

Costa Rica Feb.27-Mar.9, 2012

Tomer Ben-Yehuda

First of all, this is pretty long... I don't hold back any information or opinion, so I will not be offended if you only read the parts that are interesting to you, or skip down to the trip list ☺

So, let me start by saying that I'm a "diversity" watcher, but with a clear and definite emphasis on mammals. That being said, some of my target species were also birds, especially the long-tailed manakin and the cotingas, some snakes like Fer-de-lence, some of the poison-dart frogs and hopefully a shark because I've never seen one in the wild. I've been to Costa Rica before, in Jan 2003 with my parents and my sister. I was 16 back then and already had a passion for wildlife and especially rare mammals, but I didn't know the "rules" of wildlife-watching and definitely didn't have much info about where to look for specific species. So in about 2 weeks of zip-lining, hanging on the beach, and some hiking in the rain forest, we only managed the 4 monkey species, both sloths, a central-American agouti, white-nosed coati and some squirrels. But over the years I've seen so many pictures and read trip reports of people going to Costa Rica and seeing REALLY cool stuff like the Tapir, anteaters, tayras, and even Pumas, silky anteaters and small cats. It was when I read Jon Hall's trip report that I decided I HAD to go back to Costa Rica. And now it seemed like I enough info for a "successful" trip. March-April are supposedly the driest months of the year, with January and February being just about as dry. So on a short notice, I bought tickets for the end of February into the beginning of March – 12 days total. One last note: Please feel free to visit my Flickr set and correct any misidentifications of mammals, birds, snakes or whatever. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/benyehuda/sets/72157629685560483/>

Itinerary :

Feb. 27 – Land, drive to Hotel Savegre; night in Hotel Savegre.

Feb. 28 – Morning in Savegre; Drive to Drake Bay; afternoon walk in forest around Drake Bay; night in Drake bay.

Feb. 29 – Morning whale watching tour if available/if not available then snorkeling tour of Isla del Caño; drive to Tamandua Biological Station; night tour in Tamandua; Night in Tamandua

Mar. 1 – Early morning boat to Sirena Station in Corcovado N.P.; All day and night in Sirena

Mar. 2 – All day and night in/around Sirena

Mar. 3 – Morning around Sirena; boat back to Drake Bay and drive to Quepos; Night in Quepos

Mar. 4 – Morning tour of mangroves, Damas Island; drive to Monteverde; night in Monteverde

Mar. 5 – Morning bird-watching tour around Monteverde; Rest of the day and night in Monteverde

Mar. 6 – Morning in Monteverde and drive to Arenal; Rest of the day in Arenal Observatory Lodge

Mar. 7 – All day around Arenal

Mar. 8 – Morning in Arenal the drive to San Jose

Mar. 9 – Fly back to the USA

Day 1:

I arrived in Costa Rica around noon, and got through the immigration rather quickly. The only thing I HAVE to mention about San Jose, besides how much I hated the traffic there is the terrible experience I had renting a car with Budget CR. Do *not* do it! They are liars and thieves! First I was told that if I take a taxi to the car rental office instead of taking their shuttle I wouldn't have to pay the airport fee. That was a lie. The other thing is I reserved a GPS, which of course they did not have, and which I would have been lost without. Somehow after arguing with them then going over to Hertz and then coming back, a guy just came in to return a GPS so I received it. They all suck and they don't give a rat's ass about the customer. I will get back to this at the end, but they also charged me \$426 for a few dents DESPITE THE FACT that I paid for the more expensive \$0-deductible insurance!! Can you believe that?! So forget them. Other than that – Costa Rica is a beautiful country! As soon as I left the urban area and started on Rte. 2, the Pan-American Highway south towards Cerro De La Muerte I was amazed by the beauty, the green mountains, etc. What a nice drive! The reason I stayed near Cerro de la Muerte is because Vladimir Dinets mentioned that driving around that area at night could yield some mammals including cats. As soon as I heard that – I was booked! His suggestion was not to book a hotel though, and just drive around at night, and the only reason I couldn't do that is because the next morning I had a very long drive to Drake Bay which is in the most remote part of the country, the Osa Peninsula. As a matter of fact, Drake Bay does not have a zip code, or street names! And the road there is pretty bad, which is why I decided I needed some sleep before. So I booked a night at Hotel Savegre which is down at the Savegre Valley a few kilometers from the main highway. I didn't realize it's a few kilometers of unpaved, steep and winding road that takes about 45min-1hr to get through, because my plan was to wake up around 3am and drive up and down the Pan-American in search of animals before returning to my lodge for breakfast and then continuing onto Drake Bay. But when I got to Hotel Savegre I realized that: 1. It's too far of a drive and very dangerous at night, and 2. They close the gates between 10pm and 7am (or somewhere in that vicinity) so even if I wanted to, I couldn't get to the highway. But it's ok because Hotel Savegre should also be a good spot to see (and photograph) some nice birds like the **Blue-Throated (emerald) toucanet** which I really wanted to see, and the **Resplendent Quetzal** which I have seen before but would still make for a nice picture, plus many others. When I arrived at the hotel grounds, I saw a lot of guests (almost all 'birders') gathering around the hummingbird feeders, which had some very pretty species flying around them. I'm not really sure about the specific ones because I'm not a real 'birder' but I like to watch nice birds and take pictures. The grounds of the hotel (really more like a lodge) are very picturesque, the staff was very nice and the rooms were very cozy. A typical lodge you would expect for bird-watching in the mountainous forest. When I checked in to get my room keys, I mentioned to the young lady at the desk that one of the reasons I came here is because I was interested in finding wild cats and I heard there is a healthy population around here. She immediately proceeded to minimize the "check-in" window and pull up some motion-activated camera photos of cats on their trails. There was a melanistic **Jaguar**, some pictures of **Pumas**, a **Margay**, **Jaguarudi**, **Oncilla**, **Coyote** and some **Collared Peccary**. So that got me motivated enough to try to find out which trails to hike at night to try my chances. She gave me a map and pointed out good trails. So right now the plan was – drive up to the trails and hike a little bit after dinner, then wake up at 3am like I had planned, but instead of driving up and down the P/A highway, just drive up to the trail head again and hike for a bit until the sun comes up. She also mentioned that a bit further behind my cabin, there is a chicken house where just 2

days ago some of the hotel staff saw a **Puma** at 5:30am just sitting and licking its paws. Excellent. I got settled in my room, showered, and walked back to the restaurant/office for dinner. There were a lot of guests, and I'm pretty sure about 100% of them were bird-watchers. I chatted with a couple to see if anyone would come with me to find nocturnal mammals and maybe some owls but nope. So after dinner (which was good and very filling!) I started venturing out. First I was looking for that chicken house that was supposedly diagonally behind my cabin, but for the life of me I could not find it. Right behind the parking lot, where she pointed it on the map, was a hill with some dense forest, which I walked through but didn't see anything. Then I found a very steep trail that goes up the mountain and started climbing it as quietly as I could, but it was very steep and didn't seem to lead to a chicken house. Then on the way back down I was trying to be careful because it was so steep, and at one point my flashlight fell out and rolled down, down, down to the beginning of the trail. So now I was trying to find my steep way down with nothing but a weak cell-phone screen light. A few scary minutes later I was reunited with my flashlight and decided to leave this trail. I started driving up to the trail head that she had mentioned, and grabbed my map with me. I didn't realize the drive there was so steep and winding and I would have to use my 4wheele drive. Now I realize that since Savegre is in mountainous valley, anywhere you walk or drive is going to be a steep incline/decline. At this point it was around 8pm, and I kept driving up the dirt road in the dark, wondering if I already passed the trail she was talking about or not. That's the down-side of going by yourself. So after about 30 minutes of driving I was pretty sure I was there. I grabbed my flashlight and started hiking the trail alone. I do have to mention that it's pretty creepy to walk in the forest alone at night, even though I know there is nothing there that can hurt me besides a jaguar, and the chances to encounter it are pretty much non-existent in this place. But anyway I kept walking quietly trying to distinguish the sounds of trees moving because of the strong wind from rustling in the leaves because of animal movements. After about 30 minutes of 0 results I kind of gave up. The trail was also on an incline and I was too creeped out to walk by myself despite my very powerful mag light. Eventually I will probably get over it, but it would be so much nicer to have another person walk with me because I'm always thinking – if something DOES happen, nobody will find me for days... I drove back to my lodge and went to bed around 9:30-9:45 and set my alarm-clock for 3am.

Day 2:

Woke up at 3am to try the trail again. I drove up there, which didn't seem as long of a drive now that I kind of knew what to expect. I was also hoping to see something crossing the road, but the car made way too much noise going up the steep rocky road. I hiked up the trail again for around 30 minutes and didn't hear anything besides very strong winds moving trees and leaves and squeaking trees that sound like they're about to break. Again, it was pretty creepy and I got scared walking by myself. Of course it would have been worth it if I saw a cool animal, but despite walking in complete silence I saw nothing. So I turned around to go back to my car. I decided to see if the front gate was really closed or if I can drive up and down for a little bit, but the gate was indeed closed. I went back to sleep about 4:30 for an hour and woke up right around dawn. As the sun came up I could hear some birds singing so I went outside to go check it out. Some cool birds around the hotel grounds were nice tanagers like **Flame-colored**, some **collared red-starts**, many hummingbirds, and a **Blue-Throated toucanet** which I saw clearly with my binoculars but could not for the life of me get a picture of. I asked some guide what I should do for the next hour and-a-half before I leave, and he said I should walk down the road towards

the waterfall trail, which has a quetzal nest and it would be nice to see. Sure. On the way out from the



hotel, I saw my first mammal of the trip – a squirrel. I'm not very good at squirrel identification, maybe an **Alfaro's pygmy squirrel** or a **Bangs's Mountain Squirrel**? Either way, I continued down the road and enjoyed the scenic landscape – truly a nice place! I also saw some **black vultures**, tanagers and hummingbirds. When I arrived at the **Quetzal** nest, it was very uneventful: a few people hanging around but no birds. I walked down a little further to try to get a picture of some tanagers that were hanging out, and then decided I should start driving

toward Drake Bay. One last pass near the quetzal nest and I spotted the female hanging around on a branch, just chillin in silence. I pointed it out to some of the birders that were there and watched it for a couple minutes as it went in and out of the nest. Pretty cool, really. I was told that if I stick around for another 30 minutes or so the male will come around but I really felt like the drive to Drake Bay may take me longer than expected since I'm not so used to driving a 4X4 and I don't know the road. Plus I've already seen the resplendent quetzal extremely well in Guatemala where the sub-species has a longer and more impressive tail. I would have still stayed, of course, but didn't want to take the risk of driving the terrible road at night.



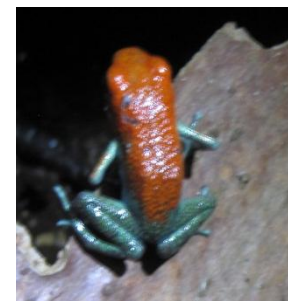
On the way back I ran into the guide who told me about the quetzal, and he pointed out a male **collared trogon** that was hanging on a tree. I cannot say I've ever seen a clear view of a male collared trogon, so I considered it a nice 'lifer'. Satisfied with my sightings of 2 trogons, a toucanet and some other awesome birds plus a mammal, I departed Savegre for Drake Bay. It was supposed to take around 6 hours, and that's exactly how long it took! AMAZING road through the mountains, I drove down and stopped by a nice coffee shop to get some caffeine and some water, and I also heard this was a particularly good place to see a **red-headed barbet**, which I really would have liked to see. But the guy told me they don't come to the feeder in this season. To see it, I would have to hike the trails, which I didn't have time for. I enjoyed my coffee and another squirrel that was all black. Like I said, I'm not very good at identifying squirrels (or bats) so maybe somebody can help me identify it? Is it some melanistic form of a red-tailed squirrel?



After the short break I continued down toward San Isidro, then to Dominical, and continued on the picturesque road along the coast to Sierpe. After Sierpe you take an unpaved road that goes to Drake Bay, Puerto Jimenez and Corcovado. The road itself is again very beautiful, very green, with view of the ocean from time to time, and hilly forests. A real pleasure to drive down, despite the pot holes and bumpy rocks. You cross through some small streams since there are no bridges, hence why this road is considered impassible during the rainy season. I kept my eyes out for monkeys and sloths, but didn't see any. I did see a male **Slaty-tailed Trogon** and stopped to take a picture but it flew away. I arrived at Drake Bay around 3:30 in the afternoon, and quickly found my hotel, Jade Mar, which is the first thing you see when you hit the "main road" that goes down to the beach. Jade Mar is one of the only hotels in Drake Bay that have hot water, air conditioning and electricity. The rooms are very simple and no meals are provided. But for \$35 a night it's sufficient and beyond. On the hotel grounds I easily spotted **Scarlet-Rumped** and **Golden-hooded tanagers**, a **Green Iguana**, some **Scarlet Macaws** from afar near the beach, a **bat falcon**, and some other birds. At 4:30 I had arranged an afternoon tour to see mostly some nicely colored poison-dart frogs which I completely missed when I was in Costa Rica in 2003, some glass frogs, hopefully some snakes, and maybe, maybe when it gets dark - some animals. I was dying to see a tamandua since I've never seen it in the wild, besides a road-kill Southern Tamandua in the Pantanal, and a Kinkajou which I missed by seconds in Tikal. Both species should not be a huge challenge in Costa Rica but the sooner I see them, the sooner I can concentrate on more challenging species. So I met with my tour guide, Martin, who works for Drake Rural Tours (Same company my 3-day guide to Corcovado is from). Anyway Martin speaks little English, but he took me to a little private property his brother owns. We walked from the office down the road and into the forest and along a creek. Immediately I saw some **Common Basilisks** running across the creek. That was awesome because I've never seen a basilisk before and had hoped to see them on this trip. Throughout the rest of the tour we saw the endemic



Golfo Dulce poison-dart frog and the **Granular poison-dart frog**, some **glass frogs**, geckos, and a **Chunk-headed snake**. All-in-all, a very nice tour, but no mammals. The only other thing left to do was to go back to the office and find out if I can join a whale-watching tour tomorrow. I had contacted Shawn Larkins back in 2010 when I was planning to go to CR with a friend, and he had mentioned that it's \$150 with a 4 person minimum. So I had to depend on others and join a



group if one was available. Unfortunately there were no groups for tomorrow and I had to join a snorkeling tour of Caño Island, which was my 2nd option. The gist was that on the way there you can sometimes see dolphins or whales too, and you can see some nice things while snorkeling like sharks and rays. So that's it, after a quick dinner at a local restaurant I went to bed around 9:30-10pm.

Day 3:

I woke up early to walk around the lodge and saw some more tanagers and a pair of **Fiery-Billed Aracaris** flying afar, and another squirrel on the grounds of my hotel, but I didn't get a good picture or a good view, and I think it's a pygmy squirrel (Alfaro's), but I'm not sure.



On the way to Caño Island we did spot some **Pantropical Spotted Dolphins** which we watched for around 20 minutes. Caño Island is the ideal, stereotypical tropical island with amazing turquoise clear water and sandy beaches with palm trees. Lush vegetation covers the island and meets the beach picturesquely. Such a beautiful place, but unfortunately because of some facility issues people are temporarily not permitted on the island. But the snorkeling was pretty spectacular with lots of puffer fish,

other colorful fish like parrot fish, and even 2 **white-tip reef sharks**, which were the first species of wild shark I've ever seen so it was exciting. Later, since we couldn't go on the beach of Cano Island, we were taken to a beach on the main land, which had some **Scarlet Macaws**, and when I ventured in-land for a bit, I also saw a **Chestnut-Mandibled Toucan** and a single **White-Nosed Coati**. The beach here was also very nice and the water clear. We ate lunch and continued back to Drake Bay. When I got back to my car, I went to the office to meet my guide for the next 3 days, Rebeca Quiro. She used to work for Osa Aventura in Puerto Jimenez but she now lives in Drake Bay with her husband Ananillas. In addition to being a biologist and a guide to Corcovado for 1 to 3 day trips, she and her husband bought some land between Drake Bay and Corcovado which they conserved and created Tamandua Biological Station. Tamandua is very simple with outdoor showers and simple cabins with beds and a desk. The forest around the station is primary and probably contains most of the same species as Corcovado. You can read more on their website or on their facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Estaci%C3%B3n-Biol%C3%B3gica-Tamandua/120808881356815>. The reason I came here is to do a night tour since they're no longer allowed around Sirena, with the hopes of seeing my kinkajou or one of the small cats shown on their website from the "camera traps". I left Drake Bay around 2:30 or so and followed Rebeca's directions to the station. Honestly, I would not recommend driving there alone. The road there is way worse than the road to Drake bay, it's very steep and rocky, and you have to drive some of the way in and along the river. I got stuck on the way there, on a river bank, and luckily was found by a little kid who saved my day. To make a long story short, within a few hours the story was over and Ananillas and Rebeca found me with my car and got some people to help resolve the situation. I followed them the rest of the way to the station, where Rebeca showed me some newly hatched woodcreepers and I saw what I believe is a **Puffing** or **Northern bird snake** (*Pseustes poecilonotus*)



After dinner, Rebeca and I set on a night tour through the trails of Tamandua. Since it's a relatively new station and they don't have as much time as they would like to explore it, this was Rebeca's first night hike on her property. Again, I saw no mammals which was disappointing, but we did see some interesting insects, a scorpion, some sleeping birds, a nightjar, spiders, land-crabs, and heard an animal walking in the forest but couldn't see it. Rebeca said she thinks it was a **Paca**. We also had a close encounter with an owl that we didn't see but I guess we got too close to it and it flew off noisily leaving us with some feathers. I think this place has much more potential, and had I been with another person I would have ventured off again later after the moon set. That was a problem, most of my nights in Costa Rica, the moon was bright and shiny and didn't set until like 2-3am. At this point I was starting to get worried about my mammal watching experience because, again, I didn't see nearly anything, not even monkeys or a sloth. I went to sleep after dinner, and woke up briefly around 1am to shine the light out of my door and see if I hear anything. But I had to wake up at 5am the next morning to eat an early breakfast and drive back to Drake Bay in time for the boat to Sirena at 6am.

Days 4-6:

Woke up around 4:45 for an early breakfast at Tamandua and drive back to Drake Bay for the 6am boat to Sirena. We got to the beach near Sirena's air strip probably about 8am and walked to the station to get settled. I was very excited for this part of the trip because Corcovado is one of the largest and best conserved areas in Costa Rica and in all of Central America. As Jon Hall mentioned, it's the only place in the world's where Baird's Tapir is common, and in the dry season is pretty much guaranteed. One thing to note that is not well-known is that most of the forest you walk in is secondary and has been recovering for about 70 years. You don't really get to primary forest unless you walk very far away from the beach and into the park, but that doesn't matter because most of the animals you see are within 1-2km from the beach. Within the first few minutes while walking on the air strip towards the station we saw some **Mantled Howler monkeys** and **Geoffroy's Spider Monkeys**. We took a few minutes to get settled, me in my room and Rebeca in her tent. The station is very simple – you have to bring your own everything: Shampoo, soap, towels, blankets, pillows (if you want) and mosquito net. For some reason, mosquitos were pretty much gone during the time I spent there, unlike Jon Hall's experience, but ticks and chiggers are disgustingly abundant and the first afternoon I pulled probably 25-30 ticks from my legs, waist, and arms. But forget that – this place is worth it! As far as mammal watching, and wildlife watching in general – the possibilities here are almost endless! But I do have to tone myself down just a bit and mention that, just like in every other place, there are species that I would consider "likely" and the rest is just luck. Within the first hour of hiking on the trail toward La Leona, we encountered (a lot of tourists and) **Great Curassow**, **Red Brocket deer**, a pair of **Baird's Tapirs** – a mother and a grown cub, **collared peccary**, more spider and howler monkeys, **White-nosed Coati** and some more collared peccary. A few things to note: even though all 4 species of monkeys are present in the park, **white-faced capuchins** are surprisingly uncommon, as are **Sloths**. **White-lipped peccary** are relatively easy, but according to Rebeca, they have not been seen for a few weeks because during this driest time of the year, most of them are a little higher near Laguna Corcovado which is an area that cannot be visited by tourists. I'll take her word for it because she was extremely knowledgeable, knew where to look for many of my target species and pointed out so many species I would have never spotted on my own besides being a (self-proclaimed) good spotter.



A still shot taken from a video, where the young Baird's tapir and a collared peccary are seen together in the same frame.



A little further down we saw some **Central-American Squirrel Monkeys**, a **Vine Snake**, many **black spiny-tailed iguanas** and **brown and/or common basilisks**. Birdwise we saw some woodpeckers and a lot of scarlet macaws. We heard some **Baird's** and **Black-throated trogons** as well as **Blue-crowned manakins**, all of which I wanted to see. We stopped for lunch on an amazing looking beach with clear blue water and tropical vegetation that descends from the hills and right onto the beach and meets the beach with mostly palms. The calmness and serenity here are unequal. We saw a **Humpback Whale** a

little further in the sea, but did not get a good picture or video. The other thing to note here is the insane amounts of litter from the sea... Literally, a homeless could build a home here, cover up with used sun-screen, un-matching pairs of flip-flops and some nasty bags of snacks. Park staff collects these amounts of trash on a weekly basis, I think. After lunch, we stumbled upon another **Baird's tapir** that was eating some fig fruit that was falling off a tree which was occupied by **spider monkeys**. There is not a very good chance to miss a Tapir in this park if you spend a few nights here. I think in the first 24 hours we encountered them at least 6 different times, and a total of 5-6 individuals. They are abundant and not only near Sirena. After lunch we continued a bit toward La Leona, spotting another **Red Brocket**,

many more **Coatis, mantled howlers** and **spider monkeys** and then then we turned around at one point to start walking back towards the station. The sudden “Tomer, here is your anteater” came as a real blessing, and also somewhat as a surprise considering this was the hottest part of the day around 12:30-1pm.

Thanks to Rebeca, I didn’t miss the beautiful **Northern Tamandua** that was climbing into the trees very silently to the left of the trail. I would not have noticed it.

Rebeca sees tamanduas in Corcovado pretty much on a daily basis. She leads mostly 1-day tours to Corcovado from Drake Bay which take the 6am boat to Sirena and the 1pm boat back. At this point, I was very satisfied with the wildlife watching for the 1st half-a-day. I had 2 more species that I REALLY wanted to see around Corcovado that were realistic: **Tayra** and **Puma**. **Tayras** are definitely present but not as common as tamanduas.

During my stay I only heard of one couple who saw a tayra. That same couple ended up seeing basically all the species I saw, just with the addition of a tayra. Needless to say I was very jealous☺. Rebeca said last time she saw a tayra was about 2 weeks ago. **Puma** is the cat that is by FAR the most frequently encountered in the park, but that does not make it common. Just the least uncommon. Other cats are really just a matter of freak-coincidence, though I did hear of 2 ocelot sightings in the past 2 months, one being just a week or 2 ago. During my stay, I didn’t hear about anybody encountering a puma, only the one couple encountering a tayra, nobody encountering the white-lipped peccary, and only myself and the other couple encountering the tamandua. The other thing is that most of the tourists that were at the station while I was there came without a guide and therefore missed most of the animals besides the monkeys, coatis and the tapirs, one which can frequently be seen from the station!

Breakfast at Sirena is at 6:30am, lunch is at 11, and dinner is at 5:30pm. To maximize our time on the trail, Rebeca and I made sandwiches every day and did not reserve spots for lunch at the station. Night walks are also not allowed because of the risk of snakes (we did see a **Fer-de-Lance** under the station platform the 2nd night). The next morning we walked from the station towards the Sirena River, and then after breakfast we took the trail towards San Pedrillo (closer to Drake Bay, even though that portion from Drake Bay to San Pedrillo is now closed, I believe).

Before breakfast we saw many **herons, egrets** and shorebirds, an **American Crocodile, Giant Tinamou**, a **Central-American Agouti**, another **Brocket deer** and many more monkeys. The long hike after breakfast until dinner did not yield so much in the category of new mammals, besides **Alfaro’s pygmy squirrels** joined by another **Tapir**, many more monkeys and coatis, another **vine snake**, a **black-throated trogon, slaty-tailed trogon**, some **ant-pitta**,



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ant-tanagers, ant-thrush, and other birds and basilisks. After lunch and after we turned around and walked back towards the station, we saw an **unidentified snake**, a **sac-winged bat**, and... another **Northern Tamandua**! It was awesome, but of course I would replace this second sighting with a tayra... But you have to be happy with what nature wants to show you, and I can certainly not complain. I also wanted to note that besides the sac-winged bat I saw many bats, but this was the only one I took a picture of, and Jon Hall helped me identify it. The unidentified snake was also pretty interesting because Rebeca knows literally all the birds, insects, mammals and reptiles of the area, so it was surprising to see one that she had not seen before. Maybe I'm giving her a little too much credit, but she *is* a biologist! Since it was only around 3pm, we walked back towards the Sirena river to find a few things: a **Brown-throated three-toed sloth** which has been seen in the area recently, some **caimans** and **crocodiles** in the river, **bull sharks** which swim up the river, and some **neotropical river otters** that inhabit the little creek /pond near the river mouth. We could not locate the sloth, as it has probably moved from the area, but we did see some **spectacled caimans**, **American crocodiles** and a lot of water birds. Approaching the small creek, which, when it doesn't connect to the river is more of a pond or a swamp, I spotted a single **Neotropical river otter**. We sat down and watched it for several minutes, as I was trying to get a decent picture or at



least a video. Otters are especially difficult to capture on camera because they only appear briefly over the surface of the water and then disappear and re-appear far from where you expect them to. We actually saw it going completely out of the water at one point. On the way back to the station we saw another **agouti**, a **common potoo**, many more **great tinamous** and monkeys, curassows, tanagers and even some parrots or parakeets but I don't know which species and they were far. **Blue-crowned motmots** were also seen on occasion. The last morning we hiked again before breakfast, starting at 5am, toward Rio Claro this time, seeing nothing of interest before sunrise. On the way back towards the station for breakfast we did see the **Squirrel monkeys** again for the second and last time, and some howlers which were accompanied by a **chestnut-mandibled toucan**. We only had until about 12:30pm, in which time the only new mammal we saw was a group of 3 **red-tailed squirrels**. But we did see the **black-throated trogon** again, a single **Baird's trogon** which I only saw briefly and did not get a picture, a beautiful **blue-crowned manakin** which I got a terrible picture of, many more tanagers and small birds, as well as guans and curassows, and a really cool **crested owl** which Rebeca spotted impressively, deep in the canopy above the trail. We did see a "used" **puma** clearing with monkey bones in the middle, but there was nothing left which means it's been there for at least a month. Even the bugs were gone and the bones were very dry. We hiked the trails around it, with my theory being that since food is so abundant a puma wouldn't ever have to travel far so even though this is old it still might be in the area, but to no avail. We went back to the Sirena river because I did want to try to see the **bull sharks**. This time we came toward the peak of



the high tide and had some luck! Amazingly, the **bull sharks** swim very close to shore, in the incoming waves that bring the tide into the river. I also saw at least 1 **American Crocodile** floating in the waves, which makes this a perfect beach for

swimming... if you want to die. On the quick 10 minute walk back to the boat out of Sirena we managed to squeeze in one last tapir, which makes the number of encounters somewhere around 10 but you stop

counting after a while, similarly to how you stop counting spider and howler monkeys and coatis. So all-in-all I would have to say that Sirena is amazing. The only thing is - I saw SO many species the first day there that my expectations for the rest of the time were really high so I was a little disappointed in the fact that I didn't see MUCH more during my 2nd and 3rd days there. I wonder if earlier in the dry season you could see more animals, but anyway, I definitely raised my species count for all categories by some good percentages in just 2.5 days, so I was happy! After the boat back to Drake Bay, I drove through the truly beautiful landscape of the Osa and Southern Pacific toward the city of Quepos, where suddenly a Best Western seemed like a palace I was not worthy of, and besides things like hot water and air conditioning that I was slightly confused by, there was a black box on the wall that you can turn on with a remote... Wow. I don't think I ever had that good of a shower, and I was so tired that I went to sleep after dinner without venturing out for a night drive or an organized night tour.

Day 7:

This was the day I was going to see a **silky anteater** in the wild! I was very excited for this encounter; I've been wanting to see a pygmy/silky anteater in the wild for years now, especially after seeing so many pictures online of people seeing them around Manuel Antonio, and especially after reading Jon's trip report to Costa Rica. Reaching Avenatura was not easy: the website Jon linked in his report no longer belongs to them (at least as of now) and they're pretty much impossible to find online. Strangely, when you log on the internet while in Costa Rica it shows up, but let me help you. Their email address is avenatura@racsa.co.cr and Maurillio's phone number is (506)2777-0973. Before I left on my trip, and when I wasn't able to find Avenatura, I did contact a bunch of Damas Island mangrove tour companies, and most of them told me that the anteater is extremely shy and they only see it a few times a year. Many of the tours are illegitimate and lure monkeys close to and onto their boats by feeding them, and of course they don't find the anteaters. There was at one more guy, a biologist named Roy Orozco (orozco_roy@yahoo.com, (506)-8881-5580) who claimed that both the anteater species are seen daily, so he was going to be my backup in case I couldn't get a hold of Avenatura. But I never got a chance to validate Roy's claims because I did get a hold of Avenatura before I left for the trip and again on my way from Drake Bay toward Manuel Antonio to ask what time the tour starts. Their tour depends on the high tide, so I believe it can start anywhere from the early morning to the late afternoon. My tour started conveniently at 9:30 and went on for 2 hours. As soon as Milenlli came into the lobby of my hotel and introduced herself I was relieved to know that I indeed found right tour. I immediately proceeded to tell her I heard about the tour and asked if she has heard of the Mammal Watching website and remembered Jon Hall. She said that from time to time, she will have a customer who mentions him, and strangely enough – today there were TWO! Myself, plus a French Guy named Dominique. After chatting about our mammal progress of our trips, we had reached the boat. Milenlli grabbed the boat operator who is excellent at spotting the anteater, and a few minutes later we were off on the water. Milenlli did mention that their success rates are very high, especially during this season when the anteaters have their babies, and that just yesterday they saw 4. But she also explained that there are days when they don't see the species, and that to be sure you see it, you should stay at least a few days. Both her and Maurillio are knowledgeable about the ecosystem and explained to us about the mangroves. They are both actually young and a good-looking couple. Milenlli pointed out some birds including a **tricolored heron**, a **boat-billed heron**, and many other birds. She and the boat driver found us some **white-faced**



capuchins, which mind you I hadn't seen yet on this trip.

After a second encounter with the monkeys the search was on for the anteater. It was a long search and didn't seem as easy as I had expected. After a while, things weren't looking good, especially when we passed another boat with a guide who had a frown and shook his head at Milenlli as to say "no, we haven't been able to find them". But finally, after a quick conversation in Spanish which I didn't understand, Milenlli said "he found one". Phew!! Our boat driver was successful in locating this tiny animal! Even after all the pictures and

descriptions, I didn't realize it was THAT small! What an amazing creature, this **silky anteater** is! We took off our shoes and got out of the boat and into the muddy mangroves to go get some better pictures. After about 20 minutes with the animal, we were off to finish the tour and have the lunch that is provided with it. The two other tourists I met on this tour changed the course of the rest of this day for me: Dominique (who also sent in his trip report), and an American girl named Sarah – both very nice, and both passionate about wildlife. I know Dominique's trip report is on the site, but I have to



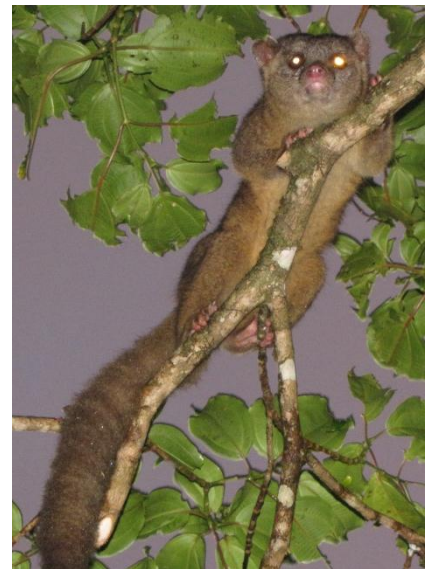
mention that aside from bats, he may actually give Jon a run for his money as far as how many mammals he has seen in his life. I know he has already seen all the wide-spread cats of the Americas – Canadian Lynx, Bobcat, Puma, Ocelot, Jaguarundi, Jaguar and Margay. On the other end, Sarah's realization that you can see so many interesting animals in their wild habitat was just beginning to bloom, and after having met Dominique on a long bus ride she was more than excited to join the Aventura trip. I told them about the trip I had booked for tonight with Hidden Valley night walk in Monteverde, to try for an **Olingo**, a **Mexican Porcupine**, and hopefully some other surprises. But Dominique immediately told me to cancel it. He said that the porcupine no longer sleeps in their tree, and that they walk you around looking at ants and insects. He said this was one of the more disappointing tours he has taken, and that instead, I should go to the hummingbird feeders around 4:30pm and wait for an olingo there. I was a little hesitant about that because of some mixed feedback I received on my post prior to my trip, and also because Jon Hall said he had waited from about 5:30pm until around 9pm without results. But Dominique said that Jon may have arrived a little late at the feeder - if there are no tourists around, the Olingo can arrive as early as 4:30. In fact, he assured me that the Olingo was there both the 2 previous nights and I would see it for sure. He made me promise him that after seeing the olingo I would send him a picture because he doesn't take a camera with him when he travels (my mom would get a heart attack if she heard that!).

That was good enough for me. I went ahead and cancelled the night walk at Hidden Valley and decided to take his advice. In order to arrive there at 4:30, I didn't have time to go into the Manuel Antonio national Park, which is too bad because the park is very pretty and the beaches there are dreamy. Plus some guaranteed species there are **White-faced Capuchins**, **Brown-throated 3-toed sloth**, probably

Central-American Squirrel monkey, Hoffman's 2-toed sloth is pretty common, and apparently a **crab-eating raccoon** or a few of them are pretty tame and would be a lifer, but I was willing to trade it for the chance to see an olingo (Plus I had visited the park before and saw all the species besides the raccoon). Olingos and Kinkajous are species I've been dying to see, along the same lines as Tamanduas, even more than tayras or pumas. The drive to Monteverde was about 4-5 hours, and Sarah, the girl who I met on the Avenatura trip needed a ride there, so of course I offered her one. She was also excited to come with me to the hummingbird feeder for the chance to see this Olingo. Only stopping once for gas, we arrived at the hummingbird feeders around 4:40. Hoping that we didn't miss the show, we walked quietly past the feeders, stopping to take some pictures of the colorful birds, and sat down in the far benches under the roof, that are a little bit away from the feeder as Dominique had suggested. Unfortunately, it was starting to get very windy and on top of it, it started to rain. Not ideal for an Olingo. But if that wasn't enough, about 10 minutes later, a group of about 20 noisy tourists came up and hung around for almost 30-40 minutes, taking pictures of birds and talking really loud. By this point it was already right around 5:30 and we both had to get settled in our hotel. Well, Sarah had to find one, because this was an unplanned part of her trip. We decided we would stick around until 6pm and call it a night. As we waited, the wind and the rain picked up, and around 5:50 I told her we would wait 10 more minutes. But then, right around probably 5:57, there it was! I spotted it walking through the trees



before it came to the feeders, and pointed it out to Sarah, who responded with "oh my god" when she saw it. We were literally 2-3 minutes away from leaving, when the **Olingo** had decided to show up! He just walked so nonchalantly across the branches and started climbing down the rope. It was like he knew his role, and even if he was late he didn't want to disappoint... JUST as Dominique promised! After sitting quietly and getting a few pictures and some video footage, we decided to try to venture closer to him – worst case,



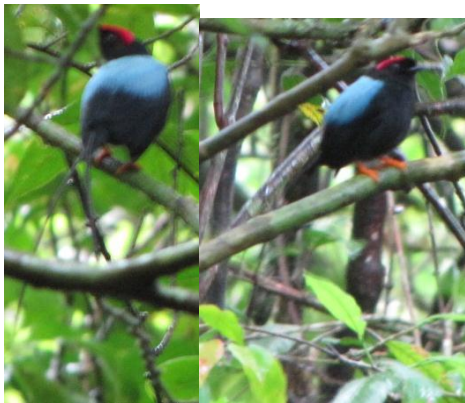
it will run away, but at least we can say saw it. Surprisingly this Olingo was not shy at all! We got within a foot of it as it was drinking from the feeder. It would stop, look at us, climb up a bit, and then when it got comfortable climb back down and keep drinking. Really an awesome encounter. Satisfied with the encounter and with the day in general, I dropped Sarah at the hostel she wanted to stay in, and went to my hotel – Cloud Forest Lodge. By this time the rain had started to pick up, and as I checked in I asked the lady if this was just a typical afternoon rain. She told me that, as a matter of fact this is NOT typical for the dry season and she doesn't know what's going on! That was some bad news. After some dinner, I wanted to to look for the **Kinkajou** at the same place Jon found it (which was supposed to be pretty much a guarantee) but it was pouring so hard I felt like I should start building an ark instead of looking for animals. Cloudforest Lodge itself is another very nice and elegant hotel with comfortable rooms and

a “mountain-y” atmosphere. They have a couple of trails on their property, one of which is called the “river trail” which goes down to a creek where Jon saw the kinkajou. The food there was also pretty tasty, but not terribly cheap. They have wii-fi in the rooms and in the lobby and restaurant, and they have a nice terrace that looks over some forest with a clearing in the middle where you can drink coffee or work on your lap top with hummingbird feeders around. If it hadn’t rained, I heard that many birds can be seen in the morning around the lodge including the **Blue-Throated** toucanet. After a shower and dinner I went to sleep and set my alarm clock to 12:30, but when I woke up to the sound of the downpour, I decided to go right back to sleep and hope that tomorrow’s weather will improve so that I can go on my only bird-watching excursion of this trip and hopefully encounter some more mammals in the afternoon and night.

Day 8:

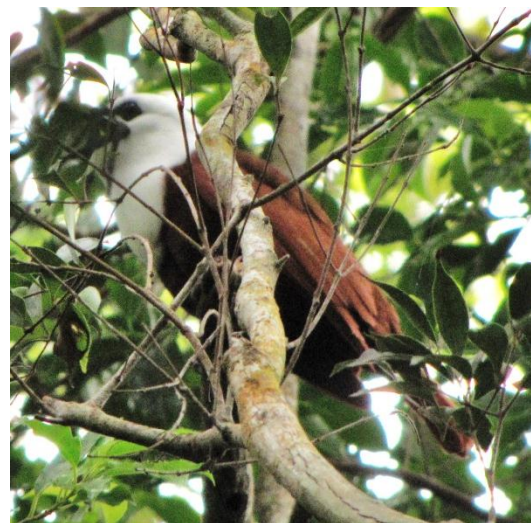
I had made reservations to meet with a private guide named Esteban (mendezguia@hotmail.com) at 6am, who would take me to see some of the birds of the area including the only bird I wanted to see as much as any mammal on this trip, the **long-tailed manakin**. Also, since I was here around this time of the year, the **three-wattled bellbird** should be feasible as are other mountain specialties. I was also interested in **red-headed barbets** and **bare-necked umbrellabirds**, both which Esteban told me there is no chance to see where we’re going. But **Blue-throated Toucanets**, **Azure-hooded Jays**, **orange-bellied trogon** and if time permits, maybe a quick pic of a **resplendent quetzal** should be doable. But when Esteban pulled up to the lobby, both of us in our rain gear, he told me that honestly he didn’t want to take my money because I wouldn’t see much in this kind of weather. But if it clears up, give him another call and he’ll take me because my two main target species – the manakin and the bellbird should be relatively easy throughout the day. So that was all very disappointing – the weather and the resulting cancellation, but what can you do... I had some breakfast and figured I’d venture into the Monteverde reserve and see if I can spot anything on my own. As the sun rose, the rain started to let down and I was a little optimistic, especially because this *is* the dry season so hopefully this rain is isolated and could let down at any moment. I wanted to go to the office of the Monteverde Conservation League – Children’s Eternal Rainforest and pay an entrance fee to go there tomorrow morning around 5am, because if you hike down to San Gerardo station, there is a pretty decent chance to see the **umbrellabirds** in the months of March-April, and the forest in the area is pretty pristine and I had read of people seeing some interesting things on the hike there and back, including a **tayra** and some cats. I’d pay them the \$10 in case, then hike down tomorrow morning if it doesn’t rain and if I see the species I want to see today. But since right now was still only around 7am I decided to go up to the Monteverde reserve first, and then deal with this later. Well, when I arrived at the reserve it was indeed getting a little clearer. But several groups of tourists, mostly birders, formed a long line at the entrance booth that I decided that even if I go in, I won’t see much because there are SO many people. Plus I didn’t come to Costa Rica to wait in a 30-45 minute line just to pay for an entrance to a medium+ reserve. So I got back into my car and decided to drive to the Santa Elena side, which, even though it’s only a couple kilometers away, it’s on the other side of the continental divide and is on the Caribbean side so it was very rainy again over there. I parked my car at the Santa Elena parking lot and started to hike down the “Private Property – Do not trespass” trail towards San Gerardo station in the Children’s Eternal Rainforest Reserve. It was a beautiful trail, but the weather only kept getting worse and I saw nothing but a single **warbler** (I think)

and some tanagers. After about 20 minutes of hiking, a guy in a little open all-terrain vehicle drove past me and asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was going to hike down to San Gerardo Station to talk to Wendy Brenes who I had contacted prior to my trip to Costa Rica, but I didn't have a phone. He said she was back in the office, and that I'm not really supposed to be hiking on this trail without permission, so I asked him to take me to my car so that I can drive to the office and talked to her. After a wet drive back and losing my camera's lens-cap, I was back in my car. What an unproductive morning. I drove to the office and talked to Wendy, asking her about potentially coming down tomorrow. She suggested I stay the night at the station but I told her I already had a hotel booked for tonight and I just wanted to pay \$10 to use their trails. When I paid, she said I also have access to Bajo Del Tigre reserve on the Monteverde side, where she has previously seen both the other species I'm looking for – the **manakin** and the **bellbird**. Around 10:30 it really cleared up (at least on this side of the continental divide) and I called Esteban back. He told me to give him a few minutes to go check if the Bellbirds are calling and then he'd call me back to let me know if it's worthwhile for me to visit. In the meanwhile I started driving to this Bajo Del Tigre reserve. I barely got there and parked my car when Esteban called me back and told me that the bellbirds are singing and happy and that we should go see them, and he would find me a manakin too. I was in a much better mood now, and met him near this small, private property, where I paid \$7 to get in and he took me on the trail. Immediately we heard the distinct call of the **Three-wattled bellbird**, and within a couple minutes he pointed it out in the canopy. Because of the strong winds I didn't get a good picture, but I really wanted to see the manakin and then come back to the bellbird since they were calling everywhere. He brought a recorder and started playing the manakin



call and lekking songs. Within a minute or 2 we heard a manakin respond, and a few minutes later we spotted it!! What an awesome bird!! Just like I wanted, a **male Long-tailed manakin** kept singing and bouncing around. We got several views of him from below, above, back and front, though it was tough to get a good picture because of the back-light and the dark forest. But after several minutes of observation, and repeated attempts both with a camera and with a video camera I was satisfied and

decided that I had fully experienced the long-tailed manakin. That really made my day because I've missed this bird before in Guatemala and never actually had much luck with manakins in general! It was time to go back to the bellbird. We found one and I got some decent footage but no pictures. But after a long time, I was also satisfied with it because despite pictures, I had seen it well and was ready to go on with my day. This trip was a lot shorter than originally planned and only



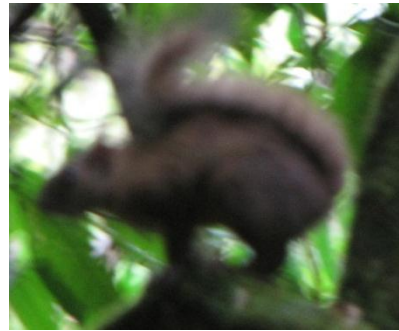
concentrated on these species, but that was circumstantial and also cost about half of the original price. I then decided to go back to Bajo del Tigre and try my luck with birds and mammals there. Bajo Del Tigre

is a quiet reserve, and just as stunning as any other in the area. You hike down the forested mountain, with views of the surrounding mountains and valleys, and it's very easy on your eyes. As soon as I started hiking I started hearing the bellbirds again and even got a recognizable picture of one. I also saw some kind of **cuckoo**, which I don't think was a squirrel cuckoo but I didn't get a picture so I'm not sure. There were many pretty birds on the way, but I kind of had my eye out for mammals. I saw a squirrel running around, and followed it long enough to try to get a somewhat recognizable picture, but all I got was the following picture so if anyone can identify it for me, please feel free:

On the way down I also spotted another squirrel hiding from the rain, which I believe is a **Variegated Squirrel**:



Other than that, I saw some kind of a **night jar**, more



tanagers and other small birds. I walked all the way down to the creek at the bottom of the reserve, which was very nice, and is where I heard another long-tailed manakin calling. By mimicking its song I was actually able to call it

over, and there it was, to my surprise! How awesome, I just called my very own **long-tailed manakin** by whistling and it responded!!! I took a crappy picture just enough to have proof of this ordeal and started hiking back up the mountain towards the exist. Just to note – after having seen both the bellbird and the manakin on my own in Bajo del Tigre, one could say I had wasted my money on Esteban – but without him I would not have known where to look for either and what to listen for to find the manakin because it has several different calls, 2 of which I was able to mimick pretty closely. I would recommend Esteban, and I'm sure if we had started at 6 like we planned instead of at 10:30, he would have found many more species I wanted to see. On the way back up the mountain I spotted some surprisingly quiet **white-faced capuchins** and a **black guan** which is endemic to a few locations in Costa Rica and Panama. Around 4:30 I was out of the reserve and went to a small bakery for a quick pastry and coffee. I drove back to my hotel and hiked the "river trail" just to familiarize myself with the trail, to see where the creek is in daylight and where there is a fruiting/flowering tree that could potentially attract a kinkajou. While walking the trail, I did some jays (I think **brown jays**) and a group of ground birds which I did not recognize, probably **black-eared or black-breasted wood-quail**. It was starting to get dark so I walked back to my room for shower and dinner, and decided that after dinner I would hike down to the creek again, and then if I don't see the kinkajou then I will try again at 3am because that's



when the moon (which was 98% full tonight) is supposed to set and then I can continue on to Santa Elena and start the long hike to San Gerardo station to be at the umbrellabird lek around 5-5:30. So after dinner, around 8:30 or so I hiked down the river trail. The sky was finally pretty clear with small periods of drizzles. But whenever it wasn't drizzling and the sky was clear, the bright moon was shining which I don't know if that compromises my chances of seeing nocturnal species, but I had a feeling it does. Plus the wind was blowing pretty hard, hence why the sky was completely clear at some points and minutes later it would be drizzling. I walked down to the creek and shut off my mag light, waiting and listening. Granted this is kind of scary, but with the bright moon and knowing that I'm on a private property I felt pretty safe. Anyway, several minutes and I got nothing. Since I had to wake up early for the walk to San Gerardo, and since the moon was going to be set by then, I only stayed around 30 minutes or so before going back to my room. On the way back I thought I heard what could have been a **kinkajou** calling, but again, I turned off my light and waited but it didn't get any closer, and I also am not familiar with the call of a kinkajou so it could have been something else.

Day 9:

The alarm was set to 3am. I woke up, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and walked outside – only to see the same kind of downpour I saw the previous morning. Disappointed, I went back to sleep and set my alarm to 6:30. At this point, it was clear that I'm not going to be seeing a kinkajou here in Monteverde, and that I wouldn't be going down to San Girardo station – so no umbrellabirds or whatever other surprises I was hoping for in that area. I woke up again at 6:30 and got some breakfast. I was so disappointed with the rain that I had decided that I'm done with Monteverde and I'm just going to start driving towards my next destination – Arenal. Unfortunately, Arenal is on the Caribbean side, which is where this weather system was coming from... But there was nothing to do but hope for the best. The main reason for going to Arenal was staying at Arenal Observatory lodge. This is the only hotel that's inside the Arenal National Park, and supposedly it's very in-touch with nature and full of wildlife and birds. They adopted an orphaned **margay** a few years ago and then slowly introduced it back into the wild, until it completely stopped depending on them, but is still seen occasionally on the waterfall trail. At one point it turned up with a completely wild kitten, which made me think that either 1. There are other margays on the property or 2. It ventured far into the forest. I would later learn that option 2. Is much more likely. I have also seen pictures of a **tayra** coming up to their bird feeders (they leave fruit out every morning to attract birds) and I have also seen or read about a **kinkajou** that was seen close to the restaurant. That's good enough – give me those 3 species in a 3day/2night stay, and I'm happy! Plus these allude to the fact that other possibilities are likely to be present. Well, all of those hopes were kind



of shattered on my first day there. After a rainy drive around Arenal Lake, only spotting some **Howler Monkeys** hiding from the rain, and both **Keel-Billed** and **Chestnut-Mandibled toucans** on the way, I arrived at this pretty nice resort/hotel grounds. I asked the guy at the registration about these species but he told me that the Tayra hasn't come to the feeder in 3 years, a kinkajou hasn't seen in at least 2 years, and the margay lives in this area he circled on my map but is not seen frequently by any means. I didn't care – I put on my rain

jacket, grabbed my camera and binoculars and set out in search for animals. But as I said before, my hopes were shattered as I explored the grounds of the resort – pretty much all the forest on the property has been cut down, with only narrow, superficial secondary growths around the waterfall trail and around the 2 “hanging bridges”. Everything else has been turned into farmland with horses and houses. It was very disappointing to see. As you walk on the roads around the perimeter, you have the primary forest to your one side (the side that is outside the property) and completely cleared out farmland on the other side. Even the waterfall trail, which seemingly has some “good” forest, is very superficial and probably extends 20-30 meters to either side at the widest points before reaching a clearing again. The only animals that are abundant and tame are **white-nosed coatis**, but I do have to mention that bird-wise, I did see my life’s first **green honeycreepers**, plus **keel-billed toucans**, a **great curassow** couple, **crested guans**, **montezuma oropendolas**, **white-fronted amazons**, some woodpeckers, **palm**, **blue-gray**, **golden-hooded**, **scarlet-rumped** and other **tanagers**, many **hummingbirds** and **flycatchers**, etc.



The fact that I only had 3 nights left in CR and I still haven’t seen a single sloth started to bother me. Yes, I’ve already seen both species here, but sloths are so iconic to Costa Rica that if nothing else, I wanted pictures to show family and friends who will never see the old CR album. I inquired in the front office about a guide who would take me to see some sloths on my 3rd day here if I don’t see one by then. I also purchased some tickets for the Arenal Hanging Bridges park which supposedly is one of the only places in the world where your chances of seeing a **Lovely Cotinga** are realistic. Plus I figured any place outside of the grounds of this lodge sound like a better place to see animals, and maybe find my own sloth. Finally in the late afternoon it cleared up again, and for once you could start to see a volcano instead of people pointing out where it’s supposed to be. After dinner I walked back to my room with a flash-light and saw a forest rabbit, or a **tapeti**. At night, I woke up at 12:15 and hiked the waterfall trail again, and the pine trail where the margay supposedly lives. Then walked through the hotel grounds stopping by a small terrace that overlooks some forest, waiting and listening, then down through the hanging bridge near the lobby and down the old lava trail that starts from the restaurant, and back up. The entire expedition lasted until around 3am or so and produced nothing but an unidentified baby snake.

I’m sure a little more research will result in me identifying it, but I will do that some day... Other than that I didn’t hear anything that could have sounded remotely like a kinkajou or even an owl, let alone cats or tayras. All-in-all I am pretty disappointed with Arenal Observatory



lodge. I expected it to be somewhat like Bosque-del-Cabo in the Osa – a luxurious resort but that is in touch with nature and has trails going out immediately into the preserved primary forest of the national park. But instead it’s all cut down farmlands like I said, with narrow and superficial strips of forest for show. The old Lava trail does go into the forest, and they have another trail to the Cerro Chato crater that goes into primary forest, both which are very steep and difficult to walk. I started the Cerro Chato trail around 4:30pm earlier that day, but it’s so steep that you have to use your legs and arms to climb

up which makes it difficult to walk quietly or see any wildlife. Anyway, I went back to sleep around 3-3:10 disappointed with the lack of wildlife for this day.

Day 10:

I woke up around 6:30 again, to try my luck early morning through the waterfall trail, where supposedly the Margay was occasionally seen. No luck. At least it wasn't raining and the sky was actually pretty clear. I walked for about an hour from 6:45-7 to around 8-8:15 and ended up at the restaurant for some breakfast. As I said, they do put fruit out on some feeders, so there were a lot of colorful birds to see from the restaurant and the terrace, including my first **red-legged honeycreeper** of the trip, a **green honeycreeper**, many **tanagers**, **oropendolas**, more **white-nosed coatis** and a **blue Dacnis**, which is another species I have seen before but not well. Since it was getting nice and sunny out, I decided to venture out towards the Arenal Hanging Bridges park which is on the other side of the Dam. For once, you could actually see Volcan Arenal almost whole, and it was very stunning. The Arenal Hanging Bridges park is very popular which means less chances to see cool stuff. Especially because I got there around 11am when other tourists were there. I spent the first 30-40 minutes trying to walk fast and distance myself from a couple of groups – some noisy tourists from the USA and some less noisy Dutch tourists. I stumbled across a generic guided tour with a bunch of old tourists. They were looking at something and the guide asked me if I wanted to see the **Broad-Billed Motmot** through her scope. Sure, why not. Another nice bird, but not a lifer. I hiked around the park for around 2 hours trying to spot a sloth without luck, and without seeing too many other birds either. I did see some **whip-tailed lizards** and some other lizards. I also got bit by several leaf-cutter ants that I accidentally stopped to photograph something in the middle of their trail. At one point, I heard a loud drilling-like noise. It was way louder, lower-to-the-ground, and higher frequency than a woodpecker. It was also followed by a whistle. With my now expert birding skills (yeah right) I decided that this was the sound of a manakin and I was going to look for it. Not a minute later the guided tour was getting closer to catching up with me and I heard the guide say "this is the sound of a manakin". I felt so smart... Another 20-30 seconds and there was a beautiful **white-collared manakin** in clear view a few feet from me in the bushes. A REAL nice bird! I quickly got out my camera and tried to capture it, but the group which has now caught up was not being quiet and observant. The guide kind of hushed them for a minute – just enough for it to re-appear on another small branch, again in clear view. Another quick attempt to aim my camera at it and it was gone. Still, I was very satisfied with the encounter. I am now at 3 well-seen manakins for the trip, compared to my usual 0. I definitely have something for manakins, as well as trogons, toucans, barbets and cotingas. After they passed, I stuck around and tried to imitate the song that followed the drilling noise of their lekking ritual, but I think by this point it was off into another part of the forest. Back at the visitor center, I saw a **swallow-tailed kite** and some vultures. I got back to the lodge around 2:30, had some lunch, and was on a mission to find a night tour that would guarantee me, or almost guarantee me a kinkajou! A couple of phone calls and I got in contact with Arenal Oasis, which is a tour that concentrates on frogs, snakes and insects of the night, but they have been seeing a **kinkajou** at a specific flowering tree a few times this week and over the past few weeks. They promised me they would try extra hard for me. I arrived there right at 5:45 which is the time the tour is supposed to start. I was joined to a group of 4 tourists from Germany and we started the hike. Along the way we saw SO many frogs, toads and insects, including the iconic **red-eyed treefrog**, **smokey jungle frog**, a **hog-nosed pit**



viper, and so many others I can't even start to remember. Of course as soon as we started walking it started downpouring again. Well that basically reduces the chances for a kinkajou by right about 100%. The guide has confirmed that he has never seen a kinkajou in the rain. Great. After the 2 hour kinkajou-free tour, we ended up back at the office. It was right around 8:30, the rain has let down almost entirely and I offered the guide another \$20US to take me out privately and find me the kinkajou. He tried, really – he took me to a few specific trees where they have been seen recently, we turned off our flashlights and waited... nothing... then we would go to another place, walk silently and listen. But after another hour-hour and a half of trying to find one through periods of rain and no rain, all we heard was a distant call of what he confirmed was either a kinkajou or a barn owl. So I left a little disappointed again, but I cannot complain about the guide – he was extremely knowledgeable, found us a lot of (non-mammal) stuff, and really did

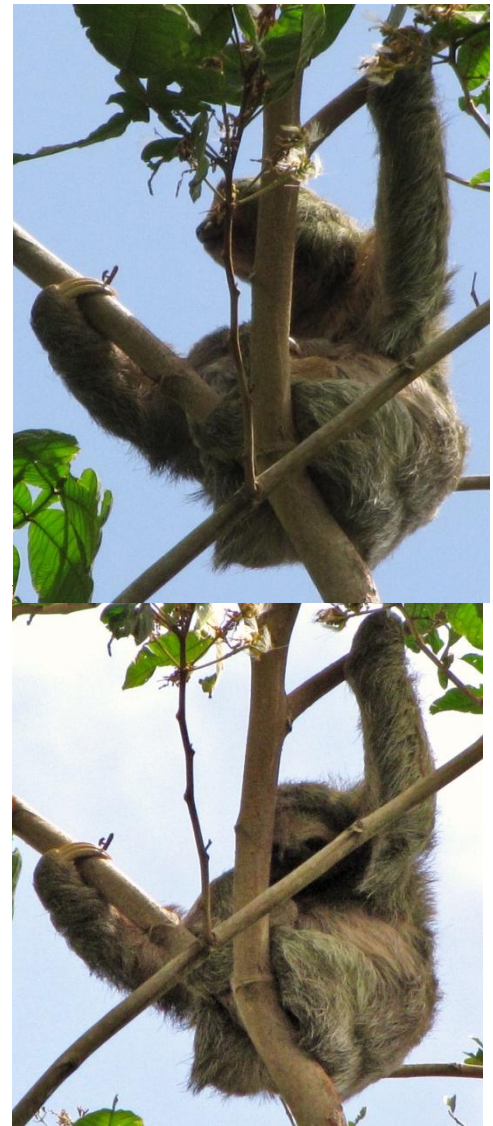
his best to find me a kinkajou but mother nature was not being very cooperative. Now was around 10:15 and I had to get back to my hotel, Arenal Observatory Lodge by 11 which is when they close the main gate. I got in my car and drove through La Fortuna to my hotel. After La Fortuna but before the police station and the turn towards Arenal Observatory Lodge, you go through about 1 kilometer or so of good forest habitat, which is supposed to be a good place to see **sloths** during the day. I was driving slow and I was pretty tired from the long day. Just when I was running thoughts about how I wasn't going to see the damn kinkajou on this trip, a **HUGE CAT** JUMPED OUT OF THE FOREST ONTO THE ROAD, LESS THAN 10 METERS IN FRONT OF MY CAR! It happened so quick, that 2 things followed: 1. I almost got a frickin' heart attack, and 2. I SLAMMED on my breaks and watched the creature just cross the road and hop right into the forest on the other side! It was so fast that at first I didn't know what animal it was. To this day I'm still only 80-90% sure that this was indeed a **Puma**, because it was so fast and it just disappeared, but I'm pretty sure. Besides the visual details, by process of elimination – It was not a jaguar, and the only other animal that's compatible in size and color is a white-tailed deer which obviously looks nothing like a cat, doesn't act like it and usually freezes when high beams are shined on it. Well since it crossed from my right to my left, I pulled into the left (and wrong) lane as I slammed on my breaks. My maglight launched forward in the passenger seat and I bent down to pick it up and spotlight this awesome animal. But by the time I bent down, grabbed the light and shined it outside my driver-side window into the forest which was on a downward slope from me, there was nothing. MAN!! What an encounter, but also, kind of a miss. But still - a cat, and a lifer!!! Phew! My heart was definitely still beating fast. But I was also still parked on the wrong side of the road, potentially facing traffic, so I had to get out of there. Since my hotel is off the beaten path, and the drive there does go through the national park and through some pristine forest habitat, I decided that that I would video tape the rest of my drive, just in case. Worst case, I'll go and delete it afterwards, but if another animal crosses the road, at least I'll have it on tape. So I did, but unfortunately this was the last excitement of the drive home. I made it to the gate in time, but tonight I definitely did not go to sleep disappointed...

Days 11-12:

I was so tired, and I woke up in the morning around 7. I went straight to the restaurant for breakfast and as I passed the registration desk the guy there asked me if I ever found my kinkajou. I told him I didn't, but I also told him about my puma encounter. He said he saw a puma right around the same area about 3 years ago. After a nice, leisurely breakfast and some last looks at the honeycreepers, tanagers and some other birds including some unidentified parrots far in the air (a common occurrence throughout my trip – a lot of unidentified parrots), I called the guy whose contact information I received from one of the guys at the registration desk. This guy was going to find me a 3-toed sloth, and hopefully also a 2-toed sloth, since I have managed to be in Costa Rica for almost 2 weeks and NOT see either. I met him around 10:30 near one of the hotels in La Fortuna. He got in my car and told me where to drive. We got off the main road into a small forested road, and at one point he said "I will find you a sloth in the next minute".

Indeed, within a minute or two he found one in a cecropia tree to the left. Phew, at least 1 **brown-throated three-toed sloth** to add to the list. I took a couple of pictures despite the back-light and after I was satisfied we moved on. Within a few minutes he found me another 3-toed sloth, and then we set off to find a Hoffman's two-toed sloth. Supposedly they shouldn't be very difficult to find but after a drive of about an hour back-and-forth to a place where he said he usually finds them, we ended up back at La Fortuna and he said he wants to take me to his project (a small preserved area in the middle of the city) where he saw a 2-toed sloth all last night. But unfortunately, we couldn't find it there either. Too bad, but at least I got 1 sloth species. The one thing this guide told me that unfortunately was too late for me was "If you do a tour of Arenal Hanging bridges at night you will see a kinkajou for sure!". So I departed La Fortuna after dropping him back off at that hotel, and started driving back towards San Jose. The drive there took about 3-4 hours mostly because of traffic inside the city, and I arrived at my hotel – Posada Canal Grande which is a highly recommended hotel, in a good location in San Jose but on a small hill, away from the city noises and traffic, with the coolest little swimming pool and terrace around it with small suspended chairs, beds and couches to lounge in the shade around the pool. The hotel staff was super nice and one of the girls who worked at the registration was probably close to my age and pretty cute. Since it was now around 3:30 in the afternoon I decided to try my luck with Braulio Carrillo anyway, especially with this being my last day in Costa Rica. Again, I remembered how I don't like the city of San Jose because of all the traffic and annoying buses that just stop

sometimes for an indefinite amount of time until their capacity is filled. But as soon as you exit the city and get on the highway through Braulio Carrillo, it's a different world. Within the first kilometer or 2 you see the sign that says "Braulio Carrillo National Park". I haven't read the Lonely Planet or Frommer's



books of Costa Rica lately, but if a drive through Braulio Carrillo is not mentioned in their “THINGS YOU SHOULDN’T MISS” section, then they are really depriving their readers of an amazing experience. Since I’ve already been to Braulio Carrillo in 2003, and since there was a lot of traffic and it was raining (again), I didn’t take any pictures of the drive. But wow – what a dramatic and amazing road through the mountainous cloud forest, steep cliffs and the kind of stuff you see in Jurassic Park movies or documentaries about China or Thailand. Just the drive there was worth it. The visitor center is located about 30km deeper into the park so you really get to enjoy a good amount of it just driving there and back. But as Vladimir Dintes promised, the traffic is always busy and you just don’t see animals crossing the road despite the good habitat on both sides. For some reason, it wasn’t like that when I visited the park almost 10 years ago, but maybe the fact that we visited it on new-year’s day helped empty it of people. Regardless the drive is remarkable and I think it kind of summerizes the beauty, lushness and magic of Costa Rica. It was also kind of a symbolic, picturesque summary since it was my last day there. After driving through the rain which was heavy at times I arrived at the visitor center around 4:30-4:45 but it was closed... So I parked my car across the street near the other trail, locked everything and started hiking. Like I mentioned, last time I was there there was not much traffic, but this time I noticed that you can always hear the traffic noises in the background throughout the trail, hence why many animals aren’t seen in this area. Just to note that the longer trail that starts from the visitor center does get deeper in the forest and is further away from the main road. But like I said that whole area was closed. So I hiked quietly, again through some rain which didn’t increase my chances at anything. That whole situation was kind of unfortunate because this park is so awesome and the forest is so dense and pristine that it really has potential, but the “good” trails being closed and the annoying weather just made it very unfruitful. So no species to note at all besides the over-abundant and usual leaf-cutter ants. At one point, in the deepest parts of the forest I did hear some interesting and unfamiliar bird songs, but I wasn’t very patient because it was also getting kind of late and I wasn’t comfortable with my car being parked on its own near the busy highway. But I did enjoy the amazing view from the lookout point of the two rivers flowing alongside and then merging, surrounded by awesome mountainous rainforest. There was a small observation deck that wasn’t there in 2003. Obviously pictures don’t do justice. But anyway, I drove back through BC and saw no animals again. I went back to my hotel and enjoyed a nice dinner at the italian restaurant with the same name as my hotel. The next day I woke up just in time to return my car. Again I have to mention



about how terrible my experience was with Budget. Despite having paid for the most expensive, \$0-deductible insurance, they charged me over \$400 for a few dents that were on the side because I didn’t

make a claim right when it happened. I told them – fine, give me my car back and I'll go make a claim now, but they refused and basically cheated and stole the money from me. Bastards. I'm going to write a very angry letter to budget and explain my overall horrible experience with them. With that frustration and with those feelings, after arguing and making phone calls back and forth to the US and to Budget representatives I took the shuttle to the airport. It really is too bad that this awesome trip had to begin and end with the POSs at Budget, but that does not take anything away from that fact that Costa Rica is such an amazing country. I will come again, for sure.

Mammals seen on this trip:

1. Brown-throated Tree-toed Sloth (*Bradypus variegatus*)
 2. Silky Anteater (*Cyclopes didactylus*)
 3. Northern Tamandua (*Tamandua Mexicana*)
 4. White-headed Capuchin (*Cebus capucinus*)
 5. Central American Squirrel Monkey (*Saimiri oerstedii*)
 6. Mantled Howler (*Alouatta palliata*)
 7. Geoffroy's Spider Monkey (*Ateles geoffroyi*)
 8. Central American Agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*)
 9. Alfaro's Pygmy Squirrel / Central American Dwarf Squirrel (*Microsciurus alfar*)
 10. Red-Tailed Squirrel (*Sciurus granatensis*)
 11. Variegated Squirrel (*Sciurus variegatoides*)
 12. Tapeti (*Sylvilagus brasiliensis*)
 13. Sac-winged bat species (*Saccopteryx* species)
 14. Pantropical Spotted Dolphin (*Stenella attenuate*)
 15. Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)
 16. Puma (*Puma concolor*)
 17. White-nosed Coati (*Nasua narica*)
 18. Bushy-tailed Olingo (*Bassaricyon gabbii*)
 19. Neotropical River Otter (*Lontra longicaudis*)
 20. Baird's Tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*)
 21. Collared Peccary (*Pecari tajacu*)
 22. Central American Red Brocket (*Mazama temama*)
- (Other bat species – not identified)

Notable Birds (that I remember):

- Great Tinamou
- Brown Pelican
- Brown Booby
- Magnificent Frigatebird
- Great Egret
- Tricolored Heron
- Little Blue Heron
- Snowy Egret
- Cattle Egret
- Striated Heron
- Green Heron
- Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
- Boat-billed Heron

- Bare-throated Tiger Heron
- White Ibis
- Glossy Ibis
- Black Vulture
- Turkey Vulture
- Lesser Yellow-headed vulture
- Osprey
- Swallow-tailed kite
- Common Black Hawk
- Roadside Hawk
- Northern Caracara
- Yellow-headed Caracara
- One of the forest falcons (can't remember which)
- Bat falcon
- Crested Guan
- Black Guan
- Great Curassow
- One of the wood-quails
- Northern Jacana
- Double-Striped Thick-knee
- Scarlet Macaw
- Orange-fronted parakeet
- White-fronted amazon
- Squirrel Cuckoo
- Crested Owl
- Common Potoo
- One of the nightjars
- I'm not even going to attempt to remember and identify all the hummingbirds...
- Black-throated trogon
- Baird's trogon
- Collared Trogon
- Slaty-tailed trogon
- Resplendent Quetzal
- Ringed Kingfisher
- Green Kingfisher
- Blue-Crowned motmot
- Broad-billed motmot
- Fiery-billed aracari
- Keel-billed Toucan
- Chestnut-mandibled Toucan
- Emerald (Blue-throated) toucanet
- Golden-naped woodpecker
- Pale-billed woodpecker
- Some woodcreepers...
- A few of the antshrikes/angbirds/antwrens
- I think Streak-chested antpitta
- Three-wattled Bellbird
- White-collared Manakin
- Long-tailed Manakin



- Blue-crowned Manakin
 - Wrens...
 - Clay-colored robin
 - White-throated Magpie Jay
 - Brown Jay
 - Collared Redstart
 - A few of the ant tanagers
 - Summer Tanager
 - Cherrie's Tanager
 - Blue-Gray Tanager
 - Palm Tanager
 - Silver-throated tanager
 - Golden-hooded Tanager
 - Blue Dacnis
 - Green Honeycreeper
 - Red-legged Honeycreeper
 - Scarlet-rumped Cacique
 - Montezuma Oropendola
- ... At least these are the ones I know for sure.

Other Interesting Species:

- Golfo Dulce Poison-dart frog
- Grannular Poison-dart frog
- Smoky Jungle Frog
- Red-eyed Treefrog
- Glass Frog
- Fer-de-lance
- Hog-nosed pit viper
- Puffing/Northern Bird Snake
- Vine Snake
- False Coral Snake (?)
- Chunk-headed snake
- Unidentified Snake (?)
- White-tipped reef Shark
- Bull Shark
- Spectacled Caiman
- American Crocodile
- Common Basilisk
- Green Basilisk
- Whip-tailed Lizzard
- Black Spiny-tailed Iguana
- Green Iguana
- Anole species (several...)