

Trip report: Christmas 2019 in Ecuador

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We returned home from South America luckily just before the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) disease outbreak. My recent ice-cold prediction on the next new SARS epidemic came sadly true far too soon (our giant panda trip in Sichuan 2018, see the hog badger text).

We spent the northern winter 2019-2020 in Ecuador, mainland Chile, Easter Island, and Brazil. It was a nostalgic trip with my wife Anneli. We had visited those South American countries a few times before. We did also some not-so-serious mammal-watching, just trying to fill the gaps. Since we visited mostly well-known mammal sites, I am only reporting about Ecuador, in order to give some updated information that I hope some readers may find helpful. Though I don't admit that I was ever really obsessed about the big predators, it was nice to have seen all the bears and big cats in the wild after this winter pleasant tour.

Our aim was to have nice Christmas time in Quito Old City and try to see three magnificent mammal species in Ecuador we missed previously, namely – you surely guessed – the spectacled bear, the mountain tapir and the olinguito. Although we travelled extensively in Ecuador in 1995, we missed the two latter species in N Ecuador, Cotopaxi and elsewhere, since at the time we were more interested in trekking and adventure. The olinguito was not yet even described at that time.

There are several excellent trip reports from Ecuador at this web site, and based on them we decided to visit Bellavista and Coca-Cayambe National Park on our way to Chile. Both of them are simply magnificent and easy-to-reach places from Quito.

We spent only two nights at Bellavista, Tandayapa on 23-25th December. Fortunately, that was enough. It is even better known among ornithologists due to its Andean cock-of-the

rocks and several ant-pittas. It is also a wonderful place to see nocturnal moths, though not at all as good for butterflies as the now closed Tinalandia not so far away where we spent some lovely time with Tina and her dogs in the past.

On the first morning at Bellavista we were lucky to see a female and a nest of the cock-of-the-rock and a curious **tayra** (*Eira barbara*). There were also at least five **red-tailed squirrels** (*Notosciurus granatensis*) living around the lodge, and many more in the cloud forest itself. In the evening I asked a ranger about the olinguito, which is said to be almost guaranteed at Bellavista. I was a bit shocked to hear that nobody had seen it for at least a week or more, and we only had two nights there. However, only after five minutes, the same guy came running back and told us that the **olinguito** (*Bassaricyon neblina*) was surprisingly back again at the feeding place. Great! A cute animal with a white tip of the long tail. The night was rainy, but still the moth scene was simply great. Though no sign of the oncilla, which we had fortunately seen years ago in Brazil.

On the following sunny morning we visited the cock-of-the-rock lek site nearby. Nice noisy birds, and not so nice noisy tourists. We saw also several golden-headed quetzals, plate-billed mountain toucans and white-faced nuns. There was also another, or maybe the same, tayra close to the lodge. In the evening, it was quite silent at the feeding place, but just as we had lost our hope, there was a mammal, not another olinguito but its bigger cousin **kinkajou** (*Potos flavus*) with its curved tail. Nice, and again the moths were fantastic!

Our next stop was the mountain village of Papallacta, well-known for its hot springs, next to the Coca-Cayambe National Park on 26-30th December. We stayed four nights at the convenient Hosteria Pampallacta, because the fancier and much more expensive Hotel Termas de Papallacta was fully booked.

We were guided by the well-known bear researcher Armando Castellanos Peñafiel, his geneticist son Francisco, the local guide Rodrigo, who was a fit and super-good animal-spotter, and the driver Claudio. All of them were very nice company. Armando did not only know his study area and the target species, but also the individual bears and tapirs of the region. His stories about the animals were really fascinating.

Our first day included a trip from Quito to misty Coca-Cayambe. In the park, we first tried to find a bear from a paramo site which requires a short but steep and difficult ascent to a mountain ridge. The terrain was wet and slippery, admittedly quite demanding for us. Rodrigo was running ahead, and he saw something, so that we were running, too, even with the risk of heart attack. And there it was, a dark animal in the grass just below from us. First, we thought it was a bear, but no, it was a **mountain tapir** (*Tapirus pinchaque*), a nice-looking black woolly animal with white lips. Rodrigo made a curved walk to the other side of the mountain, and the tapir finally noticed him and started to walk towards us, then run a bit and walk slowly again in the valley. Excellent views, we were really lucky!

After that we started to descend the slope on the other side. It took quite a long time. Suddenly, Rodrigo noticed a male **spectacled bear** (*Tremarctos ornatus*) not so far away. It had been there all the time, even though Rodrigo had checked the slope and tried to find it

without result. However, then it was there on the slope not so far away! Thus, all our target species were seen without so much effort.

We continued our trip by car and saw an **Andean rabbit** (*Sylvilagus andinus*) and an **Andean white-tailed deer** (*Odocoileus virgianus peruvianus*) next to the road.

During the next day we tried to find more bears and tapirs without any success. We drove around the roads in the prime paramo habitats and did several short walks. We found many sites where the bears had recently been eating, and I even tasted the same half-eaten vegetarian food – not bad at all.



Birds included the Andean duck and the black-and-white hawk-eagle, and the alpine plants the delightful red uncurrosa (*Ranunculus gusmannii*).

The last full day in Coca-Cayambe on 28th December was cloudy, foggy and rainy again. We spent a long time driving around in the park without seeing anything interesting. Finally, close to the road just above us there was a **spectacled bear** female with a cub. They were quite afraid of us running upwards. We spent some time watching them, and to our surprise, Rodrigo noticed another female bear much higher on the very steep mountain slope. Soon we noticed that it has a small cub, too. They were curious and looked at us calmly from the distance.

We continued our search during the next two days without any success. We saw nice birds like the Andean condor, the shining sunbeam, and the western tawny ant-pitta, and a few butterflies of the pierid genus *Catantix*, but no more mammals. Anyway, we were more than satisfied. Muchos gracias Armando, Francisco and Claudio, yupaychani Rodrigo!

My conclusion is that the olinguito is surely still there, but not necessarily so sure if you only have a couple of nights available at Bellavista. It may not be a bad idea to spend several days in this magnificent, though a bit expensive lodge.

At the large Coca-Cayambe National Parks, there are about fifty spectacled bears. However, in spite of the relatively open landscape, they are very difficult to find. By hiring Armando, your probability to see one or a few is greatly increased, even from the roads. The mountain tapir is still far more difficult, more dependent on luck, but more likely if you are fit and able to take long, steep mountain treks. None of the animals we saw were monitored, but there are also some satellite-tagged animals, at least in theory easier to find, but unfortunately not necessarily close to the roads.

Armando (ijnachi@gmail.com) can organize study tours for one or two scientists, conservationist or serious mammal-watchers based on his study permits in the Coca-Cayambe National Park and elsewhere in his study area. It is a fantastic experience and highly recommended. However, bigger groups or ordinary tourism are not allowed in the park. The money generated by Armando from guided trips goes to bear and tapir conservation and research.



Our superb guides Armando, Rodrigo and Francisco enjoying their well-deserved morochas and humitas.