



### **RESERVA CAÑADA EL CARMEN, CHACO, PARAGUAY**

We are Karina and Andrey (aka Travelling Zoologists), a couple of field zoologists who also work as guides, expedition managers and photographers. We have moved to Paraguay and continue to explore the last, well-hidden pieces of true wilderness that this country preserves. Here we would like to share with you some information about one of the little natural jewels that we particularly enjoyed, Reserva Natural Cañada El Carmen. Do not hesitate to contact us for more information about this place and wildlife watching in Paraguay in general. We run guided tours focusing on mammal and bird watching and offer a variety of tailor made itineraries including but not limited to child-friendly tours. We are always happy to provide free travel advice for independent travellers. Contact us at [zoology.gilev@gmail.com](mailto:zoology.gilev@gmail.com)

#### **General info**

The [Cañada El Carmen Reserve](#) (-21.63465984277378, -62.34028565310504) is a little known private reserve on the Paraguay-Bolivia border in the Chaco Seco (Dry Chaco) region of Paraguay. The reserve covers 4000 hectares of a unique ecosystem of Chaco xeromorphic forest. The very dry landscape is dominated by shrubs and cacti. The low, dense, impenetrable (to humans) vegetation is home to a great diversity of fauna. Among the mammals, Geoffroy's cat, jaguar, lowland tapir and Chacoan peccary are some of the key species. Several trails and year-round watering holes make it possible to come face to face with many of these animals. This is what makes the reserve so special, as the most common and usually unavoidable method of observing wildlife in the Chaco is to drive along the dusty roads, day and night. A rare opportunity to enjoy a good

variety of Chaco's specialist fauna on foot, or waiting quietly by the water, is very refreshing. The reserve has proven to be great for both mammals and birds, as well as some herps, including the majestic red tegu (*Salvator rufescens*) hanging around the camp.

So far, Cañada El Carmen is a hidden paradise for nature lovers, where you can have the whole reserve to yourself most of the time. Fingers crossed that this promising wildlife-watching destination will become more popular (and therefore more sustainable) with further infrastructure development. The fact that it is owned by the conservation-minded NGO [Guyra Paraguay](#) gives hope for a preservation of the place in the distant future. The reserve's location is both good and bad. It's more than 700km from the capital, Asunción. It's a long way for sure, but in combination with other Chaco Seco wildlifewatching destinations, it's more than worth a ride. The Enciso NP is only 120 km away and the "Chaco capital" Filadelfia is about 300 km away. Unlike the more famous Defensores del Chaco NP, you don't have to fight your way on awful dusty roads for hours to reach Cañada El Carmen as almost all the way to the reserve is paved.

The reserve deserves a minimum stay of three or four days (more is better). Guests can stay at the ranger station in basic but clean rooms with a fan and bunk beds. There is electricity, a hot shower, a kitchen with fridge, stove, etc. and a stylish, cosy terrace. The rangers (usually just one) are very welcoming. Alternatively, you can camp near the ranger station building on a spacious campsite with a large shelter to escape the midday sun (see photo below). All fees for the stay (a little higher than usual Paraguayan prices, but not much) go to the NGO, which makes it a pleasure to pay.

The nearest town (9 km away) is Infante Rivarola with a petrol station and a small grocery store. It is a good idea to buy food and water in a larger town such as Mariscal Estigarribia or preferably Filadelfia. In the reserve, only Personel has (weak) mobile coverage, but in the town and nearby, the more popular Claro and Tigo work well.

### **Watching mammals**

The most pleasant way to see mammals in Cañada El Carmen is to hang around the waterholes after dark. When we visited the reserve in the late dry season, we had most of our sightings at two waterholes near the ranger station. In the wetter years/seasons, there is another great waterhole at the end of the trail about a kilometre west of the ranger station. It's the best place in the reserve to see both Chacoan peccaries and pumas. The two waterholes at the ranger station (a small one and a large one) are very close to each other and to the buildings. Sometimes the rangers and infrequent visitors make noise and fire at night and you might think that no wildlife will come. But our experience is that as soon as the noise stops (sometimes even before) the mammals arrive. So don't be frustrated by human noise at night (which is rare), as there may be

even more activity at the waterholes afterwards as the animals have been waiting for a while to get to the water.

There are two possible tactics for these two waterholes. The most obvious is to sit quietly on the bank closest to the building (animals usually come from the 'forest side') and scan the area near the water with the thermal imager at night. It is possible to find a spot where you can monitor more or less both waterholes without moving much. When we see something in our thermal, we usually wait for the animal to approach the water and, even better, to start drinking. This increases the chances that it will not run away as soon as we turn on the light. When turning on the lights, we always try to be considerate and respect the sensitive eyes of nocturnal mammals. It is a good idea to start with very low light (e.g. the periphery of the spotlight) and then use the minimum light necessary for observation. It is worth checking both waterholes from time to time, as cats often prefer the smaller waterhole, which is more like a paddle (and looks less promising), to the larger waterhole, which attracts tapirs. Daylight observations at the waterholes can also be productive, especially on hot days. In the late afternoon, for example, grey brocket deer, Chacoan mara or even Geoffroy's cat are possible.

The second tactic for seeing mammals at the watering places near the ranger station is to check them from time to time during the night. This can easily be combined with night walks, as all three possible walking routes start here. This tactic is more comfortable for those who do not want to sit still for a long time or who need some (interrupted) sleep. The downside is that there is a greater chance of disturbing and scaring away the mammals on their way to the water. For the waterhole at the end of the trail leading west from the ranger station, only the first tactic would probably be effective, given the shy target species (Chacoan peccary and puma).

There is another productive waterhole nearby (15 minutes drive) but outside the reserve. Jaguar, lowland tapir and Azara's night monkeys (and probably many more) are possible. It is on unfenced private land and it is difficult to predict whether it will be accessible in the future. Contact us if you are interested before you go for more information and directions.

Two trails from the ranger station are good for morning birdwatching and night walks in search of mammals and herps. In terms of mammals, night walks are much less productive than waiting by the waterholes. It is possible to see mammals along the trails during the day, but this is rare. We have seen Chaco maras and Molina's hog-nosed skunk, while others have seen Chacoan peccaries and pumas. The access road from the ranger station to the highway is good for night walks/drives, especially if Geoffroy's cat is one of your targets. Night drives along the highway in both directions from the access road can be quite interesting. Turning left (when leaving the reserve) and scanning is the most reliable way to find plains viscachas in the area. While the right side of the highway (between the reserve access road and Infante Rivarola) has a ridiculous density of southern three-banded armadillos (we had over 50 individuals one night when we

tried to count them). The highway and the road to the south just before Infante Rivarola are potentially good for Chacoan peccaries.

### **The species observed recently and where to see them**

**Azara's night monkey** (*Aotus azarae*) – near the reserve. Drive towards the Bolivian border for about five km until you reach a small bridge over a dry riverbed. We saw them on the side of the highway opposite the reserve while walking along the riverbed a few hundred meters from the bridge.

**Chaco leaf-eared mouse** (*Graomys chacoensis*) – walking trails in the reserve.

**Chacoan mara** (*Dolichotis salinicola*) – walking trails in the reserve, especially the one to the west, and small waterhole by the ranger station.

**Chacoan naked-tailed armadillo** (*Cabassous chacoensis*) – the access road to the reserve (one sighting).

**Chacoan peccary** (*Catagonus wagneri*) – the waterhole at the end of the trail going west from the ranger station. Occasionally they are seen also on the most distant parts of the both walking trails.

**Common yellow-toothed cavy** (*Galea musteloides*) – walking trails and especially the access road to the reserve, small waterhole by the ranger station.

**Crab-eating fox** (*Cerdocyon thous*) – walking trails and the access road to the reserve, all waterholes and organic pile (behind the large waterhole) by the ranger station.

**Geoffroy's cat** (*Leopardus geoffroyi*) – large and especially small waterhole by the ranger station and the access road. Also seen outside the reserve (the same area as for night monkeys).

**Giant anteater** (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*) - large waterhole by the ranger station.

**Gray brocket deer** (*Mazama gouazoubira*) – walking trails and both waterholes by the ranger station (day and night).

**Jaguar** (*Panthera onca*) – large and small waterhole by the ranger station.

**Jaguarundi** (*Herpailurus yagouaroundi*) – regularly crossing the highway especially to the left from the access road (away from the Bolivian border), at the midday.

**Lowland tapir** (*Tapirus terrestris*) - large waterhole by the ranger station, the waterhole at the end of the trail going west.

**Molina's hog-nosed skunk** (*Conepatus chinga*) – walking trails, small and especially large waterhole by the ranger station.

**Pampas fox** (*Lycalopex gymnocercus*) – large and small waterhole by the ranger station and along the highway, especially to the left from the access road (away from the Bolivian border).

**Pearson's Chaco mouse** (*Andalgalomys pearsoni*) – walking trails in the reserve.

**Plains viscacha** (*Lagostomus maximus*) – along the highway especially to the left from the access road (away from the Bolivian border).



**Puma** (*Puma concolor*) – the waterhole at the end of the trail going west from the ranger station. Sometimes seen also on the most distant parts of the both walking trails.

**Southern three-banded armadillo** (*Tolypeutes matacus*) – abundant along the highway, especially towards the Bolivian border.

**Tapeti** (*Sylvilagus brasiliensis*) – walking trails in the reserve and along the highway.

Here are a couple of nice videos about the reserve made by a fellow photographer -

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CUF1GRdAjpA/>

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/COOYEsEuWcN/>

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