











## Rare Andean Mammals Tour

**Destination:** Bellavista & Cayambe-Coca National Park, Ecuador

**Duration:** 11 Days **Dates:** 1<sup>st</sup> November – 11<sup>th</sup> November 2019

-  Exploring the Andean habitats of the Andean western slope in central Ecuador
-  Watching two Spectacled Bears cooperatively hunting a Mountain Tapir
-  Having a good view of the ever elusive and seldom seen Colocolo
-  Seeing 116 species of bird including Fawn-breasted Tanager & Andean Condors
-  Hiking the wonderful cloud forests of Bellavista – home to the Olinguito
-  Martin had a Stump-tailed Porcupine in the grounds of our hotel one night
-  20 mammal species including 4 Spectacled Bears, 2 Mountain Tapir & Olinguito
-  Watching a pair of wonderful Tayra coming and feeding at close range each morning
-  Having very close views of 7 different Andean condors including some close views
-  Having close <40m views of both Mountain Tapir and Spectacled Bears

### Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)  
 Freddy (Bellavista Lodge Naturalist Guide)  
 Claudio (Cayambe Coca National Park Guide)  
 Quimen (Driver)

### Participants

Mr. Ewan Davies  
 Mr. Peter Hobbs  
 Mr. Dario Nessi

### Overview

**Day 1:** Quito /  
Bellavista  
Lodge

---

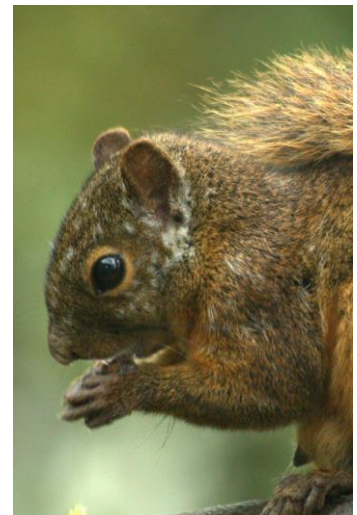
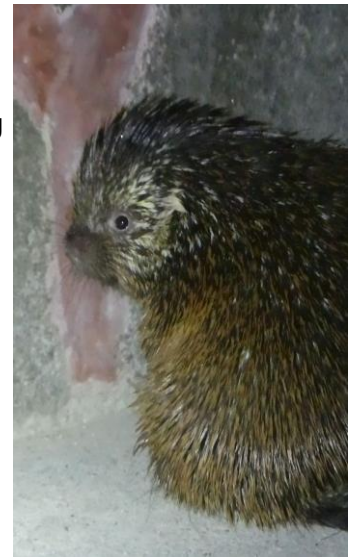
**Days 2-3:** Bellavista  
Lodge

---

**Days 4-10:** Cayambe  
Coca

---

**Day 11:** Quito / Puenbo





# Day by Day Breakdown

## Overview

Ecuador may be a small country on a map, but it is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of life and biodiversity. With a range of habitats from the dry Pacific coastline to the snow capped volcanoes and peaks of the Andes and the steamy and tropical Amazon Rainforest to the desolate and arid Galapagos Islands; there is life at every turn here.

This tour aimed to showcase one of these regions and some of the habitats within this area. The area being the Andes and the main habitats being the cloud forests of the western slope and the high altitude paramo (grass lands). We would aim for certain species which are specialists within these ecosystems.

Our first stop would be the cloud forests around Bellavista lodge. This one time farm is now a great birding lodge and it shot to fame in the mammalwatching circuit in 2013 when the new olingo species 'olinguito' was described and it turned out that this lodge has a small population of this wonderful little carnivore that comes and feed on the banana bait left near the restaurant each night. There is also a good number of other mammals recorded from this forest lodge, including tayra, white-eared Andean opossum, Andean bear and others. However these other species would take more luck to see, we would hike the trails in the day and then stake out the feeding station at night as well as spotlighting the roads to see what we could see.

We would then move on to the paramo, the high altitude grasslands that are found above the treeline in the Ecuadorian Andes. These rolling hills and steep valleys are home to Andean (spectacled) bears, mountain tapir and Andean condor among many other species. We would hope for these larger species but also smaller species such as Andean fox, Andean rabbit and rarities like northern pudu and stump-tailed porcupine.

Throughout the trip we would also be trying for some super hard species such as northern oncilla, colocolo and western mountain coati but of course these would require lots of luck as well as hard work.

With over half of all the bird species in all of South America and twice as many as live in Europe, more mammals per square meter than anywhere else in the world, more frog species than any other country, 25,000 species of plants, 1,250 species of fish, 350 species of reptiles and untold hundreds of thousands of invertebrates; we would not be left disappointed with our wildlife adventure of Ecuador.



## Day 1 **Quito / Bellavista**

## *Travelling & Wildlife Watching*

Everyone had arrived the day before and overnighted in the Peumbo Birding Garden just outside of Quito and so we left early after breakfast to travel the 3 hours into the cloud forest and to Bellavista. We arrived and spent some time around the lodge grounds until lunch and the rooms were ready for us.

The birdlife was good around the lodge, including many hummingbirds such as buff-tailed coronets, gorgeted sunangels, collared incas, speckled hummingbirds and a couple of very nice empress brilliants. There was also great views of the only easy resident diurnal mammal; the abundant red-tailed squirrels.

After lunch we had a walk along one of the trails with Freddy, however the clouds had come in and the rain started so we didn't hold out much hope for a lot of sightings. The cloud got thicker as afternoon progressed and the rain threatened to stop a few times, before starting up heavier than before. But we did have some nice bird species seen including sickle-winged guans, white-tipped doves and white-throated quail-doves (all near the compost heap). As the rain continued there was not much wildlife around so Freddy explained about some of the plant species, the ancient ancestors of ferns that are present here, the various lichens, mushrooms and palms in the forest as well as the cercropia trees. Also telling us that most of the forest in Bellavista is no older than 30 years, it was a former farm and most of it was cleared, so the silver-leaved cercropia is one of the most dominant trees as it is a very quick growing species (~5m per year) and so a very quick coloniser on logged / cleared land. It also explained why most of the trees were relatively small and the understory vegetation was so thick here.

We turned back as it was evident the rain wasn't going to stop and we had a couple of other species but not seen well as everything was now silhouetted against the bright white low cloud cover. But we found a pair of plate-billed mountain toucans and turquoise jays.

Back at the lodge we had dinner and as soon as we sat down to start the call of 'olinguito' erupted and we darted out to see the wonderful animal climbing back from near the lodge along the ropes (holding the bananas) to the trees. Banana in mouth it made a swift exit, out of the rain and to the thicker vegetation to feed. We all saw it but it



was brief and we didn't get any pictures. So we went back in to finish our dinner as the olinguito did the same hidden from view.

After dinner we went back out and waited but it seemed to have moved off. So we went out for a drive, down the road towards the main road. The rain was still falling, but lightly and on and off. However it was not very productive, the road is very narrow and the forest thick, so we only had a very narrow view and were relying on an animal (hopefully northern oncilla) crossing the road. As it was in 2 hours we only got a common potoo perched on the top of a telegraph pole.

Coming back to the lodge we did have great views of the olinguito, this time closer and spending more time in the open. Great views of it feeding and climbing around. We also had some Peruvian tailless bats around the hummingbird feeders and what were most likely Andean brown bats and common long-tongued bats also.

---

## Day 2 **Bellavista Lodge**

## *Wildlife Watching*

This morning we went to the feeding station to see if the bananas had attracted a tayra, the last couple of mornings had seen tayra come around the lodge. But not this morning it would seem. Instead there were many pretty birds around including blue-winged mountain tanagers, Blackburnian warbler, black-capped vireo, chestnut-capped brush-finch, beryl spangled tanager and montane woodcreepers. There was of course the abundant red-tailed squirrels scurrying around everywhere.

Then after breakfast we went for a longer hike, we explored up the slope and into some stunning cloud forest, there was lots of evidence of Andean bear feeding. Many hearts of palms and bromeliads broken into and the leaves and stems bent and pulled off. We didn't see a bear, but did hear a loud branch break which could have been one hidden from view feeding. We did see a couple of lizards including the wonderfully well camouflaged female gem anole and the more brightly coloured rainbow langelot. Some birds we saw included a very brief view of a slaty-backed nightingale thrush and then very nice views of a small flock of plate-billed mountain toucans and distant views of a flock of red-billed parrots. The cloud set in again as we moved down into a valley and we then spooked a rodent (most likely a white-throated cloud forest rat) from the undergrowth, only Dario and Martin saw this species as it ran into the thick vegetation. On the road as we walked back we found fresh cat scat, by the size most likely small ocelot or northern oncilla, which is exciting and told us where we would try spotlighting tonight.

The afternoon walk was very productive for birds, with several species of tanagers seen and also both species of quetzal known from this habitat; the crested quetzal and the golden-headed quetzal. There was also great views of the crimson-mantled woodpecker which is another specialist of this habitat and elevation.

Then after dinner the stake out began for the olinguito again, but the rain had started and remained relatively heavy for the next few hours. At around 20:50 the olinguito arrived and treated us to great views as it came close to us to grab a banana and fed on it in the open.

After the olinguito had departed we left for a drive up the slope, it had stopped raining and there were many bats around, mostly Peruvian tailless bats flying back and forth through the forest and over the road. Peter also had a brief view of a rat crossing the road, no ID but possibly a second white-throated cloud forest rat.

---

## Day 2 **Bellavista Lodge**

## *Wildlife Watching*

This morning at around 05:45 staking out the feeding station rewarded us with a tayra. The animal arrived on the forest floor and it could be seen walking up the slope before very skilfully climbing up the slippery vertical trunk to get to the bananas. It took one off and climbed back down and fed, before climbing back up and getting a second one, all in all great views. But it was just too dark for pictures, tomorrow we would come with torches to be more prepared. It left the area just before 6am and we then had breakfast as the red-tailed squirrels started to become more active. As did the bird species, blue-winged mountain tanagers, russet-crowned warblers and red-collared sparrows. Then at 9:30 again we went for another hike into the forest with Freddy, but the rain was fairly heavy and the trail we tried was very slippery so we didn't see too much at all. Just a couple of new birds which were grey-fronted woodwren and rufous-headed pygmy tyrant. Then after lunch Peter and Ewan went for a walk down the road, they walked around 6km down and then were picked up by Kema in the vehicle. They found a female Andean cock-of-the-rock on a nest near the road, which was a great sighting as well as having a Central American agouti cross the road in front of them. Dario stayed behind at the lodge and was rewarded with a pair of tayra coming to the feeding station and feeding on bananas. It was just before dusk, but they showed themselves well and he got some pictures.

The cloud was quite thick set this afternoon and evening and by 8pm the olinguito had still not showed up. The olinguito did eventually show up and we had great views again, but it was alone and we didn't have a kinkajou or opossum join.





## Day 4 Cayambe Coca National Park

### *Wildlife Watching*

This morning we spent the time around Bellavista once again, the rain and cloud had set in from sunrise and around the feeding station early this morning there was a pair of tayra coming multiple times to feed on the bananas. We had great views in good light as they climbed up to eye level, they were very relaxed and offered wonderful views. There was the normal collection of birds around the lodge this morning too, the cloud and rain was heavier this morning than previous mornings and we stayed around the lodge, packed up and rested before leaving after lunch and heading higher up and into the paramo.

On the way out of Bellavista we stopped to look a female Andean cock-of-the-rock on her nest on an overhanging rock face next to the road. The rest of the 4 hour drive was uneventful, the views of the rugged paramo got closer and closer until we were then driving through them and heading closer to our home for the next week. The town of Pampallacta, located on a hot spring there are thermal baths everywhere, including in each of our hotel rooms. There is nearly always low cloud cover around here as well and this afternoon was no different. After checking in and having dinner we headed out for a little spotlighting. We hit some of the roads just outside and around the park, searching for paramo species. The low cloud was very thick in some places and open in others, so we had some good patches for spotlighting and then other areas where the beam couldn't penetrate more than 5m away. This would become standard for the next week of spotlighting. But we did have some nice sightings, including several rufous-bellied nightjars and a nice perched barn owl above the grass looking for rodents. But the undisputed highlight and very possibly the rarest sighting of the trip was a colocolo. This is a small spotted cat which is widespread in the Andes, it is also part of a confusing taxonomy, some people refer to the colocolo as the same species that also inhabits the pampas grasslands of southern South America and the Pantanal, whilst others (such as Royle Safaris) regard the colocolo as a distinct species from the Pampas cat and Pantanal cat.

However even if you split the colocolo they are still a very variable species. So there are a handful of features we used to define the cat from others (namely domestic cats), firstly we didn't see any other domestic cats near this location and in fact only saw one or two in the entire trip. But more importantly this cat had two cheek strips, a pale throat and belly with markings on it, black stripes on the legs and irregular stripes going diagonally from top to bottom along the flanks. We spotted it just near the road, it stood and curiously looked at us for a minute or two before slinking off into the grass and out of sight.

Well not a bad way to start of the next section of this trip.

## Day 5 Cayambe Coca National Park

### *Wildlife Watching*

This morning we met Mario and his brothers Patricio and Claudio, who would work together to take us into the park and hopefully see some of the mammals here. Our first targets were the two large draw cards here; the spectacled bear and the mountain tapir.

As it happened we didn't have to wait very long as Claudio spotted a bear within the first 30 minutes of being in the park, it was quite distant. But we could clearly see the bear as it moved through the paramo looking for bromeliads to feed on. We watched it moving in and out of the patches of forest for a few minutes before Martin got something else on the thermal. Looking through the scope this turned out to be a mountain tapir. It was around 30m away from the bear and whilst the bear seemed oblivious to the tapir the tapir was staring at the bear and waited for the bear to move off a little, before moving off in the opposite direction. The tapir then walked into a small patch of forest, but shortly after disappearing a second bear came on the scene and followed the tapir's tracks exactly and then the tapir burst from the forest and ran up the slope around 20m and stood to watch and wait for the bear, but the bear didn't emerge for a while. Then the tapir started to walk off and then the bear came after it and they moved swiftly towards the top of a small slope and then the second bear which was on the other side of this small patch of forest, started moving quicker and both the bears started to move forward towards the tapir in a pincer movement. Closing in on the tapir until all three animals had walked off and over the ridge and out of sight.

To see two bears within the first hour was amazing, combined with a tapir too and then to see them interact was more than we could ever have hoped for.

We then left the area and went for a walk towards Suchas Lake and along the way several plant species were pointed out to us, including sungfo which is a medicinal plant. Used both to treat stomach pains when boiled into a tea and then also used to open airways with its strong oils. There were also some nice birds around including red-crested cotingas, stout-billed concludides, tawny antpittas and great thrushes. We walked around some of the lake



and then through a stunted forest in a loop back towards the car. We were stopped and scanning as we went and then we got back in the car and continued to stop and scan the hillsides in likely places for bears and tapirs. We also spent a little time on a slope which is good for the Ecuadorian hillstar, and we found it along with other birds including more tawny antpittas and Andean tit-spinetail.

The visibility got worse as the day continued and we arrived at the antennas, it was so bad we couldn't scan anywhere around here, so we headed back down and to the town of Pampallacta, we had lunch and then re-entered the park on the other side. The rain was on and off here and it stopped long enough for us to enjoy a wonderful tapir sighting. It was just on the other side of a small depression and no more than 50m away. We watched it moving through the vegetation, feeding a little and also using its nose and ears to locate us. It could smell and or hear us, but couldn't see us (as they have bad eyesight), but it was not nervous about us. It was relaxed and kept coming closer to us. Sniffing the air and moving its flexible trunk in our direction, we could see the features, white-lips, thick fur and stocky body very well. After a good long time we left the tapir in peace and headed on away.

We came back around the area after turning around to head back out of the park and to the hotel and made a quick stop at the tapir again, it was in the same place and feeding this time. We left and headed out, but on one last scanning stop we had a juvenile spectacled bear. We were able to get to around 40m away from the bear, it was moving at first and then it stopped and sat down and as we watched from our amazing vantage point we could see it was trying to fall asleep. And whilst it was not nervous about us being around it didn't feel comfortable enough to actually fall asleep with us being that close. So we left it to sleep in peace and left the park.

What a day! 3 bears, 2 tapirs, hunting behaviour and then a close sighting of both species. What an incredible day. After dinner we went to look for the stump-tailed porcupine, this species used to be seen quite easily at a nearby thermal spa and resort. But it had not been seen at all for the last 5-6 months. So we spotlighting around the forest, but didn't see anything, the cloud was very thick and visibility less than 10m.



## Day 6 Cayambe Coca National Park

## Wildlife Watching

This morning we entered the park with Claudio again, we had a brief Andean rabbit in a vegetable patch on the way to the park from Pampallacta town and then some nice birds including many great thrushes, shining sunbeam and red-rumped bush-tyrant. It was a little rainy this morning but not too bad as we entered the gate and started our scanning, driving, scanning routine. But the weather quickly turned worse, thick cloud and rain came in and it stayed with us most of the day. This made everything more difficult, but is the risk you run when you are looking for wildlife in the hill altitude open areas of the Andes.

We did however have nice views of tawny antpittas and a very nice blue-mantled thornbill feeding and then perched on the grass. The birding was pretty good today (which was handy as the mammals were very tough as the scanning was next to impossible for most of the day with the thick cloud), and we had another paramo hummingbird species, the great sapphirewing as well as a juvenile broadwing hawk, variable hawks, Andean gull, a small flock of Andean shelducks and a pair of great horned owls perched near the road. One new mammal we did see today was unfortunately dead, but Ewan found the body of an Ecuadorian blackish shrew on the side of the road.

As it happened the only mammal we found today was the Andean rabbit, we had another one cross the road in the afternoon. Because we had had amazing bear and tapir views on the first day we had decided to focus on the other mammals a bit in these days, so things were a little slower than they could have been if we were going hard for bears. Plus the weather had not helped at all today. Claudio was trying hard and we just didn't see anything particularly interesting today. We headed back for dinner and then after dinner drove down one of the entrance roads to the park, getting permission from the ranger to go in and spotlight for around 30 minutes (which was very nice and unexpected from them), but all we saw were a few rufous-bellied nightjars and an Andean rabbit. But when we returned Martin released that his thermal imagers must have dropped out of the car when we stopped to look at a nightjar (damn nightjars) and so him and Kemi rushed back and managed to find it. Then when they arrived back the hotel staff pointed Martin to a stump-tailed porcupine which was wondering around the hotel grounds and was underneath a balcony table and chairs when he found it. The rest of the group were in bed and Martin knocked but didn't get an answer. What a shame as this species is tricky to see and allowed for very close and good views.





---

## Day 7 Antisana Ecological Reserve

### *Wildlife Watching*

This morning we decided to head to another area of paramo, Antisana. Named after its impressive volcano dominating the surroundings. It took around 2.5 hours to get there and as soon as we did we started to see Andean rabbits, there were many of them along the sides of the roads and in the pastures. We had also left the clouds and rain behind and it was lovely and clear in Antisana. We also had some very nice Andean gulls and American kestrels as we approached the entrance to the reserve.

In the reserve the raptors continued with great views of a pair of aplamado falcons perched on adjacent fence posts and then a pair of variable hawks took to the sky. There were many raptors in the sky around us and it wasn't long before we had our first Andean condor, they are well known from Antisana and a good number of Ecuador's ~100 or so population can be found here. There was also a huge number of carunculated caracaras around, on the ground and in the sky. We also found two Ecuadorian hillstar nests in an abandoned house and then started to find some Andean white-tailed deer. In the end we spotted several herds of these deer, some close but most at a distance.

Also around were several black-faced ibis and a large flock of Andean gulls, we then drove to La Mica Lake and walked around, there were many rabbits around the buildings and on the lake Andean shelducks and an Andean coot. There were also deer around the far side of the lake, we had lunch here and then afterwards started our journey back.

The clouds around the Antisana volcano began to clear and we had decent views of most of the snow-capped volcano as we left the plains and started to descend. Near Tambo Condor we had a pair of Andean condors thermalling (they often roost and nest around here and the guano stained rocky haunts were clear to see, even from a good distance. Then at Tambo Condor we had views of a black-tailed trainbearer, tyrian metaltail, green violetear and the giant hummingbird (which is a speciality of this little birding spot).

Back on the main highway we stopped to scan for bears, there is one large male bear who has a territory on the side of the highway and we found him. He was very distant but through the scope we watched as he walked easily up the near vertical slope and started to feed on a bromeliad. We could see him tearing into it, throwing the pieces he didn't want away and eating to his heart's content. The power of the bear as it reduced this huge and tough plant to debris was incredible to see.

Back at the hotel we decided to give Kemi the night off from driving and we stayed around the hotel instead.



---

## Day 8 Cayambe-Coca National Park

### *Wildlife Watching*

This morning Peter and Ewan had some nice birds around forest that backed onto the hotel, including rufous antpitta and brown-bellied swallows. This sky was clearer than previous mornings and we headed into the park via Pampallacta again. We staked out the car park near the entrance gate here as it can be a good place for Andean fox (the only 'commonly seen' animal here we had not seen yet), but nothing. One of the senior park rangers were there and we asked him and he said that they had not seen any foxes here for 15 days and that the collared fox was last known to be on the hills behind the nearby waterfall. So we walked up and beyond the waterfall, it was stunning country, with rolling plains and lakes and steep hillsides forested with dark green stunted trees covered in lichen. But we didn't see any foxes. There were twany antpittas, Andean teals and plain-coloured seedeaters but that was about it.

We then hit the main road again and went back to our routine of driving and scanning and driving and scanning. On one of these scans Martin had something in the thermal and after a while we got it in the scope and what originally looked like a puma (when curled up and the head was hidden behind a rock), turned out to be an Andean white-tailed deer when it stood up and popped its head out from the rocks.

Today was another very quiet day, with only some birds of note, great-horned owl, Andean tit-spinetail, blue-mantled thornbill and plumbeous sierra finch being some of the best ones. But no more mammals today.

We also went out to near the Antennas part of the park at night and only came across one Andean rabbit. It would appear we were destined to not have a view of an Andean fox on this trip.

---

## Day 9 Cayambe-Coca National Park

### *Wildlife Watching*

This morning the weather had set in thicker and more miserable than the previous days and it didn't lift all day long. It made everything difficult, scanning was so hard as the visibility was very poor and the thermal was useless in the



thick cloud. Other than some of the common birds, tawny antpitta, brown-bellied swallows and great thrushes there was nothing to see. We stayed out longer today and staked out the car park near the entrance gate as the Andean fox was seen there last night / evening (shortly after we had left) and it may come back again, but today was a Saturday and the park was busy and the carpark particularly was food of people being noisy, engines running, an especially loud ranger and unsurprisingly the fox didn't show up.

We would have a little change of scene tomorrow and one last chance for the Andean fox tomorrow night, so far it was the only 'common' mammal in the region we had not seen and it would be good to get a sighting.



## Day 10 **San Isidro / Cayambe-Coca NP**

### *Wildlife Watching*

This morning we left Pampallacta early and drove down the eastern slope a little way and to Guango Lodge, it was a quick stop to see the wonderful sword-billed hummingbird. It didn't disappoint and came to the feeders a couple of times whilst we were there. We also had views of red-tailed squirrels and many other hummingbirds including tourmaline sunangel, long-tailed sylph, chestnut-bellied coronet, glowing puffleg, collared inca, fawn-breasted coronets as well as turquoise jays and glossy flowerpeircers. After getting this iconic member of the hummingbirds we continued on the road towards San Isidro. This lodge / reserve is another birding reserve, but it has a salt lick and on occasion tapirs are seen as are the range restricted little red brocket deer. So we headed there for a walk. On arrival we immediately saw a black agouti feeding on corn at one of the feeding stations, this large (well fed) agouti was joined by a second later in the morning. Around the main lodge there were so many hummingbirds, mostly the common and aggressive (to other hummingbirds) the chestnut-bellied coronets but also around here were speckled hummingbirds, tyrannulet, bronzy incas and tawny-bellied hermits. Besides from the birds the walk around to the salt lick (which we couldn't see) was quite unproductive. So we had some coffee and watched an Inca jay and then went for a walk along the road up the slope a few kilometres. It was quite hot when the cloud parted and whilst the forest and road looked prime for mammals, we were at the wrong time and also in the past when people have walked or spotlighted this road, they have more often than not come away empty handed. It is the frustrating thing with these cloud forests, they look perfect for spotlighting and seeing mammals, but the reality is the density and diversity of these higher altitude cloud forests are not very high in mammals. So we had lunch and then returned back to the main road.

On the way back we made a short detour to see a male torrent duck spotted on the Pampallacta River, we then drove on passed the town and towards the first entrance to the park from Quito and beyond to the slopes we saw the large male bear the other day. We stopped and scanned often but there were only a small group of 3 male Andean white-tailed deer that Martin got in the thermal, there was also another animal coming up in the thermal in the grass up the slope, but nothing in the scope, we searched and searched, so we like to think that was a puma curled up in the grass and perfectly camouflaged ☺; we did have an Andean condor soaring near the horizon as it went one way we went the other and returned to the hotel for dinner.

After dinner we went beyond Pampallacta for one last shot at the Andean fox and also spotlighting, but the security guard at Termes Pampallacta had other ideas and didn't allow us through in the vehicle, so instead we walked up the road for around 2km spotlighting and using the thermal. But the cloud cover was so thick we didn't see anything other than an montane myotis hunting moths in the misty gloom.

---

## Day 11 **Quito / Puenbo**

### *Traveling*

This morning we once again met up with Claudio (for the final time) and headed out into the park, we headed to Antennas and had many Andean rabbits around as well as great thrushes and a couple of tawny antpittas, but it was so thick with cloud and very rainy for most of this morning that despite Claudio's efforts we didn't see anything other than common birds, rabbits and one distance Andean white-tailed deer.

So we returned to the accommodation for lunch, said goodbye to Claudio and then headed across the valley to Quito and our night in PBG. As always there was an abundance of birds in the garden, but the heavens opened in the evening and we had our final dinner under the sound of torrential rain.













