

ECUADOR 16-28 NOVEMBER 2015

After a failed attempt to see Andean Bears in Peru, and reading multiple trip reports on Ecuador on this site about Cayembe-Coca National Park, I decided to go back to Ecuador for the third time to try to see the bears. I also decided to tie this in with a trip to Bellavista for the Olinguito, and the Cuyabeno region to try for Yellow Handed (Lucifer) Titi Monkeys.

I had wanted to see the titi monkeys for some time, and after researching my best option, the Cuyabeno Lodge seemed like the most reliable place with sightings, based on their website. The lodge is located in the 603,380 hectare Cuyabeno Nature Reserve in eastern Ecuador. It was the first lodge in Ecuador that was started in a national park system, and was started to boost tourism in the area with concerns with farming and the heavy oil industry in the area. The lodge was built by local Siona tribes for the company Neotropic Turis, and like all the lodges in the Cuyabeno region, employs the Siona on a rotating basis as boat guides (the guides go from lodge to lodge on week long rotations). With the close proximity to Colombia, and previous safety concerns issued by tour companies, tourist numbers are not as high as in the Yasuni region of Ecuador.

Day 1 – an uneventful flight to Quito. My friend and I stayed at the Hotel Casa de Campo Tababela which is ten minutes from the airport. We had an early flight the next morning and did not want to drive into Quito. The airport is also building an actual hotel across from the check in area which will be another alternative in the future

Day 2 – Took a very early morning flight to Lago Agrio. The town is basically an “oil boom town” and evidence of the industry is everywhere. From there we drove 1.5 hours to an entry station along the Cuyabeno River bridge. Prior to getting there we picked up our guide Gulliver (highly recommended) near his village. The entry station is where all the boats going into the region have to sign in with park officials. After doing this it took another 1.5 hours along the Cuyabeno River to reach the Laguna Grande where the lodge is located. This was also the first time I have had national park patrol officers stop me and check the boat credentials while on the river.

During the dry season, the entire lagoon dries up, and tourists have to make the end of the trek on foot. On the way to the lodge we saw a large troop of Common Squirrel Monkey, and a family of three Monk Sakis.



The lodge itself has three levels of housing. A more dorm style with shared bathroom, a mid range, and a tower that has the more upscale rooms that include a large balcony with ensuite facilities. We chose to stay in the tower. The lodge itself is slightly run down compared to others that I have stayed at, however it was in a beautiful area, had constant wildlife on the lodge grounds to watch (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians) and hands down had

the best food of any jungle lodge that I have stayed at. The first two nights we were the only lodge guests, the last night we were joined by a group of ten tourists (mixed herd of Europeans and Americans, all belonging to the noisy subspecies).

After getting to the lodge we ate lunch. As soon as we sat down, six Black Mantled Tamarins (most likely Graell's based on where we were) were sitting in the trees across from the restaurant staring at us. The tamarins stuck around for about an hour.

After that we decided to an afternoon boat trip around the lagoon. One of the things our guide did for us, after I had jokingly told him I get severe neck cramping after any jungle experience with looking up at the top of trees or pointing my camera up for extended periods of time, was to take two of the lodge lawn chairs and put them in a boat for us. So basically we could lay back which made looking and photography easier. The look on other tourist boats filled with guests from other lodges when they saw our boat, made the



whole thing worth it. In the lagoon we only saw Amazon Pink River Dolphins and Long-nosed Proboscis Bats.



That night we did a night walk along one of the trails from the lagoon. It was mainly for insects and amphibians, but I tried to look for mammals as well. We heard and saw tree movement from Spix's Night Monkeys and at the end of our walk I heard an intense yowling noise (unfortunately not close) that our guide identified as a Margay. I was told that they

are sometimes seen along the edge of the lagoon at night. A large group of noisy tourists on the trail from another lodge cut our night walk short.

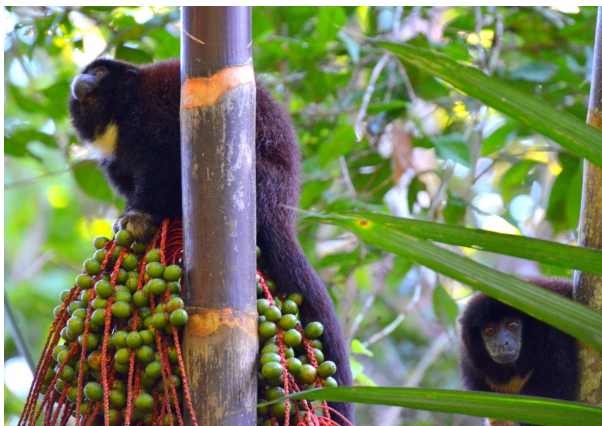
Day 3 – My friend that I was with had never been to South America and wanted to do a village tour that is often offered by most jungle lodges. This was something I had never done before because I want to maximize my wildlife viewing time. I was told by Gulliver that the trip to the village took over an hour by boat and it provided a good opportunity to look for mammals. I had talked to Gulliver about wanting to see a Lucifer Titi monkey at the lodge. I was told a pair were often seen every morning. Sure enough at 7:15 am, above the boat jetty, I saw a long fluffy brown tail hanging from a tree while I was eating breakfast. When I went down to further examine, the pair of titis were busy eating about 3 meters above my head. The pair then proceeded to go around to the trees the tamarins had been in the previous day, go around the main trees on the periphery of the



lodge, then disappear into the jungle at the back of the lodge grounds. We were able to watch them for over 45 minutes at close range. Between 7 am and 7:40 am the following two mornings, the pair repeated this trek around the lodge and were easy to photograph. I was told they were a regular sighting and are often seen during the day in the trees from the top of the observation tower. The previous year they had a baby with them.

From there we took the boat ride to the closest Siona village. The first highlight was the largest mixed troop of primates I had ever seen in the neotropics. A large group of Black Mantled Tamarins led the way followed by Common Squirrel Monkeys, then White Fronted Capuchins and in the rear were three Lucifer Titi monkeys. There must have easily been at least 100 primates in this group. We also checked out two day roost sites for Spix's night monkey (none seen) and went to two separate areas for pygmy marmoset. At one of the sites we could hear the marmosets, but they were too high in the tree to see. After the village tour along the way back we saw more Pink Amazon River Dolphins and Proboscis Long Nosed bats. After lunch and a quick siesta we headed back onto the river. The tamarins seen the previous day at lunch were then hanging out in tree by the tower prior to us getting in the boat. The afternoon was not as eventful except for seeing Venezuelan Red Howler Monkeys, and the largest Green Anaconda I had ever seen sunning itself on the top of a tree. We did a night boat trip around the lagoon and did not see any mammals.

Day 4 – We decided to do a jungle hike to see poison dart frogs and so my friend could stand on the Equator (which runs across from the lodge). After watching the titi monkeys again for thirty minutes, we took a boat to the opposite side of the lagoon to the trail head.

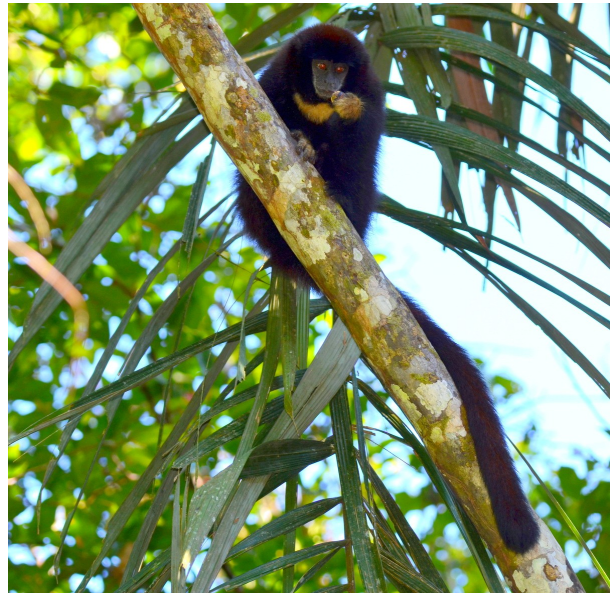


We had more views of Black Mantled Tamarins, saw a large family of Common Woolly Monkeys that were difficult to photograph in the canopy, and well as a nice mix of insects and birds.

After the trek we went back to the lodge for lunch and a small troop of about 10 White Fronted Capuchins were hanging out in the trees outside the restaurant. In the afternoon we did another boat trip that extended past sunset. We saw more Amazon Pink River Dolphins, Proboscis Long Nosed bats , as well as Greater Bulldog Fishing Bats skimming the water at dusk.



Day 5 – Our last morning at the lodge included more titi watching.



The boat trip back to the Cuyebeno Bridge took longer on the way back (about 2 hours) due to lower water levels and the current. We had a nice view of a Yellow Crowned Brush Tailed Rat,

more tamarins, and a family group of 5 Monk Sakis.



We then took the 1.5 drive back to the airport. Along the way a single Black Mantled Tamarin was walking across the road. We took an afternoon flight back to Quito, and were picked up by a driver that worked for the Bellavista Lodge. What should have been an easy 1.5-2 hour drive ended up taking over 4 hours due to roads being blocked off for a Catholic festival that involved thousands of people on the road walking to a village to celebrate (I am not sure of the name of the festival however). What seemed impressive at first with the number of people walking, soon became unimpressive with the number of detours and road blocks we encountered. The lodge itself has been previously described here in detail. It is located in a cloud forest reserve in Tandayapa. From the main highway, a gravel/dirt road takes visitors to the lodge gate. Along the way a Red Brocket Deer was in the middle of the road. I imagine our driver had maybe seen one other deer in his lifetime, based on his excitement level/squeals of delight when he saw the deer. By the time we got to the lodge it was raining. We met up with our guide Jorge who took us to our room and described the details of the lodge. We decided to stay in the private balcony suite section of the lodge, which was also located across from the feeding station for the Olinquito. Jorge had told me they had not been seen in the three days before I had got there by guests or on the night cameras the lodge sets out. The only thing that stopped me from even trying that night was the heavy rain. I was told however a Tayra was showing up daily at the banana feeding station.

Day 6 – we decided to hike around the trails by the lodge for the day. While the bird life was excellent, the only mammals we saw were Red Tailed Squirrels.



After dinner I decided to park myself on the upper platform of the banana feeding station. Jorge and one of the other guides had set out additional bananas earlier in the evening for me, in the hopes that the Olinguito would show. Luckily for me his plan worked, and not just one, but three made appearances that evening. They were very difficult to photograph however, as almost every time they would come out into the open a cloud would roll by right in front of me.



Day 7 – While trying to plan an event for the day, we had talked to the lodge owner

Richard the day before. Since we already had a private guide, he recommended we go to the Paz de las Ave Bird Refuge to see the Andean Cock of the Rock. It was a bird I had never seen, and Richard told me that based on our conversations I was a “mammaler”, however, if I considered myself any sort of naturalist, I needed to see this bird. The trip was actually well done, as the area had a blind at a lek site, as well as having feeding stations for a variety of ant pitta species.



We went back to the lodge for lunch and mid way through, Jorge came to get me as the Tayra was busy at the banana feeding stations. I have seen the species multiple times, but not at a feeding station, so it was nice to watch one at close range and relaxed.



The afternoon we hiked around the lodge and saw more squirrels. I had told Jorge that I would have also liked to see a Andean White - Eared Opossum. Jorge told me they had not been seen recently, but placed some additional things around the banana feeding station to try and entice them. We also proceeded to do a night drive along the dirt roads near the road (only saw an unidentified large rodent cross the road) and checked the compost pile multiple times. No opossums or any other mammals were seen. I also

multiple times checked the hummingbird feeders for bats and did not see any.

Day 8 – In the morning we saw more squirrels, a beautiful Toucan Barbet right outside our room, but nothing else.

We then had a private transfer take us to Papallacta where we stayed at the Termas Papallacta. We decided to take the afternoon off and soak in the hot springs. At night there were multiple Brazilian Forest rabbits hanging outside of our room.



Day 9 – After reading Jason Woolgar's report about how he had toured with Armando Castellanos who studies Andean Bears and Mountain Tapirs in Ecuador, Jason was kind enough to link me up with Armando to set up a tour. Armando is now leading small groups for 3-4 days to see some of his research subjects that are radio collared. You also have the chance to see non collared animals along the way. He was also the one that helped Jon Hall see

a Mountain tapir. That morning he met us in the lobby of our hotel. He was a wonderful individual to be around, and it was nice to see someone so passionate about what he is doing. The first day we drove into the Cayembe-Coca National Park to pick up Melchor Ascanta (a former park ranger who had excellent tracking skills) and his son Oscar who would accompany us looking for bears and tapirs. The basic plan was to drive around to see if we saw anything, then go to known active bear areas, drop them off with walki talkies and wait to see if they saw anything. The morning turned out nothing, so in the afternoon we drove to any area close to the town of Papallacta, where Armando's favorite research subject Rebecca the Andean bear lived. This was the first time I had seen a radio collared animal tracked in person. Melchor, Oscar and Armando went ahead of us, found her sleeping on a mountain side, then brought us to the base of the mountain to watch. She was very relaxed with us and were able to watch her for about 30 minutes before we left. Along the same hike we saw a White Tailed Deer.

Day 9 – Heavy rain and wind made this day a no go for wildlife. We did drive around in the national park proper in the morning, then decided to go back to the lodge to soak in the afternoon.

Day 10 – In the morning we saw multiple Brazilian Forest rabbits outside the restaurant that were easy to approach and photograph. Armando told me the rabbit numbers were very low in the National Park itself currently and we were lucky to see them.

This day we decided to focus on finding Panchita, a radio collared Mountain Tapir in Armando's study group. This was the same tapir that Jon hall saw (minus the bling). This was probably one of the most intense hikes I have ever done, up and down and up and down the sides



of mountains (at high altitude) until they got a good radio signal. We sat on the edge of a small cliff staring down at tall grass with Armando whispering she is here, she is close. Sure enough within a few minutes, Panchita stood up right below us. She seemed very relaxed and after about 10-15 minutes she walked off right below us.



On the way back to the car, a male Andean bear (not collared) was walking across the level grass. We stopped, but as soon as he either saw or smelled us, he ran off across the road on the other side.

Day 11 – I spent the last day with Armando while he dropped Melchor and Oscar off on the opposite side of the park. The only wildlife we saw was single White Tailed Deer. In the afternoon we had a transfer back to Quito where we spent the night at the Casona de la Ronda.



Day 12 – after a city tour for my friend, we took a night flight home.

A couple thoughts about my trip -

1. Cuyabeno was a great place in my opinion. While you do see a lot of evidence of the oil industry from the pipelines, to the workers to the trucks, once you get into the actual reserve the area seems untouched. I also only got two insect bites which is a jungle record for me, the most delicious human to insects currently on the planet. There are chances for Amazon manatees, however I was told not as high as things I had read on the internet. I do think however that getting a private guide is a must if you want to concentrate on mammals, or on what you want to see. There are a variety of lodges in the area, many gearing towards budget travelers, which means you could get stuck in a boat with ten other people, and not a comfy lawn chair like me.
2. I am obviously now some “sort” of naturalist as I have seen an Andean Cock of the Rock.
3. I know there are some people that are against seeing radio collared animals and do not think it is a real natural experience. I say to this, you have obviously never tracked a radio collared Mountain Tapir. I like hiking, but I worked months before trying to get in better shape for this part of the trip. Trying to move at an adequate pace, off trail, in high grass and mud, up and down, at elevation is not easy. The effort alone I think I should get 2-3 mammal ticks for this experience. At the time I did this, I was told that my friend and I were the first females to do the tour, and Melchor told Armando he was impressed that we were fit and could keep up, as Ecuadorian women do not like to climb mountains. Doing the trip with him also helps support his project and brings money for his radio collars. Not only does he study the animals, but he works trying to educate the people who live around the bears and tapirs about how important they are to protect, which in my opinion is the real target audience in the long run.

Species list -

1. Common Squirrel Monkey – *Saimiri sciureus*
2. Monk Saki – *Pithecia monachus*
3. Graell's Black Mantled Tamarin – *Saguinus graellsii*
4. Amazon Pink River Dolphin (boto) -*Inia geoffrensis*
5. Proboscis Long Nosed Bat – *Rhynchonycteris naso*
6. Yellow Handed (Lucifer) Titi Monkey – *Callicebus lucifer*
7. White Fronted Capuchin -*Cebus albifrons*
8. Venezuelan Red Howler Monkey – *Alouatta seniculus*
9. Common Woolly Monkey – *lagotrix lagotricha*
10. Greater Bulldog Fishing Bat – *Noctilio leporinus*
11. Yellow Crowned Brush Tailed Rat – *isothrix bistriata*
12. Red Brocket Deer – *Mazama americana*
13. Red Tailed Squirrel – *Sciurus granatensis*
14. Olinguito – *Bassaricyon neblina*
15. Tayra – *Eira barbara*
16. Brazilian Forest Rabbit – *Sylvilagus brasiliensis*
17. Andean Bear – *Tremarctos ornatus*
18. White Tailed Deer – *Odocoileus virginianus*
19. Mountain Tapir – *Tapirus pinchaque*