

Ecuador 8.-23. 11. 2019

As usual, our trip was somewhat of a mix between looking for mammals, birds and wilderness in general. The main idea was to try to find some places where we could visit the rainforest on our own, without the hassle of tours, guides and lodges, preferably in the form of a short few-day trek with camping. This was a complete and utter failure, but I am getting used to it and if this goes on for a while, I am going to just stop trying and go every year to Taman Negara ... Anyway, we have still seen 14 mammal species (plus some bats, possibly of many species, which we could not ID at night), all of those new for us, as well as at least 190 bird species with more than 100 lifers, all of that while spending roughly \$500 per person locally (just excluding flights from Europe) for a two-week stay, so I hope that it partially proves that you don't need to be filthy rich to enjoy tropical habitats.

In this report, I will focus solely on mammals observed – most of the places we went to (with the remarkable exception of Jatun Sacha) were teeming with birds and can be recommended as great birding spots – a relevant report will be published on birdforum.net once we finish the IDs. For general practical considerations, I would note that my wife got her cellphone stolen the night of our arrival in public transport in Quito and that the city is in general dreadful and should be abandoned as soon as possible after arrival for more acceptable areas. The inter-city buses are acceptable, but their schedules are highly unpredictable – a journey that takes 6 hours one way can take 3 hours the other one. We tried to rent a car in Coca, but the only possible way would be to leave a \$3000 cash deposit, which somehow raises the question about what to do with it afterwards – if you wish to have a rental car, take one from Quito. Besides the sometimes revolting local cuisine, no further issues were encountered.



Black-mantled Tamarin, Anderson's Four-eyed Opossum and Amazon River Dolphin

Our main Amazon destination was Pañacocha, a small village on the banks of Rio Napo, reachable only by boat, namely the daily passenger boat between Coca and Nuevo Rocafuerte. It is about 4 hours from Coca and only two hours from the last place that can be in theory accessed by road (Providencia) – however it makes no sense to go from there, as taking the boat all the way from Coca is actually faster, only costs \$10 and is a nice experience. In Pañacocha one finds a “hotel” for \$10 per person, where having own mosquito net is advisable, and several basic eateries that serve food mainly when the boat is stopping by for lunch, but also sell basic supplies, so you can stay there as long as you want (or in our case, as long as you don’t run out of cash because you did not plan well).

The village is surrounded by mostly impenetrable jungle with a lot of wetlands; only to the northeast there is a broad but muddy track that you can follow for a few kilometers through a mosaic of forest and a few clearings leading to some plantations – this was the center of our activities. It leads to a private property and some parts of it may be private, as the owner was explaining us, but he was generally tolerating of our presence. Already during day we have met a group of **Black-mantled Tamarins** near the cemetery at the edge of the village – those confused us a lot as they are missing from the Wikipedia list of mammals of Ecuador. We visited the track twice at night and run into several groups of **Kinkajou** and one **Anderson’s Four-eyed Opossum** which was in a tree at eye-level right next to the track.



Woolly Monkey of unknown (sub)species

Disappointed with the lack of access further from the village, we chartered a canoe from a local guy, who charged us a somewhat absurd price of \$50 per person +\$15 entrance fees for a 5-hour excursion – I am still not sure how hard should I bargain in such situations though. The main target was Laguna Pañacocha, where we indeed saw **Amazon River Dolphins**, even if always very briefly, the secondary

destination was a nearby Isla de los Monos (Monkey Island) where several groups of **Woolly Monkeys** live. Our guide called them “Mono Chorongo”, which is however just a generic name for any Woolly Monkey and as they live on an island in Rio Napo, which otherwise acts as the natural barrier between Brown and Silvery Woolly Monkeys, we were at lost about the exact species ID – until Richard Webb told me on the forum that those are being lumped back into a single species anyway, so we can leave it at that. Our guide tried a lot to show us some on the ground after we landed, but we only got to see them from the boat, however those views were great anyway.



Humbolt's Squirrel Monkey and Venezuelan Red Howler Monkey

As one has to retreat back through Coca from there, we paid a brief visit to the nearby Limoncocha for a day and a night, as it is easily reached by bus. Immediately upon our arrival we met a group of **Humboldt's Squirrel Monkeys** at the edge of the village near the reserve entrance. The reserve can be accessed only with a guide, but it only costs \$40 for the whole group (we were four) – or so we were told, the guide then asked for \$60, which we refused, he then tried really hard, we were happy and gave it to him voluntarily after all. The only access anywhere is by boat; we first got taken across the lake to a short trail where we walked to no interesting effect and then got boated around with great birding and relatively distant views of **Venezuelan Red Howler Monkeys** until sunset, after which we observed Caymans – actually mostly just their eyes – and an incredible amount of fireflies.

Our second main target for exploration was Pacto Sumaco, as we knew there was a trail leading from the village towards the volcano and we wanted to explore it for a few days. We got stopped in the village and forbidden from continuing in our plan of a multi-day trek unless we take a guide with us, which we definitely did not want to do – we had to take accommodation here and take at most one-day trips, which is somehow allowed on the very same trail without a guide. The accommodation was in a “community lodge” at the outskirts of the village, where we have chosen the option of a roofed deck without walls in the second floor where we just erected our nets with perfect views of the volcano and great birding directly from there, for the fair price of \$5 per person.



Eastern Lowland Olingo and Brown-mantled Tamarin

We found no mammals on our day trip towards the volcano, but we found some other trails below the village next to the road out – only retrospectively we learned that those belong to the Wildsumaco lodge and that they charge \$30 per day for their use; well, they should post a sign saying so for their own benefit as the trails are so far from the lodge that I don't know how people should connect those two things together themselves. There we met some more **Woolly Monkeys** (this time clearly Brown according to the ranges) during day and an evening visit produced more **Kinkajou**. More interestingly, spotlighting from the road itself, we found our only **Eastern Lowland Olingo** high in a tree. We also investigated a track westward from Pacto in the night, but it is mostly in a kind of a ditch with limited views around – nevertheless we found a **Common Opossum** for our trouble.



White-fronted Kapucin and Kinkajou

In Tena, we have noted a **Humboldt's Squirrel Monkey** right in the middle of the town from looking from the riverfront towards the island with the ZOO. The nearby Jatun Sacha reserve was eerily dead when it comes to birds but produced **Brown-mantled Tamarins** of the very attractive reddish variety. The also nearby town of Puerto Misahualí is famous for monkeys coinhabiting it with people – those are **White-fronted Kapucins** and they are indeed really easy to see there.

Moving across to the other slope of the Andes we took refuge for three nights in the famous Yellow House in Mindo, which may well be one the best birding spots I have ever seen – it's a bit of a miracle that at \$20 per person we were the only guests because this is one of the best deals of the continent. The lush gardens provided frequent views of **Central American Agouti** during the day and a **Common Opossum** during the night. On the trail uphill, still in the farmland area, we met a **Nine-banded Armadillo** in daylight and spotlighting in the forest brought some more **Kinkajous**. There were also some very vocal monkeys that we did not manage to ever really see well, but there was no realistic chance for a species we have not seen on the trip yet anyway. Finally on the road from the Tarabita (the wonky cable car leading to the waterfall area) we found a **Red-tailed Squirrel**.



Central American Agouti, Red-tailed Squirrel, Nine-banded Amarillo and Common Opossum