

Primates in Panama (February 2022)

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Recently a few trip reports about Panama were posted on Mammalwatching.com. So why another trip report about the same country? Well, we didn't follow the itinerary of most of the mammal watchers who stay in the (expensive) Canopy Lodge in the Soberania NP and in the Los Quetzales Ecolodge & Spa in the western mountains of Panama. We went to some places which are not mentioned in other trip reports, didn't book any wildlife guides and still had 7 out of the 8 possible primate species which live in the country. We didn't try for number 8 (Geoffroy's Spider Monkey) as we already had seen it before. We were not accompanied by a guide during this trip and we arranged everything ourselves. We indicate in detail where we have seen the monkeys and do not get stuck in vague descriptions such as 'seen on private property'.

In contrast to the authors of most trip reports on this website, we are no fanatic mammal watchers and are only/mainly interested in primates. We take it easy, spending at least 3 or 4 nights at every location. So it was not a wildlife watching holiday, but a holiday with wildlife watching. That is the reason we don't add a detailed itinerary to this report.

General impression of the country

This was our first trip to Panama and we actually knew little about the country. But after 4,5 weeks of traveling we can recommend the country. We never felt unsafe, although we didn't go downtown Panama city and didn't go to the city Colón, which doesn't have a good reputation.

Panamanians are quiet and timid and do not raise their voices easily. For example, they hardly use their horn in traffic. In short, a great country to travel as a tourist with your own rental car.

Costa Rica is a more often visited country by nature lovers than Panama. The landscape is more diverse and the touristic infrastructure is better (so more touristic and more expensive) than in Panama. On the other hand, the number of primate species in Panama is double that of Costa Rica, so more interesting for us!

Car rental

We rented a car from the international airport in Panama City. When you read the reviews on internet, all the car rental companies try to scam you. And... It also happened to us. We rented a middle-sized SUV, but they gave us a small SUV. It was the same car brand and it was dark at the parking lot. So I just noticed the downgrade 1 day later. We complained, but the car rental company answered the cars are in the same category. Well, with a price difference of 25% on their own website that's a lie.... The good news is that the car was in good condition with low mileages and did the job.

Driving in Panama is easy: the main roads are good (just a few potholes, good road signs) and people don't drive crazy. There are police checkpoints near the border with Costa Rica and en route to Torti in the eastern part of the country. The officers are friendly, check your passport and sometimes your drivers license and give it back to you without asking money. The most annoying thing? The policemen with a laser gun. They are everywhere and if you are speeding, you have to pay the fine on the spot. A few times we were lucky as the car that was driving right in front of us was pulled over by the police. We left Panama without a fine for speeding.

We used Google Maps to navigate as you can download the maps in advance and use the maps offline. It all worked fine although local people prefer Waze.

Weather

February is in the middle of the dry season and in the central part of Panama we had reasonable good weather. But the weather around Volcan in the western mountains of Panama was very unpredictable with lots of wind and a lot of rain in the mountains which are covered in cloud forest.



Pipe Line Road

In Torti (in eastern Panama) we had good weather, but just after we left they had 4 days of pouring rain. So the dry season was not so dry in that part of Panama....

Accommodation

I don't bother you with our itinerary of all the accommodations we stayed, but a few words about these 3 places:

- **Summit Rainforest and Golf Resort** (near Parque Nacional Soberanía). In the weekends this place is crowded with families from Panama City. But during weekdays it's a quiet and relaxed place and we paid just over 50 USD for a room with a beautiful view, a very good breakfast, swimming pool, good Wifi etc. And there is wildlife on the property: Geoffroy's tamarins, Mantled Howler Monkey, Panamanian Night Monkey, Lesser Capibara, Agouti and American Crocodile. And of course lots of birds. So we think a good alternative for the more expensive Canopy Lodge.
- **Refugio Ecologico Mono Feliz (on Burica Peninsula)**. This is the only area in Panama where you have a good chance of seeing the endangered Black-crowned Central American Squirrel Monkey. The Burica Peninsula is in the far southwest corner of the country. Mono Feliz has very simple accommodation and is located on the south coast of the peninsula. We got in contact with Mono Feliz through their contact details on FB. The owner of Mono Feliz got a stroke last year and will probably answer by voicemail as he is unable any more to type messages. There are simple, but clean huts close to the beach. No electricity, no wifi, just a magnificent view. You can cook your own meals in the kitchen for a minimal fee, the kitchen is well organized. If you drive slowly you can get there in the dry season with a small SUV (Hyundai Venue) or a bigger SUV. In the dry season it's not the 4x4, but the clearance of the car which is important. In the wet season you must have a good 4x4 car for the last 5 km. How to get there? First drive to the small town of Bella Vista and ask directions there or follow Google Maps to the Burica Surf Lodge. Mono Feliz is 5 minutes further along the same road, the road ends at Mono Feliz.
- **Hotel and restaurant Avicar** in Torti (whatsapp +507 67460051). Torti is in the eastern part of Panama and the nearest place to stay if you want to see the Brown-headed Spider Monkey. Be aware that the Interamericana to Torti is full off potholes and it takes more time than you hope/think to travel from Panama City to Torti.... The village itself is quite small and pretty poor, but this hotel had very good rooms, a swimming pool, a decent restaurant, hummingbird feeders and a very friendly and helpful owner (Andres). When we asked a few weeks in advance if he knew where to look for the Brown-headed Spider Monkeys he started asking around and by the time we arrived he had arranged an appointment with a local farmer to look for the monkey (see Brown-headed Spider Money).



Cabana with seaview



Last few km to Mono Feliz

Primates seen/places visited

Panamanian Night Monkey (*Aotus zonalis*)

This is not an easy species to find as they are sleeping in their tree cavity during daytime. When we talked to one of the staff of the Summit Rainforest Hotel about our interest in primates, he jumped into a golf car, we joined him and he drove to the entrance of the complex. Just 5 meters from the main road and 5 meters from the entrance gate (on the right side if you face the entrance and your back is towards the main road) is a tree with an obvious big hole in it. Even during daytime (with binoculars) we could see a pair of eyes looking at us. We went back at dusk and the Night Monkeys came out of the tree cavity and disappeared

into the vegetation within a few seconds. According to the member of the staff this is a reliable place for this species and yet so close to the road and the entrance of the resort....

Geoffroy's Tamarin (*Saguinus geoffroyi*)

This species was a bit more difficult than we had hoped for. We just saw it two times during the trip:

- From the lobby in the **Summit Rainforest and Golf Resort** you can see some platforms with fruit. The tamarins visit these feeders (for birds and primates) every now and then, but we saw them just 2 times in 5 days (although road work on a path between the hotel building and the feeders probably have disturbed the tamarins). It's also a nice spot for birdwatching.
- On the road from the entrance to the forest in the **San Francisco Reserve** west of Torti. The entrance fee for the reserve is double this year and is now 20 USD. A bit strange as all the national parks in Panama are free of charge. The unsealed road on the property is full of birds and it's an easy walk. As soon as you enter the forest, the road veers to the left and goes up, very steep!! Some travel reports indicate that the reserve is located east of Torti, but that is not correct. It's located 6 or 7 km west of town.



Black-crowned Central American Squirrel Monkey (*Saimiri oerstedii*)

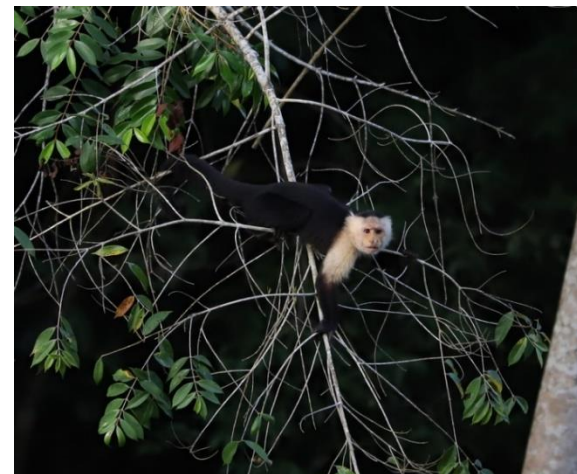
There is only one place in Panama where you can see this endangered species of squirrel monkey: the Burica Peninsula. The remaining forest on the peninsula is fragmented, but there are a few NGO's working on education, reforestation and making rope bridges over the main road. So the future for this species looks OK.

The squirrel monkeys visit Mono Feliz almost daily (but not at the same time) because they can get a snack: bananas. The wife of the owner calls the monkeys when she hears them and then hangs up some bananas for them. The bananas are gone in a few minutes as are the monkeys. They don't hang around Mono Feliz all day waiting for more bananas. I tried to follow the group after they had eaten some bananas, but they disappeared in the forest, moved fast, didn't make a lot of noise and totally ignored me. Mono Feliz supports the group of squirrel monkeys with bananas for more than 20 years, but the behaviour of the group is still normal. I see it as a bonus for the monkeys that they can use well in an area where humans have cut down a lot of forest.



Panamanian White-throated Capuchin (*Cebus imitator*)

We had some difficulties finding this species in Parque Nacional Soberanía during our first visit. As these monkeys are mainly fructivorous they travel bigger distances than howler monkeys (which eat mainly leaves) and are more local. During our second visit to the national park a week later we saw them 3 times on 1 day: one animal along the Pipeline Road, a big group in a fruiting tree along the Camino de Plantación and a nice group along the northern edge of the Gamboa Village. So if you spent some time in the area and pay attention to fruiting trees, you have a good chance of spotting these noisy groups.



Colombian White-throated Capuchin (*Cebus capucinus*)

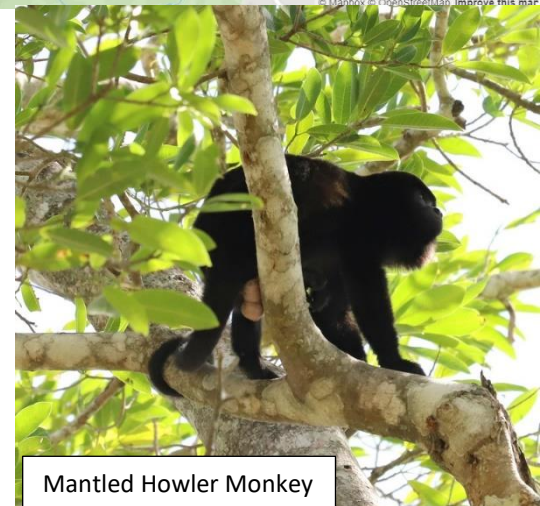
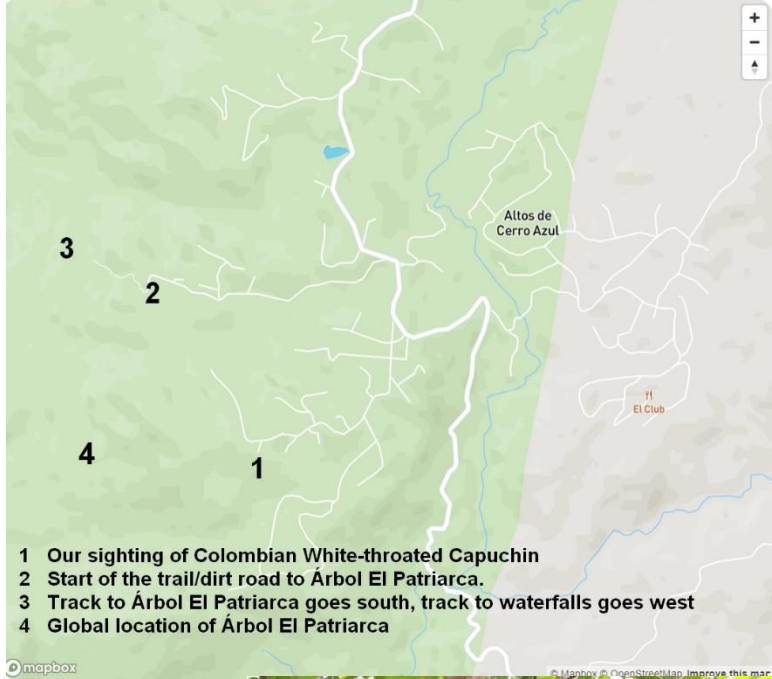
This is a quite difficult species to see in Panama, maybe because of his name 😊. There are just a few sightings on iNaturalist and Observado from this species in Panama. It lives in the eastern part of the country, with Parque Nacional Chagres as its most western distribution. So we just tried for this species by spending a few nights in a nice accommodation in the mountain/holiday village of Los Altos de Cerro Azul. The village actually consists of houses scattered in a forested area. We asked the owner of our accommodation if he had seen this species. He knew the species and said it can be seen in the area of Árbol El Patriarca, a big tree which can be reached along a walking trail/dirt road that starts at the end of Calle Rio Mono.

The first afternoon we walked along the Paseso del Chimboraza and a few hundred meters from the end of this road a track goes south into the forest. We walked this track for just 200 meters when we heard a lot of noise in the trees: a group of monkeys. This turned out to be a group of howler monkeys, but there was also 1 capuchin monkey among them. They were quite far into the forest and a steep slope prevented us from going closer. But the capuchin monkey was curious and came closer to observe us! To be honest, the differences between the 2 capuchin species are small and because of the geographic location it must have been a Colombian White-throated Capuchin Monkey.

Because of the bad weather the next day we didn't walk to Árbol El Patriarca and don't know if groups of capuchin monkeys can be seen there.

Mantled Howler Monkey

This primate species is easy to see (and hear) in and around Parque Nacional Soberanía). If you spent some time on the pipeline Road or the Camino de Plantación you will see this species. We saw it 10+ times in this area. But it is also easy to see elsewhere in the lowland areas of Panama, sometimes even in trees along the main road.



Mantled Howler Monkey

Brown-headed Spider Monkey(*Ateles fusciceps*)

When we planned our holiday, we were not sure where to see this species in Panama as none of the trip reports is clear where exactly this species can be seen. The main stronghold for this species is/was the Chucanti Nature Reserve near Torti. To get to this reserve you need a 4x4 as the roads are sandy and/or rocky.

We booked El Hotel y Restaurante Avicar in Torti for 4 nights and asked the owner in advance about the spider monkeys. He knew the species well and arranged an appointment with a local farmer who has a farm alongside the road from Torti to Platanillo and Rio Pavo. Use openstreetmaps to find these villages as they are not on Google Maps. So not in the mountains at all.... Our expectations were low as there are no reports of seeing the spider monkeys outside the mountains around Torti. But you never know. So we went to the farm (just after Rio Pavo) and had a very warm welcome, although our knowledge of Spanish is minimal and the knowledge of the farmer of English was minimal. We walked for 45 minutes along the river with pasture on one side of the path and high trees on the other side. We saw some Howler monkeys but were thinking if spider monkeys can survive in these areas..... At the meeting of 2 rivers the farmer stopped and started looking around. After a few minutes Jeannette discovered black monkeys and they were not Howler monkeys, but Brown-headed Spider Monkeys! They were alert and slowly moved away from us. We understood from the farmer that a lot of wood is still cut by indigenous people in the mountains, so the suitable habitat for the spider monkeys in the Chucanti reserve is getting smaller and smaller. Since a few years, groups of spider monkeys have settled in the remaining patches of forests along the river in the valley. According to the farmer they stay there all year. We gave the farmer a tip of 20 USD and he was very happy with this. He definitely wants to receive more guests on his farm!

The biggest surprise came on the way back to Torti. First we stopped near a big tree with black primates: Howler monkeys. A few km further on (just north of Platanillo) we saw a lot of black primates in trees along the river, about 100 meter from the road: a group of about 15 Spider Monkeys playing and jumping around in the trees not far from some small houses. Adults, subadults and youngsters!! So it's possible to see the spider monkeys in the area of Platanillo and Rio Pavo.

Other primate species

I already mentioned in the introduction we didn't try for the last species of primate in Panama, the **Geoffroy's spider monkey** (*Ateles geoffroyi*) since we had seen it very well at the Maya-ruins of Thikal in Guatemala and in Costa Rica.

Other mammals seen

We saw some other mammal species during our trip:

- **Lesser Capibara.** It lives in some ponds on the golf course of the Summit Rainforest and Golf Resort. We saw 2 animals in the pond right next to the entrance gate of the resort.
- **Two-toed Sloth.** Seen a few times during the trip.



Brown-headed Spider Monkey



Spider monkeys playing. This picture is taken from the main (asphalted) road from Torti to Platanillo

- **Northern Tamandua.** Seen twice during daylight along the Pipeline Road in the Parque Nacional Soberanía.
- **Central American Aguti.** Very easily seen around the hotel buildings of the Summit Resort. Seen every now and then elsewhere during the trip.
- **White-nosed Coati.** Seen a few times during the trip (Valle de Anton, Pipeline Road) but not as often as in Costa Rica.
- **Nine-Banded Armadillo.** Seen along the Plantation Road in Parque Nacional Soberanía.



Final thoughts

Although the scenery is not as spectacular as in Costa Rica we liked Panama a lot. Why? Because it's less touristic, we felt safe all the time, the people are very friendly and relaxed, the country is easy to travel and the prices of the food and accommodation are reasonable. And... although we organized the trip ourselves we were very successful with finding the primates species we wanted to see!

If you would like to have some information about our trip, please get in contact with us:

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