area with bird feeders, benches, well-maintained paths, treehouse, ponds, etc. This part is great for slow lazy birding as the best things can be seen sitting patiently by the fruit feeder or walking slowly along the paths. Feel free to ask the lodge staff to add some fruits on the feeding 'table' if you want to spend your time by the feeder and there is not much left. Oranges are almost always present on the feeder but bananas or papaya is necessary to attract beautiful large bird species such as oropendolas or a keel-billed toucan (as well as mammals). Near the feeder, it is easy to see a set of common mammals (**Central American agouti, red-tailed squirrel, variegated squirrel**). At night a hummingbird feeder placed near the main fruit feeder attracts **orange nectar bats**. Also, the fruits left after the day visitors attract several different individuals of **common opossum**. We saw them both just after full dark and late at night. The same individuals can be found throughout the garden (mostly on the trees) when spotlighting. One night we spotted a **forest rabbit** late at night right under the bird feeding table. During our last day at the lodge, a **brown-throated three-toed sloth** was spotted on the tree very close to the dining area.

The second part of the Lodge territory is completely different. This part is mostly wild with a single path along the stream crossing the whole property. This path is great for night walks. From the dining area go straight in the direction of the entry gates and turn left. There is more than one option to go to the left but it is easy to figure out when you are there as the wrong paths are short. Once you find a long path leading to the stream you will walk its first section through the bush. Here we saw a couple of **common opossums** and a single flighty **Central American woolly opossum** there. Near the place where you can see the stream for the first time, there is an organic waste pile (one of the inconspicuous short turns to the right) attracting opossums. Also, this is the place where we had our first (and the only) glance at the **water opossum** swimming hastily along the stream. It was quite a distant look as the path is 20 or so meters above the stream itself. With binoculars, we were able to see it diving and snorting. This spot (with somewhat fortified bank and a bench) above the river is great for trying to see water opossum as it allows a clear view of a quite long section of the stream. However, we tried for five nights (several trials every night) and caught our luck just once. Keeping walking along the stream, we found a hollow tree where our thermal device helped us to spot a **Rothschild's (Andean) porcupine**. We were able to see only some parts of its body but we were more than happy as we have never seen this species before.

Another good option for a night walk without a guide is the road leading out of the town Valle de Anton which is close to the lodge. The lodge gates are locked late at night. We believe it is possible to ask the staff keep to it open for you but we just climbed over the fence. It wasn't difficult. There is also an inner gate which we simply got around (there is little path going around it). When the entry gate is behind you turn to the left and walk along the road named Via hacia Rio Indio (according to Google). It is better to start later at night as there is some traffic until about 9 p.m. Walking between the Lodge entrance and the entrance to the Chorro Macho trails (the place is also called Canopy adventures) we spotted four **Hoffman's two-toed sloth**, three **brown-throated three-toed sloths**, a **nine-banded**

armadillo, and a **kinkajou**. One night we had a guided night walk through the Chorro Macho area (the entrance is locked at night so you cannot enter without a guide). Despite a careful search for more than three hours, we only found one fast running mammal which appeared to be a **gray four-eyed opossum**. During the day Chorro Macho area is good for scenic views and some nice birds.

We took several morning walks with the lodge guide. The price includes a transfer to some specific area by car and the guided walk itself. It was good to see the surroundings not available by foot from the lodge. The most interesting sites were a day roost of a spectacled owl and a mountainous area on the way to Altos Maria well-known for the good chances to encounter **Western pygmy squirrel**. According to our guide (Danilo Jr), most of the encounters with pigmy squirrels are brief and distant. We were very lucky enough to spot a very relaxed individual feeding on moss while hanging on a tree trunk right in front of us for more than 20 minutes. Since childhood, we have been watching numerous red squirrels fed by nuts in city parks at home. So, we were completely enchanted by the passion with which the pygmy squirrel consumed moss in fascinating amounts.

The Tower

The senior guide, Carlos, met us with very bad news. The access to the Pipeline Road is closed from 4 p.m. till 8 a.m. because of health restrictions. We were very disappointed as night walks along the Pipeline Road was one of the main reasons we wanted to visit the area. We tried to add some humour to this disappointment and tried to imagine how this decision was made by two guys in the government:

- *Hi mate!*

- *Hi mate!*

- *How are you doing today?*

- *Well, to be honest, I'm not very well. The number of people infected by Covid-19 is rising steadily. We have to make something with this...*

- *Yeah, sure. But what can we do? I think we've tried everything already.*

- *Right. But wait... I have a totally new idea. What if we will close access to the Pipeline Road at night? There are thousands of crazy mammal watchers gathering there every night. They sing together, hug and kiss each other, and of course, they do it all without any face coverings! This may be the main reason for the rising number of infections.*

- *Wow, dude... I think it is absolutely brilliant fresh idea! I think as soon as we will close the Pipeline road at night the number of infections will go down immediately, and the country's economy will recover immediately!*

- *For sure! I also think that climate change will just stop if we will issue the restrictions for the Pipeline road right now, without any advance notice.*

- *You know, I am proud to work with you, dude.*

- *Thank's, mate. We did a great job today, let's grab some beer.*

- *Sure!*

:)

Despite this first disappointment, our stay at the Canopy Tower was fantastic and it brought us some memorable mammal encounters. The fact that we were one of the first post-Covid guests at the Tower

had its pros and cons. A huge advantage was the absence of any other guest for most of our stay. Thanks to this, sometimes it felt like we are not just tourists here, but we actually live in this weird tower in the middle of the tropical forest. When another couple arrived for two days in the middle of our stay, we realized that being alone at the Tower had another advantage. The tower is almost completely metallic and from your room, you can hear every step other people make moving around. Soundproofing is literally non-existent so that you hear a quiet talk in the nearby room. It was particularly noticeable for us as we made long walks every night, took early walks (before the heat) every morning, and the middle of the day was a perfect time for us to get some much-needed sleep. Another couple staying at the Tower was calm and quiet but even their calm and quiet activity made our midday nap almost impossible. Thus, good earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones are highly recommended at the Tower, especially if you are a light sleeper.

A major disadvantage of being among the first guests after a long break were the inconsistent and shy visits of the mammals attracted by bananas which the staff hang on the Cecropia tree (guests can observe them from the dining level of the Tower). During our first days there, neither the day visitors of the banana feeder (**Geoffroy's tamarins**), nor the night highlights (**Western lowland olingo and Central American woolly opossum**) did show up. By the end of our stay, however, the situation changed (with bananas and plantains placed everyday). For the last three days, we enjoyed perfect eye-level views of a troop of tamarins. Olingo has never showed up, but we managed to see a shy woolly opossum (soon after dark) and a lovely not too shy couple of **Panamanian night monkeys** (later at night). Waiting for the nocturnal creatures at the dining deck of the Tower at night is quite boring as you can't stop thinking that the chances to see something while walking are much higher. However, it is worth it as you can get a close view of the species typically seen high in the canopy. There is a couple of ways to increase the probability to see the night visitors of the banana feeder. First of all, make sure the staff put the banana on the tree. They may forget and go to sleep so that there will be nothing to be waiting for (secret tip: keep a banana or two during the breakfast (or just ask for it anytime), so that if one banana placed by the staff will be dropped down by an awkward kinkajou, you will be able to replace it and wait for another mammal to come). The second and more sophisticated factor affecting the success of the night feeder is the characteristics of the banana. Perfectly, it should be a super-ripe plantain (aka cooking banana). Carlos, a senior guide, said that the smell of a ripe plantain is a crucial factor for attracting night monkeys and olingos. Usually, the kitchen staff keeps plantains for cooking and put usual bananas on the tree for animals. It worked well for the tamarins but we can confirm that for the nocturnal mammals plantains (and their smell) were much more attractive. You may try to ask the guide in advance to provide the plantains for the night observations.

Besides the banana feeder, the upper deck of the Tower provides good chances to spot a few mammals. We saw two **white-nosed coatis** climbing the trees near the Tower and wandering around on the ground. Scanning the treetops with the scope freely available for the guests, we spotted several distant **brown-throated three-toed sloths** and a number of interesting bird species. Only once during our 8 night-long stay, sloths (a female with her offspring) were close to the Tower. It was great to observe them at eye level. Also, only once we were able to observe a troop of **mantled howlers** from the tower's deck up-to-close. Having read in other trips reports about **spectral bats** being seen from the top of the tower, almost every day we spent 30-60 minutes after dark hoping to see one. Only two evenings were successful. During the first evening, a single individual just passed by the tower and the only thing we had time to realize was that something much bigger than a usual bat is flying. The

second lucky evening (three days ago) was more interesting. Two of these huge beasts made a few circles around the top of the tower and disappeared. Probably they were not happy with our torch (it was in a weak mode, but still). Both times spectral bats appeared 30-50 minutes after twilight. So, we had to be late for dinner not to miss these sightings.

Even more than the Tower itself, we enjoyed the road leading to the Tower. It is called Semaphore Hill road and it goes through Soberania NP from the very base of the Semaphore hill to its top (where the Tower is situated). This road is a true gem for mammal watching! Walks along this road are included in every itinerary at the Canopy Tower but usually, people spend not much time there attracted by the more renowned Pipeline road and other famous mammalwatching spots nearby. We think that this road deserves more attention! We walked it many-many times both during the day and at night. Daytime sighting included a fabulous leucistic **Northern tamandua** (seen from the middle section of the road at about 4 p.m.), three species of primates (**white-fronted capuchins, mantled howlers, Geoffroy's tamarins**), **agouties, red-tailed squirrels**, both species of **sloth** and **coatis**. There is a bridge down the road (close to the base of the hill) with four bat species hanging underneath (which we believe were the **lesser white-lined bat, common big-eared bat, Seba's short-tailed bat, common long-tongued bat**). It is worth checking different sides of the bridge to find different species. We also found **common big-eared bats** roosting in some of the concrete drainage pipes under the upper and middle sections of the road. The Semaphore road is also great for day and night birding (the lower section is good for black and white owls – both day roost and active birds at night can be seen with some dedicated effort).

While the day walks were good, our night sorties with a thermal imager and torch were outstanding. Different mammal species showed up during different parts of the night and it was really hard to stop walking even when we were tired to death. Walking down the hill is easy, but the way back up the hill to return to the Tower requires some basic level of fitness and it is hot even at night. However, the results absolutely worth it! The upper section (closest to the Tower) was repeatedly good for **lowland pacas**. In total, we saw about a dozen of individuals. They were usually seen soon after dark and disappeared later at night. We were surprised how easy it was to see this species which is usually very shy. Thanks to the thermal imager we detected pacas at a good distance. Turned off the lights and slowly and quietly approached them to have a closer look. With lights on, pacas are very flighty and it is hard to get a good photo. Sleepy **agoutis** make quite a similar noise as pacas do and these two species look similar through the thermal imager. There are many more agoutis than pacas and we ended up calling agoutis 'false pacas'...

The upper section of the Semaphore road appeared to be very good for night sightings of **collared peccaries, nine-banded armadillos** and **tamanduas** (we had one or two tamandua sighting almost every night). One tamandua encounter was particularly good as the animal moved on the ground close to the road and we were able to follow it and observe him feeding here and there. It had a fresh wound on the tail.

The middle section of the Semaphore road can be good for pretty much everything. Here we had **Central American woolly opossums** (multiple good views), **common opossum** (just one), **Robinson's mouse opossum** (a prolonged view of an individual stood frozen on a branch), **Tome's spiny rat** (several individuals spotted with the thermal imager on a forest floor), one **Western lowland oringo**

high in the canopy, **Panamanian spiny pocket mouse** (one spotted deep in the bushes) and occasionally all species seen along the upper section of the road except the peccaries. The absolute highlight of this section (and of the whole trip!) was a fabulous sighting of a **silky anteater**. We are 100% sure that we would miss it without a thermal imager even though it was not far from the road and not very high. We had a clear view and did some nice photos. We observed this unrealistically looking mammal for about 10 minutes staring at us and moving along the branches. It wasn't happy with the light at all.

The lowest section of the road was generally more boring but we saw a couple of very vigilant **night monkeys** and a few **nine-banded armadillos**.

Our first night at the Tower we took a guided night walk along the Semaphore road and it was absolute nonsense. You just get one more person with you with weak light and making a lot of noise. Our night walk guide Igua started the walk with a brilliant phrase "It is almost impossible to see something at night" and continued it constantly talking about some stupid things (e.g., that sloths feed on carrots, cucumbers and tomatoes... yeah, he literally said this) while looking around in a very lazy manner. After 30 minutes he was satisfied with our single sloth sighting and turned back. We said him that this is definitely not enough and he continued for a while but we soon realized that it makes no sense and let him go back to the Tower... To be honest, even a good guide is not particularly necessary for the night walks here. If you have a limited budget and know how to use your thermal imager and a torch, go ahead by yourself! Fewer people mean less noise! Just walk slowly and do not give up during prolonged periods of 'no-mammals'. Some nights at Semaphore hill were more productive than the others and the same is true for the different parts of a particular night. Once we made the whole way down the hill without any noticeable sightings (agoutis and howlers sleeping in the trees don't count) but the way back brought as three **porcupines**, two **tamanduas**, **Tome's spiny rat**, two **woolly opossums**, a **paca**, and a **silky anteater**!

It is possible to ask the Tower staff to pick you up at a particular time from the base of the hill after your night walk (in this case you don't have to climb up). We did it once as we were too tired after a long day walk but it worked not very well. They came about 50 minutes earlier than we agreed when we did only a half of the way down. The vehicle made the rest of the walk quite senseless as everything was scared away by the noise.

Our day walks were mostly focused on the famous Pipeline road. Here, we had two guided morning walks with Carlos and two morning walks without a guide. It's so great that the staff can just drop you off there and pick you up many hours later for a small fee! Walks are usually half-day long as in the middle of the day it is not much to see (hot!) and a nice lunch is waiting for you at the Tower. It is possible, however, to have full-day walks and afternoon walks which we never tried as due to Covid restrictions we had to leave the park before 4 p.m., when the air temperature only starts to drop.

While we are real fans of unguided mammal- and birdwatching, the guided walks (mainly focused on birds) were enjoyable. Carlos spotted and helped us to see many more birds than we would see alone. He knows all the bird sounds (songs and calls) and is able to spot even the tiniest of them deep in the vegetation. Mammal-wise, having a guide on day walks is not necessary but useful. One morning

Carlos met a friend working at the national park and he showed us a tamandua destroying a termite nest not very high in the canopy. We observed it for about 30 minutes which was fantastic!

The Pipeline road has two quite different parts. The first one starts at the park gate and ends near the Discovery Centre. It is a broad road which had some limited but still annoying traffic. The forest is secondary with not very tall trees and the visibility is relatively good. Morning walk along this part brought us several **red-tailed squirrels** and **agouties**, a **brown-throated three-toed sloth**, a troop of **white-fronted capuchins**, and a **tamandua**. The second part of the Pipeline road starts after you pass a Discovery Centre turnoff and cross a stream. No vehicles are allowed here. There is a gorgeous thick forest and picturesque bridges along the way. It is a pleasant experience to be able to walk freely through this kind of forest. The road is still good and wide even though not as wide as the first part of the road. However, we had much fewer birds and mammals there probably because of thick vegetation. During two morning walks we've got several loud troops of **mantled howlers**, numerous **red-tailed squirrels**, a shy **coati**, and a very vigilant group of **collared peccaries** deep in the bush. In general, this part of the road has poorer visibility and more shy birds and mammals (likely because of fewer people and no vehicles). It gives you a much wilder experience though, and it is reportedly much better at night. Previous reports mention daytime jaguarundi sightings here.

The only other place we visited while staying at the Tower was a guided tour to the Summit Garden and the nearby Summit Ponds. The reason we took this tour was to see a roosting colony of **common tent-making bats** under the palm leaves which seems to be guaranteed at the Summit Garden. How painful it was to realize that the garden is closed to the public when we arrived. We REALLY wanted to see this species, so we started to walk around the garden gates and fence without much hope... And this paid off! First, we found a single individual under the leaf of a very short palm to the left of the gate. It was too close to us when we tried to get a proper look, and it flew away inside a dense bush (we felt sorry for disturbing it during the day but what this guy was thinking about choosing such a short palm!). We checked many tall palms right in front of the entrance to the garden and two of them had small groups of resting **tent-making bats**. The key was to check all the leaves which looked 'broken' somewhere in the middle (this is what these bats do to actually 'make a tent'). Not far from the garden are the Summit Ponds – a great place to see a boat-billed heron (distant view but nice!).

Tips for future travellers

- There are no doubt that the Canopy Tower is a great place for mammal watching. The area around it is fantastic but you can actually visit it without staying at the Tower. The stay at the Tower, however, gives you a lot of bonuses like banana feeding spot visited by Geoffrey's tamarins and coatids at daytime and kinkajou, Central American woolly opossum, Eastern lowland olingo and Panamanian night monkeys at night. From the upper deck you can have brief but still impressing sightings of the spectral bats. Having a three-toed sloth or a troop of mantled howler monkeys at your eye level is a lovely experience too.
- Whether or not to include the Canopy Lodge in your Panamanian itinerary depends on your time, budget and interests. We were very lucky with mammals there but the place is more famous for its

birds. The mammals we had exclusively at the lodge included only two (but nice!) species: a water opossum (very irregular sightings according to our experience and guide's comments), and Western pigmy squirrel (guides know a reliable area to look for but you can find the area by yourself using www.inaturalist.org). If the Canopy Tower is an absolutely unique place, the Lodge can be replaced (if needed) by any other (cheaper) accommodation nearby. Self-guided walks in the area shouldn't be a problem.

- We very much recommend including at least a couple of night walks along the Semaphore road in your itinerary if you plan to visit the Pipeline road area.

- Consider the time of year you are going to be there. We were repeatedly told that we arrived during the best time of the year. Definitely, the dry season is best for night walks as you can normally use your camera and thermal devices.

- Thermal imager is a must. It actually made our trip. We started with classic spotlighting and we often used thermal imaging and spotlighting at the same time. We tried to compare the two methods and the result was shocking - only about 3-5% of our sightings will be possible with a spotlight only. We can't stop thinking about how much we have missed in our previous trips when we only had a torch. Many great Panamanian mammals such as porcupines, anteaters, pacas, and armadillos have very weak or no eyeshine. Moreover, thermal imaging helps you to spot a mammal without disturbing it. As a result, you can carefully move closer, get your camera ready and only then use a light to see the animal in its full glory. The thermal imager was also very useful in finding small mammals like rats and mouse opossums in the bushes. Look for cheaper options if a good thermal scope is not affordable, they can work perfectly too. We used a small device that can be attached to the smartphone or tablet (SeekThermal Pro). It is lightweight and cheaper than a "normal" thermal scope.

- If you want to visit the Tower not only for mammals but for birds too, make sure they will give you a good guide as not all of them are good enough (we had Carlos and he was absolutely perfect, then we had Igua and he was totally useless).

- More budget option is staying not at the Canopy Tower itself but in a hotel in the nearby town Gamboa. However, this includes either renting a car (expensive) or taxi drives (you need to speak Spanish plus not sure if they operate very late at night in such a rural area). If you choose this option you can park at the very beginning of the Semaphore road (the parking is here for people visiting the Plantation road popular among local cyclists) and walk up the road till the gate of the Tower and back. The road is gated for vehicles but does not hesitate to use the road for walking. The road goes through the Soberania national park and is not a private property. Only small gated territory around the Tower itself is privately owned. Potentially the Tower staff can ask you something if they meet you there as the only place this road is leading to is the Tower. But they are friendly and most likely there will be no problems. If you can afford to stay at Canopy Tower but your budget is still limited do not be tempted by more expensive rooms. We've got a free upgrade of the cheapest room we booked and got the most expensive Blue Cotinga Suite. It's bigger than other rooms and has its own tiny balcony. However, we rarely spent time on this balcony (and in the room in general) as both the dining deck and the upper deck provide much better and wider views.

Our contacts: zoology.gilev@gmail.com, angil_1305@mail.ru



Robinson's mouse opossum (*Marmosa robinsoni*) - Semaphore Hill road - Soberania NP



Panamanian night monkey (*Aotus zonalis*) - Canopy Tower - Soberania NP



Lowland paca (*Cuniculus paca*) on the roadside at the Semaphore Hill - Soberania NP



The Andean or Quichua porcupine (*Coendou quichua*), formerly Rothschild's porcupine - Semaphore Hill road - Soberania NP



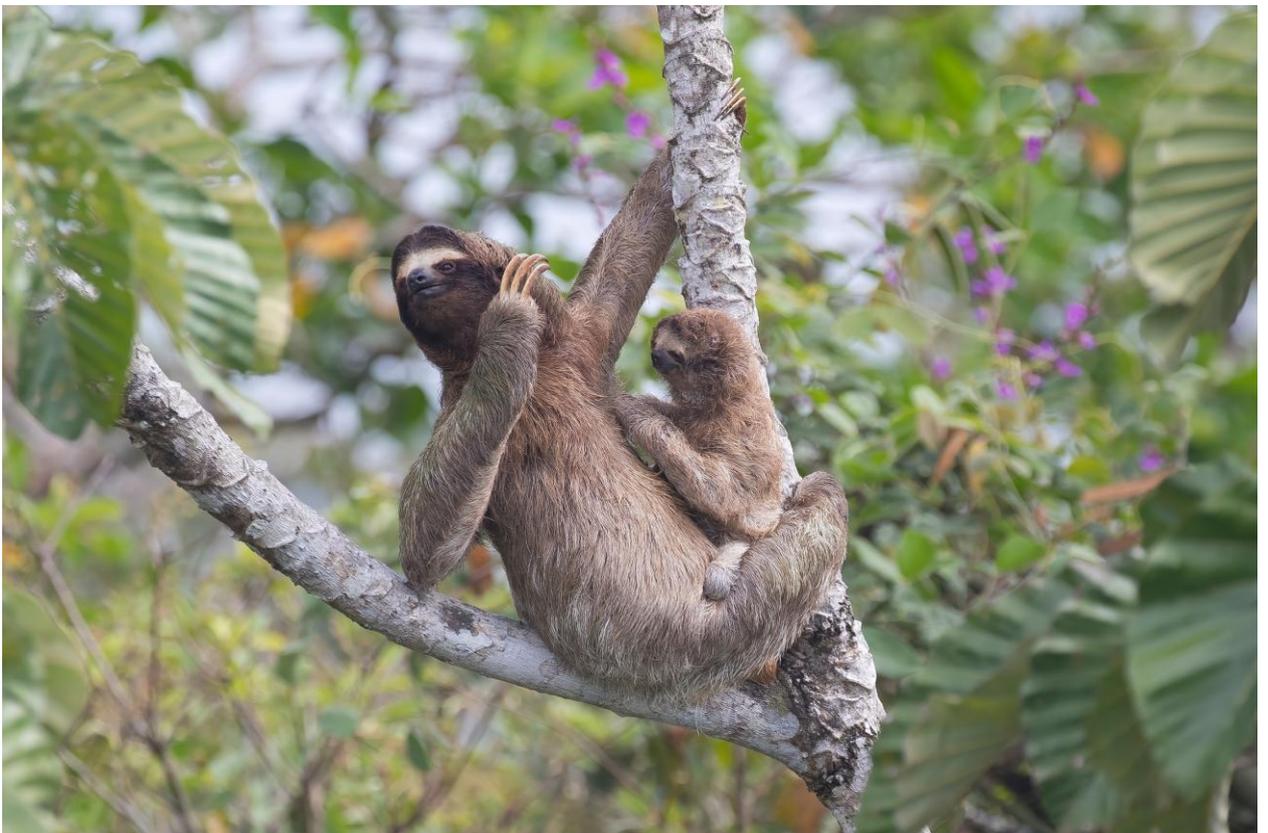
Tome's spiny rat (*Proechimys semispinosus*) - Semaphore Hill road - Soberania NP



Panamanian spiny pocket mouse (*Heteromys adspersus*) - Semaphore Hill road - Soberania NP



Western pygmy squirrel (*Microsciurus mimulus*) - cloud forest of El Valle de Anton area (on the way to Altos Maria)



Brown-throated three-toed sloth (*Bradypus variegatus*) - Canopy Tower - Soberania NP



Silky anteater (*Cyclopes didactylus* or *C. dorsalis*) - Semaphore Hill road - Soberania NP



Leucistic Northern tamandua (*Tamandua mexicana*) - Semaphore Hill road - Soberania NP



Northern tamandua (*Tamandua mexicana*) - Pipeline Road - Soberania NP



Common big-eared Bat (*Micronycteris microtis*) under the Semaphore Hill road - Soberania NP



Lesser white-lined bat (*Saccopteryx leptura*) - under the bridge at the Semaphore Hill - Soberania NP



Common long-tongued bat (*Glossophaga soricina*) under the bridge at the Semaphore Hill - Soberania NP



Seba's Short-tailed Bat (*Carollia perspicillata*) under the bridge at the Semaphore Hill - Soberania NP



Kinkajou (*Potos flavus*) - Canopy Tower - Soberania NP

