

Tomer Ben-Yehuda
Paraguay, Jun 30 – Jul 11, 2022

Preface:

I remember reading Jon Hall's trip report back at my fraternity apartment in St. Louis and thinking: "this is a place I have to get to, soon!". I have an email from back in 2012, where I contacted Paul from Fauna Paraguay, but it didn't get too far (I think the cost was too high for me, at the time).

Fast forward a decade (almost to the day!)...

So when we found out Roni, my wife, was pregnant, I knew I had to get 1-2 big trips in, before having to take at least several months of a hiatus from mammal watching. Just the thought of this is making me a little sad, and I can't wait for my future kid to be half a year old, so that he can get enough vaccinations to take him to abroad for some quality mammal watching. Note that since I couldn't match Alex Meyer's awesome podcast-baby-announcement, here I am announcing it on a trip report! Expecting a January baby boy, Woohoo! 😊

I was aiming for a 2-ish week trip, and after having read Cheryl Antonucci's successful report from Paraguay, I was leaning that way. I also haven't been to South America for almost a decade, and so after consulting with a few good people from Mammal Watching community I've decided Paraguay in July was it!

Unlike Uganda, where I researched the shit of out every national park, and cross-referenced all the species' IUCN distribution maps, I didn't do as much research on Paraguay because I figured if I just gave Paul Smith of Fauna Paraguay the list of mammals I wanted to see – he'd bring me to the right

places to try and see them. It is no coincidence that the day after my trip ended, Paul was awarded a recognition for having the most publications of any biologist in Paraguay! So if you're reading this – Congrats again, Paul! 😊

Our itinerary was semi-dynamic, and with most of the relevant lodges and hotels almost always having vacancy, it was almost up to the last minute to decide where we want to go and for how long.

I will present my day-by-day account, and I believe that for many mammal watchers who are interested in visiting Paraguay in the future, perhaps the final section of “Things I missed and Final Thoughts” could be the most relevant, along with the list of mammals seen, of course!

Day 1: Asuncion to Fortin Toledo

I landed in Asuncion at 5:15, was picked up by Paul Smith of Fauna Paraguay, and headed straight for breakfast at hotel Portal del Sol. After meeting Franci, our driver, cook and excellent spotter, and Simon, the other trip participant, we were off towards the dry Chaco.

En route we saw our first of MANY MANY **Pampas foxes**, and after lunch, we stopped by a bridge where a colony of **Diminutive Serotines** roost during the day. as we got closer to Fortin Toledo Franci spotted the first armadillo of the trip, a **6-banded (yellow) armadillo**. We walked up to it and got some good moments with it.

As we got off the main roads near Fortin Toledo, I tried looking as far as I could into the thick, thorny, dry vegetation at the roadside, and spotted a dark blob walking through it, which turned out to be a **Giant anteater**! I had only ever seen 1 giant anteater previously, on the last hour of light on my last day in the Pantanal, so this was pretty exciting. Little did I know this would turn out to be one of the most common species on this trip. Before it got dark, we also saw our first **Chacoan Maras** and **3-banded armadillos** of the trip. Of course we had to pick up the latter, and see its defense mechanism, that is, using the sides of its shield to snap off anything that gets too close to its bottom side. This could be your finger if you're not careful...



Six-Banded Armadillo



Pampas Fox

After dinner, we went on our first night drive on the roads around Fortin Toledo, where we saw many more 3-banded armadillos, **2 Screaming Hairy armadillos**, plenty more maras and pampas foxes, 1 unconfirmed and 1 confirmed **Chacoan fat-tailed opossum**, 1 confirmed **Chaco Leaf-eared Mouse**, 2 pairs of **collared Peccary**, a single



3-banded armadillo



Simon and a Giant Anteater



Chaco Leaf-eared Mouse (*Graomys chacoensis*)

Molina's hog-nosed Skunk (which also turned out to be quite common in the Chaco), 2 more giant anteaters, one which was carrying a baby, a single **Brown brocket Deer**, a single **Crab-eating Raccoon** in a tree, a single **crab-eating Fox**, and finally a mother and young crab-eating racoons crossing the road behind us. We also saw (and Paul caught) a *Banded hog-nosed snake*, the first of 6 snake species we would see on the trip. We would see all the above mammals again, with the exception of the racoons, which we never saw since the first night.

So with a 14-species 1st day, all hopes were high! Paul also informed us that there has been a 2-year drought in the area. But this could be good or bad for mammal watching...



Chacoan Fat-tailed Opossum



Screaming Hairy Armadillo

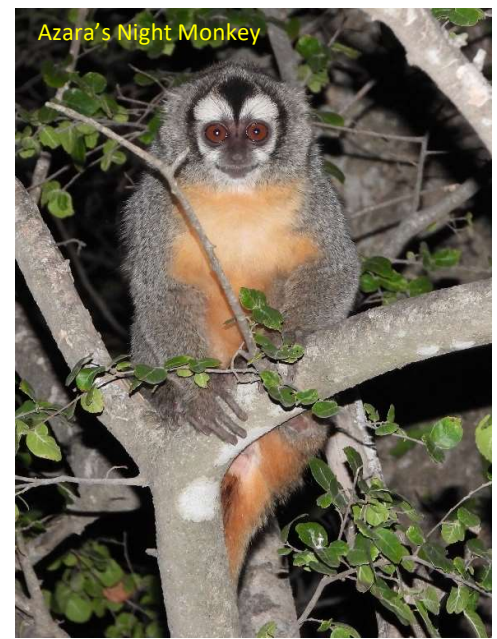
Day 2: Fortin Toledo and Iparoma

We had an early morning drive around Fortin Toledo again, where apart from the regular maras, we spotted our first **Yellow-toothed Cavy** in a small bush near the road. There is also an area nearby the cemetery-like memorial where Chacoan (Conover's) tuco-tucos seem to have many active burrows.

A portion of the morning was spent playing callbacks for Scimitar-billed woodcreeper and a couple of other birds. The only other interesting thing to note this morning was a dark animal running through the grass, which we were never able to identify. Of course my brain immediately screamed "Jaguarundi!", but my logic says it was most likely not one.

Early afternoon we went out "digging" for tuco-tucos, excavating seemingly fresh burrows and placing traps at their entrances. Paul had mentioned that unlike the Pilar Tuco-tuco which perfectly fit inside the trap, the Chaco or Conover's Tuco-tuco is probably too large for this trap. We stayed around for 20ish minutes and then gave up, collecting the traps and heading back before our afternoon activity.

In the afternoon we drove over to Estancia Iparoma, not far from the town of Filadelfia, where **Azara's night Monkeys** are pretty much guaranteed. The owners of the ranch are also very ecologically-aware and trying to become somewhat of an eco-ranch but according to Paul, since most of the forest is cut down on the property, there is not too much else there in terms of wildlife. We arrived before dark, waited, and sure enough as soon as it became mostly dark I saw out of the corner of my eye the first monkey silhouette running up a tree branch. The monkeys here are not shy at all, but apparently they're completely wild. In fact, there used to be 3, and a 4th one found its way over here a



Azara's Night Monkey

few months back, which helped me feel like I was watching genuine wildlife and not a tourist attraction or a randomly-displaced population.

On the way back we found a road which Paul has never spot-lit before, which seemed potentially promising but all we saw there were 3 leaf-eared mice, Pampas Foxes and Maras. So we drove back to the Fortin Toledo area, where we found yet another Giant anteater, a single Screaming Hairy Armadillo, the first **Tapeti** of the trip, and foxes. There was one small, slender black & white animal which quickly disappeared into a burrow as soon as we shined the light on it. From the shape and slenderness I swore it was a Grison (even though I know they're diurnal). So I asked to turn off the engine and lights. I only turned on the thermal scopes and started squeaking. When that didn't work, we waited with the scopes. After a while it finally emerged. Adrenaline-fueled, we turned on the torches only to re-identify it as another Molina's hog-nosed skunk. Damn! At least the patience proved itself and we were able to know for sure 😊.

After the official night walk was over, Simon and I hiked around the main roads of the farmland behind our cabin, finding several more 3-banded armadillos (everywhere!), maras and foxes of course, and the usual *Chaco owl*, which was the most common owl species of the trip.

Day 3: Fortin Toledo and Teniente Enciso

This morning we took one of the trails in the nature reserve adjacent to the Peccary breeding enclosures. The morning started off with a pair of Collared Peccaries and the usual Maras. While Paul and Simon were playing bird calls using the Bluetooth speaker, I continued alone down the trail quietly, spotting the first **Lowland Tapir** of the trip. I tried to get their attention, and after a couple of attempts I got them to join me, and we were able to re-locate the tapir in the forest so that everyone could see it through the thorny bush.



After breakfast we hit the roads of Fortin Toledo again. Much of the morning was spent birding, which surprised me quite a bit, but I tried to stay focused and spotted a **Greater Hairy Armadillo** on the road ahead. While this wasn't a 'lifer' for me, we had a good time with it with some close prolonged views.



Before lunch Simon went alone to dig for Tuco-tucos again. As it hadn't proven effective the previous day, I chose to take a nap. When he didn't get back in time for lunch, Paul and I drove over to search. Incidentally, we ran into him as he had just started walking the wrong way from the lodge by accident. This was a lucky chain of events: as soon as we pulled up, we noticed little sand being thrown out of one of the burrows on the opposite side of the

road from where he tried digging. Clearly, there was some Tuco-tuco action going on there! We quietly positioned ourselves in an angle overlooking the burrow, and sure enough – the inquisitive **tuco-tuco** came almost completely out of the burrow, allowing us to take pictures and videos, and positively identify it **Conover's Tuco-Tuco**. This was a cool and refreshing new species for me, as I have never seen any species in the tuco-tuco family (as Alex Meyer calls it – a Family Lifer!)



Around 15:00ish we started our drive to Teniente Enciso National Park, which is roughly 3 hours away. There were 2 targets for this area:

1. Plains Viscachas, which emerge after dark from their road-side burrows, and
2. White-lipped Peccary which frequent the water pond by the ranger station.

Reading about this place in retrospect, Teniente Enciso is also apparently good for pumas as well. But we weren't going to spend the night there for a few reasons. Paul told us that in order to make the accommodation better for his clients, he previously donated air conditioning units and a fridge to the rangers, which they could use for themselves, but his only request was to be able to enjoy them when he brings visitors. Apparently, they took the air conditioning units to their private homes, leaving the shitty, non-working ones in the guest accommodation, which gets miserable in the 40°C summer time. Furthermore, one of the rangers took the fridge into his own room and wouldn't free it up to Paul and his guests when they arrived... I totally understand the frustration. Regardless, 3 hours each way is a long way to drive on a single afternoon/evening, and almost guarantees you no time for a spotlighting session on this night.

On the drive in we saw another brown brocket deer.

We arrived before dark at a field where plenty of Viscacha burrows are present. There was some nice Latin pop and Bossa Nova music coming from the adjacent farm house, which, combined with the nice weather and a cold drink as we waited for it to get dark, made me want to bust some Latin dance moves which would probably be embarrassing in any situation other than waiting for Viscachas in the middle of the Paraguayan Chaco. As soon as it became dark, *burrowing owls* came to visit, and finally the **Viscachas** were visible with the thermal scope, but immediately upon shining the light on them they ran straight into the burrow. I was only able to get blurry photos. But we had to leave soon to get to the ranger station and see if the herds of white-lipped peccary arrived at the water pond.

When we arrived at the ranger station (which is only like a 5-minute drive from the Viscacha fields), we were told that the peccaries didn't show up the night before. Paul had been in touch with the rangers, who informed him 2 nights ago that the peccary were there. So it was worth it to try and wait. There are lots of lights and the rangers aren't particularly quiet, but they say that the peccaries don't care.



At one point, Paul walked off and then came back telling us there was a cooperative skunk on the hiking trail. So we followed him back to the trail from which he had just returned. We didn't see the skunk, but we did hike a 30-ish minute hiking trail with our thermal scopes. On that hike we found a few cavies, a tiny mouse which was later identified as a juvenile **Pearson's Chaco Mouse**, a few more tapetis and a pretty cool looking *Tropical Screech Owl*.

The only other mammal of note were apparently obvious **Silver-tipped myotis** flying around, which Paul pointed out to us, while on the trail.

Back at the ranger station, the peccaries still hadn't shown up, and so while waiting, I asked to go back to Viscacha site for a picture. We did drive back there for a couple of minutes, but with the music still on loud (as much as I enjoyed it), they were too weary. We would try again for a final time before leaving the area. Long-story-short, an additional half an hour of waiting back at the ranger station yielded no peccary, and we were going to go on a short spotlighting drive. I asked to go try for the viscachas one last time for a decent record shot, but this would compromise the night drive. I was willing to accept it, as we were would have had 30-minute



Pearson's Chaco Mouse



Tropical Screech Owl

night drive anyway, and I preferred to get a decent, recognizable picture as plains viscacha is a cool-looking little beast. Finally, we went back to the field, and with the music off, the viscachas were out and less shy. I was able to get a couple of decent shots. While looking for the viscachas, I noticed another bright little animal in the scope, but it was inside one of the random tires on the field. It turned out to be yet another immature Pearson's Chaco mouse, a mouse that would become quite common from this

moment on.

The drive back to Fortin Toledo was long and yielded several 3-banded armadillos on the road, as well as Pampas foxes and a single crab-eating fox. But after this long day, I fell asleep for most of it.



Another Pearson's Chaco Mouse

Day 4: Fortin Toledo



Collared Peccary

This morning we hiked the trail in the small reserve next to our cabin, seeing only the regular species including a single collared peccary which actually posed for a quick pic.

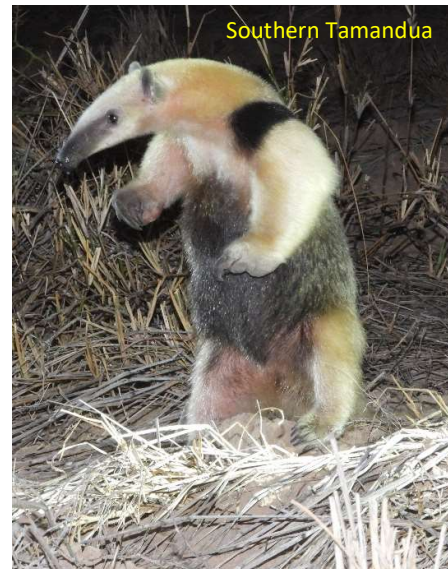
Since today was Sunday, Paul thought there would be little traffic on the "main road" outside the Fortin Toledo area. This is a wider road, so we gave it a try. We drove it after breakfast and it was quiet indeed, but mammal-wise, we only

saw a dead crab-eating fox. We then found a side-road which had forest on both sides, so we thought it could be a good place to drive. Along the drive we did 2 brown brocket, and a water hole half way through the road, which we thought to check back at night.

In the afternoon, Paul received permission to access another water reservoir near Fortin Toledo, which was on a private farm. One of the Chacoan Peccary researchers informed him he has seen the peccaries drinking from it a few days ago. We went there in the afternoon accompanied by Marylin (owner of Estancia Iparoma) and her 2 guests, in search of the Peccary and the potential Capybaras, but found neither. As we pulled up to the water reservoir we found a single Greater hairy armadillo, as well as tons of Yacare caimans and Tapir tracks everywhere. There is a hill overlooking the water reservoir, so we thought we could just sit and wait until dark. Unfortunately, around 17:00ish, 2 trucks came in to pump water from the reservoir, so we left and thought to come back at night when it's quieter.

After dinner, we went back to the water reservoir. Having seen the trucks pumping water from it earlier on, I wasn't very optimistic about this place, and thought it would be unproductive. However, I was happy to be proven wrong, when on the drive in we found a **Southern Tamandua** in the field – a lifer for me. We walked up to it spent some quality time before leaving it be.

We continued to the water reservoir and sat down for about 20 minutes or so, seeing no mammals. So we decided to go back out to the side road we had discovered earlier that day, to see if we can turn up anything new. But we drove up and down that road for a couple of hours, and only saw fleeting glimpses of tapir in the dense bush roadside, as well as 3-banded armadillo and tapeti. We also had several roadside rodents which went mostly unidentified as they scurried away into the dense bush along the narrow road. We had determined that this road was a bit too narrow and with tall, dense roadside bush, which made driving it at night unproductive. After 4 full days at Fortin Toledo, we also determined that we had pretty much squeezed out most of the mammals that could be expected to see there. So we would drive to Defensores del Chaco the following day.



Day 5: Fortin Toledo to Defensores del Chaco

We had another early morning drive which yielded nothing new. But Paul saw an animal hopping across the road, which we missed. He thought it may have been a tayra.

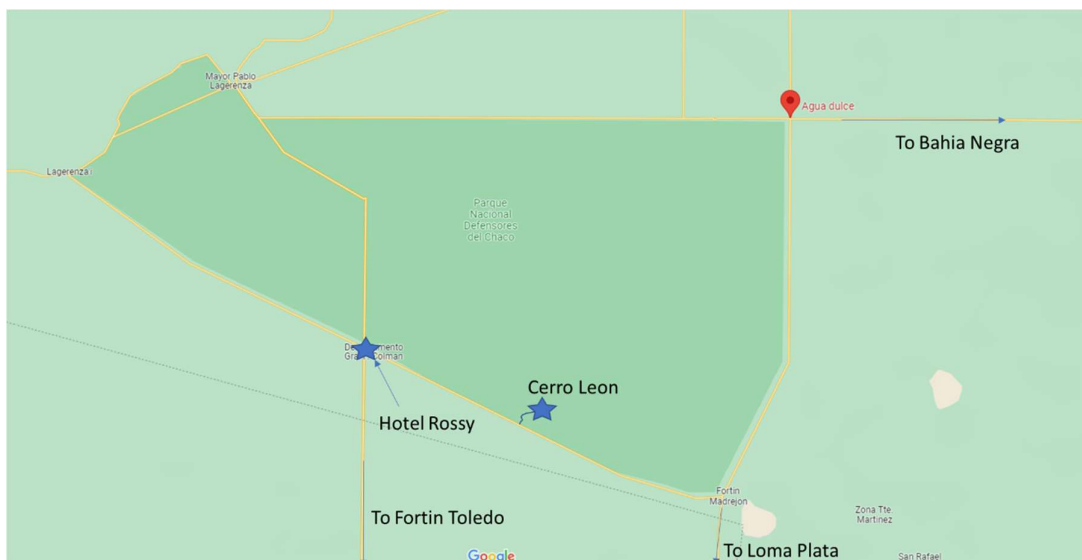
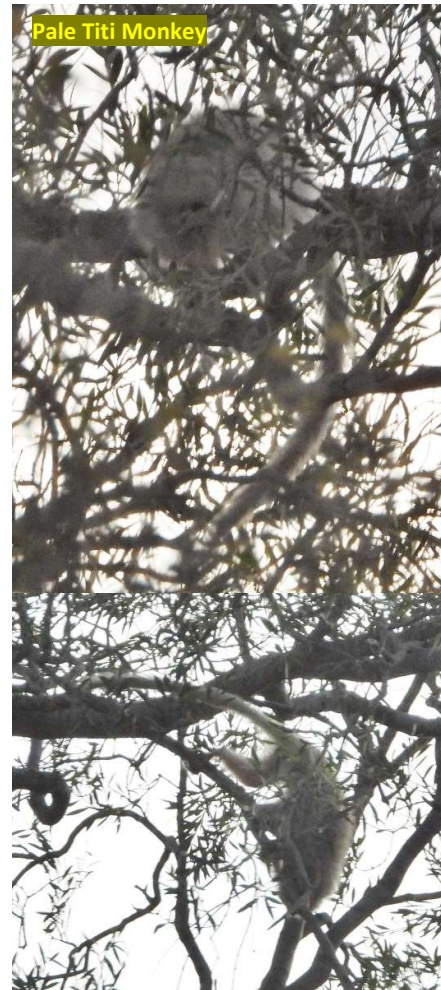
After lunch we started the long drive to Defensores del Chaco, where we were going to stay at the very newly-built Rossy Hotel, located near the military station that's on the same road that goes from Madrijon to Cerro Leon.

The drive in is along a very long road which has typical Chaco scenery on both sides. We drove pretty slowly, hoping to bump into a jaguarundi or Chacoan peccary. But alas, it was a windy day with dust-clouded roads, made even more dust-cloudy by occasional vehicles. We drove for hours not seeing any animals, until right before the sun came down, Franci spotted "mono titi!", so we were able to

get out of the car and get brief views of the **Pale Titi monkeys**, before they skittishly descended from the roadside trees and disappeared deeper into the forest.

As it got darker, we were still a couple hundred kilometers from Defensores, and so we had to drive faster. But we still had high hopes. In retrospect, this road could be good for animal spotting, as there were some open grassy road-side fields surrounded by virgin Chaco habitat. Soon after dark, Paul saw a roadside animal which he thought was a Puma but turned out to be just another Pampas fox. We also spotted another Crab-eating fox on the way to the hotel.

The hotel was indeed so new we had to remove the thin plastic film off the screens and AC controller. But it very quickly became apparent to us that this is a money-laundering business, and not a genuine ecotourism hotel. The website mentioned that there is a restaurant on-site, and Paul had texted them to ensure that the restaurant is open. They assured him that it was. However, when we arrived, it turned out not only is the restaurant not open, the cook is in Asuncion and “would be back tomorrow”. Upon speaking to the hotel owner, it was apparent that he couldn’t care less about whether we were hungry or whether we were disappointed to find the information we received as being false. I think he was more suspicious of what we were doing there for 2 full nights. Unfortunately, thinking there is a restaurant on-site, Paul and Franci only brought food for sandwiches, which would be our food for the next few days, at least 2 meals a day. The hotel agreed to make us “breakfast”. This was fine by me, but of course in the future I’d recommend bringing food if one was to stay that the place. I know Paul was deeply disappointed with this place, and the fact that they only had electricity starting in the afternoon and going throughout the night. But in all honesty, if one comes prepared food-wise, the location is actually very good, as it’s in an intersection which has 4 roads, all which cross through great habitat. The road going Southwest goes 30km to Cerro Leon, and continues another 50 to Madrejon. The road going directly North crosses through the park, and eventually intersects the road which continues East to Agua Dulce and eventually to Bahia Negra.



This evening, after a sandwich dinner, we headed out on the road which goes to Cerro Leon. I had a problem with my thermal scope: it would only work when connected to the car cigarette lighter. The special batteries I bought wouldn't charge for some reason (I later found out it was the charger). So I could only use mine from the back of the truck, but would have to put it down and use the flashlight as soon as we got down. But getting down turned out necessary for every animal spotted throughout the evening, as we only spotted rodents this evening. In some regards, in such thorny and thick vegetation, a thermal scope is both a blessing and a curse. That is because you see rodents or mouse opossums light up in the scope every 2-3 minutes on the roadside, but they all turn out to be pretty much the same species over and over, which include previously-seen rats, mice, cavy, tapeti and today's new addition: **Paraguayan Punare (spiny rat)**. While we didn't get any good pictures of Paraguayan Punare, we saw them quite a few times throughout the evening alongside the road toward Cerro Leon.

But in order to identify each individual rodent or mouse opossum in the thick bush you go through a 5-10 minute ritual which involves: spotting it in the thermal scope, calling out "stop", reversing, relocating the animal as it's moving through the underbrush, so you need to get out of the car, walk up to it, wait for it to come out of its burrow or try to get a few meters into the thorny bush in order to get a view as it's moving away from the road. And at the end of each of these rituals, 50-70% of the rodents get identified, and (so far) 100% of them are repeats.



Paraguayan Punare (*Thrichomys pachyurus*)



Yellow-toothed Cavy

Personally, I was getting a bit concerned as it was getting into half-way through the trip and we still hadn't seen many of the targets I had listed on the initial trip post on mammal watching. With still a week left, I was afraid that if we keep spending most of our time chasing after non-obliging rodents and potentially-new nightjars, then we wouldn't really have a chance of finding cats, or other "rarer" targets that Paraguay is generally known for.

Around 1:30am we turned around, gunning it back and only seeing the odd 3-banded armadillo on the road.

Day 6: Defensores del Chaco

Having gone to sleep at 2:30ish, we didn't go on an early morning ride. The Rossy Hotel owner did arrange a "breakfast" for us which consisted of deep-fried Chipa with a side of strawberry jam and a Cocido coffee-like drink. There was a pair of *turquoise-fronted amazons* that became way too habituated around the hotel, landing on our shoulders and heads as we were eating. It was funny and cute, and entertained us as we had our breakfast.

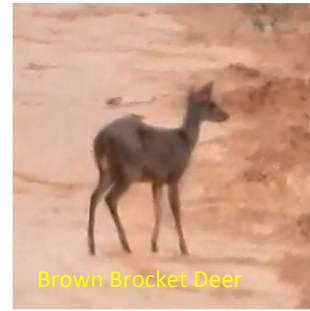
After breakfast we drove the road that goes straight North. We did find fresh ocelot footprints that went alongside the road for almost a kilometer, but other than maras and brown brockets, we saw no mammals. But I noticed that this road had more open terrain extending a few meters from the road on either side, before getting into thick bush. So we thought to try it at night.



Afternoon we were going to drive up to Cerro Leon, have dinner there and then drive back slowly, and then exploring the other road we drove in the morning. On the way to Cerro Leon we saw Brown brockets and Maras again. We drove to a bridge where a Jaguar previously lived under, which also used to be a good place for the titi monkeys. But not finding anything of interest, we headed to Cerro Leon. On the drive in, we stopped at an abandoned house/station, where we found a rodent which we initially thought was new but turned out to be Chacoan Leaf-eared Mouse, confirmed by Pablo Teta, Paul's rodent expert. After dinner at the Cerro Leon parking lot we drove back, spotting several tapeti and cavy on



the small road but without stopping for them. Back on the main road, we turned towards Madrejon and found 2 more groups of Azara's night monkeys, and a crab-eating fox among the odd maras, tapetis, mouse opossums and rodents. Once we got back to the intersection with the army post, we took the other road that goes North, as planned. But that evening we only saw more tapetis, cavies and a single Diamond-backed flame snake.



Day 7: Defensores to Loma Plata

Today we had an early breakfast and then had a very long drive to Loma Plata, driving initially the entire road to Cerro Leon and continuing to Madrejon. Unfortunately we didn't see any mammals of note that morning, but we did spot a toad-eating snake on the road and some birds.

At Madrejon ranger station we looked in abandoned houses and found 2 colonies of **Greater round-eared bats**. We also had a look at the supposed accommodation, which Paul doesn't really like to stay at because it's often used by truckers with hookers, and isn't the most clean of all places. I agree with Paul's assessment. But in retrospect I may have considered staying there (if we had brought bed sheets, etc.) since this area had some ponds rather than the ultra-super-mega dry part of the park where we stayed. Again – it's all a matter of luck. But it's just a hunch.

We headed straight South from Madrejon, toward Loma Plata, stopping for lunch at a small gas station restaurant. We did have some hopes of mammals crossing the road, as Paul's most



recent experience with a very, very freshly road-killed Giant Armadillo was on this road. However, it was super windy again today, which wasn't in our favor.

Around 16:00ish, we were getting a little closer to Loma Plata (still over an hour drive) the vegetation seemed a little greener, and less arid. At one point Paul announced "Tomer, this is Grison area," which was exciting to hear.

We made it to Hotel Loma Plata Inn, which is a nice hotel right near the center of town. After a Chinese buffet dinner at a local restaurant, we headed out on country roads toward Tunacojai (a place I can't locate on Google Maps, but Paul knows where it is). There was some traffic on the main roads initially, but then we got on side roads and started spotting wildlife in semi-open, semi-forested farmlands. We saw mostly foxes again, owls (which were numerous throughout the trip including *Chaco owl*, *Great horned owl*, *Tropical Screech owl*, the occasional *Burrowing owl* and a *barn owl*), several more roadside mice, and the second Southern Tamandua of the trip. We ended at 23:30 and headed back to the hotel.

Day 8: Loma Plata and Laguna Capitan

On day 8 of 12 we still hadn't seen many of my mammalian targets. Often throughout the trip I found myself wondering "when will it be my turn?", but today I felt like my turn has come. It really felt like Grison was the sole focus of this morning (we didn't even stop to play any bird calls).

We drove to Laguna Capitan, where early morning we only saw a sick-looking pampas fox. Because of the drought, even the salt lakes were drying out, and you could clearly see the footprints of large herds of white-lipped peccary on the dry lakebeds. There were flocks of *Chilean Flamingos* in the wet lakes, and we stopped to identify different swans and wading birds. But around 8:30am we made a turn and quickly saw a small animal running across the road, which both Paul and I thought could be a Grison. We quickly parked the car on the side of the road, got out, walked toward where we thought the animal went into the bushes, and started squeaking. AMAZINGLY and beyond any expectations, a **Lesser Grison** appeared out of the bushes and was wearily moving towards us! It got in-and-out of the bushes and played hide-and-seek with us for a while. But as long as I was squeaking (I had been practicing for this exact moment!) it was intrigued and made eye contact with me, peering over vegetation and keeping safe proximity from me. I sneaked in a few pictures, but I was mostly elated as this was one of the top 3 targets, and secretly, one of the animals I was most hoping to see on the trip! I know it's not hard to find in other places such as La Palma in Argentina, but the adrenaline I got from the encounter reminded me of why I love mammal watching. What a cool fucking critter! And we really had a moment, the grison and I.



We continued around the Laguna Capitan area, and right before getting on the main road back toward Loma Plata, we found another active Conover's tuco-tuco burrow with sand being thrown out. We waited outside the burrow but never saw the animal. We got back to lunch in a local steakhouse where we had a celebratory beer for the Grison. This afternoon we had a nap, after which we had an early dinner and headed back out towards Tunacojai area. We were going to pick up where we left off the previous night. Once we turned onto the road that goes to the so-called Tunacojai area, we saw (among tapeti and cavy) a large animal on the road in the thermal scope. It was still pretty far, and we never made it close enough to identify it. Based on the size I was pretty sure it was a tapir. When we got to a sharp right-turn in the road, we only had about 15 minutes left to the night drive, and Paul asked us if we should turn with the road or go back. I suggested we use the 15 extra minutes to make the turn and continue as long as we have. This turned out to be an excellent decision, as only 2-3 minutes down the road we thermal-scoped an animal which turned out to be a **Geoffroy's cat**. We didn't have excellent nor prolonged views of it, but it was most definitely the cat we were after. The number 1 target of my trip!

On the drive back we were discussing the encounter in excitement, and I was trying to recall all the features to convince ourselves that it was indeed that species. But as we were talking about it, another **Geoffroy's cat** dashed across the road, only a few meters in front of the car! Now this one was very clear and unobstructed, but quick as it dashed across the road from left to right in 2 seconds and disappeared into the vegetation on the right. I was still happy with the 2 encounters.

Further down the road, we saw a 3rd tamandua for the trip, close to where we saw one the previous night, which made me wonder whether it was the same individual. We got out and walked up to it, and enjoyed close views but without disturbing it too much or taking pictures.

Day 9: Loma Plata to Chaco Lodge, and then ?

We had a plan for today, but we had to make a decision for the 3 days we had left afterwards. Today's plan was: morning in Laguna Capitan and afternoon/evening around Chaco Lodge. But what's next?

Simon and I agreed that having seen what we've seen so far, Chacoan peccary and maybe a puma would be the targets we would try to focus on. Jaguarundi apparently can pop up anywhere and there's not really a place to search for it. Of all the options, we all agreed to return to Fortin Toledo. In retrospect I may have returned to Defensores or even Teniente Enciso. But the latter was pretty much out of the question because the Chaco Rally was taking place there, and it would be full of noisy, drunk people. Of course we still hadn't visited Bahia Negra nor Tres Gigantes, but Chacoan Peccary isn't likely in that area, and specifically Tres Gigantes station in the Paraguayan Pantanal was inaccessible due to the low water levels. Fortin Toledo does have some wild Chacoan peccary which sometimes come near the breeding enclosures, and pumas are possible.

This morning we returned to Laguna Capitan, where we first stopped back at the active tuco-tuco burrow area. There was one active, throwing sand. I, personally, was very satisfied with our previous sighting of this species, but I went along with it, so we waited around for like 20 minutes a little downwind but with a view into the burrow. We never did see the animal. Eventually we continued to the salt lagoons where we again saw the *Chilean Flamingos* and other wading birds. But no new mammals.

After an early lunch, we took a long afternoon siesta in our cute and comfy hotel in Loma Plata. Around 3:30pm we would take off towards Chaco Lodge, which is a privately-owned ex-lodge that's located near a large salt lagoon which features tons of flamingos in the right season. It's a shame that the lodge itself is so neglected because the location is potentially seriously great. There's a huge (now dry) lagoon, pristine Chacoan habitat engulfing the deserted road, with some visibility into the forest itself, unlike in Defensores. In addition, the lagoon near Chaco Lodge itself was a scenic location, with its beautiful dry cracked earth fields, dotted with bushes and gorgeous sunset – very reminiscent of some places I've seen in Africa. There is also an African-style observation tower with what looks like an accommodation with a balcony and one hell of a view. I was half-jokingly talking to Paul about buying the place and actually turning it back into a lodge! Mind you, this is the (very very) dry season. In wetter times the lagoon is full, with Flamingos and other birds, and animals probably come to drink. Meanwhile, the abandoned, badly deteriorating lodge hosts a colony of **Common Vampire bats**. We were able to access this private property thanks to Paul's connections.

After seeing the bats, we continued through the property to the lagoon. On the way there we played-back and called-in another one of the most sought-after LBJs of the area (I can't remember which one). Upon reaching the dry lake, we drove around in our 4X4 (the only way you can really navigate the dry lakebed), seeing plenty of footprints in the dry ground. The advantage of this area is that it's open and from the height of the back of the truck you can spot animals pretty far away. But we didn't see much. It was a beautiful location and sunset, nonetheless.



Common Vampire Bat

We stopped at a section of a lagoon which had a small pond with water, which Paul thought may have greater bulldog bats. There were no bats, but we stopped for dinner. As we drove through the dry lakebed it became apparent to me how easily one could get forever lost in that dry, monotonous lake. But luckily Paul had a GPS with us the whole time, and he also knows the area fairly well. After 30-40 minutes of driving through the lakebed, being able to scan the open area with the thermal and only finding 2 foxes, I asked if we could go back and try the very promising road in. It turned out to be a good decision. On the way back toward the main road we saw another couple of 3-banded armadillos, and a mara once we left the gate. After a few minutes of driving, we smelled a very foul smell, not of the skunk this time, but of a herd of white-lipped peccary. There were obvious fresh peccary footprints of a large herd, and in-between them, as if following them, were the fresh prints of a puma. A few minutes of very slow driving down the road, the smell became so foul that it felt like we were in the middle of the herd. We got out of the car and walked toward the roadside forest. Suddenly we started hearing the unmistakable jaw clinks of the **white-lipped peccary**. It wasn't just like 1 or 2 animals, it was clearly an entire herd, and we could hear and smell how close they were, but we never got a sight of them in the dense bush. They must have been no more than 50 meters in. I have to include them on the list as an un-numbered species, since we definitely experienced them, only not with the sense that "counts".

Throughout the next hour or so of driving along that road, we saw another giant anteater, hog-nosed skunk, a few maras, foxes and finally another Geoffroy's cat. I even got a terrible record shot of the cat, which was enough to make me happy!



About 20:30 Paul said he wanted to switch locations and try Laguna Capitan for the chance to find a capybara and potentially greater bulldog bats. I was personally surprised since the current place seemed productive, and I thought we should continue to explore it. Also, I wouldn't go out of my way to try to see a capybara in Paraguay, as I don't think the Chaco is the place to go if one wanted to see this otherwise-abundant species.

Long-story-short, we "gunned it" from Chaco Lodge road to Laguna Capitan (an hour and a half plus/minus) but didn't

end up seeing either "target". From there, we went back to our Hotel in Loma Plata to pick up the luggage and continued back to our cabin in Fortin Toledo.

Day 10: A different kind of Mammal Encounter

Today started out with an early-morning drive toward the water hole on the private land – the same one we had visited before. When we first left our accommodation and passed by the main house, we saw a truck with 2 white people who waved at us and suspected they may be mammal watchers too. This would later turn out to be true...!

As we approached the water hole we did see fresh puma tracks, possibly from this morning, right near the car park, so we had high hopes. But we ended up not seeing any mammals.

After breakfast we hiked the trail in the Fortin Toledo reserve again, but we didn't see any new mammals either.

Marylin, the owner of Estancia Iparoma (the place with the guaranteed night monkeys) has informed Paul that her husband has seen a "small" tuco-tuco species on their land. Paul thought this could turn out a rediscovery of the Chaco tuco-tuco (Ctenomys dorsalis), which is only known from 1 specimen collected in 1900. We had several conversations about the validity of this loose lead, where Paul took a more optimistic stance while I was the skeptical one. Paul did find a reliable place to see the otherwise extremely rare Pilar tuco-tuco which started from similar local knowledge, but this was a-whole-nother level. Personally, despite the very slight chance of rediscovering the species and being in all the local (and some global) papers, I felt we would have a more realistic chance of finding some of the mammals on my wish if we dedicated our time to it, as opposed to digging up unknown burrows. But we agreed that to only dedicate the hottest part of 1 day to this lottery shot.

Unrelated, the real surprise of this afternoon's visit to the Estancia came in a different kind of "mammal" encounter. As soon as we pulled up at the hotel and restaurant, we ran into Marilyn the owner, as well as the two people we saw earlier this morning (the ones we thought looked like mammal watchers). They introduced themselves as Romy and Rob Jansen, which sounded very familiar to me. Suddenly it all came back to me: Alex Meyer had mentioned that a guy named Rob Jansen supposedly e-mailed me about Paraguay since we would be there at the same time. I never received the e-mail, and being so busy before the trip with work, family events and my newly-

pregnant wife, I never made an effort to figure out what this was all about. This was too bad, as they turned out to be good people, and their enthusiasm for nature in general and mammal watching in particular is unmistakable. I just love when this happens. In the middle of a small ranch in Paraguay, unannounced and unplanned, I can run into people I never met before, and it turns out that not only are we friends on Facebook, we actually have both heard of each other, and were in Paraguay for the same reason! This has now happened to me quite a few times in different countries in the world, and each time it's exciting.

So Rob and Rommy followed us out to the supposed tuco-tuco site, but long-story-short, the burrows seemed old and unused, and despite digging and placing traps we found no rodents.

After an afternoon drive on the property where we found maras, a Pampas fox and a Giant anteater carrying a baby, we had dinner with our new friends. This time I exchanged numbers with the Jansens so that we can exchange information during the short remainder of my visit, and potentially meet up for mammal watching in the future. We saw another Hog-nosed skunk on our drive out.

At night, we went back to the water reservoir, seeing a tapir mother and calf on the way there. The tapirs always bolted when we saw them, and we never got any pictures despite having seen over 10 throughout the trip. Waiting on the hill overlooking the water hole we saw 2 **capybaras**, another giant anteater, and 2 skunks. Then on the way to the cabin we saw 2 more tapirs, another Southern Tamandua (4th one of the trip!), more maras, 3-banded armadillo, Chaco leaf-eared mouse, Chacoan fat-tailed opossum and an un-ID'ed armadillo which was most likely one of the hairy armadillo species.



Capybara



Southern Tamandua

Day 11 – Fortin Toledo

Today was our last full day in the Chaco, so while Simon and Paul took the early morning to go bird-watching with blue-tooth speakers, I decided to give mammal watching another shot. However, neither of us ended up seeing any mammals. They did find their missing woodpecker though.

After lunch we headed back out on the main road, as this again was a Sunday and we thought there would be little to no traffic. For some reason, we took the side-road again that we took the previous Sunday, despite having previously concluded it was too narrow and the forest was too thick. But today put the last nail in that coffin, as we saw 3 different groups of illegal hunters along the road, with their shotguns. At one point Paul recognized the sound of the crested gallito, so we stopped to play back the call, and eventually we were able to see it. However, we saw no mammals on the road. Back on the main, wider road we saw more sign of life with maras, a pampa's fox and another skunk in the later afternoon.

Tonight we gave the water reservoir a final try. We stayed on top of the hill overlooking the water hole for about an hour and a half or so, only seeing a capybara again, as well as 3 encounters with Molina's hog-nosed skunks, one which climbed up the hill and came within inches of us. It never stayed still but I got some blurry pictures of it. Not having produced any of our targets, we laid this



place to rest and decided to hit the roads again. On tonight's drive we saw 3 separate giant anteaters, 3 tapirs total (a pair and a single), 2 encounters with collared peccary, 2 separate brown brocket deer, a single vey tame 6-banded armadillo, a single crab-eating fox, 2 3-banded armadillos, a tapeti and another Geoffroy's cat. We also saw 2 snakes tonight: *Mato grosso lancer* and a *Coral snake*.

Day 12: Driving back home

We took the early morning walking option along the trail, but saw no new mammals. All-in-all, we had concluded that our return to Fortin Toledo may have not been the best decision. I will touch on that in the conclusions section.

On the drive back to Asuncion we stopped by the bridge again near the restaurant where the Diminutive Serotines are seen, as well as previously Greater Bulldog bats (in other people's reports). Simon scanned each and every last crevice and checked each individual serotine to see if it was a different species, eventually coming up with a **Mexican Free-tailed bat**, which according to Paul has never been recorded from this region before.



We made it to Asuncion around 19:00, where we had a quick dinner, and then I ventured out on my own to the mall, using my vocabulary of 9 words in Spanish and a little Google Translate to buy some souvenirs for my wife, family and friends in Israel. Well, the best (and only) souvenir that this expedition yielded were Paraguayan-made alfajores with Nutella.

Things I missed, and Final Thoughts:

Overall, this was a pretty successful trip, and I found more than half of the things I wanted to see, including my top 2 targets, as well as many other cool species I was hoping for.

I wasn't particularly lucky with cats, which generally people see 2, 3 and even 4-5 species of, in Paraguay. And of course Chacoan peccary was perhaps the biggest dip. But my personal let-down of the trip was not seeing a jaguarundi, which I understood was highly likely on this itinerary.

In retrospect, I think that while having some flexibility in the itinerary is good, not having a plan at all and depending solely on Paul's assessment puts too much pressure on him and isn't necessarily the best strategy.

If I could go back, I would insist on staying 1-2 nights in Teniente Enciso which is apparently good for pumas and sometimes Chacoan Peccary. It is also the only place to see the Viscacha.

In addition, I would do 1 or 2 nights around either Fortin Madrejon or Agua Dulce. I don't know much about Agua dulce, except "it used to be only a couple of houses and now it's become a whole town, so the marmosets are no longer easy there". But Madrejon looks like it had slightly different habitat than the even drier area near the army station, where we stayed, 70km further West. It sounds like Defensores del Chaco is in fact the best place in Paraguay to see the Chacoan Peccary, whereas the chance of finding them at Fortin Toledo is much smaller. The road that goes directly south from Madrejon is where Paul has seen Giant Armadillo and Titi monkeys are seen there as well. Like I said, it seems that the area around Madrejon has some water reservoirs not far from it, which is sometimes rewarding to mammal watchers who visit them. It also seems that people who spend enough time at Defensores are generally eventually rewarded with sightings of various cats. I agree with Paul's assessment that staying at the ranger station in Madrejon wouldn't be a very pleasant experience, and I may consider (or recommend) using the kitchen and shower facilities but sleeping in tents. Or at least bringing your own sheets, blankets and pillows.

The last place we didn't visit, which was too bad, was the Paraguayan Pantanal. It sounds like the road from Agua Dulce to Bahia Negra is often productive in terms of ocelots, tayras, grisons, white-lipped peccary, jaguarundis and jaguars. But not Chacoan peccaries. Visiting Tres Gigantes Station down the river from Bahia Negra could yield other species that are also quite common in the Brazilian Pantanal such as Neotropical river and Giant otters, black & white howler monkeys, capybaras, marsh deer etc., plus Pale titis, which are often reliably seen there, and are not easily seen in the Brazilian Pantanal, as far as I know. Personally, having been to the Brazilian Pantanal, I may have decided to intentionally skip Tres Gigantes Station even if it wasn't closed due to low water levels. But missing out on Bahia Negra was too bad.

I should also mention I strongly believe that 3-4 nights in Fortin Toledo is just about the maximum time I would spend there. I think there's a good 14-16 species you can see there with high confidence, but while the other species may be around, it's not the place I would go look. 7 nights in Fortin Toledo yielded a single brief sighting of a Geoffroy's cat and no other cats. Otherwise, we had repeated sightings of 3-banded armadillos, both hairy armadillos, skunks, giant anteaters, tapirs, tapeti, Brown brockets, fat-tailed possum, Chacoan Leaf-eared mouse, a couple of Tamanduas and 6-banded armadillos, and of course many maras and foxes. Note that Paul doesn't ever see grisons in Fortin Toledo.

The jaguarundi can apparently be seen anywhere, but other than the road between Agua Dulce to Bahia Negra, I wouldn't know where to specifically try looking for it. Keep in mind it's diurnal! And so is the grison.

Regarding the Chacoan Naked-Tailed Armadillo – Paul sees them on occasion but only after the rains.

Regarding the Greater Fairy Armadillo – Paul has never seen one. They spend almost all their time underground. But on a slightly related note – Nicholas McPhee of Bolivia's Nick's Adventures may be the person to contact for a remote chance to see one. Also, supposedly, after the rains.

Giant Armadillo remains elusive in Paraguay, but according to Paul, Defensores del Chaco would be the best place to try. He has recently seen a very freshly killed one just south of Fortin Madrejon, with the blood was still fresh (must have been hit a few minutes prior).

Paul has recently found a location in South-Western Paraguay where the critically endangered Pilar Tuco-tuco should be nearly guaranteed on an over-night excursion. He's working on the rediscovery of Paraguayan Tuco-tuco (*Ctenomys paraguayensis*) and potentially Chacoan Tuco-tuco (*Ctenomys dorsalis*).

But despite maybe having a few things done differently, I ended up with a total list of 32 species, out of which 22 were lifers for me, so overall the trip was great!

If anyone is interested to see the "full" album on Flickr, which has way more photos and videos, even of birds and reptiles, the link is here:

<https://flickr.com/photos/benyehuda/albums/72177720301804544>

	Species	Scientific Name	Fortin Toledo	Estancia Iparoma	Teniente Enciso	Defensores del Chaco	Loma Plata / Laguna Capitan	Chaco Lodge Area
1	Screaming hairy armadillo	Chaetophractus velloerosus						
2	Big hairy armadillo	Chaetophractus villosus						
3	Six-banded armadillo	Euphractus sexcinctus						
4	Southern three-banded armadillo	Tolypeutes matacus						
5	Giant anteater	Myrmecophagidae tridactyla						
6	Southern tamandua	Tamandua tetradactyla						
7	Azara's night monkey	Aotus azarae						
8	White-coated (Pale) titi	Plecturocebus pallescens						
9	Plains viscacha	Lagostomus maximus						
10	Lowland yellow-toothed cavy	Gelea leucoplephara						?
11	Chacoan mara	Dolichotis salinicola						
12	Capybara	Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris						
13	Conover's tuco-tuco	Ctenomys conoveri					Kind of seen	
14	Paraguayan punare	Thrichomys apereoides						
15	Pearson's chaco mouse	Andalgalomys pearsoni						
16	Chaco pericote	Graomys chacoensis						
17	Common tapeti	Sylvilagus brasiliensis						
18	Mexican free-tailed bat	Tadarida brasiliensis	Bridge en-route					
19	Diminutive serotine	Eptesicus diminutus	Bridge en-route					
20	Greater round-eared bat	Tonatia bidens						
21	Silver-tipped myotis	Myotis albesens						
22	Common vampire bat	Desmodus rotundus						
23	Geoffroy's cat	Leopardus geoffroyi						
24	Pampas Fox	Lycalopex gymnocercus						
25	Crab-eating fox	Cerdocyon thous						
26	Crab-eating raccoon	Procyon cancrivorus						
27	Lesser grison	Galictis cuja						
28	Molina's Hog-nosed skunk	Conepatus chinga			Seen by guides			
29	Brazilian Tapir	Tapirus terrestris					Probable	
30	Collared peccary	Dicotyles tajacu						
*	White-lipped peccary	Tayassu pecari						Heard & smelled
31	Brown brocket deer	Mazama gouazoubira						
32	Chacoan fat-tailed opossum	Thylamys pusillus						