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PANAMA

Date - December 2018

Duration - 20 Days

Destinations
Panama City - Santiago - David - Volcan Baru National Park - Coiba National Park - Coiba Island - Gamboa - Soberania National Park - Panama Rainforest Discovery Centre - Lake Gatun - Punta Culebra Nature Centre - Miraflores Locks - Anton Valley - Colon - San Lorenzo Protected Area - Fort San Lorenzo - Torti - San Francisco Nature Reserve - Chucanti Nature Reserve - Darien - Yaviza

Trip Overview

Having summered in my own European backyard, I ended the year a great deal further afield with a first tour in Panama for more than a decade. My son James was back from university for the holiday period and would be at my side once more and in all we had three weeks to explore a country that most people know only as the home of the famous canal that links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. However, as impressive as the canal undoubtedly is as an almost unparalleled feat of engineering, Panama has a great deal more to offer than expedited shipping and rivals Costa Rica as the best wildlife destination in Central America. Certainly Costa Rica is more developed in terms of wildlife tourism and attracts significantly more visitors, but they share the same lush rainforest typical to the tropics and are considered to be two of the most biodiverse countries on earth when you take the size of every nation into account and not only the number of species that occur in each. In addition to lower tourist numbers and the corresponding luxury of fewer crowds at most sites, Panama has the geographical advantage of being connected directly to South America and the Darien Gap, a relatively undisturbed section of jungle between Panama and Colombia, protects a vast array of life and some extremely rare species. Unfortunately, it also protects less rare species in the form of assorted killers, drug dealers and smugglers and is consequently not considered to be the most accessible destination in Panama, at least not for your average birding group. The fact that we were only able to visit the very periphery of this ecological masterpiece was of great personal disappointment, as Darien National Park is one of just three UNESCO natural World Heritage Sites in Panama and is described in their official criterion as *'breathtaking'*. I hope that I will one day get the opportunity to explore at least part of this unique reserve and I was also sorry that we would not be able to visit the island of Escudo de Veraguas on this occasion, as I know a local guide who runs trips there and can more or less guarantee pygmy sloth sightings. For those who are not aware, the pygmy sloth was only described as a distinct species in 2001 and many experts maintain that it should never have been classified as such and is essentially an island variant of the brown-throated sloth. Certainly there are a number of island populations of the brown-throated version and although the evidence does appear to be compelling that this may well be another, whilst the pygmy sloth is assessed as a separate species that only occurs on Escudo de Veraguas, it automatically qualifies as critically endangered and is actually one of the rarest mammals on the planet. A census of 2012 produced just 79 individual animals in and around the meagre tracts of red mangrove on the island, but in 2015 a study conducted by scientists at the Smithsonian revealed that the sloths are travelling further than was realised beyond the mangroves and that there is likely to be a healthier population than had been previously estimated. Revised assessments of between 500 and perhaps as many as 1,500 pygmy sloths have been suggested and whilst it would be nice to believe that the higher figure might be accurate, this would still be a tiny number of surviving animals for a single species, particularly given that Escudo de Veraguas has been isolated from mainland Panama for almost 9,000 years and that there may consequently be long-term reproduction issues regarding a lack of genetic diversity on the island. Whatever the exact scientific status of these isolated creatures, there is no doubt that these island sloths are significantly smaller than their continental cousins and I would have relished the opportunity to compare them on a first hand basis, especially as Escudo de Veraguas is such a stunningly beautiful location. As it was, I had to finalise our itinerary fairly late due to work commitments and by the time the major destinations had all been confirmed, our guide informed us that he was only available a few days before we actually arrived in the country, due largely to personal commitments during the holiday season when the uninhabited island is barely visited. I did look at the possibility of changing flights and arriving earlier, but that would have meant James having to join me later in the trip and I decided that we would make the most of what was already an impressive and demanding programme and that sadly the diminutive sloth would have to wait until my return. The tour would therefore begin in earnest with a 450 kilometre drive from east to west along the legendary Pan-American Highway, a series of connecting roads that traverse almost the entire length of the Americas, some 30,000 kilometres from Prudhoe Bay in Alaska to Ushuaia in Argentina, the

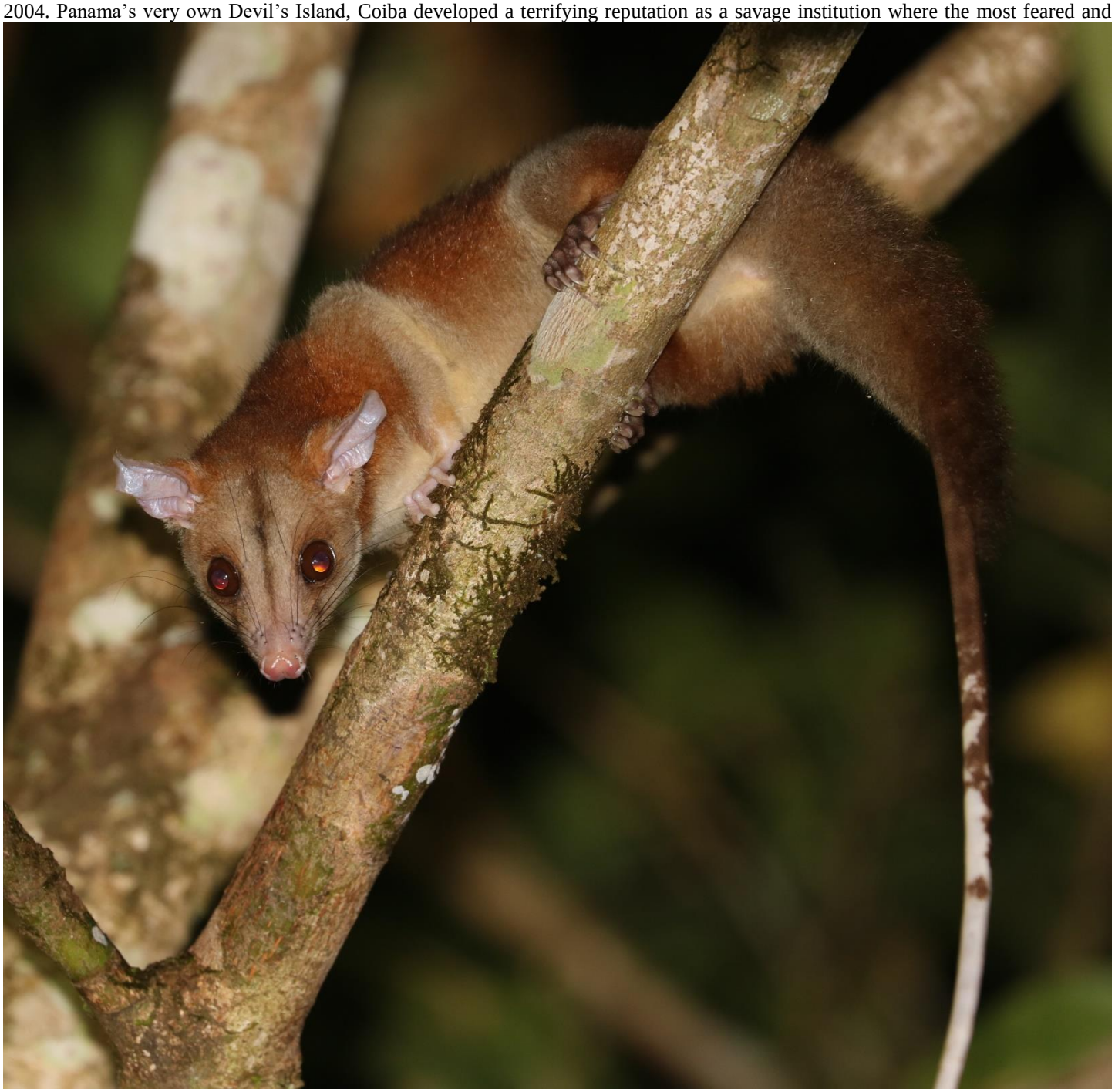
most southerly city on earth. The only break occurs at the aforementioned Darien Gap, although this 160 kilometre stretch between Panama and Colombia can also be crossed in an ultra reliable off-road vehicle, if, that is, the occupants were prepared to brave the Colombian guerrilla fighters who operated here until recently and the equally ruthless drug dealers, who are still very much part of life in this clandestine area of no man's land between the continents. We were heading in totally the opposite direction, to the far west of the country and a 400 hectare cloud forest reserve that has the enviable distinction of being able to access hiking trails in two national parks, Volcan Baru and La Amistad, which also forms part of the Talamanca Range and La Amistad Reserves UNESCO World Heritage Site. The second of the three natural UNESCO sites that I mentioned, La Amistad is a transboundary reserve shared with neighbouring Costa Rica and you could very easily spend a few weeks hiking in an area of outstanding natural beauty and exceptional biodiversity. We would not have that luxury and although we did take an excellent long hike during our one full day here, our brief stay of just two nights was more or less entirely dedicated to the cacomistle, a small nocturnal carnivore in the same Procyonidae family as the raccoon, coati and ringtail, which it closely resembles and that I last photographed at Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico back in 2015. The intention was to get a comparable shot of the cacomistle and whilst kinkajous and olingos, another two members of the same raccoon family, were also a possibility, they were pretty much guaranteed elsewhere and we would concentrate our efforts on the cacomistle, which have been visiting the feeders at two of the mountain cabins on the reserve for several years. In terms of their diet, all five of these closely related creatures are actually omnivores and both kinkajous and cacomistles have made a habit of helping themselves to the fruit that was originally left out for the huge variety of birds in the area, just as squirrels and rodents visit to steal the birdseed. Now bananas are left out for all of the species to share and whilst most people will be aware that I am totally opposed to the feeding of large predators, I have never overly objected to small mammals visiting feeding tables in the way that birds have for decades, as long as the animals involved are not fed so heavily that they become dependent on the free food. That is not the case here, as these cabins, which are actually within the boundary of Vulcan Baru National Park, can be empty for long

periods when no feeding occurs at all and although both cacomistles and kinkajous are regular visitors, there are no guarantees that you will see either. Occasionally guests will get lucky and see both, but one or the other appears to be more common and of course some people are decidedly unfortunate and see nothing, which we were desperately hoping would not be the case for us. We actually arrived much later than anticipated on our first night, partly because we stopped at various points of interest along the way, but more as a result of the worst satellite navigation system I have ever had the misfortune to be charged a large sum of money for, and I was not particularly hopeful as we settled down for what I expected to be a fairly long vigil after a ten-hour drive. It is never a good idea to turn up late and disturb an area that you should instead be observing quietly and whether our tardy arrival had any effect on the resident wildlife is difficult to say, as we had to wait until around 2am for the first sign of life and when an animal did finally arrive, it was cautious and remained within the shadow of the forest, just beyond our sight. At this stage we had no way of distinguishing

whether it was a kinkajou or a much sought after cacomistle, or perhaps even one of the opportunist opossums that have been known to chance by. As delightful as kinkajous undoubtedly are, and as much as I hoped to see them later in the trip, we were both desperate for our furtive friend to reveal itself as a cacomistle and indeed, we almost leapt for joy as it inched its way along a branch and into clear view, where we could see the distinctive and unmistakable ringed tail of a cacomistle. It was still extremely nervous for whatever reason and ultimately left without taking any fruit, which was entirely untouched when we surfaced a few all too brief hours later that morning. No matter, as we had one night remaining and it had still been a thrilling encounter, probably even more so given the long wait and the inexorable doubt that begins to gnaw at your mind as the minutes give way to hours and the hours invariably give way to despair. Although we did eventually enjoy better and much longer views of a least two cacomistles on our final night, the rest of our stay was not quite as successful, as the region is a superb one in terms of mammals and is home to at least five of the six cat species that occur in Central America, as well as baird's tapir, geoffroy’s spider monkey and even the fabled bush dog at lower elevations. We were not setting our sights quite that high of course, but we probably expected our lengthy walks during the day and at night to produce slightly more than just a brief view of a pair of bangs’s mountain squirrels, in addition to a typically impressive

variety of birds and the red-tailed squirrels that were routinely encountered appropriating their food back at the cabin. I was hoping that the same feeders may tempt in a few scavenging armored rats or possibly the Central American dwarf squirrels that we had been searching the trails for and I was more surprised than disappointed when our spotlighting forays between the engaging cacomistles, failed to produce a single kinkajou or opossum, let alone the jaguars and pumas that have been recorded here. However, what some may have considered a slow start, was not a massive issue to us, as the reserve was as pretty as it was tranquil and we were simply relieved to have savoured such wonderful encounters with these preposterously sweet creatures. I will definitely try to spend much longer here next time and if you get great views of your main target species at each destination, you generally leave happy. This was unquestionably the case as we travelled south towards our departure point for Coiba National Park, the last of Panama's three natural UNESCO World Heritage Sites. In addition to Coiba Island, the important park protects 38 smaller islands, as well as the surrounding waters and a breathtaking variety of marine and terrestrial life. Before our visit, we had a night at a small local reserve, where the owners have painstakingly restored eight hectares of tropical forest over more than a decade. They also support a number of local community and conservation initiatives and run environmentally friendly tours to both Coiba and the nearby Cerro Hoya National Park, which I intend to visit with them when I return. I had arranged our trip to Coiba with them as well and we would spend two nights on what is the largest island in Central America, partly to snorkel several different reefs and to also explore the forest trails in search of the Coiba Island howler monkey and Coiban agouti, both of which, as the names suggest, are endemic to the island. There is actually some debate as to whether the howler monkey found on Coiba should be classified as a distinct species, but it is currently assessed as a subspecies of the mantled howler monkeys commonly encountered on the mainland. The same cannot be said of the scarlet macaw, which has almost disappeared across its former range and can now only be found in low numbers in and around Cerro Hoya and on Coiba, which represents something of a last bastion for this stunning member of the macaw family, certainly in terms of Panama, as it is still thankfully widespread in parts of South America. We would ultimately see a single pair during our brief stay and of the twenty or so cetaceans that apparently populate these rich waters, our journey to the island produced a single pod of pantropical spotted dolphins, a few of which approached our boat and began bow riding in our wake. This is always a spectacular event and although I was not able to capture any decent shots, it was the perfect way to begin what turned out to be an idyllic break in our own little paradise. The snorkelling here is nothing short of sensational, as we journeyed from one dazzling coral reef to another, each a

pulsating natural aquarium teaming with life and the most vibrant and colourful fish imaginable. Moray eels, rays, turtles and whitetip reef sharks were all routinely spotted, as well as one nurse shark that came out of nowhere and somehow disappeared without me even seeing where it had vanished to. Everything looks slightly larger under water of course, but this was still a fairly substantial shark and however harmless you know they are, the heart always skips just a little beat when one of these supreme predators glides past. Given the extraordinary marine diversity, we spent as much of our stay in the water as possible and when we were not admiring the resplendent creatures beneath the waves, we were generally fixated on the similarly splendid wildlife above them, including a fabulous crested eagle and some truly impressive iguanas. Many of these have taken up residence within the ruins of the former prison, as this particular paradise conceals a dark past and was used as a penal colony from 1919 until it was closed as recently as 2004. Panama's very own Devil's Island, Coiba developed a terrifying reputation as a savage institution where the most feared and

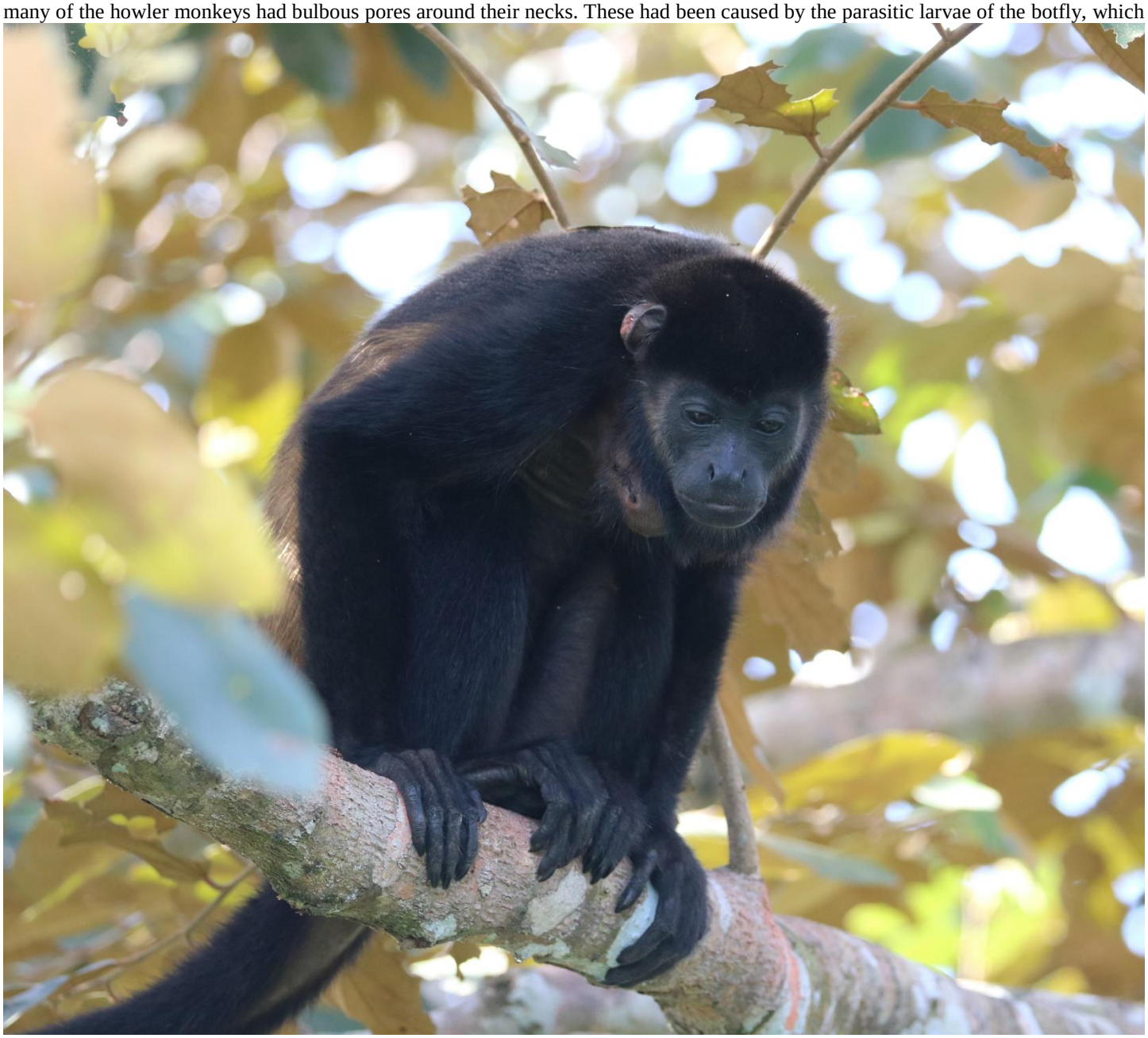


violent offenders were confined in brutal conditions, as well as the political opponents of the infamous dictator and de facto president of Panama, Manuel Noriega, who is thought to have personally tortured and executed at least some of his perceived enemies on the island. We visited the pool where it is said he liked to relax after the killings and in many respects Coiba is comparable to the Darien Gap, in that the resident wildlife has flourished in a location too terrible and too feared for humans to settle and thereby inevitably destroy. The animals here have thrived in relative isolation and today the island's natural splendour belies its fearsome past. Over the course of almost three days we could certainly testify to this, as Coiba is one of those great destinations where there is always something special to watch against a glorious backdrop, from tiny hermit crabs on the beach, to tarantulas on the forest floor and brown pelicans and black hawks flying overhead. As is always the case in an enchanting setting, our perfect stay passed far too quickly and we were even able to find a small troop of howler monkeys and two of the endemic agoutis, both of which were anything but guaranteed given our limited time on dry land. It had been a superb first few days and we drove back east towards Gamboa with very high expectations for what would be the main wildlife section of the tour. We would have almost a week in the region, as I wanted to dedicate a reasonable amount of time to a number of generally reliable sites in and around Soberania National Park, including Semaphore Hill and the Panama Rainforest Discovery Centre, which is situated on the famous Pipeline Road, probably the most celebrated birding destination in the country. Apparently more than 400 species can be observed on this single seventeen kilometre jungle trail, which runs directly through the national park and was built as a service road to access and maintain a petroleum

pipeline that was never actually used. The road is considered to be so productive that until recently the birding 'Big Day' world record was always set here, in terms of the most individual species either seen or heard in a 24-hour period, and the area has consequently produced some brilliant birding guides, many of which have worked at the lodge where we would spend all but one night of our stay. They did not have such a great reputation with mammals, but two of the guides were really helpful on the rare occasions that we used them and they also gave us a key to the outer gate, which is usually locked at night, either when the staff leave or as soon as the last nocturnal safari returns. Given that they mainly cater to birding groups, this is typically fairly early, which was obviously not going to work for us and it was essential that we were able to come and go as we pleased. This was never more evident than on our first night, when we searched until the early hours and were immediately rewarded with both possible sloths, three different opossums and a pair of western lowland olingos, as well as a small group of collared peccaries, a couple of lesser capybaras and several tapeti, the common name for a large number of negligibly divergent forest rabbits that range across much of South America and as far north as Mexico. Even for this ecologically diverse region it had been a spectacular start and of our three opossums, we would see both the common and Central American woolly opossum on multiple occasions, but were not destined to encounter another brown four-eyed opossum, at least not one that we could positively identify, as we had quite a few near misses given the often impenetrable rainforest that we were searching. I did not know this at the time of course or I would have no doubt been slightly sorry that I did not get a picture, particularly as this was not only the one opossum that I was not able to photograph, it was the only mammal throughout the entire trip that I did not get at least an identification shot of. That is a fairly good record for these conditions, as even during the day photography could be decidedly tricky, with most of the arboreal species obscured in the dense canopy and many of the others hiding in the poor light of the forest floor. Practically every night was similarly productive and we quickly added kinkajou, rothschild's porcupine, nine-banded armadillo, northern tamandua, white-tailed deer and Central American agouti to our growing list of nocturnal highlights, the last two of which would also be seen during the day. I was especially delighted with an outstanding view of the porcupine, as these shy arboreal creatures can be difficult to see well even with the thermal imaging scopes that are so popular now and I was using the old fashioned method of just a spotlight and binoculars. There is actually currently some confusion regarding which porcupine we had even seen, as I have always known the species in this region of Panama as rothschild's porcupine or Coendou rothschildi, but apparently that species has now been grouped with the Andean porcupine Coendou quichua. I am still using the common name rothschild's porcupine to describe apparently a single animal that can now be found from around the border region with Costa Rica down to Ecuador in South America. Whatever it is called or classified as, it is a fantastic mammal and one that I was very much hoping we would encounter in this area. Another was the silky anteater, which I knew was likely to be far more difficult, but that does occur in the forests we were searching and is occasionally spotted. In fact, the first of our lodge guides had seen one of these elusive tiny orange balls at the Rainforest Discovery Centre more or less exactly a week before we arrived. To give you some idea of how rarely they are observed, this was only his second sighting in the last ten years and I have only seen one during that same period, on my last trip to Costa Rica in the Damas Mangrove near Manuel Antonio. We consequently spent a great deal of time at the Rainforest Discovery Centre, which is really just another section of the national park with some additional trails and a 32 metre observation tower. We used the tower more at night when there were no other visitors, as the centre appeared to be permanently open or perhaps permanently closed would be more appropriate given the rather obvious lack of staff over what was now the Christmas period. A silky anteater is always a long shot anywhere within its range and whilst we did not see one here, the discovery centre turned out to be a great diurnal setting for northern tamandua. We chanced upon two different animals on consecutive mornings within close proximity of the entrance and in many ways our days at Soberania were just as productive as our evenings. Sloths were abundant and I quickly lost track of how many hoffmann's two-toed and brown-throated sloths we craned our necks at and it took less than two days to find all four of the primates that occur in the national park, for

the record, mantled howler monkey, Panamanian white-fronted capuchin, geoffroy's tamarin and Panamanian night monkey. Unlike the aforementioned porcupines, which had all been grouped together as one species, the capuchin found in Panama has recently been declared a separate species and split from its Colombian neighbour. Its scientific name is now Cebus imitator, the Colombian version is Cebus capucinus, and to confuse matters further, no one appears to be entirely sure whether they should be called white-faced, white-fronted or white-throated and variations of all three now exist. I have to admit that I have read none of the papers involved with the new assessment and have no idea whether it is valid or not, but I am aware that in many cases scientists are more interested in advancing their own careers and reputations than they are in accurately classifying species in order to help conserve them. All too often they are seeking a specific answer before addressing whether there is even a pertinent question and I know more instances than I can easily recall where data has been manipulated to extrapolate a finding that a scientist desperately wants to be the case, particularly

in terms of the ground breaking discovery of a career defining new species. Science does still interest me, but more in terms of the ecology of an environment and the consequential behaviour of the creatures that occur there. I have always been fascinated by localised adaptations, or environmental evolution if you prefer, and the corresponding and highly complex relationships between the same life forms in contrasting surroundings. I am intrigued by the way in which behaviour can or will adapt according to any number of environmental factors and how each species evolves to fill a precise ecological niche. The naturalist and visionary Charles Darwin introduced these concepts to an unwitting and largely disbelieving world of course and since a relatively early age, I have been aware of his brilliant and pioneering theory of evolution by a process that he termed 'natural selection'. This remorseless competition to reproduce, or 'survival of the fittest' as it would become known, is what drives every living organism and at Soberania we noticed that many of the howler monkeys had bulbous pores around their necks. These had been caused by the parasitic larvae of the botfly, which



invade their host through the mouth or nose before travelling to the neck region to open what is known as a larval pore, a protruding lesion through which it will breathe. The larva will spend the next six weeks feeding on and growing within the afflicted howler, until it finally falls to the forest floor and begins burrowing into the earth in order to complete the pupal stage of its development, from which it will ultimately emerge as an adult botfly. Although the parasite does not automatically kill its host, studies have confirmed that infant mortality rates are much higher when infestations occur and that howler monkey mortality rates in general peak during these infected periods, as adults will often carry several parasites and will gradually grow weaker as their fat reserves decline and they subsequently lose condition. We encountered a significant number of howlers in a fairly poor state, some with multiple gaping pores across their engorged necks. The howler monkeys were by far the most prevalent of the primates and the tamarins were only observed when we took a Christmas day boat trip on the Chagres River, a major waterway which runs through Soberania National Park and is damned to form Gatun Lake, at one time the largest artificial lake in the world and a substantial section of the Panama Canal. The typically lively tamarins were not that easy to photograph from the moving boat, but we would experience several far more relaxed encounters with these distinctive primates around the grounds of our lodge at Darien and the cruise did produce good views of the capuchins, as well as several iguanas and a nice variety of raptors and waterbirds. Elsewhere we were delighted to discover our first white-nosed coatis, as these beguiling and equally mischievous little rogues have always been a firm favourite and have royally entertained us both with their disarming antics on several tours. The only diurnal member of the Procyonidae family, which also includes raccoons, ringtails, kinkajous, olingos and the cacomistle from earlier in the trip, we would encounter several of these captivating carnivores in good light and that was also the case with variegated and red-tailed squirrels and a rufous tree rat, which we watched sleeping contentedly in the hollow of a tree. We had a lodge guide to thank for that rather charming spectacle and his

impressive local knowledge also produced the first of only two night monkey sightings, which were also found in a day roost, but this time awake and peering out. Although we were not destined to discover any of the mammals that these guides dream of showing their guests, we missed very little of what you would genuinely expect to see at Soberania, with the possible exception of a spotted paca, one of which had been observed the night before we arrived, just a few metres from the entrance to the lodge. I would of course have dearly loved to gaze up at a silky anteater an inch or two above my head or to catch a glimpse of a shadowy jaguarundi ghosting into the forest, but these are fiendishly tricky animals to track down and it would be churlish to complain about an area that provided so many outstanding views of animals that can be incredibly difficult to see elsewhere. I was losing count of some of the animals that we were watching, relatively scarce species like kinkajous, olingos and woolly opossums, that would have been the highlight of your stay in another region. Here they were becoming almost commonplace and there was always something impressive or simply beautiful to admire, from the tiny frogs and snakes along the forest trails to the spectacled caimans and common basilisks that would disappear in contrasting styles as we approached the water's edge. There were more birds, both outlandish and otherwise, than we could ever hope to do justice to and a significant number of scurrying rodents and swooping bats that we failed to identify, but not appreciate. As great as Soberania is for someone interested in mammals, it is even better for general wildlife enthusiasts and in all we spent time at about a dozen different sites, barely any of which could be considered even slightly disappointing. Although slightly further afield, the Punta Culebra Nature Center is a perfect example of what you can see even in the parks and urban areas of the region. A Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute property, Punta Culebra is located at the end of the Amador Causeway, just a few minutes from the heart of Panama City. The facility has a number of educational exhibits, including aquariums, touch pools and a Fabulous Frogs of Panama exhibit, which highlights the severe threats that amphibians are facing both in Panama and across the globe and the conservation work that the Smithsonian is pioneering in an attempt to help save them. As important and interesting as these displays undoubtedly are, it is the short walking trails within the centre that provide the wild highlights, as this urban educational facility is home to iguanas, armadillos, crab-eating raccoons and both species of sloth. Given the daylight opening times and the often correspondingly high temperatures, the armadillos and raccoons can be difficult to see, but we were lucky and found a pair of raccoons sleeping in the upper branches of a fortuitously low tree. They were difficult to see at first and almost impossible to photograph, but they changed positions on a few occasions and our patience was eventually rewarded with fairly decent views and a few reasonable shots. The same could not be said of the sloths, for although we found both species, they were all obscured in dense foliage, including a pair of hoffmann's two-toed sloths that were sleeping side by side with their heads resting against each other. It was a most unusual position for sloths and I was sorry that I did not manage to take a photograph that did these gentle and peaceful creatures justice. On the drive back to Gamboa, we stopped briefly at the Miraflores Locks, one of the three original locks that control the constant stream of ships through

the Panama Canal and between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Well over a million tourists queue every year to watch the mammoth liners and monstrous cargo vessels negotiate these quite extraordinarily ingenious locks, but we did not tarry long with any of them, partly because I was already aware that we would need to cross the Gatun Locks several times later in the trip and also because I find the sight of such intense heavy industry fairly depressing in what was once an ecological paradise. That said, the history of the canal and its construction interest me a great deal and to understand exactly why it was built, you have to look at the geography of the region and the alternative voyage that seafarers of the day would have been forced to make prior to the construction of what at the time was probably the greatest feat of civil engineering the world had known. Millions of years ago the landmass that we today know as Panama did not exist and there was an entirely natural gap between the continents of North and South America, through which the

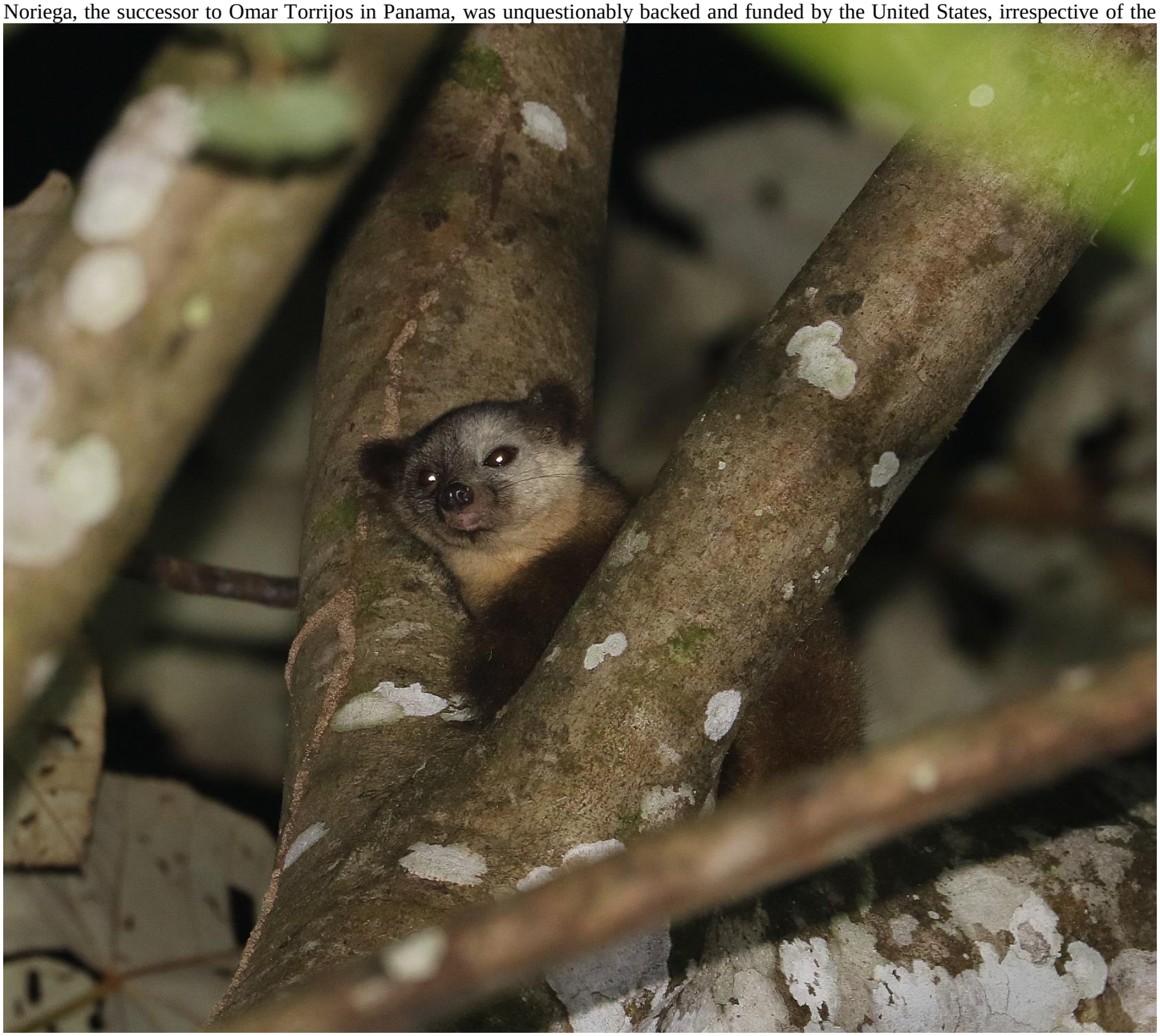
waters of the Atlantic and the Pacific could freely merge. Over several million years the movement of the tectonic plates formed underwater volcanoes, some of which emerged from beneath the waves to create volcanic islands. As these islands increased in number, so sediment from the nearby continents gradually added to their area until the gaps between the islands disappeared and an isthmus was formed connecting the continents and completely separating the two oceans, apparently forever. As their conquistadors raped and plundered much of the New World, eliminating entire civilisations in the process, Spain was the first nation to look at the possibility of creating a passageway across the isthmus, which would have given them a huge advantage over the Portuguese in the race to conquer an unsuspecting continent. An official survey was ordered as early as 1534 and when you look at any map, even the

rudimentary ones of the time, it is fairly easy to see why, as it would have taken literally months to sail the thousands of extra kilometres around Cape Horn on the extreme tip of South America. The other alternative was land routes and centuries later, after the California Gold Rush of 1848, hopeful prospectors were travelling by steamship from New York to Panama before journeying overland with the assistance of local porters, where they would catch another steamship to complete the journey to San Francisco. The construction of the Panama Railroad considerably eased the cross country process, but the long expedition still involved a laborious land element and to complete the journey entirely by sea would have involved a voyage of almost 21,000 kilometres. A canal through Panama would have reduced that voyage to just over 8,000 kilometres and in the 1870s the celebrated Frenchman Ferdinand de

Lesseps, who was already responsible for the construction of the Suez Canal in Egypt, began using his international fame to raise the $280 million or so that would pay for his second great canal project. Unlike Suez, which linked the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and was built through a flat desert that did not require locks, the passageway in Panama would have to painstakingly cut through a section of the mountains that run almost the entire length of Central America. However, de Lesseps was a charismatic statesman with no engineering qualifications or experience and he insisted that the canal was less than half the length of his North African masterpiece and would be constructed entirely at sea level without locks. In addition, he only visited the planned site during Panama's short dry season and no allowances were made for the tropical conditions that his labour force would be toiling in, particularly the raging rivers that flood during the rainy season and the interminable mosquitoes that rise from the swamps and carry diseases from which there was no protection. With hindsight, or perhaps even a modicum of common sense at the time, it was a catastrophe waiting to happen and eight years after construction began in 1881, 22,000 predominantly West Indian workers were dead, largely as a result of yellow fever and malaria. Thousands more were homeless and destitute, the project was bankrupt and 800,000 investors had lost their shirts. Gustav Eiffel, who was actually an engineer and whose tower in Paris was rising as quickly as his reputation, was drafted in to add locks to the enterprise, but it was too late and poor old Gustav was only able to earn seven million francs before the venture collapsed, for which he was later successfully prosecuted for profiteering from the calamity. The Americans took over in 1904, buying the rights

to the canal for the bargain price of just $40 million, an absolute steal given the French were asking for $100 million and that they had already excavated around a sixth of the entire canal. It was an even more staggering deal when you consider the political machinations of the previous year, as Panama was a province of neighbouring Colombia at the time and not an autonomous nation. In return for supporting their claim to independence, with US warships as well as the usual official rhetoric, the United States negotiated a treaty with the newly independent Panama that gave them full 'sovereign' control of the Panama Canal Zone, a strip of land approximately 80 kilometres long and 16 kilometres wide. In terms of foreign policy, it was an absolute masterstroke, as America was now in complete control of everything pertaining to the prospective canal for perpetuity, including access and of course all profits. That said, an operational canal still had to be built somehow and in that daunting endeavour the Americans were the beneficiaries of a momentous breakthrough in the field of medical science that recognised that yellow fever and malaria were transmitted by mosquitoes. This in turn led to the implementation of effective preventative measures, including the widespread use of mosquito nets and the treatment of stagnant water in order to reduce the breeding capacity of these deadly insects. Entire areas were drained and with the sick also quarantined for the first time, yellow fever was all but eradicated and the threat of malaria significantly reduced. After a difficult first year and a change of engineers, the decision was also made to include locks instead of trying to defy the challenging terrain even further and build the canal at sea level. Having corrected most of the ruinous oversights that literally plagued the original French venture, an army of some 75,000 workers began construction in earnest and over the course of the next decade they were responsible for what many consider to be the most remarkable achievement in engineering the world had witnessed. The figures themselves are astounding in terms of both the earth moved and the financial cost, but they pale into insignificance when you consider that, despite the undoubted medical advancements and improved working conditions, almost 6,000 men would pay the ultimate price for their labours, bringing the total death toll for one single project to approaching 28,000. For the record, the final economic cost was said to be in the region of $500 million, more than $9 billion in today's money, and apparently more than 170 million cubic metres of earth was moved in all. I read somewhere that so much soil was being dug at one stage, that it was the equivalent of excavating a new Channel Tunnel every three and a half months and just two of the extraordinary features of this engineering marvel included the construction of both the largest dam and the largest artificial lake in the world, each of which were named Gatun after the nearby town. Considering that each of these record breaking structures were mere by products of the main canal development, it is perhaps not surprising that the American Society of Civil Engineers named the Panama Canal among the Seven Wonders of the Modern World, which incidentally also featured the Channel Tunnel, as well as the Empire State Building and the Golden Gate Bridge. Although the former President Theodore Roosevelt had been responsible for the decision to build the canal and had overseen much of its construction, Woodrow Wilson was in office as it neared completion and it was a telegram from Wilson on the 10th of October 1913 which triggered the explosion that destroyed the Gamboa Dike and thereby flooded the last dry section of canal. As the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans flowed together once more, man had reversed in a single decade, what nature had taken millions of years to achieve. The canal was officially opened less than a year later and almost two full years ahead of schedule on the 15th of August 1914, just a few days after the first shots of World War One were fired in anger and the planet was plunged into darkness. The bloodiest conflict in history would witness the best and worst of humanity and as much as I admire the will, vision and sheer bloody mindedness of all those involved in the construction of the Panama Canal, particularly the workers who toiled and died in its name, it is difficult for me to ignore its devastating environmental impact. Despite the controversial way in which it was acquired, the canal remained in American control until the United States President Jimmy Carter and his opposite number in Panama, the de facto president Omar Torrijos, signed the Torrijos-Carter treaties in September 1977, which handed the canal back to Panama on the 31st of December 1999. Many of Carter's opponents were angered by the agreement, which they saw as a betrayal of American interests, and when Torrijos was killed in a plane crash just four years later, it did not take long for people to suggest that he had been assassinated by the CIA, at the behest of the new President Ronald Reagan, who had always been vehemently opposed to the canal being relinquished to Panama. Omar Torrijos, who had risen to power in the military coup d'état of late 1968, was the second international leader to have died in a plane crash within months of Reagan taking office, following the conspicuously similar death of the Ecuador premier Jaime Róldos. It was well documented that Róldos openly attacked the abysmal human rights record of the El Salvador despot José Duarte, whose dreaded death squads were responsible for the murder of thousands

of innocent people. In addition, it is now equally well known that Duarte was a CIA puppet, or an ‘asset’ as they prefer to call them, and that his homicidal junta was funded by a succession of U.S. administrations. Given their rabid foreign policy at the time, principally in terms of supporting any regimes prepared to oppose the Soviet Union, however brutal, it would be no real surprise to learn that these international leaders had been assassinated with American involvement. In his 2004 semi-autobiographical book ‘Confessions of an Economic Hit Man’, John Perkins asserts that this was the case and certainly the mad dog dictator Manuel Noriega, the successor to Omar Torrijos in Panama, was unquestionably backed and funded by the United States, irrespective of the



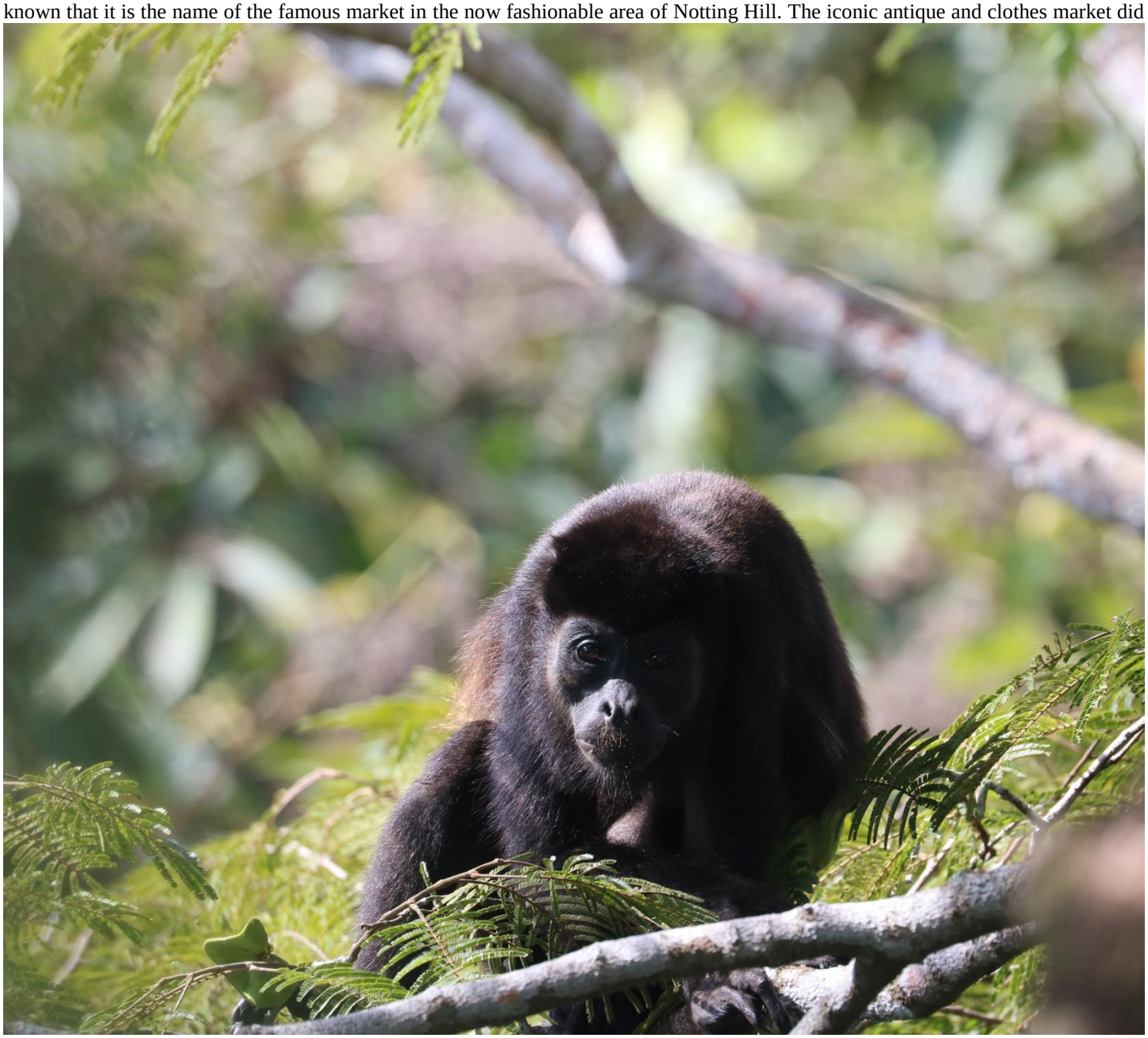
crimes that he was known to have committed. In return Noriega assisted the CIA in the region, particularly in relation to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, a right-wing organisation opposed to the socialist government. The Contras were known to have committed human rights atrocities within their own country and were responsible for thousands of deaths and in 1985 the murky and terrifying world of U.S. foreign policy was exposed to an international audience when the Iran-Contra Affair broke and it was revealed that the Reagan administration was secretly selling weapons to Iran and using the proceeds to fund the murderous activities of the Contras, including against civilian targets suggested by the CIA. While he was feted in the United States and elsewhere around the world, even receiving the Legion of Honour military award in France and being invited to speak at Harvard University, Noriega was known to be involved in drugs trafficking and money laundering and there were more than just rumours linking him to the deaths of those who opposed him. After one messy assassination too many, this particular high profile victim was found savagely tortured and beheaded, the Americans realised they had lost control of their asset and attempted to persuade Noriega to step down. When he predictably refused, the decision was made to remove him and in December 1989 American forces invaded Panama, eventually capturing Noriega and killing hundreds of civilians in the process of toppling a tyrant that their own perverse foreign policy had helped to create. Noriega’s rise to power was almost entirely a product of the Cold War, A war between two entirely conflicting ideologies, when Americans were prepared to sacrifice more or less everything in what they believed was a righteous battle against communism, including their values, their integrity and the domestic and international laws they were sworn to uphold. Noriega would spend the rest of his life behind bars and when he died of natural causes in May 2017 at the age of 83, a chapter closed on Panama’s brief but turbulent history that had begun with the ill-fated decision to accept American involvement in the struggle for independence from Colombia. That involvement was to cost them more than just a canal, but now at least they have both their freedom and their canal, which was finally returned to the people of Panama on the very last day of the twentieth century. Now the canal is administered by the state owned Panama Canal Authority, but there is a footnote to our tale, as the machinations of men will never cease and in 2013 the Chinese were granted a 50-year contract to build their own canal through Nicaragua, which was where the Americans had threatened to construct the original version in order to then purchase the rights to the Panama Canal from the French for a fraction of their true

value. We would see far more of this iconic landmark later in the trip, but for now we had to make a short detour to the west and a lodge in the Anton Valley area that had not been available earlier in the tour. Anton Valley has always been known as a superb birding destination and I was aware before our arrival that it was likely to be difficult to find productive mammal sites during the day. However, the lodge itself is nestled in an idyllic setting and has the envious reputation of being a wonderfully relaxed place to observe all kinds of fabulous wildlife. The night before we arrived, guests had been watching a rothschild's porcupine just a few metres from the dining area and water opossum, greater grison and silky anteater have all been encountered within the actual property. A mix of formal gardens and rugged forest, the Guayabo River runs directly through the pretty grounds and its crystal clear waters have been diverted to form a refreshing swimming hole that guests can dive or swing into from the lower steps of a large tree house style viewing platform. Unfortunately, the house only contained a dead rufous tree rat when we visited and we were not to be lucky with the porcupine either, despite our best efforts and some decidedly late vigils. As I feared, our local guide did struggle to show us mammals during the day and we spent much of our time trekking up a succession of steep hills in the ultimately vain pursuit of western dwarf squirrels. We still tried hard and had some lovely hikes in some beautiful tracts of largely pristine forest, but basically we saw nine mammal species within the lodge grounds, ten if you include the unfortunate tree rat, and a grand total of precisely zero beyond its boundaries. Of the nine, our only grey four-eyed opossums of the trip were the principal highlight and we were able to watch these distinctive animals on successive nights and take one or two reasonable shots before they scurried off in typical fashion. We had seen all of the other species previously, except possibly in terms of some of the bats, which I very rarely attempt to identify on the wing, but three different opossums, two sloths and two squirrels would not be a bad haul for an actual reserve, let alone a relatively compact garden. Agoutis and rabbits were also abundant and a few of the other guests confirmed that the lodge's reputation as a premier birding destination was well deserved, which is good to know for future general wildlife tours. Assessing an area and the animals that can be seen there is the entire purpose of these trips and, depending on their specific interests and how much time they have available, I would probably recommend that guests visit Anton Valley for at least a couple of nights, as the region is a peaceful one where you can observe a great deal of wildlife at a leisurely pace and we thoroughly enjoyed our brief stay. I already knew the next destination fairly well, but James had not been before and was looking forward to visiting the coastal fortifications and surrounding forests of San Lorenzo, a formally protected area on the Caribbean side of the country. I decided to use Colon as our base, which would mean either taking a ferry or crossing the Aquas Clara and Gatun locks of the Panama Canal, where you would

usually have to wait for an enormous tanker or cargo ship to crawl by before driving on past the towering Gatun Dam, which is hugely impressive in an engineering sense, if not exactly aesthetically pleasing. It was also vitally important to the original canal construction, as it was built to dam the Chagres River and flood a vast area that would become Gatun Lake. Given that this artificial waterway is about 33 kilometres long, or roughly 40% of the entire canal, this saved excavating an inordinate amount of earth and probably several years of toil. Both of these locks will be avoided with the imminent opening of the Atlantic Bridge, the third bridge spanning the canal and the first on the Atlantic side, hence its name. It is expected that this new bridge will significantly

increase the number of tourists visiting San Lorenzo, for better or for worse of course, as there is likely to be an environmental price to pay as more people pour into the ecologically sensitive area. Our first foray would be delayed slightly, as I had specifically selected a hotel in Colon that was known to have night monkeys living within its grounds and we went straight to look for their day roost, largely because these nocturnal primates are usually easier to find sleeping during daylight hours. Our visit was no exception and we quickly found two monkeys peering out from different hollows of the same tree. I am not certain if we disturbed them or if they were already active, but we had only watched them for about ten minutes before they were both sound asleep and we decided not to return and risk possibly bothering them again. It also made sense to spend as much time as possible at San Lorenzo, as the military ruins there are well worth visiting and the entire site, in combination with the historical fortifications further east along the coast at Portobello, are listed as one of only two cultural UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Panama. The actual fort has seen a great deal of action and an earlier version was destroyed by the infamous Welsh privateer Henry Morgan, who also ransacked Portobello and went on to take Panama City against a vastly superior Spanish force in early 1671. A renegade and ruthless pirate to many, Morgan lived an

extraordinary life and was viewed as something of a national hero in Britain, where he was initially held under arrest by the then King Charles II, largely to appease the Spanish with whom a peace treaty had recently been signed, only to be released and then knighted by the same monarch. The existing ruins date back to the mid 18th century when the British and Spanish again disputed the territory and the British naval officer Edward Vernon attacked the forts at both San Lorenzo and Portobello in what was known as the War of Jenkins' Ear. Although it sounds barely credible, the conflict between the perpetually warring nations erupted when it was revealed that Spanish customs officers had severed the ear of the merchant navy captain Robert Jenkins during an inspection of the vessel that he was commanding. Although the incident did undoubtedly take place, in reality, it occurred several years before the war erupted and was more used as a rallying cry by British imperialists looking to advance the nation's economic interests and military strength across the Caribbean. If Portobello perhaps sounds vaguely familiar, you probably did not grow up in London, or you would have instantly known that it is the name of the famous market in the now fashionable area of Notting Hill. The iconic antique and clothes market did



not exist at the time of Vernon's capture of what was then known as Porto Bello, but the British took the victory to their hearts and several landmarks now honour both the triumph and the commander responsible, including Portobello Road and Vernon Yard, which can also be found in this decidedly desirable part of Kensington. As impressive as the surviving fortifications at San Lorenzo certainly are, the fort's commanding strategic position at the mouth of the Chagres River is even more so and you can clearly see why the garrison was involved in so many ferocious engagements over the centuries. To control the Chagres was to control access to the country itself and a well positioned heavy artillery battery would make it almost impossible for the ships of an invading force to access the interior. Henry Morgan understood this and sacked San Lorenzo before utilising the Chagres to launch his devastating assault on Panama City and we made a point of visiting both the remnants of the fort overlooking the harbour and the entrance to the Chagres River, for a better understanding of just how significant that defensive position would have been. Our remaining time at San Lorenzo was spent exploring the surrounding forest, initially on our own and then with a local guide who would be with us for three days and the entire next stage of the tour. We had similar success with and without him initially, as San Lorenzo was productive in terms of many of the same species and the only possible exceptions involved an animal that we saw, but could not identify and then a second that we clearly identified but did not see. We were yet to meet our guide when the first encounter occurred and a raccoon dashed out in front of the car. Unfortunately, it was at distance and although I was fairly certain that it was a northern raccoon, as opposed to the crab-eating variety, it was just too quick for me to conclusively identify. Their ranges do not overlap massively and identification would have been straightforward almost anywhere else in the Americas. However, both species occur in Costa Rica and Panama and we were actually not that far from the most easterly extreme of the northern raccoon's range. Our guide had joined us by

the time of the second possible sighting, which was even more frustrating, as this time I heard what I thought was the distinctive sound of a paca and although our guide confirmed that this was the case, it was just impossible to see the animal through the dense undergrowth and there was no way of getting closer without disturbing it and basically chasing it away. Our best chance was to turn our spotlights off and to wait quietly on the forest trail, but it never did emerge and this would happen to us on two further occasions that evening. This would not have been a major issue for most birders of course, who generally count the birds that they hear as well as see, but I have no interest in wildlife watching by checklist and this would sadly be as close as we were to get to a paca on this trip. We did at least see coatis well here, including our first large group of perhaps a dozen animals, and I also coaxed a female tarantula from her burrow with a thin twig, which she attacked as soon as I placed it within the small opening, before partially leaving her burrow to investigate further. I obviously did not hassle her for long and whilst we could not confirm any new sightings at San Lorenzo, as with almost every destination visited in Panama, we would have been more than happy with the variety of animals observed here, had this been our first major location of the tour. As it was, we were now largely searching for new species and we had one particular target in mind when we moved east of Panama City for the first time, the critically endangered brown-headed spider monkey. On the way, our guide suggested a brief diversion to a 400 hectare private reserve that he knew was a good spot for western dwarf squirrels and a great deal more apparently. The problem he explained, was that you need to be there early in the morning or late in the evening and it would not be possible for us to achieve either given our schedule, as we had just this one day available to visit the reserve and then drive on to the small community of Torti, around 130 kilometres north of Yaviza at the end of the Pan American Highway. We consequently arrived later than clearly needed to be the case given the dozens of fresh tapir tracks we were greeted by, as well as the puma and giant anteater prints that we would discover on a hike that got progressively steeper as we ventured off trail in order to follow what appeared to be the most recent set of tracks. These were still soaking wet in the mud and at one stage, where the vegetation grew just too thick for us to progress further and the smell of an animal became really pungent, we were fairly certain that we were within a few metres of a tapir. We had even been able to hear slight movement for a while, but it would have been completely unfair to just go crashing through the undergrowth and almost certainly unproductive as well. We never did find the squirrel, and had now missed two different species of dwarf squirrel at three different locations, but I definitely intend to return and to spend a few nights exploring the reserve properly. At Torti we would be visiting two main sites, Chucanti Nature Reserve and San Francisco Nature Reserve. Both are home to populations of spider monkeys, none of which are doing well across their range, principally as a result of extensive habitat destruction and illegal hunting. Of the nine extant species of spider monkeys and muriquis, eight are either endangered or critically endangered and only two occur in Central America, the brown-headed spider monkey that we would be searching for and geoffroy's spider monkey, which can be found across much of the country, but is easier to observe in Costa Rica and beyond. Panama is the only country where both species live and I was keen to find a reliable spot for the more elusive brown-headed version, a spectacular primate that is notoriously difficult to see anywhere. The subspecies found in Panama and neighbouring Colombia often occurs at altitudes of up to 2,500 metres and the two reserves that we visited could certainly be described as undulating, a euphemism for inordinately steep and when we were not looking for the resident monkeys, we were pretending to, as we caught our breath. This was exactly how we first heard them at San Francisco on New Year's Eve, when we were taking a break having trekked to the top of a particularly sheer slope and suddenly we heard a low call way off in the distance. Within a few seconds the forest was reverberating in response and as we listened to just one of the many complex calls and screeches deployed by these extremely social primates, the desire to see them grew even stronger. Unfortunately we had arrived quite late having tarried longer than anticipated in search of tapirs and were rapidly losing the light and consequently our chances of finding what are strictly diurnal animals. It was a shame that we did not have sufficient time to do San Francisco justice, as it was clearly a promising reserve and at night produced the wonderful spectacle of several kinkajous and woolly opossums in the same flowering tree, as well as a cat-eyed snake and a pit viper or fer-de-lance in the local vernacular. Despite the obvious potential, we had only one opportunity at each reserve and New Year's Day would be spent searching for spider monkeys at Chucanti Nature Reserve, home to the isolated mountain Cerro Chucanti. Given that it rises

to a peak of some 1,439 metres, we were hoping that it would not be necessary to trudge and pant its entire height in order to find our quarry, but we were definitely prepared to as we set off for what would ultimately prove to be a long and fairly demanding hike. Three hours in and we had barely seen a red-tailed squirrel, let alone a spider monkey, but once again a well earned rest worked in our favour and as we recovered and scanned the distant hills, our guide picked up the first of what turned out to be a group of four spider monkeys. Although it was a massive relief to have found them, particularly as we only had a single day here, the views at distance

were not great even with binoculars and we made the decision to continue the ascent and make our way towards the monkeys that we had already observed, in the not unrealistic hope that we might spot another closer troop on the way. That at least was the theory, but another two hours in and our prospects were looking far less encouraging, as not only had we failed to find any additional primates, we had also now lost the original group that we had been hoping to reach if we were not successful elsewhere. Whilst we still had a few hours available before we would have to consider beginning our descent, we were all aware that our progress was fairly slow on the steep slopes during what was the hottest part of the day and that we were now going to require some good fortunate to experience

even a reasonable view of one of these rare primates. In general mammals do not move as much in hot weather and although this can often make them far harder to find, as movement is usually the easiest way to spot an elusive animal in almost any habitat, it can also occasionally work in your favour and you can simply chance upon an animal resting in the shade. This is exactly what occurred at Cerro Chucanti, where we had almost given up scanning for movement on the horizon and instead disturbed a young spider monkey sleeping just a few metres above the ground while the rest of its family fed in the higher reaches of nearby trees. As far as we could see, the immediate group again consisted of four members, but we could also hear monkeys moving beyond our restricted vision and

it was likely that we were in the middle of a larger group that was slowly moving through the forest feeding. We made no attempt to search for the rest of the group, as we had a superb view of the juvenile, which had almost immediately settled, as well as an adult that descended to inspect us and check on its young. Satisfied that all was well, it continued to browse unconcerned by our presence and we in turn settled down to spend an enchanting hour or so with these spectacular primates. This was certainly one of the real highlights of the tour and I was particularly pleased that it had occurred at Chucanti, as this is a very special reserve created by the biologist and ornithologist Guido Berguido, who first visited the region in 2004, principally to look for rare endemic birds. Berguido quickly discovered that this one isolated massif was home to a significant number of plants and animals that occur nowhere else and since the area received its first protection, more than twenty species have been discovered and described by science, two of which, a type of centipede snake and a heliconia flower species, have been named after Berguido. To illustrate just how important this reserve is considered to be, the plant Heliconia berguidoi exists in an area of just four square kilometres and it is highly likely that other unknown species were lost before Berguido was able to raise the funds to purchase and conserve the original 42 hectare site. Large tracts of forest had already been cleared by that stage and although the reserve has now grown to more than 700 hectares, or approximately 1,700 acres, deforestation continues in the surrounding area and of course across much of Panama. Almost 40% of the country's forest has been lost or at least significantly degraded and in 2014 Berguido founded the Adopt a Panama Rainforest Association to *'promote the conservation of forests and their sustainable use for the benefit of the people and wildlife of Panama'*. In addition to purchasing land to conserve, ADOPTA work closely with local communities and are also involved in the Alliance for a Million Hectares, an ambitious conservation initiative to restore a million hectares of forest in Panama by 2035. Further details of this project, ADOPTA in general and the Chucanti Nature Reserve, can all be found online at www.adoptabosque.org and I would unhesitatingly recommend adding Chucanti to any wildlife tour in Panama, not only to search for the truly majestic spider monkeys, or indeed any of the other species that can be found here with more time, but also to support the tremendous efforts of Berguido and his team. We ideally would have spent longer here and I certainly intend to return, probably with the same guide, who would not be accompanying us as we moved on to our last destination, a wildlife lodge in the Darien region. As I have already touched upon, we would not have the opportunity to explore Darien National Park or much more than the outskirts of the infamous Darien Gap during this final leg of our journey. That said, the area is still a productive one in terms of wildlife and our lodge was ideally positioned on the edge of a small patch of rainforest, which, despite its size, actually produced some of the best sightings of the tour. Tamarins were regular visitors to the trees situated just behind our comfortable safari style tents and coatis and howler monkeys were commonly observed on the main forest trail, which also produced our first and only view of a poison dart frog, in this case the green and black variety. Three tayras, running across the lawn and along a fallen tree before disappearing into the forest, were undoubtedly the

highlight of our stay here, particularly as this would be our only glimpse of these superb animals of the trip, but that sighting would have been pushed very close if I had been able to conclusively identify the animal that splashed out of a small stream as we approached on a nocturnal walk. I was fairly certain that it was a water opossum, and indeed there is little else that it could have been, but I very rarely attempt to classify mammals by a process of elimination and I never include a species unless I can positively identify it. Even from the momentary view in the glare of my spotlight, it appeared to be a water opossum, but the sighting was so brief that I could not be entirely sure and this type of near miss was now becoming an unfortunate characteristic of the tour. We had already missed what I thought was a northern naked-tailed armadillo on a night drive in a nearby forest, as this particular armadillo looked distinct to the more common nine-banded variety. However, we were in a moving vehicle and my fleeting view of its hind quarters disappearing into the long grass was again just not sufficient to be one hundred percent certain. In both cases I believe that my initial identification was correct, as I know these animals well and one view is usually good enough to identify a species that I am familiar with. That said, I am equally aware of the temptation to try and somehow transform an indeterminate sighting into a creature that you are hoping or perhaps desperate to see, as I have witnessed this on more occasions than I can remember with individuals and groups that I have spent time in the field with. Obviously it is always helpful if your guide can assist, as is frequently the case with guides of sufficient local knowledge, but in Panama most of the lodge guides are far more experienced with birds and at Darien one almost certainly cost us yet another encounter. We had been staking out a stretch of river where a neotropical otter was known to visit, when our guide decided that an hours wait was more than sufficient and that he would look further up river without us. In truth I should have either stopped him or insisted that we all go together, but birding guides can get very impatient when looking or waiting for mammals and he was moving about so much that I decided it would probably make more sense to let him wander off on his own. As

it was, he strayed too near the riverbank and although he later reported that he had indeed seen the otter, he also confirmed that it had instantly dived under the water, never to be seen again or at least not by us. These three near misses in a single region perfectly highlight the fine margins between the successful tour that we enjoyed and a really exceptional one and to further illustrate just how capricious wildlife viewing can be, I have added a section to my mammal list featuring the species that we were perhaps unlucky not to see for a variety of reasons. We almost certainly missed other animals as well, as will always be the case on any given trip, but we were not particularly fortunate in Panama and if you add these ten additional species to our other sightings, both the tour in general and the country as a prospective wildlife destination, take on an entirely different perspective. One animal that I would have dearly loved to somehow conjure out of a dubious sighting was a bush dog, as these almost mythical carnivores are one of the few canids that I have yet to observe in the wild and are consequently a species that I am desperate to find. That they have been spotted on the drive south to Yaviza, the last stop on the Pan-American Highway before you run out of road and directly into the Darien Gap, will

perhaps give you some idea of why the region is considered to be so ecologically significant, both in terms of the exceptional variety of divergent habitats and the extraordinary biodiversity that these largely pristine ecosystems protect. Although I would have relished the opportunity to explore further afield and hope that one day I will be able to access at least a small section of the national park, it is probably just as well that the majority of this natural wonder remains beyond our grasp, as this very isolation has no doubt saved it from the commercial exploitation that has devastated our rainforests across the globe. For now Darien remains predominantly a birding destination, and while we were in reality far more likely to see a crested owl than a bush dog, on one night drive, along a single stretch of forest, we encountered more than forty individual sloths, opossums and kinkajous, as well as what I believe was probably that northern naked-tailed armadillo. When you consider that our lodge was barely situated on the periphery of this vast and essentially undisturbed wilderness, it is not difficult to imagine, not for me at least, how amazing it would be to spend a few weeks

exploring the interior of this spectacular region. Having said that, I am of course fully aware that I have expressed similar sentiments regarding almost every location visited in Panama, as none of our stays were long enough to entirely do each area justice and there are a number of additional sites that I would like to include for future tours. Whilst the country is not without its problems, it remains an outstanding destination for all wildlife enthusiasts and our exciting journey had been a wonderful way to end what had been a mixed and in some ways perhaps even a low key year in terms of my research tours. It is fairly rare for me to only arrange four trips in a single year and usually when this is the case, at least one or two of them are reasonably long expeditions. That was not possible this year due to work commitments and none of my tours exceeded three weeks. As such, 2018 produced considerably fewer highlights than normal, particularly when you consider that it is impossible to include any of the animals viewed from hides in Finland, which was the vast majority. As much as I love watching bears and wolves, these iconic predators have to be encountered in genuinely wild conditions to be truly appreciated and seeing them fed in this way was as demoralising as it was unnatural. Norway was a much more natural affair and her epic landscapes were on a number of occasions matched by the supreme animals that graced them. The muskox and sperm whale sightings were especially memorable, but for me and I think also for James, the highlight of our stay in this primeval land was first spotting and then following a minke whale along the bleak coast of Varanger. It is much more difficult to pick a single event from our time in Panama, which, as you will have read, produced an entire series of terrific sightings without perhaps there being one obvious standout moment. The same could not be said of our time in Poland and as thrilled as I was to chance upon an unexpected brown bear in the Tatra mountains, nothing could compare with the magical experience of watching wolves and bison in the early morning rain at Bieszczady. We had already witnessed these impressive animals individually, but to watch their timeless interaction on a European landscape was a momentous occasion for me. This was the eternal struggle between predator and prey in an ancient setting and as I wrote later that day:

There is nothing quite like getting up at 4am in the pouring rain.
Climbing steep damp Polish hills in the mist and wet.
Lying watching a wild bison herd.
Waiting for a first wolf to appear.
Staying so quiet and so still that it runs past without even noticing you.
Forget viewing hides, forget feeding animals.
This is the way to watch wildlife, this is the way to watch wolves.

1	Tayra	Eira barbara	Three together in the grounds of our lodge at Darien.
2	Crab-eating Raccoon	Procyon cancrivorus	A pair in a tree at the Punta Culebra Nature Centre.
3	White-nosed Coati	Nasua narica	Observed at Gamboa, San Lorenzo and Darien.
4	Kinkajou	Potos flavus	Common at Gamboa, San Lorenzo and Darien.
5	Cacomistle	Bassariscus sumichrasti	Two or three individuals at our cabin in the Volcan Baru National Park area.
6	Western Lowland Olingo	Bassaricyon medius	Several sightings at Gamboa and one at San Lorenzo.
7	Northern Tamandua	Tamandua mexicana	Five individuals, all in the Gamboa area.
8	Hoffmann's Two-toed Sloth	Choloepus hoffmanni	Routinely observed in every major area visited.
9	Brown-throated Sloth	Bradypus variegatus	Common at most destinations.
10	White-tailed Deer	Odocoileus virginianus	Individuals and a mother with young at Gamboa.
11	Collared Peccary	Pecari tajacu	Three sightings of seven animals at Gamboa.
12	Panamanian Night Monkey	Aotus zonalis	Two pairs in day roosts at Gamboa and Colon.
13	Mantled Howler Monkey	Alouatta palliata	Commonly observed at almost every destination.
14	Coiba Island Howler Monkey	Alouatta palliata coibensis ssp	A small group on Coiba Island.
15	Brown-headed Spider Monkey	Ateles fusciceps	Two groups of four at Chucanti Nature Reserve.
16	Panamanian White-fronted Capuchin	Cebus imitator	Two in the mangrove on Coiba Island and small groups at Gamboa and San Lorenzo.
17	Geoffroy's Tamarin	Saguinus geoffroyi	Low numbers at Gamboa, common at Darien.
18	Central American Woolly Opossum	Caluromys derbianus	Observed in healthy numbers at most destinations.
19	Common Opossum	Didelphis marsupialis	Commonly encountered throughout the tour.

20	Brown Four-eyed Opossum	Metachirus nudicaudatus	A brief view of an individual at Gamboa.
21	Grey Four-eyed Opossum	Philander opossum	Low numbers in the lodge grounds at Anton Valley.
22	Nine-banded Armadillo	Dasypus novemcinctus	Two on the same night walk at Gamboa.
23	Tapeti	Sylvilagus brasiliensis	Observed in low numbers at most destinations.
24	Rothschild's Porcupine	Coendou quichua	Two individuals in the Gamboa area, one sleeping during the day and one active at night.
25	Red-tailed Squirrel	Sciurus granatensis	Observed in every area visited.
26	Variegated Squirrel	Sciurus variegatoides	Infrequent sightings at multiple locations.
27	Bangs's Mountain Squirrel	Syntheosciurus brochus	Two in the Volcan Baru National Park area.
28	Lesser Capybara	Hydrochoerus isthmius	Several at Gamboa and one at San Lorenzo.
29	Coiban Agouti	Dasyprocta coibae	Two individual sightings on Coiba Island.
30	Central American Agouti	Dasyprocta punctata	Regularly encountered at almost every destination.
31	Rufous Tree Rat	Diplomys labilis	Two in the Gamboa area, one at night with our guide and one sleeping in a tree during the day.
32	Pantropical Spotted Dolphin	Stenella attenuata	Small pods on the journeys to and from Coiba Island.
1	Puma	Puma concolor	Fresh tracks at a private reserve.
2	Neotropical Otter	Lontra longicaudis	Viewed by our guide at Darien.
3	Northern Raccoon	Procyon lotor	Possible sighting at San Lorenzo.
4	Giant Anteater	Myrmecophaga tridactyla	Fresh tracks at a private reserve.
5	Silky Anteater	Cyclopes didactylus	Not a near miss as such, but encountered at Gamboa the week before our stay.
6	Pygmy Sloth	Bradypus pygmaeus	I was unable to secure the guide, but easily encountered on an overnight trip to the island of Escudo de Veraguas.
7	Baird's Tapir	Tapirus bairdii	Multiple fresh tracks at a private reserve.
8	Water Opossum	Chironectes minimus	Probable sighting at our lodge at Darien.
9	Northern Naked-tailed Armadillo	Cabassous centralis	Probable sighting on a night drive at Darien.
10	Spotted Paca	Cuniculus paca	Observed the night before we arrived at our main lodge at Gamboa and heard twice at San Lorenzo.


Caribbean
La Amistad
Colon
Chagres
Lake Gatun
Soberania
Lake Bayano
Costa Rica
Panama City
Volcan Baru
Omar Torrijos
Altos de Campana
Panama
David
Isla del Rey
Santiago
Darien
Isla Coiba
Cerro Hoya
100 km
Pacific Ocean
Colombia
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