

Costa Rica 10.–24.7.2021

After a year-and-a-half-long covid break in our travels, during which we have been to no other country than Poland and the Czech Republic, we have finally finished our vaccinations and thus felt like are reasonably protected against the chance of getting stuck in a foreign prison due to testing positive. After a depressing research of the state of the world, plagued with one take on the hygiene theater more deranged than the other, we concluded that the Costa Rican approach to the problem was the least annoying – and we wanted to visit it for a long time anyways.

In two weeks, we saw 19 species of mammals + a few species of bats – for those we have ultrasound recordings but no idea how to ID them, so the overall number is uncertain. We saw both species of sloths, all four species of monkeys and assorted smaller mammals. Remarkably, we missed out on both anteaters and the tapir, mainly due to the impossibility of any kind of independent entry to Corcovado. The results are, as always, available on iNaturalist – except for the Paca and (likely Nine-banded) Armadillo of which we have no photos. We also recorded 190 species of birds, 29 species of herps (including crocodiles, caimans, some freshwater turtles, huge iguanas etc..) and a lot of other small life.



Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth

Practical

Costa Rica is overall a very pleasant and easy country to visit. It's small and populated, and thus it doesn't have that much wilderness – and sadly the two major tracts left, La Amistad and Corcovado, have fallen victim to the “guided only” plague (and thus are dead to us), but it still has some remarkable and very easily accessible nature. In fact, for the typical “lodge tourist” it's probably one of the best destinations on Earth, because the lodges are just expensive (instead of outrageously expensive as in most other places) and everything is virtually next door to everything else. A surprising amount of people also speak English, the cuisine is miles better than in, say, Ecuador and everyone is generally cheerful, helpful and friendly. The main downside of Costa Rica from the mammal-watching point of view is that a lot of the good nature is in national parks and those are generally not accessible at night at all, so one has to be a bit creative to find areas for night searching.



Brown Three-toed Sloth

But before we start, let me explain the aforementioned Costa Rican approach to the covid problem. It was quite simple: pay up and we let you in. For some \$100 per person, we secured “government approved covid insurance” (which is in reality just a tourist entry fee), went through some mildly Catch-22 labyrinth of online paperwork which required some guessing as to how to properly pad their own reference numbers with zeros and how to navigate the circularity of requirements between Costa Rica and Lufthansa, but after that, everything went smoothly and we were let through all checks quickly and without hassle. Once in Costa Rica – and in particular once far away from bigger cities, the most popular tourist spots and any pretentious establishments, the hygiene theater was almost non-existent and we could mostly enjoy our stay like nothing was happening, only having to wear masks a few time in a supermarket and when we accidentally booked too posh of a hotel. Probably the best illustration of how things worked was our boat trip from Tortuguero, on the public boat, with no mask in sight, during which we passed a

private boat belonging to a rich-people lodge, on which most passengers wore their surgical *and* FFP2 masks over each other – I really don’t want to imagine how their faces looked in the 35 degree heat and 90% humidity under that ...

The main impact of covidism on the trip was thus through the absurd nightly curfew, as moving around was technically prohibited from 9 pm to 5 am, limiting the time available for night drives. This could obviously be ignored when in the depths of Osa, but as most of the country is rather well inhabited, we followed the rules elsewhere and thus we couldn’t explore as many roads at night as we would have wanted.

For the duration of the trip, we rented a 4x4 Suzuki Grand Vitara from Target for slightly over \$1000. My relationship with car rental companies is famously troubled and I am very rarely heard praising anyone in this notoriously crooked business – but Target Costa Rica is an absolute exception, because I have never seen any company treat customers with such commitment. Our car broke down (it was not entirely clear who was at fault) – in Osa of all places – and they delivered another one, all the way to Puerto Jimenez, in less than 24 hours (for which their driver had to get up at like 4 am). We returned even *the second car* slightly bruised, but Target did not even comment about that, asked for no extra money and just only cared about our satisfaction. I was a bit apprehensive about getting a 4x4, thinking it might be overkill for the heavily developed country, but it was absolutely worth the money. Not only

there were many interesting roads, mainly around Osa, that would not have been accessible by a normal car, but in the last days of our stay, the rains got so heavy that we were seeing sedans hopelessly stuck in the mud even on the main intercity highways! The main downsides of the Vitara were the very weak engine, struggling in steep ascents, a stupidly small tank, giving us some headaches on Osa, where consumption is extreme and filling stations scarce, and the very low clearance for this type of vehicle – on the other hand, it was a full 4x4, with diff lock and half gear, capable of getting out of precarious situations under its own power (well, until the rear diff broke on the first car and we had to be towed out from a river by an excavator truck).



Central American Squirrel Monkey

Reading about Costa Rica, we were a bit worried about theft, especially theft from the car. We have thus prepared in a way that implicitly assumed theft – we packed the car mostly with stuff that was old, damaged and generally disposable (for example a tent which we originally planned to throw away before the trip) and we always took all electronics in day packs with us. At least the Vitara had a cover for the trunk, so the contents was not immediately obvious – another rental company I talked to before told us outright that their cars have no trunk covers, which is fine, because all our stuff will be in the hotels ... do they really not understand the concept of wishing to visit places along the road while traveling from one place to another? At the end of the day, we encountered no issues, but it may as well have been sheer luck.

We bought a Claro SIM card with some internet for a few bucks. The coverage was generally good and we were thus usually able to just secure the next place to sleep on booking.com, typically around \$15 per person. The country is really build around electronic communication and the one day we run out of data, we were struggling to find a hotel – luckily we found a Claro kiosk in a small village, recharged the account and booked a place like civilized people. We camped three times – in San Gerardo de Dota on the Suenos del Bosque property (thus getting access to their pretty nice trails), in Carate behind the

jugaría and once in the “wild” by the Tuis River (near Rancho Naturalista) – in principle we could have done without the tents and sleeping bags, as the options for camping are not abundant in the country, but it would have been a shame to miss in particular the fantastic camping in Carate.



Derby's Woolly Opossum

Sites and mammals

See the iNaturalist observations for details:

https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2021-07-09&d2=2021-07-26&place_id=6924&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska

San Gerardo de Dota – both night and day walks around Suenos del Bosque property brought only several **Red-tailed Squirrels**. The rest of the valley is heavily inhabited and the main road (old Panamericana) above it was too far for a sensible night visit considering the curfew.

Sierpe – the main square in Sierpe had a very nice **Variiegated Squirrel**, the best view of this particularly colorful form we had on the trip. We have spent an entire day on our own inflatable boat in the Sierpe wetlands, exploring shady both mangrove passages and broad channels – despite careful search of the mangroves (in the massively optimistic hope to stumble upon a Silky Armadillo) the only mammals we found was a troupe of **White-throated Capuchins** who paid us a visit when we were hiding in mangroves from a storm in pouring rain (I am quite sure they came just to laugh at us). Night drive in the hilly terrain south of Rio Sierpe brought no mammals.

Rancho Quemado – this forgotten village is the perfect base to explore central Osa. In the SE corner of the village, a trail goes to the forest and branches into a large system of paths where you can walk for hours. At the beginning, there is even a marked side trail, but the deeper unmarked trails seemed better. Night walks didn't bring any mammals, but early-to-late morning walks brought **Central American**



Central American Dwarf Squirrel

Corcovado) also had **Central American Red Brocket**, hidden in bushes and very hard to see. Around the river mouth in Carate, there were very fresh Tapir tracks (and some further interesting tracks from other mammals) but despite best efforts, we found no actual animals. A night drive through the last village before Carate brought **Southern Opossum** in trees. On the journey back from Carate to civilization, we saw all four local species of monkeys within two hours: **Central American Spider Monkeys** right at Carate and **White-fronted Capuchins**, **Central American Squirrel Monkeys** and **Mantled Howler Monkeys** at different spots along the road to Puerto Jimenez.

Puerto Jimenez – getting stuck in the town overnight, we explored it a bit and found a fruit feeder with a **Northern Raccoon** near the bridge over the small mangrove creek that separates the airfield from the town. We also made a morning outing on our inflatable boat around the coastal mangroves just north of the town, but found nothing.

Spider Monkeys, Mantled Howler Monkeys and Central American Dwarf Squirrels; there were also some dark bats flying above the trails long into daylight. A night drive on the “main” road between Bahia Drake and Rincon produced **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth** and **Derby’s Woolly Opossum**. The sloth was found with a spotlight – hanging high up in against the sky it was difficult to notice in IR. The village proper had, unsurprisingly, **Red-tailed Squirrels** and the restaurant at the bridge over Rio Rincon, where the Bahia Drake road starts had **White-throated Capuchins**.

Carate – if you want to enjoy the last glimpses of the end-of-the-world feeling that Carate has, you need to hurry up, because they are now paving the road. But as of now, it’s an amazing area, where we should have spent more time than we did. Already a few kilometers past Puerto Jimenez a **White-nosed Coati** run across the road (in broad daylight); later at night we found another one along the trail to Madrigal and another at Carate airport. The trail to Madrigal (which you can follow for about 3 kms before reaching



Central American Red Brocket



Nephelomys sp.

Iyok Ami – a hip mountain hut right next to the old Panamericana near Los Quetzales, which we found randomly on booking.com, has a nice trail system in cloud forest. A night walk with IR produced a **Nephelomys sp.** which refused to show anything more than half of its head. But it was our first tropical “mouse”!

Tortuguero – we went into the water trails of the national park with our inflatable boat on our own, which was completely fine (despite some discouragement from local guides), but rental canoes are also available if needed. With the small boat, we penetrated the channels so deep that we were there alone, finding excellent herps and birds, but from mammals we only found **Central American Spider Monkeys** jumping between branches above a channel and glimpsed the back of something (perhaps an Agouti) running away in the undergrowth. The village itself has **Variiegated Squirrels** and **Mantled Howler Monkeys**. A night walk on the track north towards the airport produced both **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth** and **Hoffmann’s Two-toed Sloth** – these animals have proven surprisingly difficult to notice and I can imagine that we could have easily missed more even with IR. For the first one, a group with a guide pointing a green laser on it surely helped. At the southern end of the village, the national park starts immediately – you



Gabb’s Cottontail/Central American Tapeti

are not supposed to go there willy-nilly, especially not at night and we were even warned by a local about the danger of jaguars – but we nevertheless walked several times at least the path that straddles the border of the park perpendicularly to the beach, which could be plausibly presented as “we thought this is just a road in the village” in case we got caught – this strategy rewarded us with a fleeting sighting of a **Paca**, albeit without photos.

Tuis river – an evening walk along an irrigation channel flowing from a small dam on the upper portion of the river, as well as the dam itself had a lot of bats (at least two different-sized species could be nicely observed hunting) and next to the dam there was a **Gabb’s Cottontail** (also called **Central American Tapeti**). A day hike in the hills south of Platanillo (in an area that may or may not have been close to a place called Silent Hill) produced no mammals. We then continued exploration of the area due east towards Grano de Oro, but it was a raining a lot and nothing of interest was found.

Carara – on a rainy morning walk through the Laguna Meandrica trail we spotted some unidentified deers (in IR only). The main group of trails had **White-fronted Capuchins**, **Central American Agouti** and a presumably **Nine-banded Armadillo**. The park was however absolutely stellar for birds and herps. The nearby Crocodile bridge did indeed offer good viewing of crocs, but only before the big rains came, then there was too much water in the river. A roadside restaurant about 10 km north on road 34 in San Jeronimo had great views of **Mantled Howler Monkeys** in trees directly from the dinner tables.

Manuel Antonio – inside the park, we found only **Central American Agouti** and **Variegated Squirrel**, despite the popular idea that it’s an easy place for sloths. We also took a night drive through the landscape NE of Quepos (across road 34), but found nothing of interest, being again quite limited by the curfew.



Tracks found near the river in Carate – Ocelot?, Tapir, Raccoon/Coati?