

# Ecuador's Mammals

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 August - 5 September 2014

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Report compiled by Gustavo Cañas Valle

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Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour Leader: Gustavo Cañas Valle

Participants: Jeff Clausen  
Jean Dille

## Summary

During this 14 day trip we spotted not just endangered and very local species of Amazonian and Andean mammals, some representative and endangered species of birds which inhabit the Ecuadorian Avenue of the Volcanoes. We saw Giant Otter and Golden-mantled Tamarin, the newly described Olinguito (*Bassaricyon neblina*), Spectacled Bear and the very rare and hard to find Mountain Tapir.

In the same habitats we also had chance to spot or hear range-restricted birds such as Carunculated Caracara, Black-faced Ibis, Silvery Grebe, Ecuadorian Hillstar, Blue-backed Thornbill, Toucan Barbet, Plate-billed mountain-toucan, Uniform Treehunter, Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Cloud-forest Pygmy-owl, Giant Antpitta, Yellow-breasted, Ochre-breasted Antpitta and Andean Condor.

Alpine plants like *Gentiana sedifolia*, *Hallenia weddeliana* and the endemic *Xenophyllum rigidum*, occurred in the habitats shared by *Puya bamata* which is one of the species in the preferred diet of the Spectacled bear. Endemic *Puya retrorsa* offered its turquoise blooms to the hummingbirds as we arrived to watch Andean Condor in Antizana.

### Day 0

Sunday 24th August

Travel day

### Day 1

Monday 25th August

Quito to Coca & Napo Wildlife Center (NWC)

Today we travelled to Napo Wildlife Center. We had lunch on the way to the first landing point, at the Interpretation Center. There we transferred to a canoe, while luggage was transported separately. This was the first interaction with the tropical rainforest south of the Napo River. We enjoyed the quiet transfer, listening to the water, the birds, and the insects, before we arrived and were welcomed to Añangu Cocha and the cabins. A refreshing cocktail was also waiting. After dinner the group had an introductory talk and a preview of the activities of the next day.

### Day 2

Tuesday 26th August

NWC

The planned activity for the morning was canoeing the creek towards the Interpretation Center, at the canoe transfer dock. During the ride, the group looked for various species of monkeys which occur in the forest. At the Interpretation Center they received an introductory talk about the Kichwa that live by the Napo River, their traditions and life style.

The center is surrounded by healthy mature secondary forest, with a dominance of Cecropias, which are very attractive for mammals. Today's finds included Giant Otter, White-fronted Capuchin, Common Squirrel Monkey, Dusky Titi Monkey, Venezuelan Red Howler, Silver Woolly Monkey, and Long-nosed Bat.

## Day 3

Wednesday 27th August

### NWC

After a canoe ride from the Añangu Lake to the Interpretation Center, we started a walk to the parrot lick along the southern shore of the channel. At the salt lick, parrots, parakeets and macaws were expected including Dusky-headed, and White-eyed Parakeets, Blue-headed, Yellow-crowned and Mealy Parrot (Amazon). They had a picnic lunch, which they took at the center. On the way back to the lodge, we added one more mammal to the list: Dusky Titi Monkey was seen along the creek.

## Day 4

Thursday 28th August

### NWC

The morning started with a canoe ride along the channels that surround the lake. Vegetation on the shores allowed closer looks at birds including Hoatzin and Black-capped Donacobius. In the afternoon, we walked to the observation tower. To close today's activities, after dinner, Jeff and John were offered a night walk. Mammals seen during the explorations included Linnaeus's Two-toed Sloth, Golden-mantled Tamarin, and Venezuelan Red Howler.

## Day 5

Friday 29th August

### From Coca to San Isidro: Monkeys and San Isidro Owl

The group departed after breakfast at the lodge. As John and Jeff left the lake, they recorded White-fronted Capuchin, and Common Squirrel Monkey, along the creek. The motor canoe ride took about two and a half hours, until it arrived in Coca – also known as Francisco de Orellana. Right after we met at La Misión-dock, we headed to San Isidro, in the Cosanga River Valley via the Loreto - Río Hollín Road. On the way, we shared a friendly chat on Ecuadorian and South American ecology, culture and history, to create a brief context to our wildlife adventure in Ecuador.

We headed to a private reserve where we planned to have lunch as we looked for monkeys. We enjoyed tropical juices: Papaya and Maracuyá (Passion fruit) while watching Poepig's Woolly, Capuchin and Squirrel Monkeys. We then left, and climbed the Guacamayos ridge. One hour later we arrived at San Isidro Lodge where we enjoyed dinner. Alejandro, our friendly and knowledgeable host, offered an insight on the recent encounters with Mountain Tapir, Spectacled Bear, Puma and Black Agouti in the premises. Using his data we planned our first early morning looking for the Mountain Tapir.

## Day 6

Saturday 30th August

In the dark, we started our day at 5:00. Using our flashlights, we arrived at the salt licking station where we decided to sit and wait for the Mountain Tapir. We carried plastic chairs and dressed comfortably.

In the dark our first interesting wildlife encounter was Swallow-tailed Nightjar, calling from the ravine down the trail. It kept calling at intervals until the darkness gave way to the first light of the sunrise over the Guacamayos Ridge. Other species joined the morning choir: Inca Jay, Subtropical Cacique, Russet-backed Oropendola, and White-bellied Antpitta, among others.

We delayed breakfast until about 8 AM. After breakfast we visited the hummingbird feeder station, where there is also a feeding platform for mammals and seed-eating birds. There we had our first encounter with Black Agouti. Interesting hummingbirds at the feeders included Long-tailed Sylph, and Bronzy Inca.

Around mid-morning we explored the trails to the Andean Cock-of-the-rock view point. At the loop connecting with the Macucoloma trail, we looked for tracks and remnants of mammal activity. Along our walk we found Bromeliads chewed on, scattered at different locations. Also on the trail, we spotted Agouti tracks.

After lunch we walked the self-guided trail, which leads to the artificial salt-licking station. Along the trail we found several animal paths, but without fresh usable tracks. Again at the station we looked for tracks and we found a fresh Tapir track: well defined, with a decomposed leaf included in the mud and a fresh green leaf, just fallen in it. We took a brief break in order to be ready for evening activities, first looking for Spix's Night Monkeys before dinner and then stalking Mountain Tapir again, right after dinner. Both our explorations proved fruitless, although walking at night in the forest is always a unique experience, particularly when the night is so clear that one can watch a splatter of stars over a black carpet of sky.

## Day 7

## Sunday 31st August

The consequence of a clear night in the mountains is a cold environment and a cooler morning. Once again we walked in the dark at 5:00 AM to look for Mountain Tapir. This time the night was clearer and we ended waiting for the tapir under the moonlight. Sounds of nature seemed more exotic under the silver light. Even though we did not see the Tapir we had enjoyed listening to how nature woke up. So, we decided to watch one of those creatures calling from the bamboo. We arrived at the feeding station for White-bellied Antpitta and called it in. It offered great looks.

At breakfast, we welcomed a warm drink and toast. We enjoyed watching hummingbirds while waiting for mammals to arrive at the corn/banana feeder. This morning we spotted Black Agouti again (3 individuals, two adults and one small). As we went for lunch, we watched a Pale-edged Flycatcher collecting nesting material. Right after lunch we departed to the highlands, where our local guide Patricio was waiting for us. As soon as we met him we started our search. We went to overlook the Papallacta Lake and the mountains surrounding it. We did not find any movement or markings of Spectacled Bear activity. We switched locations and arrived at the Papallacta Pass. There, as we arrived we got great views of a Spectacled Bear! On a hillside overlooking the pass, this individual was eating leaves. Patricio needed to collect some photo identification information so he approached the area where the bear was, at a safe distance both for him and for the bear.

As we continued exploring we arrived at the antennas hill. There we had the opportunity to enjoy unbeatable views of Many-striped Canastero perched at eye-level and Paramo Ground-tyrant arriving to perch on rocks right in front of our eyes. At dinner we celebrated our successful spotting of Spectacled Bear. We wished now for Mountain Tapir and at local highlands mammals like Andean Fox.

## Day 8

## Monday 1st September

We left before breakfast started at the hotel. Today we had Mario as our local guide. With him and carrying our day's meals we entered the Cayambe Coca National Park. Picnic breakfast and picnic lunch are the standards for searching for mammals that are active mostly early in the morning and late in the afternoon. We had to walk through irregular terrain in order to approach the area. Therefore, we needed rubber boots and walking sticks collected this morning. After a short walk we were successful and spotted Mountain Tapir. It was a large male walking between two patches of vegetation. It showed himself for about 20 minutes, which we enjoyed thoroughly.

The area offers healthy vegetation and a habitat without the constant presence of humans. Therefore, birds are available also at their best. Our first highlight of the morning was Black-backed Thornbill, perched a few meters from us. Again we had great looks at Many-striped Canastero. Other species easily seen as we explored the area were Sedge Wren, Andean Teal, Andean Ruddy Duck, Plumbeous Sierra-finch, Black Flowerpiercer, Variable Hawk, Stout-billed Cinclodes, Bar-winged Cinclodes, and the very local and range restricted Red-rumped Bush-tyrant. The most important bird we spotted was Giant Conebill at a Polylepis stand where we heard a pair singing. After one single touch of playback we had them singing together right next to us, posing for great pictures.

A full day exploring the highlands above Papallacta, with clouds coming and going, surrounding us and unveiling remote peaks, gave us the feeling of being the only ones in the mountains. White-tailed Deer was a constant sighting all through the day.

## Day 9

## Tuesday 2nd September

We began the day up at the highest point of our drive through the mountains, looking for bear tracks or remnants of eaten plants. As we explored the same areas as yesterday, we had great looks again at Many-striped Canastero, Red-rumped Bush-tyrant, Black-backed Thornbill, and Viridian Metaltail. We also had the chance to see Antizana Volcano partially uncovered. The light was right and the landscape very picturesque.

Our first Andean "wolf", more properly described as a fox, appeared at the park rangers check point. It arrived to look for an easy meal of bread. During the time we were at the ranger's house, Patricio and Mario were monitoring a research area where alarms marked the arrival of a bear. They work for the Spectacled Bear Conservation and Monitoring project. We expected to have bear activity in a certain area, so we drove there, next to a lake, where we patiently waited for any signs of a bear. Our second Spectacled Bear appeared at the end of the day, in an area of *Neurolepis* bamboo, as the sun set. Sadly only Jeff and I were able to spot it and watch it. Patricio was monitoring the other face of the valley and Jean did not carry his binoculars, which he found hard to manipulate along with his camera.

## Day 10

## Wednesday 3rd September

At 6:00am Jean and Jeff had a cup of coffee, and we collected our picnic breakfast and pack lunch for the day.

The day started with a cloudy sky that turned into a fine drizzle with no-end. Indeed it was our companion the whole day. We drove around the whole maze of roads within the Cayambe Coca National Park highlands, looking on every patch of forest. We thoroughly enjoyed being in nature and had the excitement of the chance to see a bear, as we found fresh tracks of two individuals. Today, we spotted White tailed Deer, and one South American Rabbit. Bird-wise we saw highlights like the infrequent dark morph of Variable Hawk (Puna Hawk), Tawny Antpitta, Andean Ruddy Duck and once again the very local Red-rumped Bush tyrant.

Our final destination for today allowed us to watch the sunset on top of Antennas Hill, where we closed our stay in this area of Ecuador with the view of Antizana Volcano amidst the orange edged clouds and a deep sky-blue background.

## Day 11

## Thursday 4th September

At 5:20am we were on the way to Antizana Ecological Reserve. Our goal was to arrive to the Secas Lakes area and watch Andean Condors. We saw Condors flying freely as we drove to La Mica Lake. The Condors had an unusual early start due to the recent availability of a carcass in the proximity of the Secas cliffs. As we drove to the bridge from the first check point, a pair of Andean Condors flew along the gorge and above the ridge on the opposite side of the valley. They were close enough so we were able to define sex: one was a male and the other a female, and both of them were adults.

After watching the condors disappear high in the mountains in the direction of the sunrise, we drove ahead to look for Black-faced Ibis at the Ovejería Plateau. Along the way I stopped the vehicle for American Kestrel, hoping that it was Aplomado Falcon. Wishful thinking did not work this time! A few metres ahead we stopped again. This time it was a female White-tailed Deer looking at us from a relaxed lying position. A kilometre further on a second deer was grazing. Here we heard and saw Andean Lapwing taking off as the deer climbed the slope behind a house. Even though Antizana was cuddled in the clouds, it still presented a magnificent view and was worth stopping for a picture. On the Ovejería Plateau, we drove by Carunculated Caracara, Black-winged Ground Doves, a field covered with about 30 Andean Lapwing still asleep, and three Paramo Pipits gliding right over the grass looking for shelter from the presence of our vehicle. Planning to have breakfast at a sheltered and birdy spot, we arrived to the park entrance and checkpoint. There, after we registered our arrival, we enjoyed our fruit, sandwiches, juice and coffee while spotting Andean Tit-spinetail munching on its own morning meal.

After that, we went looking for the Silvery Grebes that inhabit La Mica Lake. A group of four was protected from the wind in a sheltered bay, next to Andean Teal, Andean Coot, and Yellow-billed Pintail. Right before taking the path to the lake we also saw a pair of deer: female and male (with grey velvet antlers). As we returned to the parking lot we saw Many-striped Canastero, and Sedge Wren on both sides of the trail, and Bar-winged Cinclodes as well. At the parking area, next to a patch of Polylepis, Tawny Antpitta continued calling in the open, and on the slope right below two Ecuadorian Hillstar females were chasing each other and perching in the open. We then scanned the roadsides slowly up to La Ovejería plain for ibis. There in the far distance they were, probing the ground looking for their first meal. We walked to them to take some pictures. On our way back we also collected images of wild flowers. To close our visit to Antizana we watched two species of unique hummers; we stopped at Chuquiragua flowers to find and photograph an Ecuadorian Hillstar male. We had great looks at its dark violet glitter on its head. We also found our last target - the largest of all hummingbirds, the Giant Hummingbird.

We then set off to Bellavista Lodge in the Tandayapa Valley. Around noon, we crossed the Guayllabamba watershed to the northwest. We stopped at the original Equator monument close to the town of Calacalí, which marks the line where both hemispheres meet. We took a picture of the monument as a souvenir of our visit to the “Middle of the World”. Next we decided to visit the Alambi Hummingbird garden for lunch at a comfortable and sheltered picnic spot – with a show of hummingbirds included. We recorded 16 species including White-whiskered Hermit, Purple-bibbed White-tip, Green-crowned Brilliant, Green-crowned Woodnymph and Western Emerald.

After the hummers, we had a second find of a White-capped Dipper and a Cock-of-the-rock nest with two chicks. We then departed to Bellavista: our lodge for the night. We arrived around 4:30pm to have a look at the hummingbird feeders with a soda or a beer in our hands, and saw Gorgeted Sunangel. Then we went into our cabins to have a rest before our visit of “Olinguito” at the banana feeders right after dinner. Olinguito did not know of our schedule and decided to arrive early, just to interrupt the beginning of our meal. We happily rushed through the dining hall and to the banana feeder view point. There Olinguito had just stopped eating because it was expecting the arrival of a Kinkajou. While one left the other arrived allowing us to see the differences between both cousin species: a non-prehensile tail and a white spot on the tip of a black hairy tail in the case of the first. The Kinkajou appeared securing its footing with its thin, short-haired tail wrapped around a nearby branch. After finishing dinner we returned to the feeding station view point and then we closed the day with a walk and had great looks at Common Potoo at the parking lot, before closing the day at 9:30 pm.

## Day 12

## Friday 5th September

### Full day exploring the trails looking for mammal tracks and shelters

We started our day with a late breakfast at 7:30 AM. Then we monitored the compost pile for vertebrates. We heard Golden-headed Quetzal, Ocellated Tapaculo and White-throated Quail-dove. There was no mammal activity at the compost, so we decided to go watch the hummingbird feeders in front of the bar: beer and birds was the menu before lunch. To close the morning session, as we walked to the dining hall, a Toucan Barbet appeared above our heads. It stayed for a while so we were able to enjoy it even without binoculars. During lunch some branches shook in the trees behind the dome. Some of our fellow visitors were focused in the branches. I approached the window and there it was - a Red-tailed Squirrel exploring the bromeliads. As we approached it, it froze. So we were able to have good looks at it.

During the afternoon Jean took the first part of the afternoon off. Meanwhile, Jeff and I went to explore the trails. Along the hike we saw Uniform Treehunter, Flavescent Flycatcher and the colourful and shared endemic Plate-billed Mountain Toucan. As we returned to continue monitoring the compost pile during the evening, our fellow visitors had seen at the banana feeders a Tyra swiftly crossing. Sadly one cannot be in all sites at all moments, however, we spotted White-throated Quail-dove and Chestnut-capped Brushfinch during the late hours of the day. As the night set, we also had Sickle-winged Guans arriving to eat at the compost. The male rattled and whistled as it flew through the canopy looking for his night roost. Silence gave way to the vibrating sound of cicadas. The night begun and a growing new moon illuminated the scene. We stayed and enjoyed the night in silence under the bright light of the new moon - a delightful experience.

Right after dinner we returned to the mammal observation area and enjoyed several views of at least two individual Olinguitos approaching the bananas. To close our mammal experience in Bellavista we were rewarded

with a display of the curiosity and braveness of the smallest of the Olinguitos we had seen tonight, as it approached us in the platform. We closed our day at 9:30pm.

## Day 13

Saturday 6th September

### Angel Paz Reserve visit and transfer to Quito Airport

At 4:45am we were packing our luggage in order to depart at 5:0am. We drove the old San Tadeo-Nanegalito Road. Upon our arrival 40 minutes later, we had breakfast: fruit, juice and sandwiches, until Angel showed up. He led our way to our first show: Andean Cock-of-the-Rock in their morning display at their lek. We then went to look for Yellow-breasted Antpitta and Lyra tailed Nightjar. No luck with the nightjar but excellent looks at two Yellow-breasted Antpitta. After a morning spent in the Paz Reserve we spotted three species of antpitta: Giant, Ochre-breasted, and Yellow-breasted. We heard Rufous-breasted Antthrush and Cloud-forest Pygmy-owl and spent time watching the fruit eating birds: tanagers and the range restricted Toucan Barbet.

At 9:30am we were finishing our snack at the parking area: coffee and local treats like bolones & empanadas, before we left. After a relaxed drive to Quito, we arrived at the airport at noon, I delivered some snacks and water to our travellers, and we said our goodbyes...

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