

Tiputini Biodiversity Station with Cayambe-Coca (Bush Dog, Spectacled Bear, Pygmy Marmoset)

This trip was part of a larger monthlong birding odyssey, during which we also aimed for some much-wanted mammal targets. We got more than we bargained for in many respects. We went with the goal of seeing Mountain Tapir, Jaguar, and Pygmy Marmoset, and predictably dipped on the first two. This report will highlight the areas where we focused on mammals, which included Cayambe-Coca, San Rafael Falls, and Tiputini in Yasuni National Park, having already visited Gareno Lodge and other sites in immediately previous trips (and afterwards continuing on to lead a birding tour in Panama, and thence to the US).

The indisputable highlight was watching three BUSH DOGS playing on the riverbank for a few holy seconds at Tiputini, but we also lucked out with 2 Brazilian Tapirs in 5 days, 7 species of primate, and Spectacled Bear in the highlands.

Tiputini Biodiversity Station is a modest but legendary research center for Amazonian wildlife. It's a full day's travel from the nearest town, but oil drilling has reached just 7km away from the station as of the late 2000s. Birds have been in precipitous decline there since and likely before then, and we found it pretty depauperate compared to our expectations, but many other indicator groups-- frogs, large mammals, and moths-- were diverse and abundant. Field stations are some of my favorite places in the world, with a feeling of being somewhere between summer camp, a monastic seminary, and the wilderness.

We began our trip with bird guide Mauricio Ruano, who had offered to drive us overland to Coca, and would guide us at the station. He is an excellent guide, but the station proved to have guides who were nearly equally competent in birding and definitely equally competent in mammals. Our guide at Tiputini was José of the Yuturi community (outstanding). Our guide and driver in Cayambe-Coca was José Gallardo. Please reach out to me at William Freedberg AT gmail DOT com for contacts for any of these folks.

We highly recommend this trip for Spanish-speakers—we are both high-proficient-- but non-Spanish speakers could do just fine. One station director at Tiputini speaks fluent English and others speak fine English. The directors have 3-week shifts and switch over.

Executive summary:

Day 1: To Coca. Red Howler and White-fronted Capuchin at the defunct San Rafael Falls.

Day 2: To Tiputini. One Brazilian Tapir on the boat ride down.

Day 3: Morning boat trip to the parrot lick yielded BUSH DOG and another tapir. Evening at the canopy tower yielded a saki (Napo Saki seems most likely at this site).

Day 2: Not much, but excellent birds. A guide reports a Jaguarundi, which we doubted.

Common Woolly Monkey on the trails and White-bellied Spider Monkey at the cabins (PM).

Day 3: We miss White-lipped Peccary near the dining hall but get Pygmy Marmoset and one of the Golden-mantled Tamarin complex.

Day 5: Depart Tiputini. We pick up a lightning-fast and unsatisfying view of a giant otter on the way back.

Day 8: After some rest, an Andean Fox (culpeo) on Volcan Pichincha in the Quito city limits.

Day 9: A Spectacled Bear on the road back to Quito after a fruitless day in Cayambe-Coca.

Day 10: Some Andean White-tailed Deer and probably feral llamas at Antisana NP

Day-by-day:

The trip began inauspiciously. The road from Quito to Coca was “derrumbado” (landslid). We had to take the road via Lago Agrio (‘bitter lake,’ now euphemistically called Nueva Loja or New Loja). This was meant to take an extra 1.5 hours, but it ended up taking 2-2.5 hours longer. We spent about 7.5-8 hours in the car. The goal was to see some of the amazing landscapes on the way and bird Coca Falls for foothill specialties, like White-tipped Sicklebill, and connect with some primates. Ultimately it was not quite worth it and we would recommend flying like most sane tourists, although we had a great time anyway.

We left Quito at 830, made an unsuccessful stop in the intense fog at Papallacta Pass, stopped at Guango Lodge for hummingbirds, and worked our way to Coca Falls. The falls are now almost gone due to a Chinese hydroelectric project upstream. The afternoon birding was poor but we picked up chestnut-fronted macaw and chestnut-mandibled toucan.

On the trails to the falls, we encountered White-fronted Capuchin (I think-- wherever their taxonomy stands now) and Red Howler Monkeys. We ate an acceptable veggie quesadilla at FOLKCAFE gastro-bar in Nueva Loja and made it to Coca in the late evening.

The next morning, I was ill from something I’d picked up several days before and we made a surprise stop at an amazingly efficient hospital in Coca for some antiparasitics. In and out in 90 minutes, including labwork. Total cost \$20 for the meds, \$10 for the labwork, \$40 for the doc. We met the boatman for tiputini at one of the town piers and handed off a wad of cash (payment in full!) The station coordinates all your logistics. We took a boat from Coca to Pompeya (theoretically it is faster to drive straight from lago agrio to pompeya you’re not going through coca anyway). We took an empty “ranchera” bus belonging to the station from there down the oil road to PUCE Yasuní research station (1h20—amazingly quick). We then took a boat (2h) to tiputini. We stopped for a Brazilian (lowland) Tapir hauling its disproportionately large ass out of the water and booking it up the bank. We were given an orientation, assigned a station guide, José, and set loose.

Our first morning at Tiputini, we took a trip with José, Mauricio, and two other guests to an underwhelming parrot clay lick (perhaps only so because we arrived a few minutes late and the birds were already on the clay, but perhaps they were wary because of the bush dogs we were about to see). José pointed out another tapir crossing the river—what luck! A few minutes later, we heard a pair of explosive bark-wheezes that made José’s brow furrow. He said it wasn’t the tapir, nor anything else he recognized. Wondering if it might be something special, I started a voice recorder just in case the animal vocalized again, but... no luck. Then, José hissed through his teeth, “perro de monte!” and I shivered with

excitement expecting to see a short-eared dog. He pointed vigorously, many times, at the far bank, which appeared to be nothing but brown clay and rocks. I scanned furiously as the guides struggled to explain in Spanish that they were “right there! On the bank! Can’t you see!” (Thanks, guys, for the directions). When I picked out the first of three canids, playing and nipping each other as they ran parallel to the river and disappearing after less than 10 seconds, I was amazed to see unmistakably long-necked, short-legged, grizzly-headed canids. Bush dogs! Only poor photos and no recordings of the vocalizations of these usually very quiet animals came as a result, but it was an absolutely unforgettable experience.

In the afternoon, we walked the trails and went to the canopy tower, picking up some great birds and a **Common Woolly Monkey**. Tiputini’s canopy tower is excellent (and has stairs - thank god). The canopy “walkway” is now defunct after collapsing during a storm (with nobody on it). Adam, my friend and traveling partner, excitedly said he thought he found a Harpy Eagle perched in the canopy, which turned out to be a **saki** of some sort creeping away when I raised my binoculars. An exciting find of a somewhat slinky and furtive monkey, to be sure, but we NEVER let Adam forget that he called a primate a Harpy Eagle. Around the cabins, we saw several species of monkey, including a **White-bellied Spider Monkey**, put on an incredible show as they passed through the cecropia trees.

Our second full day, we took a boat to the lake to the west, and took a trail walk back to the station. We barely made it in time for lunch at a birder’s pace. The lake was quiet, with hoatzins, but no hoped-for anaconda and no agami heron in the nearby creeks. We hit one great flock, found an incredible basket fungus and some gigantic fluff-tailed leafhoppers, but saw no good mammals. Mauricio swore he saw a cat bolt out of a tree in front of us, and swore that in fact it was a jaguarundi, but I didn’t even see movement. In the afternoon, we missed a herd of a dozen or more **White-lipped Peccaries** behind the dining hall. One apparently threatened Mauricio, but, he claims, he huffed and feinted towards it, and it ran. Bloody stupid idea with these big pigs! We appreciated a few **white-lined bats** of some sort (picture far below). We went on a night walk, but found no good mammals, though we found a dozen or so species of frog and three species of snake (the Halloween-colored **Siphlophis cervinus**, a positively massive **Siphlophis compressus** slowly creeping up on an innocent sleeping **Plica plica lizard**, and an all-too-brief look at a **Drepanoides anomalus**). There were uncountable insects, bird-eating spiders, scorpions, and other marvels.

Our third full day we started again at the canopy tower, but not before picking up a beautiful Salvin’s Curassow on the way. Great birds, no mammals. There was a brown vine snake (**Oxybelis aeneus**) near the staff dorms. In the afternoon we took a stab at some **Pygmy Marmosets**, for which there is a decent “sap tree” in the várzea forest on the south bank. The várzea has a distinctly weedier, vinier look to it than the terra firma forest, but I think it was also second-growth. We found two beautiful marmosets but not after running into a very temperamental group of **Golden-mantled Saddleback Tamarins** and a **Brazilian Giant Tortoise** (*Chelonoidis denticulatus*). An early evening vigil for fiery topaz was wholly unsuccessful.

Our final morning in the lowlands, we had to leave, sadly, right after an early breakfast. The boat trip back produced a few fine waterbirds, and sudden cries of “**GIANT OTTER**” on the boat as we veered neck-breakingly towards a side creek. There had been six, but we only got the briefest views of the nape of one as it dove and rounded a bend. The habituated tapir at PUCE Yasuni station was nowhere to be seen and we boarded the bus back towards the port of pompeya, and eventually, our flight to quito.

After a few days fussing around the city and acclimatizing, we spent some time in the Papallacta sector of Cayambe-Coca, as well as Antisana National Park, looking for spectacled bears. We had two days and one night in Papallacta at Hostal Coturpa and two nights in Tambo Condor, an excellent (but no longer very cheap) locally-owned spot near the Antisana gate. At Papallacta, we were remarkably let into the pedestrian-access-only gate with a vehicle, and enjoyed some uniquely spectacular flora and birds. Several condors later, despite extensive searching, we still had no bear or tapir—only to find on the way back to quito (and nearly out of the highlands) that a black dot on a hillside by the highway was in fact a beautiful adult female **Spectacled Bear** gorging itself on Puya bromeliads. Apparently this individual had become fairly comfortable feeding a good distance away from the constant din of traffic. At Tambo Condor, the mammal-watching was pretty thin, although we enjoyed cracking looks at THREE Band-winged Nightjars, Giant Hummingbird, and other specialties of the property. We did have a few **White-tailed Deer** of the Andean race. Finally, before climbing up Pichincha from the TeleferiQo cable car in Quito, we had several close but fleeting views of an **Andean Fox** (culpeo) near the area where tourists can rent horses.

SOME LOGISTICAL INFORMATION ABOUT TIPUTINI—CROSSPOSTED FROM MY TRIPADVISOR REVIEW. I found this info is hard (impossible) to come by online, so hopefully this will be some help to one of the next wildlife-addicted sods who ends up organizing a trip.

COSTS are subject to change, but the price for my group of 3 was \$80 per person per night, including all food, guiding, and expenses once at the station, but not including transport. This price could be for single or double accommodation depending on how full the handful of (6ish?) tourist cabins are, but my sense is they are rarely full-- we each got our own cabin. Legitimate, university-sponsored researchers may get a rate of nearly half that. The cost of transportation can seem excessive depending on the schedule of the station, and how out of their way they must go to run the pickup (so, if your group is the only one going or coming, it will cost a lot more). For us, it was \$700 flat-rate both-ways from Coca. This includes the three legs of transportation quoted on their website (boat with spanish-speaking staff from coca, station director meets you in pompeya and gets you through the checkpoint, buses you to the PUCE yasuni station, and riverboats you to tiputini). At a little over \$100 per person each way, it seemed like a lot but very justifiable given the expenses to the station, and it could be reduced with a larger group. It is entirely possible this price might be higher under certain circumstances for the station, and I'd counsel anyone not to try to negotiate a better price, out of fairness to TBS (which is run by honest folks).

TIMING: Trips are made only on two days of the week, such that it's only possible to have a

3-night stay or a 4-night stay (or, combining these, a 7, 10, etc night stay). We departed Coca at ***around 10am and arrived TBS around 3:30pm***. Their boats have gotten a lot faster since their website was last updated, so transit times Can be quicker than stated there. Returning upriver is a little slower. On your last day, the station requires that you leave immediately after breakfast (so they have enough turnaround time to get back in the afternoon), so don't think you'll have any time for activities that day. We left TBS at 830ish and got to Coca ahead of 130.

ORGANIZING A STAY: Your first point of contact will be the logistics coordinator, who is also the wife of the emeritus director. This person can be very helpful, but has the inexplicable habit of only answering only one question per inquiry. This can be a little frustrating-- try phoning them if you must. Inquiries for a stay should be made several months in advance as the station fills up quickly for certain dates (but outside of academic breaks and January, it can be pretty vacant). Once there, the station manager will orient you to the station. Catalina was the manager when we were there and was incredibly helpful and nice.

LAYOUT: The station is quite spread out. The main dining room and gathering point is right on the riverbank, but can be as many as four flights of stairs up depending on water levels. The library and lounge are about two-three minute's walk away, and the tourist cabins another two-three minutes walk away from that. The dorms are in another direction. The trails between buildings are stepping-stone style or boardwalked to make mud less of an issue.

ACCOMMODATION: The cabins for tourists have two twin beds and a private bath. The shower is cold-water only. Electricity is limited to 6pm-9pm (and a morning period as well? I forget). Weak rechargeable lanterns are provided. It is helpful not only to have a headlamp but a rechargeable light of your own if you are going to need to get up predawn. The beds are very comfortable and the pillows are very thin. The screens are effective unless, obviously, you fail to shut your door.

FOOD: While it's one hell of a lot better than most field station food, it's still very basic. Vegetarians, vegans, and gluten-intolerant people can be accommodated with ease. You will not lack for protein or vegetables. The cooks sometimes put something remarkably complicated and tasty together that could be served in any tourist lodge, but also sometimes just throw together simple rice/beans/salad/soup. Don't go expecting fancy food (here or at any research station) and you will not be disappointed!

WIFI: There is OK wifi in the main lounge, but it is only quick when nobody else is using it (try super early AM or late at night!). You must schedule wifi use with the manager. It costs \$1.25 per half-hour. It CANNOT support video calling or voice calling or streaming of any kind unless nobody is on it, and these services are restricted to researchers only. If you try to make a wifi call when someone is on an existing connection, they'll be booted off. This is a great way to make enemies.

GUIDING: Guides are excellent. We were wrong to also take another personal guide (at

cost) to the station because we couldn't get an answer on whether or not the guides at TBS were trained proficiently in bird ID. We were assigned José at the station, who used to guide birders at the now-defunct Yuturi lodge, and knew 90% of birds at the station (with the exception of, like, very tricky flycatchers) by sight and did nearly as well by sound. He DID NOT have a speaker or use playback. If you are going to bird here, make sure you come armed with good tape equipment unless you're truly ideologically opposed. As for non-bird guiding, well, José was equally excellent. He found us bush dogs from the boat, which were a first for him in 25 years of guiding, and may be the rarest carnivore in Amazonia. He could track and read sign. Other guides at the station may be even better at this; one now-retired guide reportedly used to be a professional meat hunter, and could stake out just about any mammal (if you had more than a few days). Anyway, in conclusion, it's not unfair to have high expectations for guiding here, and the individualization of the guiding (unique among ANY station I've stayed at in any part of the world) makes this station a huge draw for wildlife enthusiasts.

Going here can be an incredibly rewarding, restorative experience. It also requires the usual good faith and flexibility that most travelers to remote parts of Latin America are already used to exercising. I am very happy to discuss further with prospective travelers via tripadvisor messages or email (william freedberg at "g" mail d0t com, no quotes, no spaces, no anything)

Photos:



Grey-headed Parakeets, plus a Blue-headed Parrots, Orange-cheeked Parrots, and part of a Mealy Parrot at the lick.



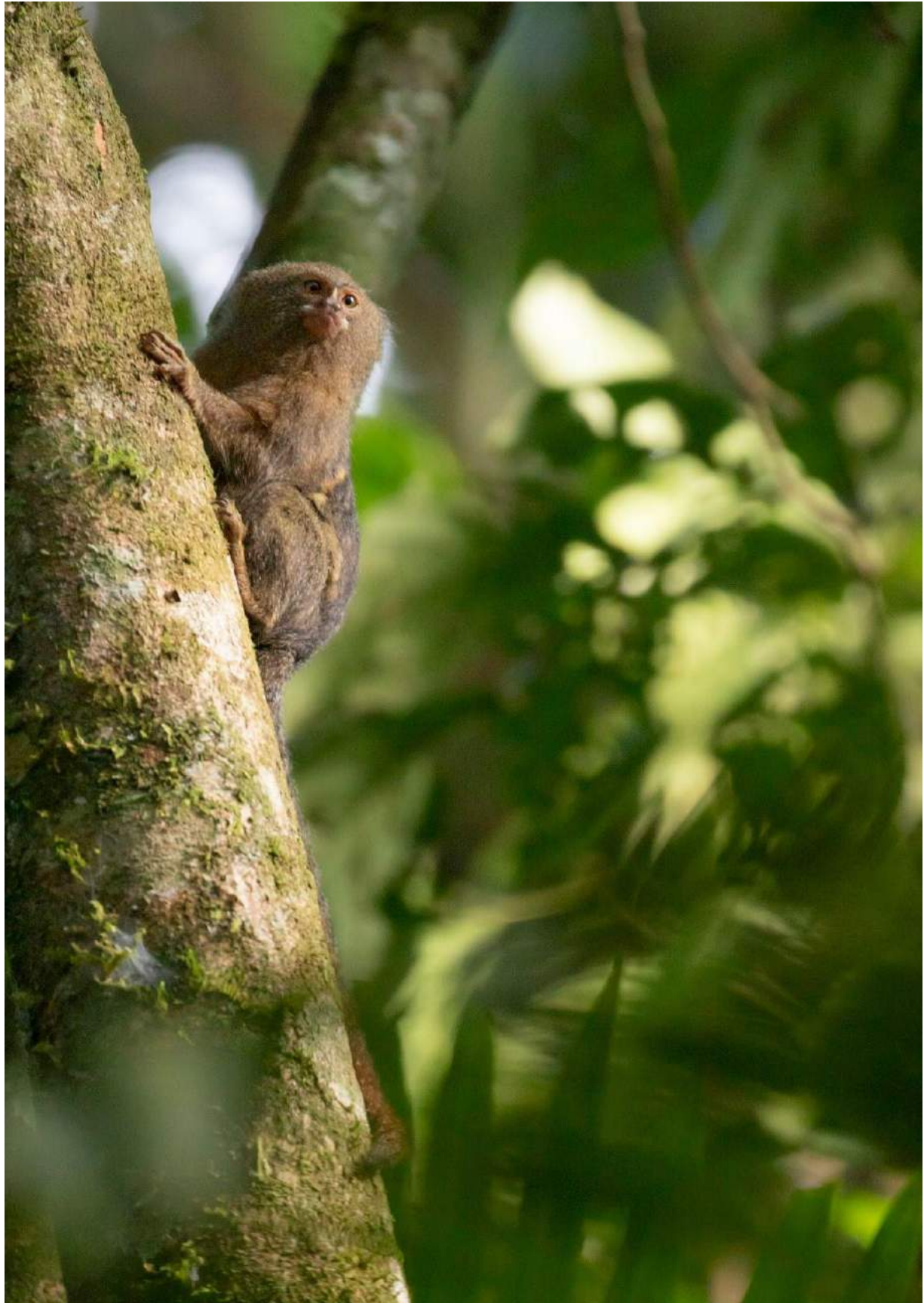
This incredible basket fungus recalls a hexagonal geodesic dome, and stank aggressively. It had a whole suite of attendant insects, some of which I'd never seen and imagined were specialized in these ephemeral and quick-to-shrivel fruiting bodies. Turns out, this is an introduced species, *Clathrus rubra* or the basket stinkhorn, from EUROPE of all places. Joke's on me!



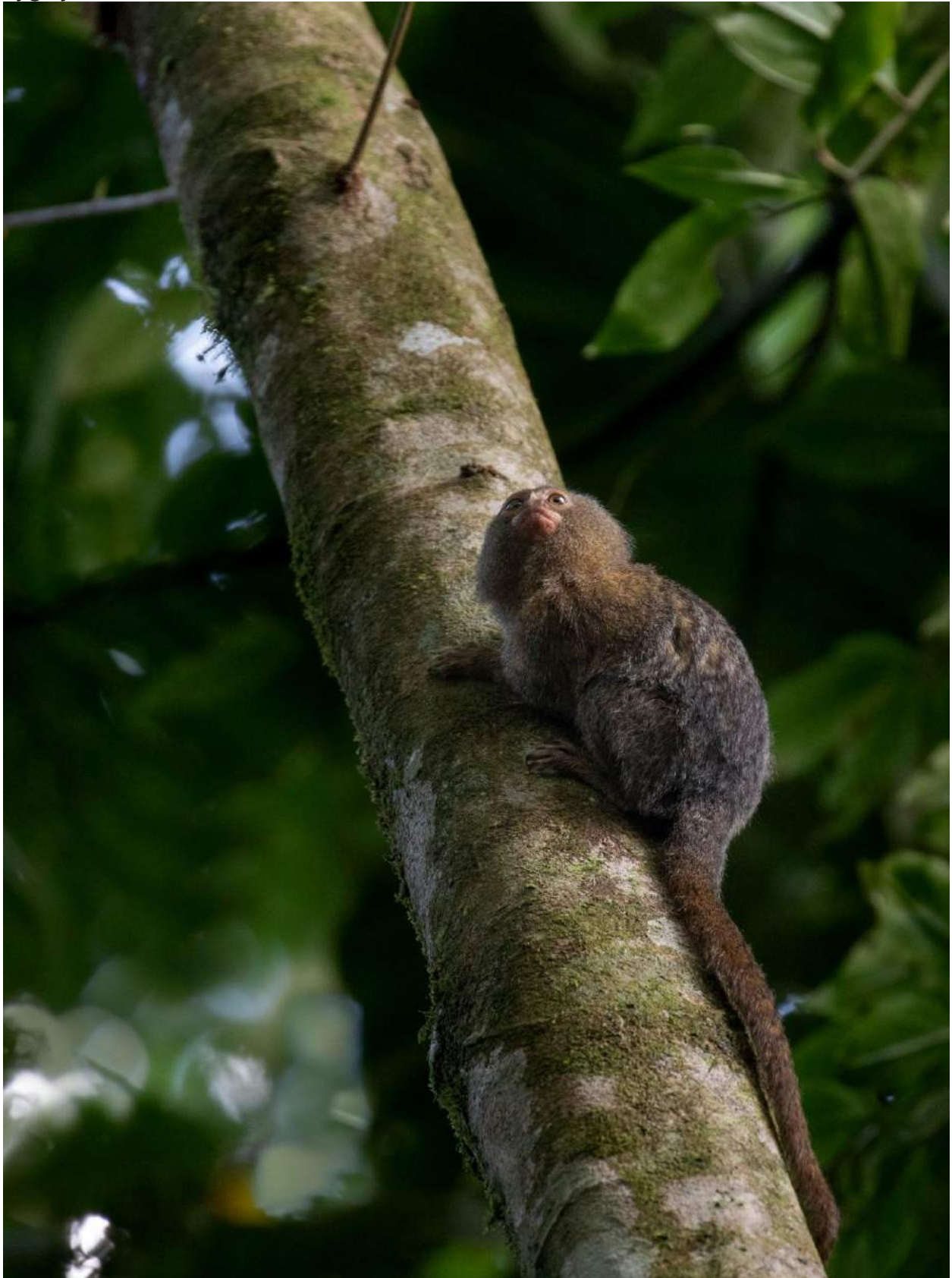
A close-up of the stinkhorn's structure, with one of the dozens of morphospecies of grasshopper (and fly, and butterfly, and hemipteran) feeding on it.

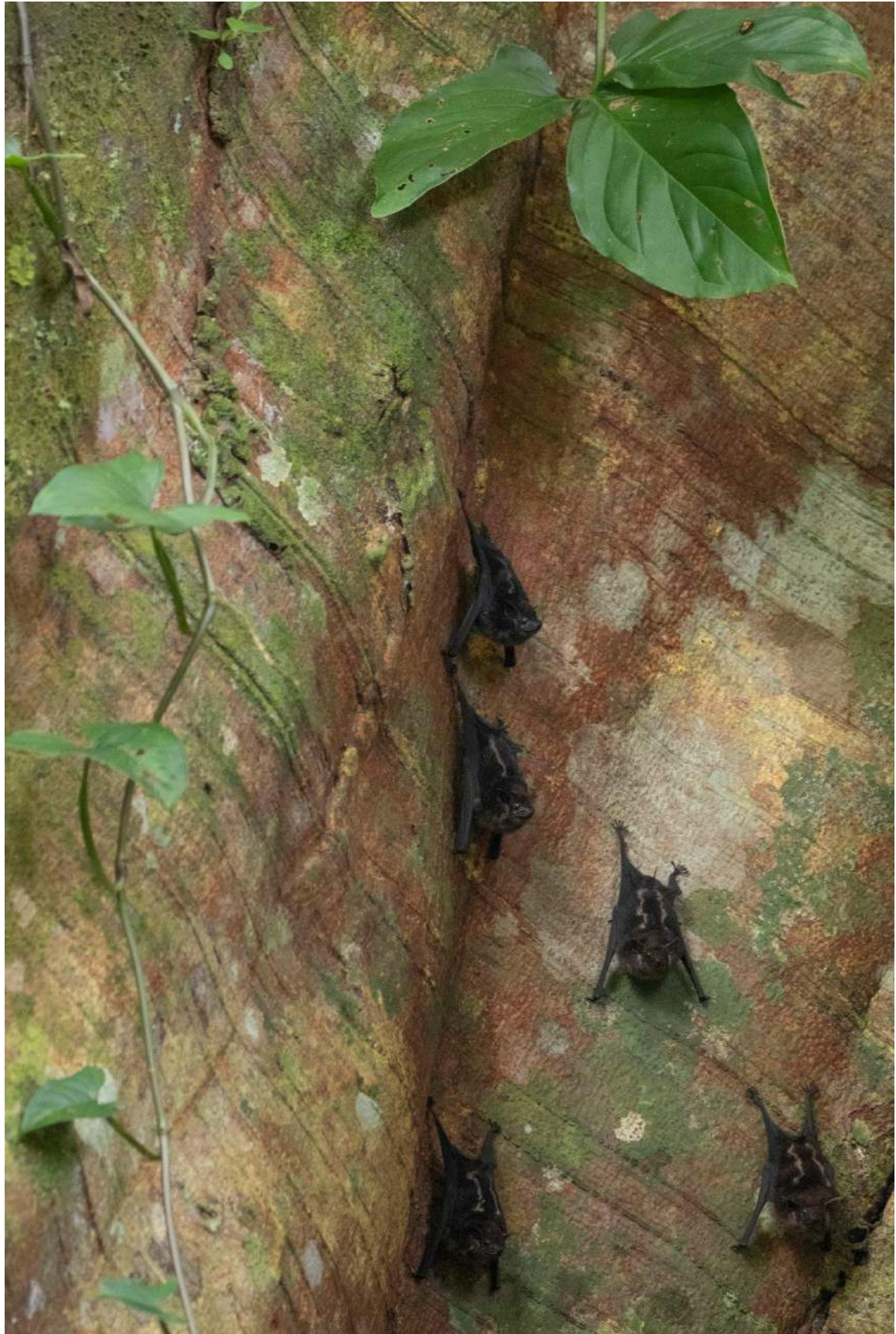


A banded Wire-tailed Manakin, part of a long-term study.



Pygmy Marmoset.





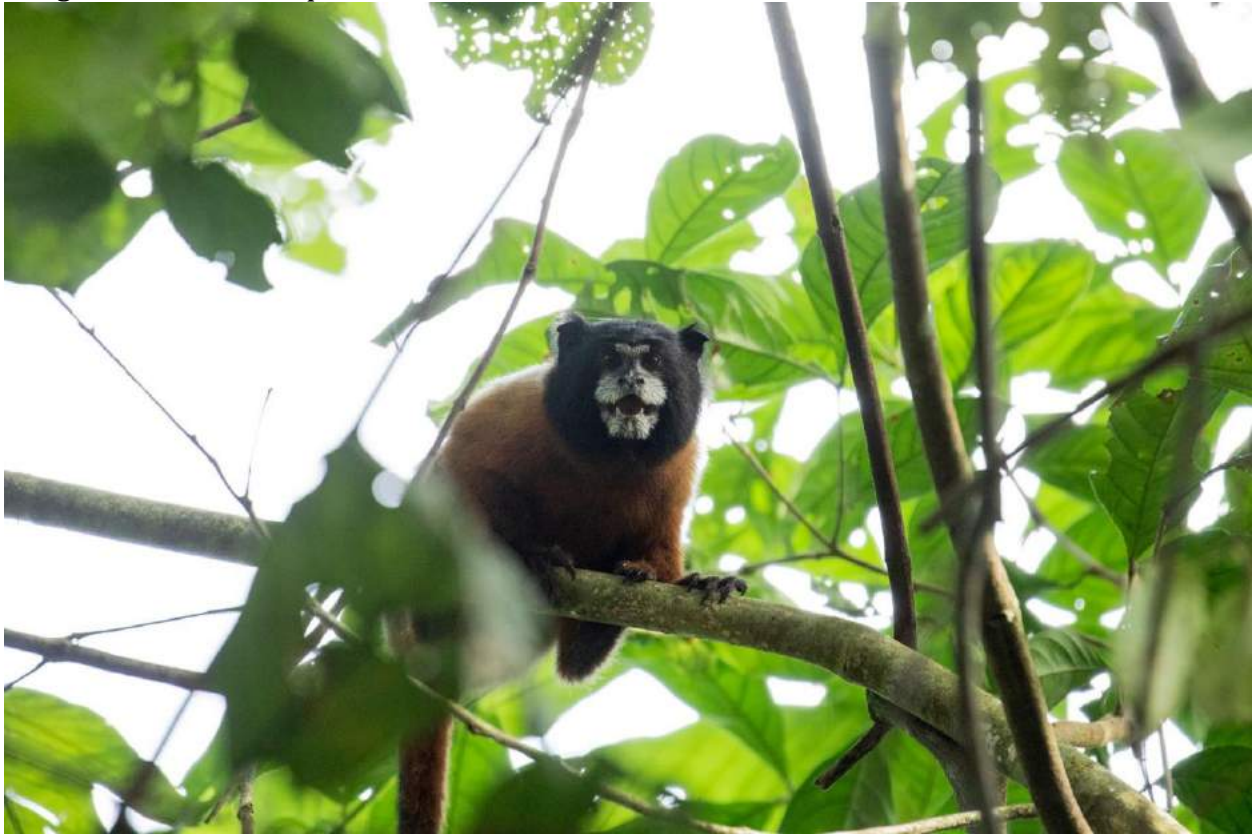
Some sort of white-lined bats.



Salvins's Currasow



Long-billed Woodcreeper.



Golden-mantled Saddleback Tamarin.



White-bellied Spider Monkey



BUSH DOG



BUSH DOG



Brazilian Tapir