

Panama

or how I discovered the Neotropics



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Photo: Panamanian night monkey

Trip to the Republic of Panama between the 10th and 26th of March 2024.

Number of animal species seen: 29 mammals
 336 birds
 10 reptiles
 2 amphibians

Living in Australia, and with several trips to Asia, Europe, and North America as well as a couple of trips to Africa behind me, I feel I am beginning to have seen a reasonable sampling of the world's zoological realms. The big hole was of course, the neotropics, or Central and South America. Obviously, I had to do something about it. I did have a major trip planned to Colombia; however, due to a significant medical issue in the family, I just didn't feel I should go on any trips that might take days for me to extract myself and get back to Australia, so I looked at other options.

In my file of proposed trips (mostly compiled over COVID lockdowns) I found an itinerary to Panama. The advantage of Panama is that it is very small, and therefore you are never far from an international airport with frequent flights to the USA. I also made sure I only went to places with good road connections. Even so the return trip took 37 hours from the time I walked out the door of our last lodge in Panama till I walked in the front door at home.

I was travelling with Graeme Phipps, my friend and usual travel companion. The trip was to be in two parts, firstly up to Boquete in the west of the country to explore the cloud forests, then back to the canal zone to join a Tamarin Tour with the people who run the famous Canopy Tower. This would be something new for me, the first time I had been in an animal-watching "tour group" with strangers.

We took the Qantas flight from Melbourne to LA, and then the Copa Airlines flight to Panama City. Using the Qantas partner airline would have given me access to lounges, seat selection etc, but they only seem to fly to Panama from Miami, and I did not want the extra flight time and layover. Anyway, Copa was fine. The only thing that disturbed me was that they flew B737max aircraft.

Day 1. We arrived at Panama City airport safely and on time at 10am and then picked up a rental car. I did not want to drive all the way to Boquete on the first day so booked into the Royal Decameron Hotel on the beach near Anton.

We arrived at the hotel just before 2pm. I had thought check in, have lunch, relax by the pool, dinner, and an early night. It turned out the Royal Decameron Hotel was not a normal hotel; it was an all-inclusive resort spread along the beach and with lots of rules. So, can we check in? Not until 2.30pm. Can we have lunch? Not until you check in, and lunch finishes at 2.30. So, what can we do for lunch? No answer. Eventually after we checked in about 3.30pm (I know) we found there was a small do-it-yourself hamburger bar. We would have been better off stopping at one of the many McDonalds we passed on the way.

Eventually we got to the pool, where the major activity seemed to be moving between the pools and the bars with all-inclusive alcohol. I signed a chit for a couple of pool towels. After our swim Graeme tried to take the towels back, but the attendant would not accept them, saying the pool had closed (at 5pm), so we dropped the towels on a lounge. We saw some birds and a huge green iguana then went back for dinner and an early night.

Day 2. We were up early for some birding at a nearby hot spot. Walking to the car we saw our first mammal, a **variegated squirrel** running across the lawn and up a tree. It turned out to be the only time we saw this species. I was aware from iNaturalist that this squirrel was to be found in the hotel grounds, so it was good to see it.

After birding we had breakfast and went to check out. All was going fine with checkout till right at the end the cashier, with a flourish, pulls out the chit I had signed. “And where are the towels?” he asks, in a style somewhat reminiscent of Inspector Clouseau. If you haven’t picked them up, beside the pool where we left them, we answered. This goes on for about ten minutes until he calls a superior, and we were allowed to go on our way.

In Boquete we stayed at Tinamou Cottages, run by a Dutch couple, and the wife, Terry, was to be our bird guide. Hans, the husband, helped us get our luggage to our cottage, so I asked him about mammals. He mentioned an armadillo that had been seen around our cottage recently and pointed to some diggings. It sounded promising.

Days 3 to 5. On our first morning at the cottage, we saw a **red-tailed squirrel** at a feed table beside our deck, and we saw this animal several times. However, this was this was the only mammal we saw at Boquete.

We went out a couple of evenings with a thermal scope and saw nothing. There weren’t even any rats around the feed bin for the horse that was on the property. To be honest, this is much as I expected, as everything I had read and heard had been negative about mammal prospects around Boquete. About the only species found there that cannot be found elsewhere in Panama was the cacomistle, and Hans did say they saw them quite regularly.

Days 6 and 7. After four nights in Boquete, we drove back to Panama City to drop off the car. We stayed in a city hotel that night before being picked up the next morning by a minibus from the Canopy Family. Forty-five minutes later we were at the Canopy Tower, which was to be our base for the next seven nights.

The Canopy Tower is very well known in the bird world. It is a recycled US army radar tower from the Cold War. The ground floor is an entry foyer, shop, office, and staff facilities, the next two floors contain guest accommodation, while the top floor provides the guest lounge and dining. Above that is an observation deck which circles the radar dome. Not only does its height put it above the canopy it is on top of Semaphore Hill, the highest point for miles around.



The Tamarin Tour is basically a series of half or full day trips to local birding spots, with a greater emphasis on mammals.

There are also three night-tours included. However, it is not intense mammal watching, about 90% of the time is spent birding. The last two nights are spent at the Canopy Lodge, near Anton, but inland at a higher elevation.

We had two couples as our companions on the tour, both American and a little older. One gentleman had spent his career in the Californian State wildlife department, so we had plenty to talk about. The other couple were also very friendly, and while the husband was a very good bird photographer, there was none of the posturing that sometimes comes with that.



The first afternoon was at leisure, and the first mammal seen was a **brown-throated three-toed sloth** climbing a nearby tree. Immediately prior to dinner a **Seba's short-tailed bat** was seen flying around the lounge, while during dinner a **Derby's woolly opossum** was seen at the feeding station in a tree next to a window. After dinner we walked the access road down Semaphore Hill, the first of our night tours with our guide. We saw **western lowland olingo**, **nine-banded armadillo**, **brown-throated three-toed** and **Hoffman's two-toed sloths**. An excellent start.

Day 8. The next morning, we walked down the hill again (transport was provided for the return uphill) primarily for birds. While waiting for the walk to start a troop of **Geoffroy's tamarins** came through. We saw this species three times at the Tower. On the walk down, as well as birds, we saw **Central American agoutis**, a **white-nosed coati** and a **northern tamandua** high up a tree. The agoutis were ubiquitous, especially at dusk, while coatis appeared at a couple of other locations later.



At the bottom of the hill, we found a troop of **mantled howler monkeys**. That the howlers were common was amply demonstrated by their constant calling, to the extent the Tower provided ear plugs to block out the noise. However, it was actually quite difficult to get views of them and we only saw them a couple of times more.

Both species of sloth were seen, and they and the agoutis proved extremely common during the rest of our time here and were seen constantly in suitable habitat. That evening we saw a **kinkajou** at the feeder during dinner.

Day 9. The next morning, we were birding on the Pipeline Road, where we saw our first two **Panamanian white-fronted capuchins**. **Red-tailed squirrels** were also quite common on this road. In the afternoon we visited Summit Park, which contained a small zoo of Panamanian animals. We only visited one exhibit, the harpy eagle, and on exiting the aviary saw a small colony of **tent-making bats**. In the evening, we identified **chestnut sac-winged bats** around the hummingbird feeders.

Day 10. The following day was an all-day excursion to San Lorenzo National Park, which is on the Caribbean coast, but no new mammals were seen, although we did see **white-fronted capuchins** again.

Day 11. The follow morning's activity was one of the more enjoyable wildlife watching experiences - a cruise on Lake Gatun.

Lake Gatun is an artificial lake created by damming the Chagres River. It forms a major part of the Panama Canal, connecting the two lock systems, and provides the water needed to operate the locks. There are numerous inlets and islands teeming with wildlife, and our tour mainly consisted of investigating some of these inlets.

First mammal seen was a **lesser capybara**, poking its head up above the grass along the edge of the lake. This is all many people see of this species, but fortunately a few minutes later we were watching three of them move along the riverbank.

On one of the islands, clinging to the trunk of a tree was a small colony of **proboscis bats**, close to a basking American crocodile. The only other mammals were a family of **white-fronted capuchins**, unusually down on the lake bank feeding.

In the afternoon we visited the Panama Rainforest Discovery Centre, which is located about 5km up the Pipeline Road. A feature of the Centre is a steel observation tower, which we climbed, apparently 176 steps. About halfway up the tower we found a roost of a small colony of **greater sac-winged bats**.

A night drive did not produce any mammals besides the ubiquitous sloths and agOutis.

Day 12. The next morning, we were back up the Pipeline Road for more birdwatching. That afternoon we visited the Gamboa Resort, primarily to see the Sloth Sanctuary. The Gamboa Resort is a large hotel, which due to its location, is often used by visiting bird and mammal watchers.



The relationship between the Sanctuary and the Resort is unclear. You buy a ticket to the Sanctuary at the tours desk in the Resort then a vehicle takes you a few hundred metres down the road to the Sanctuary, still in the Resort grounds. A guide takes you past a couple of tortoise exhibits, a frog exhibit, into a netted butterfly enclosure, then through an orchid display. Finally, you reach the sloths. Four animals are displayed on a platform that sits in the middle of an old but roofed basketball court. They each have a framework of branches to move around. A presenter then gives a talk about the animals, concluding with the usual "this is a sanctuary not a zoo" comment.

The Sanctuary flouts its conservation "credentials" and receives support from an American conservation organisation. However, I could see no evidence of any conservation actions. They work entirely with one species, the two-toed, which because of diet is the easiest sloth

species to keep in captivity. This is even though being in the habitat, they are ideally situated to investigate the captive care of the three-toed sloth. In any case, neither are threatened. As an education and rehabilitation facility it is probably adequate, but as far as conservation goes it is a non-starter.

We then walked across to an area of forest nearby where we came across a roost site for **Panamanian night monkeys**, opposite which was a tree with a large split in the bark with an **Andean porcupine** sitting in it. I would say our guide knew about the night monkey roost, but the porcupine was fortuitous. The night monkeys were very inquisitive and poked about half their body length out of the hole of their nest, giving great views. The porcupine had its back to us and never stirred.

Day 13. In the morning, we headed off to the Metropolitan National Park, or Metro Park for short, located not surprisingly close to the city centre. It was very popular with joggers, walkers, and family groups, and here we saw the bulk of the birds for the day. We also saw some **mantled howlers**.



Next stop was Punta Culebra, which is an island which has been connected to the foreshore of Panama City by a long causeway. The Smithsonian has several displays here, the feature one being a display of Panamanian frogs. There is a population of **northern raccoons** here, often described somewhat misleadingly as crab-eating raccoons. To be sure, living on the seashore they do eat crabs, and I think tourism authorities and guides refer to them as such because of the disdain most

Americans seem to have for their native raccoon. In any event they were a lifer for me.

On the way back to the Tower, we made a short stop at Caminos des Cruces National Park, to see a spectacled owl roosting site, where we saw two birds. Walking back to the carpark we observed a group of **Geoffroy's tamarins**, the first we had seen away from the Tower.

The afternoon trip was to the Miraflores Locks, to see the canal in operation. Probably not something I would have chosen to do but reasonably interesting. Apparently red brocket deer can sometimes be seen in the grasslands behind the lock, but I did not see any.

The night drive produced another spectacled owl, as well as the spectacular sight of a great potoo flying across the night sky. The only new mammal seen was a **white-tailed deer**.

Day 14. After breakfast we transferred to the Canopy Lodge. which was about two and a half hours' drive away. The lodge is at a higher elevation and is situated in a garden with substantial trees and a stream flowing through it.

Arriving in time for lunch, we spent the afternoon birdwatching nearby. Over lunch we met Jonathon, a young American bird photographer who had worked as a guide at the Lodge and was staying there for a couple of weeks. Jonathon kindly offered to accompany us

spotlighting for mammals that evening. The afternoon was devoted to birding, and no mammals were seen.

The evening tour was confined to the Lodge gardens. Jonathon had a pair of thermal binoculars, which he had purchased to assist him in locating sleeping birds. He had also recently seen a water opossum, which he was happy to help us find. The night walk turned out to be an opossum fest, with four species seen.

First seen was a **Derby's woolly opossum**, followed by a **dark four-eyed opossum**. The highlight of course was the **water opossum**, which we watched through thermal scopes, then watched it plop under water and disappear as soon as spotlights were turned on. A **southern opossum** was the final opossum seen for the night. To top it off we saw **orange nectar bats** at the hummingbird feeders.

At least when we visited, the stream was quite shallow, running over rocks between several deeper pools. The water opossum was seen at the pool nearest the swimming pool.

Day 15. Getting up early we had extended views of a sunbittern working its way up the stream, a stunning bird that I had not expected to see on this trip. Again, no mammals were seen during the day's birding. We went out in the evening to try for the water opossum but failed, however we did see a **Central American tapeti** (seen by others the previous night but missed by me) and identified a **velvety free-tailed bat** flying around the lodge.

Day 16. Rising before dawn we drove back to the airport to fly home. Other than the ring-road being closed for a while by a demonstration of workers protesting not being paid, the trip proved uneventful, and we arrived back home 37 hours later.

What did we miss?

Based on what I had expected to see from research on this site and elsewhere, very little. Paca and silky anteater were both possibilities and were two species (and Families) I would like to have seen. It was obvious from research that we were very unlikely to see animals like tapirs or cats. Overall, I could not have been happier.

One group of animals that I was very surprised we did not see were rats and mice. It is not that we had glances that were impossible to identify, we did not see so much as a rat's tail disappearing into a hole. Very strange.

The Tamarin Tour as a mammal tour.

Obviously, the Tamarin Tour is not a mammal tour, but rather a bird tour with an additional emphasis on mammals. It worked for us, as we were to see almost all our mammal and bird targets, plus several we did not expect to see. The dedicated mammal watcher might be a little less enthralled about the birdwatching.

I was thrilled with the walking tour down Semaphore Hill on the first night however the two night-tours driving down the road were disappointing, adding only white-tailed deer to the tally. I did not like their spot-lighting technique and felt they were concentrating on getting to the owl watching spot.

The canal zone is extremely easy to drive around, and I would not hesitate to recommend a self-drive, self-guided tour. The mammal watcher might want to spend a night or two at the tower for

the experience and concentrate on night walks down Semaphore Road. Otherwise, there is other accommodation available nearby and the Semaphore Road can still be walked by parking at the bottom.

Species List

I am not bolding my new species, as apart from the coati and white-tailed deer, all species were new.

1. Derby's woolly opossum *Caluromys derbianus*
2. Water opossum (yapok) *Chironectes minimus*
3. Southern opossum *Didelphis marsupialis*
4. Dark four-eyed opossum *Philander melanurus*
5. Mantled howler monkey *Alouatta palliata*
6. Panamanian night monkey *Aotus zonalis*
7. Panamanian white-faced capuchin *Cebus imitator*
8. Geoffroy's tamarin *Saguinus geoffroyi*
9. Lesser capybara *Hydrochoerus isthmius*
10. Central American agouti *Dasyprocta punctata*
11. Andean porcupine *Coendou quichua*
12. Red-tailed squirrel *Sciurus granatensis*
13. Variegated squirrel *Sciurus variegatoides*
14. Central American tapeti *Sylvilagus gabbi*
15. Chestnut sac-winged bat *Coermue brevirostis*
16. Proboscis bat *Saccopteryx bilineata*
17. Velvety free-tail bat *Molossus molossus*
18. Seba's short-tailed bat *Carollia perspicillata*
19. Orange-nectar bat *Lonchophylla robusta*
20. Tent-making bat *Uroderma bilobatum*
21. Western lowland olingo *Bassaricyon medius*
22. White-nosed coati *Nasua narica*
23. Kinkajou *Potos flavus*
24. Northern racoon *Procyon lotor*
25. Nine-banded armadillo *Dasypus novemcinctus*
26. Northern tamandua *Tamandua mexicana*
27. Brown-throated three-toed sloth *Bradypus variegatus*
28. Hoffman's two-toed sloth *Choloepus hoffmanni*
29. White-tailed deer *Odocoileus virginianus*

