

Mammal watching in and around Mexico City.

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General Information

I have visited Mexico City (locally known as Mexico DF, for Distrito Federal) twice, in late Nov 2003 and in late March 2012. For each site listed below, I give the year I've visited it, so you know how recent my information is. Included are sites within about 100 km of Mexico City.

Mexico City area is not as rich in endemics as some other parts of the country, and large mammals are sparse here, but there are some nice shrews, bats, rodents, and lagomorphs. The species list is pretty long thanks to large elevation range (from dry tropical forests at ~1000 m in the southwest to just below the snow line on 5452-m Popocatepetl). Endemic species are found mostly in mixed and coniferous forests at 1800-3200 m. High plateaus between volcanoes are arid and have a few desert species at the southern limit of their ranges. Deep valleys have dry tropical forests with impoverished tropical fauna. The once abundant wetlands have mostly been drained or developed. Rainy season is from May till Sept. Dry season is probably better for viewing mammals as dry leaf litter makes finding them (particularly shrews and mice) easier. Bat fauna in caves changes with the seasons, with some species only wintering there and others apparently moving to lower elevations in winter. All sites are usually hot and almost totally lifeless from 11 am till 6 pm (plus or minus 1-2 hrs depending on season and elevation), unless it's overcast, which is unlikely from Oct till March. Nights can be freezing above ~1200 m in winter, and above 3000 m year-round.

This is one of the best-developed and most expensive parts of the country; expect to spend almost as much as in cheaper parts of the US. When renting a car, note that online quotes don't include obligatory third-party insurance, and you also get ripped off on exchange rates, so you end up paying at least \$300 per week. A good place to stay in Mexico City is Hotel Havana (77 Republica de Cuba, 5518-15-89, hotelhabana@terra.co.mx): it is cheap, quiet, friendly, with good wi-fi; it changes dollars at excellent rates; there is a really good cheap restaurant directly across the street; there is also free parking space on Calle Chile around the corner. Local food differs from "Mexican" food available in the US about as much as sushi at Tokyo's Tokuji Market differ from those sold in Walmart. Plan as much physical activity as possible, or you won't fit into the airplane seat on your flight home. Basic Spanish (on the level you can reach in about a month) is essential as well as mostly sufficient. If you also learn a couple words in Nahuatl, expect to be greeted as a folk hero in villages and small towns.

There are reportedly pickpockets in Mexico City, and recently there's been frequent muggings in hilltop parks on the outskirts of the city, but otherwise the area is at least as safe as the US as long as you are not on the road. Road hazards include well-hidden topes (speed bumps), kamikazes passing slow trucks on blind curves, taxi drivers, and stray domestic animals. You eventually learn to anticipate all of them. Don't drive your own car into Mexico if it has low

clearance; topos will kill it in a week if you don't stick to toll freeways. Mexico City has reasonably good public transportation, except in slumish outlying areas. Other large cities are connected to it by toll freeways (Carretera Quota, expensive) and free highways (Carretera Libre, usually very slow).

Travelling in the region requires careful planning because you have to avoid Mexico City traffic. Driving into the city from 7 am till noon or out of it from 11 am till 9 pm on weekdays would add at least 1 hr (and possibly up to 3 hrs) to your travel time as given by GPS. Note that GPS devices are generally too optimistic about this, so add another 50% to all travel time estimates they give anywhere in the area. Almost all sites listed below can get terribly overcrowded on weekends.

Recommended sites

1. Mexico City (2003, 2012) has nice parks, ranging from well-trimmed Parque Chapultepec to relatively natural-looking Bosque de Talapan and Reserva Pedregal (in Ciudad Universaria). All these parks have **Mexican gray squirrels** (including some melanistic ones in Pedregal) and, reportedly, lots of **ringtails**. The latter two parks reportedly have also **Virginian opossum**, three spp. of **skunks**, **long-tailed weasel**, and **Mexican woodrat**. In 2003, but not in 2012, there was a small colony of **Aztec mastiff bats** in the replica Maya temple in Museo de Antropologia in Parque Chapultepec. Nearby zoo has captive volcano rabbits (locally known as teporingos), among other things. Parque Ecologico de Xochimilco (one of the last remnants of the lake that had once filled much of the basin now occupied by Mexico City) has **Northern raccoons**, but they are very shy. Some habitat there looks good for **rice rats**. The only park I managed to visit at night was Reserva Pedregal; there were lots of mice (the ones I saw well appeared to be **Mexican spiny pocket mouse** and **Mexican harvest mouse**), and two spp. of bats that looked like **California myotis** and **Mexican long-nosed bat**, but not much else.

2. Ixtaccihuatl-Popocatepetl (Izta-Popo) National Park (2003) is accessible by a good road from the town of Amecameca. Depending on traffic, getting there takes 1.5-3 hours from Mexico City. The road climbs to a high pass over the saddle between the two volcanoes, known as Paso de Cortez (Cortez passed there on his way to Tenochtitlan, as Mexico City was called in Aztec times), and then descends towards Cholula in Tlaxcala State. Two gravel roads branch off at the pass; one climbs Popocatepetl to the south and the other Iztaxihuatl to the north. The southern road is often closed due to volcanic activity. The stretch of the main road from the pass down to 2800 m on Tlaxcala (eastern) side is good for **volcano rabbits** at dusk and at night. Unlike many other rabbits, they seldom cross roads and have to be searched for in the bunchgrass (look for runways on south-facing slopes). The saddle area has lots of shrews (the ones I saw were probably **Orizaba** and **Saussure's shrews**), **white-tailed deer**, **nimble-footed mouse**, **volcano harvest mouse** and **Mexican vole**. Moist fir forests below the pass area had yet another shrew (almost certainly **Central Mexican short-eared shrew**), a **Southern flying squirrel**, **Mexican mice**, and a **Mexican volcano mouse**. Park rangers said that this habitat also has **white-tailed**

deer, coyotes and bobcats. Lower elevations at Mexico (western) side have **smoky pocket gopher, Osgood's mouse and Sumichrast's harvest mouse.** I also saw **Philips' kangaroo rat** crossing the road just a few km east of Amecameca. This park (especially picnic spots) is very good for birding, with many northern species at the southern limit of their range.

3. Nevado de Toluca National Park (2012) is similar to the previous site, but has less fir forest, and alpine habitat there is more easily accessible. It is 1.5-2 hours from Mexico City. The gravel road into the crater is often closed from November to March, but you can still drive to good alpine habitat and then walk to the crater lakes (if you are not prone to altitude sickness). After heavy winter snowfalls the park is sometimes closed completely. Volcano rabbit was said to be present at 2800-3200 m, but as of 2015 there are reports that it's extinct here. The only mammal I saw above the tree line was a shrew (**Jalisco shrew**, I think). The area of small restaurants near the toll gate has **canyon bats** in the toilet building, and is said to have **white-tailed deer** at dusk. Pine forests nearby have **Mexican cottontails** (told from other cottontails by being excessively cute) and the endemic *planiceps* subspecies of **naked-nosed pocket gopher** (look at stream terraces just below the tree line).

4. Santuario Mariposa Monarcha (2003) is a cluster of nature reserves around the town of Angangueo in Michoacan, 3-4 hrs from Mexico City. The only reserve accessible by paved road is El Rosario, 20-30 min from the town. The reserve has huge numbers of wintering Monarch butterflies from November till late January, but is closed Sept-early Dec. The reserve and surrounding hills have good fir forests and lush tallgrass meadows, where I found a **bobcat**, a **hooded skunk**, **Aztec and Michoacan mice, small-toothed and Western harvest mice**, and a **Mexican vole. Pumas and coyotes** are said to be common. There are numerous abandoned mines in the area. Some are said to contain huge bat colonies in summer (the description sounded like **Mexican freetail**). In winter, the few small mines I managed to find had hibernating **fringed and cave myotis, big brown bat, Mexican big-eared bats, and Townsend's big-eared bats.** The road from Angangueo to the highway is good for night drives; I saw a **Virginia opossum** and a large shrew (almost certainly a **Mexican giant shrew**).

5. Tula (2012) is a small town 1.5-2 hrs north of Mexico City, in Hidalgo State. It is the site of the ancient Toltec capital, and its Zona Arqueologica is one of the most interesting Precolombian sites in the area. There's not much wildlife during the day, when Zona Arqueologica is open, except for lizards, hummingbirds, **rock squirrels, tropical ground squirrels**, and an occasional **white-eared cotton rat.** Forests below the pyramids have both **Mexican gray and Peter's squirrels.** If you park outside the first gate and stay in the forest until everybody leaves at dusk, you can see a lot of mammals. Rodents include **hispid pocket mouse, Ord's kangaroo rat** (not seen well – could be Philips's), some pocket gophers I didn't see (possibly **naked-nosed or Merriam's pocket gophers**), mice **Plateau mouse, Sumichrast's harvest mouse and Northern pygmy mouse.** The small colonial church has a **pallid bat** colony (the roost is not visible, but you can see the bats flying in and out). Flowering agaves and cacti attract **lesser and greater long-nosed bats**, while **common big-eared bats** use the second gate (the one with

museum) as a night roost. At dawn you can see **desert cottontails**; at night - **nine-banded armadillos**, **gray foxes**, **hognose skunks** and **white-sided jackrabbits**. On-site museum has some of those, as well as mounted **ringtails** and **Mexican ground squirrels**.

6. Teotihuacan (2003, 2012) is the most impressive Precolombian site north of Mexico. Unlike other Zonas Arqueologicas in Mexico, it opens at 7 am rather than 9 am, which means you can get in at dawn in winter. **Mexican ground squirrels** are common until it gets hot, **Eastern cottontails** live in the botanical garden area, and there are lots of **pocket gopher** burrows. In winter of 2003, fenced-off palace chambers had **Yuma myotis** and **canyon bats**, but in 2012 most such places were watched by guards and couldn't be checked out. Also in 2003, I saw a **black-tailed jackrabbit** on Highway 132 a few km northeast from Teotihuacan.

7. La Cima (2012) is a nondescript place on Mexico-Morelos state line, popular among birdwatchers as the last known site for Sierra Madre sparrow. It is reached by a dirt track (passable only by high-clearance or rental car) which branches off Carretera Cuernavaca Libre exactly 24.5 km from its junction with Carretera Cuernavaca Quota on the southern outskirts of Mexico City. If you see a yellow bus stop, you missed it (don't despair, a minute further down the road there's a gas station where you can safely turn around). You can also walk to the site from the highway (expect freezing nights). There are small garbage dumps along the dirt road where I saw a **hooded skunk** before dawn (and many nice birds later). There were also **badger** tracks there. After about 1 km you reach a junction with a - surprise! - well-maintained paved bike path (and a power line). The bike path junction area had the largest density of gopher burrows I've ever seen in Mexico; it took just 40+ minutes of waiting in the car to see a **Merriam's pocket gopher**. Also in the junction area, there was a small sinkhole that had apparently been used as a den by **coyotes**, but it was vacant at the time of my visit. At night there was one **Philips' kangaroo rat** under the power line, a *Peromyscus* (apparently **Trasvolcanic mouse**) at the edge of the forest, and at dawn a **cotton rat** (not identified to species) a bit further down the track. The place also looks good for **harvest mice**. While driving there, I saw an almost-certain **deer mouse** about 1 km N of the highway turnoff

8. Malinalco (2012) is a town 2 hrs southwest of Mexico City, famous for its rock-hewn Aztec temple. Park guards said there are sometimes bats in the main temple, but I didn't see any. A trail past the main temple goes to a huge crevasse in a rock face which contains a colony of **Toltec fruit bats** and some freetails that I couldn't see well; they seemed too large to be anything but **Underwood's bonneted bats**. The only other mammal I saw in Zona Arqueologica was a *Cryptotis* shrew that ran across the temple trail; I think the elevation was too low for anything but **least shrew**. There were also some ringtail tracks around the main temple in the morning. The dry tropical forest and huge cliff faces beyond the temple area were teeming with life at night; in just 4 hrs I saw a **Virginia opossum**, a few **nine-banded armadillos**, **Pallas's long-tongued** and **greater long-nosed bats** (around flowering columnar cacti), a **Southern spotted skunk** and an **Allen's woodrat**. Small Aztec ruins are scattered through the forest outside Zona Arqueologica, and sometimes have **Mexican woodrat** nests or **ringtail** droppings inside. There

were also apparent **desert red bats** flying around street lights in town, and **Norway rats** in the streets. Souvenir stalls had items made of **Mexican porcupine** quills, and vendors said they were of local origin. **White-nosed coatis** reportedly visit the temple area from time to time. The trail to the main temple and other trails nearby have outstandingly good birding and lots of reptiles; I think it's the best low-elevation birding site in the whole area. I am sure there are lots of other mammals there (perhaps even **jaguarundis** and **collared peccaries**), but unfortunately I only got there just before the end of the trip and didn't have more time to explore.

9. Grutas de Cachahuamilpa (2003, 2012) in Guerrero are about 3 hrs south of Mexico City via Cuernavaca, and 1 hr from Malinalco. This is one of the best sites for bats in Mexico. The main cave has high ceilings and relatively few bats. In winter of 2003 there were **Parnell's mustached bats**, **Argentine brown bat** and **Aztec fruit bats**; in spring of 2012 I found only the latter. The surrounding area is a national park with lots of deep crevasses and small caves; in 2003 I found **Waterhouse's leaf-nosed bats**, **Allen's yellow bats** and **Allen's big-eared bats** in those caves, while in 2012 there were **Aztec fruit bats** and **funnel-eared bats** (**Mexican greater** if you prefer to split them). The park office had photos of some of these species plus **highland yellow-shouldered bat** (probably a summer visitor) and *Myotis* sp. Limestone slopes are good for rodents; in 2003 I found **Southern pygmy mice**, and unidentified *Peromyscus*, **Mexican harvest mice** and a **Mexican woodrat**, while in 2012 I didn't visit the site at night, but saw one **white-eared cotton rat** at dawn.

Other interesting places in the area include Lagunas de Zampoala National Park just southwest of Mexico City (reported to have **white-tailed deer**, **gray fox**, **long-tailed weasel**, **Mexican cottontail**, **hog-nosed** and **hooded skunks**, and **Mexican gray squirrel**), El Tepozteco National Park on the southeastern edge of the city, Zoquiapan National Park (a northern continuation of Izta-Popo NP), and Desierto de Los Leones National Park just west of the city, with an old monastery worth checking for bats and remnant forests said to have **bobcat**, **coyote**, **ringtail**, **Northern raccoon**, **grey fox**, **hooded skunk**, **Mexican cottontail** and **Mexican gray squirrel**. Its western continuation is called La Marquesa National Park.