

Colombia

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Submitted by Matt Miller

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In August, I traveled to Colombia for a month-long fellowship I received through The Nature Conservancy. I was based in Cartagena, but also traveled to the Llanos region and tropical dry forest.

I've found that most people don't consider Colombia to be a top destination for wildlife, largely because many of the more remote areas have been off limits for years due to guerilla and paramilitary activity. This is changing, fast. With the current government, more areas are safe to travel than ever. Areas that are reported by Lonely Planet and other guidebooks as dangerous are now perfectly safe. There are still dangerous areas—but a traveler can definitely explore new wildlife areas without security concerns.

Colombia offers a lot for the naturalist: It is one of the most biologically diverse countries on earth, and has more species of birds, butterflies and amphibians than any other. It also has a variety of interesting mammals.

I traveled to areas without any infrastructure for tourists, but I suspect that will be changing. There is a real interest in promoting Colombia's natural features to tourists. Let's hope it can be done in a way that benefits wildlife and communities.

I unfortunately was not able to get to some of the better known wildlife areas such as Tayrona National Park and the Amazon River. There is a lot to see and perhaps this will give you some ideas. Feel free to contact me with any questions.

Los Llanos – The Llanos region is a huge swath of flooded grasslands that includes a large part of eastern Colombia as well as Venezuela. In Venezuela, wildlife tourism is well-established on a number of large ranches, but paramilitary activity and accurate travel warnings have kept tourists out of this area in Colombia. But the area is now safe, although there are still no tourists. In the area around Villavincencio, easily reached from Bogota, there are some farms that are now offering various tour packages, and the Llanos is easier to explore from there. However, from what I understand, this is not one of the most wildlife-rich areas of Los Llanos.

We flew to Yopal, in the Department of Casanare. There are no tourists in this town, and none exploring the Llanos from this area. There is a very rough oil pipeline road that goes deep in the grasslands. We drove this road as far as we could, then took horses into cattle ranches. The cattle ranches exist here remarkably well with wildlife. They are not set up for tourists, but there is interest in hosting eco-tourists in the near future. The area has a lot of potential. We visited in the rainy season, which (as in the Pantanal) is not the optimum time for wildlife viewing as the mammals area spread out. **Capybaras** are the most common large mammal, with herds roaming along the rivers and in most wetland

areas. **White-tailed deer** were abundant. **Feral hogs** were regularly spotted and figured prominently in our meals. Llanos long-nosed armadillos, an endemic species, were common; one young man on one of the ranches had a special knack for catching these so we could have close up looks and photographs. I also had great views of a **southern tamandua** and an **opossum** of indeterminate species.

Colleagues who visited the same area in the dry season also saw **giant anteater** and a **puma**. Giant anteaters are reportedly not difficult to find during the dry season.

Bird life was astounding, with huge flocks of black-bellied whistling ducks, the endemic Orinoco goose, scarlet ibis, roseate spoonbill and many other wetland birds. Grassland birds like the burrowing owl were abundant. Caimans and various turtles could regularly be seen along the waterways.

The grasslands literally stretch to the horizon here; with thousands of birds overhead and capybaras and deer grazing the field, it's a magical place.

Yopal – To reach the Llanos in the Department of Casanare, you can fly into Yopal, which is serviced by daily flights from Bogota. This is a small, ranching-oriented city, the kind of place I enjoy. Due to an increasing number of oil field workers, there are hotels. The Hotel Camaruco has clean rooms, a swimming pool and nice courtyard for a reasonable price. Huge steak dinners typify the food in this region, and there are a large number of restaurants in town. Fruit juices are popular and delicious. A swimming hole in the local river, called Aguarico, is just outside of town with emerald clear (but cold) waters, and san cocho (the delicious Colombian national stew, with chicken, yucca, corn, potato, etc) served on the banks. I enjoyed the town—completely untouristy, excellent food and a good place to understand the scope and importance of cattle ranching in the region.

Cartagena and Surrounds – I was based in Cartagena, a town justifiably best known for its historic walled city, its colorful streets and its nearby beaches. That's the reason to go to Cartagena. This city is well-covered by the guidebooks and it's definitely a place you should visit if you travel to Colombia. Around the city is not the best spot for wildlife, but it's worthwhile to stop by the Parque Centenario—the city park located between Getsemani and the Ciudad Alta. There are many **red-tailed squirrels** in this park, and they can be easily photographed. For some reason, locals have taken to releasing other wildlife in the park. The animals are not caged but are somewhat limited in that it can't very well leave the park, being surrounded by the city. There is a group of **cotton-top tamarins** that can best be seen early in the morning. There are also a couple of **three-toed sloths** in the tree-tops if you look carefully, and a number of green iguanas.

Birding is often offered as a tour option in the mangroves near Cartagena, but I went instead at the Laguna Totum, a lagoon near the popular Totum mud volcano (also worth visiting). There are large numbers of water birds, and we also saw several green iguanas and a tegu lizard here. There's no organized tour but local fishermen will take people out for a nominal fee; Spanish language skills help.

The Islas Rosario—Caribbean islands off the coast of Colombia—are a popular Cartagena day trip. However, the package tours seem pretty awful, with large tour groups, stops at touristy places like an aquarium, and a lot of time spent shuttling from one stop to the next. This is not a mammal watching destination, but if you want to go, a good option is the local company Cultura del Mar. They offer individual snorkeling trips, with plenty of beach time, so you're spending time on the islands and in the water. The snorkeling is not world-class by any means—there aren't many fish—but snorkeling around the mangroves was interesting and the guides were good.

Tropical Dry Forest – This interesting habitat is tropical forest that has a very pronounced dry season, leading to interesting adaptations among animals living there. The forest is highly endangered, far more so than rainforest. I visited parcels that are still intact, including the ranch El Ceibal near Cartagena. Currently, there are not tours offered to this area, but there may be opportunities in the future. The most interesting creature here is the **cotton-top tamarin**, located by radio tracking with staff from Proyecto Titi, an organization dedicated to preserving cotton-top populations.

Proyecto Titi has helped the local community build a new business, which involves collecting plastic bags (a real problem throughout rural Colombia due to lack of garbage collection) and crocheting them into mochila bags. It has transformed the community: They now have an income without extracting it from the forest (poaching, wood collecting, etc). You can buy these mochila bags on-line at **proyectotiti.com**.

We also saw red howler monkeys in the tropical dry forest, as well as large numbers of birds. We found tracks of **crab-eating fox** and **jaguarondi**, and **capybaras** have been reintroduced. I wish I had more time to spend in this area as there are great possibilities for birding and mammal watching.

Bogota Wetlands – Bogota has a number of wetland areas, ranging from sewage lagoons to nicely protected nature reserves. These include several endemic species of birds, with the Bogota rail being perhaps the best known. Due to a change in flights, I had an extra afternoon in Bogota, so I arranged a birding tour with Oswaldo Cortes to see these areas. The wetlands reserve at La Conejera is great, well preserved with lots of birds. **Wild guinea pigs** were abundant in the reserve. There is some debate as to whether these are feral guinea pigs or actually a separate species found only in the Bogota wetlands. We saw two of the endemic birds, the subtropical doradito and silvery-throated spinetail. We would have seen more if we could have gone at a better time than mid-afternoon. There were also a lot of masked ducks, sparkling hummingbirds, moorhens and other interesting species. Oswaldo Cortes (email: oswaldo_aves@yahoo.com) is an excellent guide and does trips to the cloud forest and various reserves near Bogota where you can see huge lists of species. He's a friendly guy and committed conservationist, and I would definitely go with him on a longer trip if I'm back in that area.

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