

Trip Report – South America, June-July 2011

We spent a month in Chile, two weeks in Peru and Bolivia, and three weeks in Ecuador including a visit to the Galapagos Islands. We saw a total of **32 mammals**, all but one new to our life list.

Chile

Our first week in Chile was spent on Chiloe Island where we were treated to six days without rain – apparently almost unheard of here. We initially stayed at Chepu Adventures on the west coast, which proved to be a brilliant choice. Not only are Fernando and Amory wonderful hosts with a great love of nature, not only is Amory's home cooking excellent, but this is also probably the only place in the world with consistent sightings of **Southern River Otter**. Even though they are less readily seen in winter we found them on our third day – two different sightings. Both times I was on the verge of hissing at our boatman “don't get so close, you'll scare them off!” but thankfully my Spanish wasn't up to it and he knew his stuff – the otters were remarkably tolerant. At Chepu we also had a distant view of a **Coypu** from the lodge, and better yet a very close view of two **Southern Pudu**, in the open and in broad daylight – they are regular visitors to the grassy slope below the lodge.



Southern River Otter (local name “huillin”)

At Punhuil, north of Chepu, **Marine Otters** are readily seen. Being there out of season was lucky – instead of sharing a boat with a dozen tourists more interested in seeing the penguin colony (fools!), we were taken out alone in a boat for incredibly close views of otters fishing and one devouring a huge crab on a rock just a few feet away.



Marine Otter (local name "chungungo") with a crab supper

We saw **South American Sealions** in the water at various places on Chiloe's coast, including the ferry crossing from the mainland, at Castro harbour and at Dalcahue harbour. We had a very brief view of one **Chilean Dolphin** at the north end of Castro harbour, identifiable by its dark colour, small size and small fin. On the main road between Castro and Quellon (don't ask me where exactly!) after dark we saw four mice crossing the road within half a kilometer, and then found a squashed specimen of **Olivaceous Grass Mouse** on the same stretch. So I'm concluding that the others we saw were the same, as Jon has noted before that they plague when bamboo is in flower. Finally, on the ferry back to the mainland we saw a single **Peale's Dolphin** at dusk.

On Chiloe the target we missed was Darwin's Fox, as we were there out of season and with insufficient notice we couldn't get into Tepuhueco or Tantauco which seem by far the likeliest places for a sighting. It was nice to be there out of tourist season, but it also meant seeing far less cetaceans than we had hoped.

The rest of our time in Chile was spent in the north, on the coast at Arica then up into the Andes around Parque Nacional Lauca and then again in the Andes at San Pedro de Atacama. In Arica harbour there are some extremely fat Sealions and if you drive south to the end of the coast road and walk the rocky path you may, like us, see a couple of Marine Otters and more Sealions.

At the main entrance to Lauca, Las Cuevas, we easily found many **Mountain Viscacha** among the rocks on the short trail there, and also spotted a **Bolivian Greater Mouse** which had exactly the same half-asleep zen expression as the Viscachas. From there onwards we also saw any number of herds of **Vicuna** on the altiplano. We got up to the Salar de Surire in our little rental car with no trouble, but since we weren't staying the night it wasn't sensible to spotlight for Andean Cats with a three hour drive back to Putre still to do. We spent a lot of time on the roads around Putre searching for Guanaco and Northern Huemul, both of which live in this intermediate mountainous zone before the altiplano. We spotted a group of **Guanaco** on our second day and found another group further south towards Codpa, but although we spent time on all of our three days we

didn't see a Huemel. Everyone we've spoken to agrees that they are rare and not easy to find, which is no consolation at all.



Bolivian Greater Mouse, sneaking up on a Mountain Viscacha

At San Pedro de Atacama we didn't expect much apart from the plentiful Vicuna, but if you take the El Tatio tour with a company called Cosmo Andino they will take you to a secret hot pool that the other companies don't use, and this is in a little valley absolutely abounding with Mountain Viscacha. Maybe hundreds. And by good fortune there was a **Culpeo Fox** present, eyeing up some possible breakfast. I think we cramped his style, as he wandered off without hunting.

Peru and Bolivia

This wasn't a mammal watching trip, we were doing the tourist thing and seeing La Paz, Cusco, Machu Picchu and the Colca Canyon. However, at the Jardins de Mandor we spotted at least three agoutis that we are identifying based on IUCN distribution maps as **Kalinowski's Agouti**, as we can find no photos of them online for visual ID! Mandor is set in a small cloud forest valley an hour's walk down the railway tracks from Aguas Calientes, the tourist town that serves Machu Picchu, and is about the only worthwhile thing to do around that dump.



Kalinowski's Agouti (unless anyone can suggest another ID?)

And on the first day of our Colca Canyon tour we passed through the reserve Aguada de Blanca y Salina where there were herds of Vicuna visible and also **Northern Viscacha** in the rocks at the roadside. To be honest there seems to be enormous confusion amongst authorities about the distribution of Northern/Peruvian vs Southern/Mountain Viscacha, but these ones were distinctly larger and had much less sandy or rufous colours in their fur than those in Chile.

Ecuador

In Ecuador we spent three days in the Amazon basin at Sacha Lodge on the Napo River, and then four days in the Galapagos Islands on a boat. Hoorah for sea-sickness pills.

Sacha is an excellent birding lodge and has a nice set of primates, but our guide admitted that with “only” a 2000 hectare reserve surrounded by land being used for agriculture, plantation or oil extraction it doesn't have a population of bigger mammals as good as the million hectare Yasuni National Park on the other side of the Napo; this is where Napo Lodge is. That might be a tip to choose Napo Lodge for your mammal watching, but I can't recommend it properly as we didn't stay there.

Anyway, at Sacha we saw **Black-mantled Tamarins**, a **Pygmy Marmoset**, several troupes of **Red Howler Monkeys**, a couple of troupes of **Squirrel Monkeys**, a troop of **White-fronted Capuchins** and a **Night Monkey** in a tree hole in daylight and in the canopy after dark. Around the lodge **Black Agouti** are easily seen in the drier parts, and on a trail we saw a **Green Acouchy** briefly. From the canopy walkway or kapok tower it is usually possible for the guides to point out a **Three-toed Sloth** in a treetop, although at some distance.



Black-mantled Tamarins *can* touch their noses with their tongues

Our two night walks and one night canoe trip proved unproductive for mammals except the aforementioned Night Monkey; even guides who have been there several years have typically only seen cats, tapir or opossums once or twice. Ever. The only species of primate we missed at Sacha was the Dusky Titi monkey, but apart from that we effectively saw every mammal species that there was a realistic chance of seeing here.

On our final day we got the opportunity to cross the Napo river and do a morning walk on a new trail cut into Yasuni NP near a riverbank parrot lick. This produced a single **Monk Saki Monkey**, a couple of **Coati Mundi** and a glimpse of a **Paca**. There were also lots of Peccary and Tapir tracks, so it all looked pretty good. There are a couple of other monkey species also only found on this side of the river, so if you visit Sacha it's worth asking whether the trail across the river is available.

The Galapagos are more known for birds than mammals, but we certainly got to see plenty of **Galapagos Sealions** on every island we visited and to snorkel with them off a rocky island on the east coast of Espanola. Pure magic. Our guide insisted that the Galapagos is a sub-species of the California Sealion but the latest I can find suggests they are genetically a distinct species. We also found endemic **Santa Fe Rice Rats** scuttling in dry scrub on the island of Santa Fe. I pointed them out to a different tour guide, but when his group asked what I'd seen he told them "oh, just some mice." All wildlife guides are not created equal!



We only saw two mammals in the Galapagos, so you can ID this

By bad luck we had picked a tour that didn't go to any of the islands where the Galapagos Fur Seal lives (mostly the northern ones), which just means we'll have to go back some time to see the other endemic. What a chore.

With only a week left in our year after the Galapagos we were inclined to relax and didn't expect to see any more mammals. But in the cloud forest above the town of Mindo we saw **Red-tailed Squirrels** while bird-watching and at night in the garden of our lodgings we spotlighted an **Anderson's Four-eyed Opossum**. On the other side of the Andes we spent our final nights loafing at the hot springs resort of Papallacta. A ranger for the nearby Cayambe-Coca NP told us that a range of mammals can be found here including Tapir, Spectacled Bear, Tayra and others. It rained all day for both our days there, which kept the temptation to explore at bay.



Swimming with sealions, one of the highlights of our year
More photos from this trip at www.otteradrift.com

That's the end of our year-long trip around the world. It hasn't been a dedicated mammal-watching trip by any means, but we've kept our eyes open everywhere and gone for some

specific mammal locations in most countries we visited. We've seen a pretty pleasing total of 214 mammals over the year, 178 of which are new to our life list.

South America List

Mammal	Country	Life list	First spotted
South American sealion	Chile	Yes	Chiloe
Marine otter	Chile	Yes	Chepu, Chiloe
Southern pudu	Chile	Yes	Chepu, Chiloe
Coypu	Chile	Yes	Chepu, Chiloe
Southern river otter	Chile	Yes	Chepu, Chiloe
Chilean dolphin	Chile	Yes	Castro, Chiloe
Olive grass mouse	Chile	Yes	Chiloe
Peale's dolphin	Chile	Yes	Chiloe
Vicuna	Peru	Yes	Aguada de Blanca y Salina
Northern viscacha	Peru	Yes	Aguada de Blanca y Salina
Guanaco	Chile	Yes	Parque Nacional Lauca
Bolivian greater mouse	Chile	Yes	Parque Nacional Lauca
Kalinowski's Agouti	Peru	Yes	Jardin de Mandor
Mountain viscacha	Chile	Yes	Parque Nacional Lauca
Culpeo fox	Chile	Yes	El Tatio
Black agouti	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Black-mantle tamarin	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Brown-throated three-toed sloth	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Red howler monkey	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Pygmy marmoset	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Common squirrel monkey	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
White-fronted capuchin monkey	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Night monkey	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Monk saki	Ecuador	Yes	Yasuni National Park
South American coati mundi	Ecuador	No	Yasuni National Park
Paca	Ecuador	Yes	Yasuni National Park
Green acouchy	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
White-lined sac-winged bat	Ecuador	Yes	Sacha Lodge
Galapagos sealion	Ecuador	Yes	Galapagos
Santa Fe rice rat	Ecuador	Yes	Santa Fe, Galapagos
Red-tailed squirrel	Ecuador	Yes	Mindo
Anderson's four-eyed opossum	Ecuador	Yes	Mindo