

Junin Lake, Peru Trip Report
August 2024
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Summary

Following up on a past report on mammalwatching.com (which I can't find anymore to credit the author, sorry), I extended a trip to Peru by a few days to go to Junin Lake to see if I could find Northern Colocolo (or Northern Pampas Cat, ie leopardus garleppi if you're a believer in the proposed split of Pampas Cat). While the report on the site was for Andean Mountain Cat, I was confident that this was a likely location for Colocolo based on a recent research paper discussing the diet of Colocolo around Junin Lake (see: **Diet of Leopardus colocolo (Carnivora: Felidae) in the Reserva Nacional de Junín, Junín, Peru** by Ursula Fajardo, Daniel Cossíos, and Víctor Pacheco, <http://doi.org/10.15381/rpb.v21i1.8248>). I figured I'd give it a try and if I saw an Andean Cat - great consolation prize. We succeeded in finding the Colocolo on two of three nights of searching, including great close views and pictures.



One stern looking Colocolo.

Guides

I contacted Alejandro Tello (ateguevara@gmail.com) to organize the trip. He didn't join, but he arranged Alexis Alcantara (WhatsApp: +51 975 136 161) as a guide, and equally importantly Cesar Donato Zevallos who lives in Ondores on the shores of Junin Lake as our local guide/contact. Cesar's help was the key to our success.

Day 1

We drove the long, narrow, winding Carretera Central, stopping along the way to do some excellent birding. We slept on La Oroya around 11,500' to acclimate.

Day 2

We drove the remaining distance through Junin to Ondores. We did some birding in the morning to see the endangered and endemic Junin Grebe, and then started our search for the cat. We began searching a rocky area by the lake where the cat had been seen in the past. The habitat seemed good and the hiking was pleasant, but there were dogs around which was discouraging. At night, we spotlit from the road but to no avail.

Given the constant presence of dogs in the area we'd planned to search, we discussed finding another area. Cesar said that he knew a guy with a farm about 40 min outside of Ondores who has seen a cat on a cliff full of viscachas, so we thought we'd try there the next day.

Day 3

In the morning, we walked the area by the lake shore but there were more dogs so we gave up on that spot for good. We then went to the farm of Cesar's friend. We had a conversation with him and he reported regularly seeing a "gato montes" ("mountain cat", not specific on species) in a large area of rocks that held viscachas on his property. He gave permission for us to hike and look for the cat day or night. After walking the area, it was clear that the best chance to see the cat was on a large limestone fin where we found cat scat and where the viscachas liked to hang out. However, to get the best looks at night with lights, we'd need permission from other surrounding farms to walk on their land too. Cesar spent the afternoon getting that permission from the other farms while Alexis and I headed back to Junin for food and a siesta.

In the evening, we returned around sundown and walked around the limestone fin spotlighting. Towards the end of our circuit, we caught the eyeshine of a distant (150m?) cat that immediately slinked away and was not refound. That was a good sign, but not the sighting we were looking for.

Day 4

In the morning, we returned to the farm around sunrise time and walked around the limestone cliffs again to no avail.

Finally, for our last evening, we returned and sat at a high point scanning for about 1.5hrs before the sun went down. Then we walked our loop around the limestone fin again, and only about 15 minutes into it we saw a cat at very close range (15m?). It immediately turned away,

but we repositioned ourselves to get a wide view of the area it went to, and upon turning our lights on again, the cat had found a perch on the rocks facing us. It gave 30-60 seconds of excellent views before disappearing again - success!

It seems to me that this is a pretty good spot for the Northern Colocolo. The habitat is good with ample prey, an enormous nearly mile long cliff/complex of rocks to hide in, water nearby, and it isn't being hunted or harassed. We saw the cat 2/2 nights in this location, and the cat was out early both nights (8pm on the first night, 7pm on the second night) – so it seems like it regularly patrols the area each night.



The cliff area where we searched, and found, the Colocolo.



Another look at the cat, and one of the local Lesser Horned Owls.

Thanks!

A huge thanks to Alejandro, Alexis, Cesar and the farm owner (whose name I never caught).

Some Notes on the Trip

This was not an easy or comfortable trip, so be forewarned.

- The altitude is quite high with most walking between 13,500' and 14,200'. We walked in some areas as high as 16,100'. Alejandro recommends two acclimation nights typically, but I live at 8,400' and had spend a few days prior hiking between 9,000 and 13,000' in the Sacred Valley so I did just one. Cesar had stories of evacuating people due to the altitude.
- The hotel rooms are clean but lack heat and are as cold as 4-5C at night. Had I known this, I would have brought a 0C sleeping bag which I find more comfortable to sleep in than under many heavy blankets.
- Food was fine, but the restaurants in Junin are randomly closed and we missed a meal or two due to this. Bring snacks or arrange with the guide to bring a couple extra meals!
- It's generally a bit chilly and can be windy. Bring many layers.
- I wouldn't do this trip without a guide. The location is on a private farm that you need to have permission to walk on. Cesar was certain we'd be shot at if we just wandered around at night without the permission of the surrounding farms that he worked to attain.