

I was fortunate enough to work as the head naturalist guide at Sacha Lodge in the Ecuadorian Amazon for 14 months, where I was able to see many of the special mammals the region has to offer. Admittedly, I didn't pay the same attention to mammals as I did to birds and as a consequence made little effort to track down some of the smaller creatures. Fortunately, given the fact that I spent almost a full year in the field from morning to night, there was little that I missed apart from smaller mammals that would have required trapping, and some bats.

### The Lodge

The lodge itself is situated on the edge of a blackwater lake (cocha) on the Northern side of the Napo River. It's about 2 hours by motorized canoe, downstream from the town of Coca. You can take a short forty minute flight over the Andes from Quito to Coca or make your way there overland, stopping at various lodges on the Eastern slopes of the Andes, some of which have great mammals, like Mountain Tapir. The lodge is one of the more upscale establishments along the Napo and reaching the lodge independently is not suggested - when you book your stay, all of the transport arrangements are included.

Also included in the price are the services of both a naturalist guide and a local tracker - both valuable to your stay. Since most guests are general enthusiasts, all of the guides focus on the major creatures of the forest and know where best to find them. Usually you will make three excursions per day - morning, afternoon and night. This includes overland trails and canoe trips through the flooded forest. Guides are usually more than happy to have a special interest group so let them, and the management, know of your intentions in order that they can arrange the best schedule for your stay.

### The Mammals

Unless you ask to be taken to the Southern side of the Napo known as Shipati, you will spend your entire time in the forest surrounding the lodge, apart from one trip to the parrot lick in Yasuni Park, across the river. I'll talk about the animals on the North side, around the lodge first.

There are seven primates and it's not uncommon to see all the species in a 3 or 4 day stay. On many occasions I saw all seven in one day - sadly it often happened when my clients were less than interested. **Red Howler Monkeys** can be heard calling most mornings and, together with the **White-fronted Capuchins** and **Squirrel Monkeys**, are most often seen in the areas of flooded forest (Varzea). This includes the long boardwalk leading to the lake from the main river, sections of the Pantano Trail, forest around the lake and Orquidea creek as well as other, less regularly used trails. The boardwalk (Anden) is not a trail as such and you will usually only use it to make your way to or from the boats on the Napo, including your arrival and departure from the lodge. The creek is magical and a trip there at night or during the day is always a favourite. It is also the route to get to the famous wooden tower, built into the canopy of a huge Kapok tree. These species, like many of the others can also be found in dry forest and when they are calling it's much easier to track through this forest toward their calls.

**Pygmy Marmosets** are less widespread but you're just about guaranteed of a sighting as they never move far from their favourite feeding trees, one of which is just next to the cabins. They are very habituated and once you know where the tree is, you can sit watching them from only a few feet away during your free time. During these periods of free time you can't use the trails without a guide. It makes sense since getting lost is a reality and in any case the guides are always available and will find you much more. There are a couple of other 'Marmoset trees' in the forest.

**Red (White-tailed) Titis** frequent the secondary forest along the river and you might have to ask to head there as it's usually not frequented by regular groups, purely because it doesn't hold much else of interest.

**Spix's Night Monkeys**, while relatively infrequent on night walks, are much easier to find at their

tree cavities during the day and the guides can show you where these are. **Black-mantled Tamarins** can be located by their high-pitched calls and a small group of them is usually present around the cabins, especially around the boardwalk between the restaurant and manager's office.

The monkeys are the most conspicuous mammals and it seems that due to a lower density of larger predators, such as Harpy Eagles and the various cat species, their numbers might be higher than usual. This also applies to some of the smaller, terrestrial mammals. **Black Agouti** and **Green Acouchi** are fairly common throughout and can always be seen around the cabins if you sit quietly and wait. Particularly in the the area around the Marmoset tree. **Pacas** and **Nine-banded Armadillo** regularly put in appearances on night walks and often allow close approach. Both these last two species are more regular when trees are in fruit or flower but can also be found near the dump along with **Common Opossum** . Unless you ask for special permission to see the dump, you will not be taken there, however some of the trails that leave from behind the lodge pass very nearby. **Kinkajou** is also regularly seen, and like the Pacas, you have a better chance if you can find a fruiting/flowering tree (dry season). I only saw **Olingo** once during my stay.

**Tamanduas** are seen every few months, as are **Tayras**. **Brown-throated Three-toed Sloths** on the other hand are far more regular and are best seen from either the wooden tower or the canopy walkway. Whenever you are taken to these areas, your guide should take along a high-powered telescope to scan the tree tops. They are also seen in flooded forest and consequently can be found in the same areas frequented by the Red Howler Monkey etc. Orchidea creek can provide some fantastically close views as the canopy hangs low over the water. **Linnaeus's Two-toed Sloth** is much less regular but often remains in the same tangle of vines for extended periods so you'll be taken to see one if it has been recently spotted.

Three species of squirrel are present and you should see at least one of the **Amazon Red (Northern and Southern)**, and the **Amazon Dwarf**. The latter species can be found around the lodge grounds.

Both **White-lipped** and **Collared Peccary** are around but you're more likely to smell them than see them. I had some great encounters in my time there but they were few and far between.

**Coatis** are not very regular but I often surprised them by walking swiftly and quietly, only to end up in the middle of a group, individuals passing right by my feet, before one of them detected my presence and the whole lot darted off in all directions. In 14 months I had **Neotropical River Otter** in Orchidea creek a handful of times.

As mentioned earlier, I didn't pay specific attention to smaller creatures (something I regret now) but I recorded a few nonetheless. **White-lined Sac-winged Bats** have known roosts in several locations, often in the buttress roots of a kapok tree or on trunks along the edge of the Napo River. **Tent-making Bats** occasionally roost under a leaf near a trail and can be seen very closely for weeks, until the leaf withers and they move on. A **Bulldog Bat** species is guaranteed on a night excursion into the mouth of Orchidea creek where the fly right by the side of the canoe. When you're bored of them, look for the Electric Eels in the shallow water below. Opossums of various kinds are regularly seen in the canopy during night walks but often go unidentified . Of the species I had close views of, and that I bothered to identify, **Murine Mouse Opossum** and **Brown Four-eyed Opossum** were regular if I remember correctly.

There are are a handful of animals on their list (make sure to buy this list at the start of your stay) that I never saw there but had been in the recent past. **Silky Anteater**, **Ocelot**, **Giant Armadillo** and **Short-eared Dog** all fall into this category. Actually, a good friend of mine saw the latter on an island in the Napo river, not far from the clay lick. Both species of river dolphin are rare in the busy waters between the lodge and Coca. For a better chance at these, head to Panacocha downriver.

The South side of the Napo.

A visit here during your stay at Sacha will almost certainly boost your mammal list. An extra four species of primate are present, two of which you are likely to see. These are the **Golden-mantled Tamarin** and **Equatorial Saki**. The other two, less likely species, are the **White-fronted Spider Monkey** and **Silvery Woolly Monkey**. for which you'd have to head in very far toward Yasuni National Park. **Tapir** is seen on occasion and the nearby sections of the Napo river are the only areas where I encountered **Red Brocket Deer**. **Capybara** tracks are easy enough to find. If you make it here and happen to return to the lodge after dark, the sandbanks along the Napo hold **Brazilian Rabbit**.

Notes on the rest of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Lodges open up all the time and I'm sure there have been new additions since my time there. Nevertheless, I'm sure that little will change, as lodges end up in similar areas and as a consequence present very similar mammal species.

Along the Napo, aside from Sacha there are a few other well established lodges, some of which offer similar mammal and wildlife-watching opportunities but few of which offer both local and international, English-speaking guides. That's not to say guides don't speak any English at all, but in some cases it's rather poor, and more importantly, Sacha's guides (Ecuadorian and International) seem to understand the needs of more hard-core naturalists a little better. In any case, the larger mammals are always searched for and you can save quite a few bucks by staying at a few other places. One exception is the Napo Wildlife Center. Being situated on the South side of the Napo, in the same extensive forest as the Yasuni National Park, they have an abundance of wildlife and a slightly different set of species. **Capybaras** are much more regular for example.

Also near to the shores of the Napo is a small settlement on the edge of Limoncocha (lake). It's a little difficult to get to and it has the same species as Sacha. I hitched a ride on one of the many oil trucks and slept in the only 'hotel' in town for \$4. Local wardens can paddle you around the edge to spot monkeys.

Naturally, in my time with all the local guides and forest-dwelling residents I heard many stories of hunting areas they frequent and the species they saw. One such story was about Amazon Manatees near the border, where the Napo flows into Peru. Presumably there are flooded forest areas and smaller tributaries that might hold the species but I never had the time to make the trip. The same people showed me restaurants in Coca where I could eat Paca, Armadillo and Tapir!

Further South of the Napo lies a region designated as a Huarani reserve and close to this region is where a fellow guide from Sacha built a small lodge a few years ago. The forest is much better and far more remote than any of the lodges you can reach from the Napo - partly as a result of less hunting pressure. It's called Shiripuno and you're likely to bump into some of the larger, more difficult species from the Napo . **Tapir** is more regular (licks are present in nearby forest) and I had an incredible encounter with a herd of a couple of hundred **White-lipped Peccaries** there. **Tayra** too, is more likely here and **Silvery Woolly Monkey** is quite certain. **White-fronted Spider Monkey** is a little easier to hear but shy and easy to spook off without a view. For a more up-to-date review contact Jarol using the Shiripuno website. Similar in its location amidst prime forest is the Tiputini Research Center though I'm not sure if regular tourists can visit. They Apparently have regular **Jaguar** sightings.

Elsewhere in Ecuador.

I spent almost my entire time traveling to birding destination, and apart from a trip to Galapagos I seldom tracked down specific mammals. On a trip to Bilsa research Station in the North West however, I did learn that some interesting mammals were available.. An exception to these trips was one I made to Manglares Churute in the South West near Guayaquil. At the reserve headquarters I hired the obligatory guide (\$5) and we headed out on bicycles to nearby forests where we easily found **Mantled Howler Monkey**. The mosquitoes were unbearable though, as note of caution.

Another of these dedicated mammal trips was rather spur-of-the-moment in nature. I had birded some excellent areas for **Spectacled Bear**, of which there are a few in Ecuador, but had never made a concerted effort just for the bear. I have many friends who have encountered them at various locations including the road up the Tandayapa Valley not far from Bellavista Lodge. On one occasion however I was staying at the Magic Roundabout not very far from Cabanas San Isidro and the Guacamayos Ridge when the owner picked up my interest in seeing the animal and gave me a good tip. He sent me across the main road and down to the small river at the bottom of the valley. From there I spotted the local farmer who put me in a small basket and I zipped across the river by cable, ending up in a small open field surrounded by steep forested hills and ravines. He said the bears were not there at this time but assured me that they come every few weeks to feed on the young shoots of a particularly common Palm, when they are very easily tracked down and seen for many days. I decided to have a look anyway and I can confirm that they tear the place apart and leave a lot of sign behind.