



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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MEXICO

Date - August 2022

Duration - 24 Days

Destinations

Mexico City - Milpa Alta - San Pablo Oztotepec - Pachuca - Barrancas de Aguacatitla - El Chico National Park - Totalco - Perote - Cordoba - Lake Catemaco - Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve - Tabasco - Oxolotán - Tuxtla Gutiérrez - Balam-Kú - Calakmul Biosphere Reserve - Laguna Om Biological Station - Tres Garantias - Felipe Carrillo Puerto - Valladolid - Xocén Reserve - Merida - El Corchito Ecological Reserve - Cuxtal Ecological Reserve - Piste - Tzucmuc - Amazili Nature Reserve - Ek' Balam - Playa del Carmen - Playacar - Sacbe Ecological Village - Cozumel - Tulum - Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve - Punta Allen - Chichen Itza - Cenote Kax Ek - X-Can - Cenote Sac Ha - Rio Secreto - Punta Laguna - Otoch Ma'ax Yetel Kooh - Cancun

Trip Overview

Although I have visited Mexico before, it has always been to my great shame that I have never organised a dedicated wildlife tour here, as this thoroughly unique region acts as an ecological bridge between North and Central America and, as such, is one of the most diverse countries on the planet. Indeed, according to the 2022 Global Biodiversity Index, which ranks every nation in terms of its mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian, fish and vascular plant numbers, Mexico is the 5th most biodiverse country on earth, Brazil, Indonesia, Colombia and China make up the top four, and has the second highest number of different ecosystems behind only Colombia. According to the statistics alone, Mexico is home to 533 mammals, 1,105 birds, 988 reptiles, 411 amphibians, 2,629 fish and 23,385 vascular plants, all of which is impressive enough, until you then consider that 30% of those mammals are endemic, as are 47% of the amphibians and more than half of the reptiles. So ignoring all of the other endemic organisms, including literally



thousands of plants, considerably more than a thousand mammal, amphibian and reptile species can only be encountered within the rainforests, deserts, mountains and seas of this one extraordinary landmass. I obviously could not hope to explore more than a fraction on a single tour, which is perhaps why I have delayed visiting for far too long, and I originally planned to include three main areas. The first would be the steaming, evocative rainforest regions south of Mexico City, where the verdant dense jungle conceals a host of exotic species and the magnificent remnants of a once forgotten Mayan civilisation, ultimately wiped out by the conquistadors of the Spanish Empire. However, after some preliminary research I quickly realised that I could spend an entire trip on the Yucatán Peninsula alone and that if I wanted to include the other main locations, the arid Chihuahuan Desert bordering the United States in the north and Baja California Sur, part of the Baja California Peninsula and home to some of the best whale watching anywhere on earth, I would require at least seven weeks. As much as I have always loved dedicating this long to a single tour, I rarely have that kind of time available now and I therefore decided to split the expedition in half and take the first part in August 2022, followed by the second a few months later in March 2023. This remains the plan and the second trip is very much in place, but even then I am fully aware that I will have only seen a fraction of what this ecological masterpiece has to offer and will need to return, realistically on multiple occasions. This was certainly the case on this initial foray, as I left the bountiful forests of the Yucatán without feeling that I had really been able to do them justice, particularly Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, where I undoubtedly needed a great deal longer and will make a specific point of visiting again. As will be the case when I return next year, this first tour was made in the excellent company of the Mexican biologist and conservationist Juan Cruzado Cortés, whose expertise, dedication and local knowledge, particularly in terms of the most productive mammal sites, proved invaluable throughout. Although Juan's English is significantly better than my Spanish, at times we struggled slightly to understand each other, but in general there were very few issues and I remain exceedingly grateful for his hard work and enthusiasm. He did all of the driving for example, and I was fortunate to be able to use his vehicle, which had a sun roof that I could stand to spotlight from each evening. This of course meant that I had a significantly better chance of observing wildlife in more or less every direction and although I am pleased to say that we did see almost every major species together, sadly this would cost Juan one memorable sighting on our penultimate night. As it was, he just seemed thrilled that I had seen this particular animal and Juan is clearly one of these exceptionally popular individuals who seems to know just about everyone. Indeed, if he was not personally able to recommend a suitable site or confirm whether somewhere was currently accessible, within minutes he would be

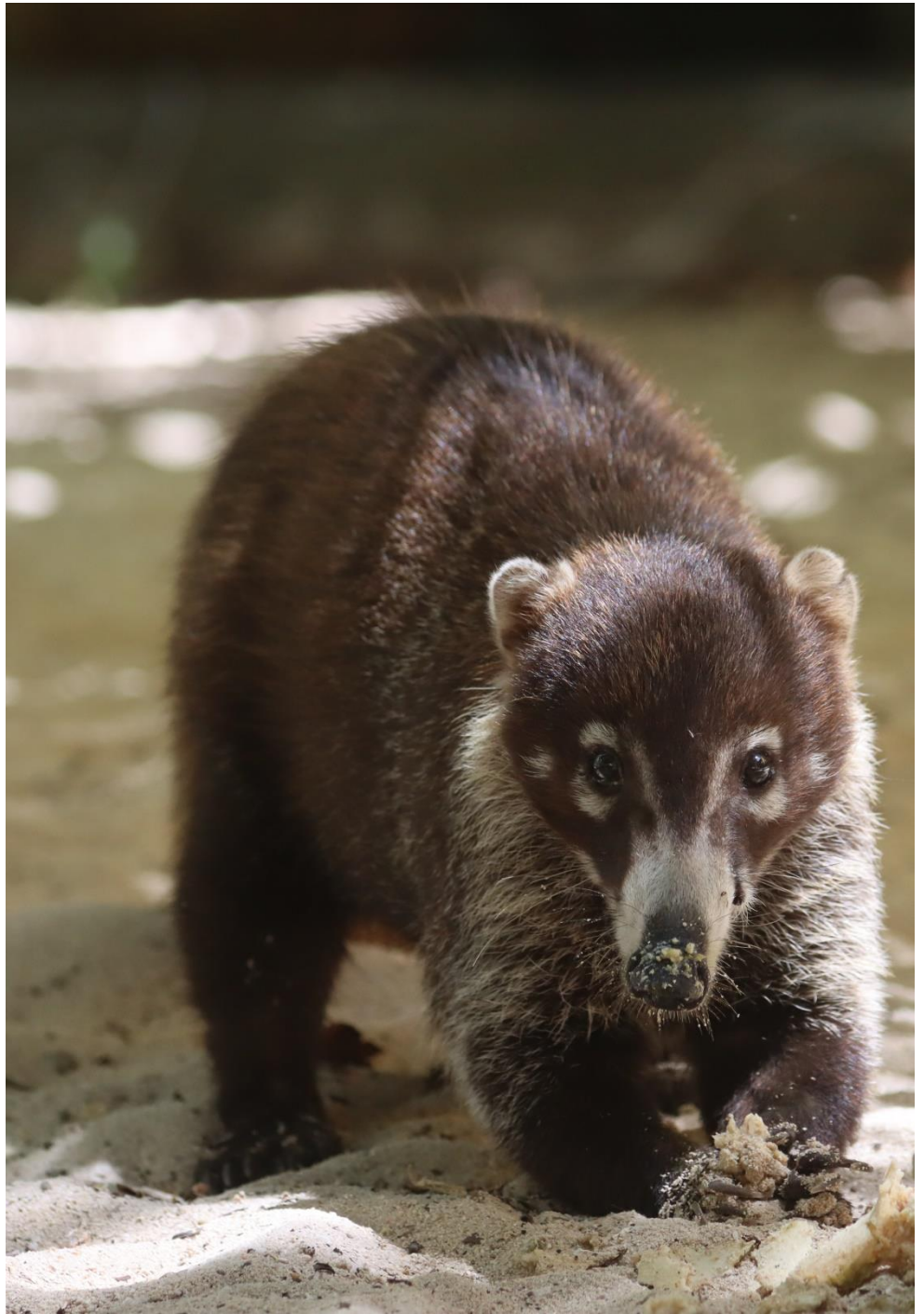


talking to someone who could. Throughout the tour I had the great pleasure to meet many of his friends and colleagues, they are basically one in the same as you can imagine, and to even participate in a lecture that he gave at a university in the state of Tabasco, primarily aimed at encouraging ecological awareness and conservation among the local indigenous people. Juan has been involved in various community initiatives over the years and some of his accounts of the conservation issues in his homeland are as familiar as they are disturbing. I could see for myself that many of the sites we visited were in really poor condition and that at some destinations species were barely clinging on among the inexorable urban sprawl. Of most concern were his horrific tales of the destruction being wreaked to the rainforest in various regions and of the Tren Maya or Maya Train currently being built, which will traverse 1,500 kilometres of the Yucatán, including directly through some of the most significant areas of pristine jungle on the continent. Scientists and conservationists from across the country maintain that the \$15 billion project will have a devastating and profound effect on the



environment and that entire ecosystems will be irreparably damaged. Certainly, when you look at the traumatic images of huge swathes of rainforest being cleared to make way for the tracks to be laid, it is difficult not to feel deeply disturbed and more than a little ashamed. It goes without saying that I am looking forward to travelling with Juan again next year, but from what he has told me, you have to be concerned that Mexico, like so many other countries across the globe, is not receiving anywhere near the level of protection required in order to conserve its fragile habitat and genuinely unique biodiversity. As I have already touched upon in terms of the incredibly high percentage of endemic species, much of the wildlife here is irreplaceable and once it is lost in Mexico, it is lost forever. Juan has been working at the forefront of conservation in his homeland for more than two decades and, although he takes a keen interest in all wildlife, he specialises in rodents and bats. As such, he is probably the leading authority in both of these fields in Mexico and his indispensable and exhaustive research has been used to support important environmental projects all over the country. His fieldwork involves a great deal of trapping, of both rodents and bats, as well as literally hundreds of camera traps, many of which we checked along a succession of forest trails. However, Juan very rarely uses a spotlight, as this is one of the most ineffective methods of locating wild animals and biologists would simply not have the time to collect essential data in this way, as this tour would go on to very clearly demonstrate. In fact, I am reasonably convinced that our spotlighting was the least productive I have ever known, certainly in terms of a tour involving such a high number of likely species, and it was not as if we were not trying hard, as we would often devote six or seven hours to the task and never less than four. The weather did not help to be fair, as we experienced a great deal of rain throughout the trip, some of which was so torrential, it was difficult enough to locate the road, let alone any small mammals wandering along it. There was always likely to be a reasonable amount of rain in this region of Mexico in August, but this was when Juan was available to join me and I have no regrets at travelling at this time of the year with him, not considering the invaluable support that he was able to provide. That said, some of the evenings were unbelievably tough, certainly when we reached

the dense rainforest areas, and we would often go entire nights without seeing anything, only to salvage the situation with a last minute sighting or two or three encounters within a brief period. There are generally two types of disappointing wildlife tour, the obvious one where you just have a complete disaster and miss almost everything and a second type where you do see some of your target species, but so poorly you can barely identify them. In a way, this second experience often feels far worse, as technically you know that you have seen the animal you have been searching for, but so unsatisfactorily, the achievement barely registers. This tour did not fall into either category and I would not even go as far as to call it disappointing, particularly as almost everything was observed extremely well, usually in good light and more often than not at fairly close quarters. Nevertheless, the time devoted to each major success was insufferably poor and when we did find something really interesting, the encounter was invariably brief. This can often be the case when working in or around rainforest, as none of these animals want to be seen and can very quickly disappear beyond view, which can often be just a metre or so off the road. For example, these ten individual sightings, tayra, red brocket, Yucatan brocket, spotted skunk, northern tamandua, spotted paca, nine-banded armadillo, puma and two long-tailed weasels, lasted no longer than 60 seconds combined and that is probably being generous. All were watched clearly, but there was no opportunity to savour each creature and definitely no chance of photographing any of them. Photography, in fact, was more or less impossible at night with Juan driving, as I was responsible for locating the animals in the spotlight and then identifying them, usually with binoculars. Holding a spotlight and using binoculars is tricky enough, although I have learnt to manage it over the years, but a camera comes a poor third place, especially in the rain, and I barely raised mine in anger at night. If anything did occasionally tarry, so basically opossums and owls, Juan would assist with the identification and I could try for a shot, but in general we concentrated on just finding as much as possible and seeing it all as well as possible. This is probably the best advice I could ever pass on in terms of looking for wildlife in challenging conditions and for all the difficulties experienced, we were still able to discover a superb selection of mammals,



largely as a result of a great deal of hard work and Juan's expert local knowledge, which was probably responsible for more than half of the species recorded. He cannot work miracles of course and even at some of the sites where he has previously been successful, we were not on this occasion, but these instances were rare and we actually failed to find very few of the species that we specifically searched for. We missed Mexican voles at two locations, but that was mainly because we were only able to visit during the middle of the day when the sites were disturbed, and we also missed the Perote pocket gopher, as there were no obviously active burrows at the usual destination for this decidedly localised species. Probably the biggest disappointment of the tour was failing to see a Mexican hairy dwarf porcupine at either of two cave complexes where they are known to sleep and, to make matters even worse, we had to crawl through pitch-black, tarantula filled caverns just to look. There was also a chance of a water opossum at one destination, but this was always going to be a long shot, and we should probably have seen white-lipped peccary on one of our jungle hikes, as we could hear them clearly, but our local guide decided that, instead of waiting quietly on the trail to see if they emerged, we would go in after them, which obviously created far too much noise and rather spoilt that opportunity. Although it does not fall into exactly the same criteria, as we never visited a site to search specifically for it, I am also unsure exactly how we failed to encounter at least one striped hog-nosed skunk, as their smell is extremely distinctive and we kept encountering this pungent odour, but without ever chancing upon the owner of such a characteristic aroma. Despite these occasional setbacks, our dedication, in combination it must be said with some extremely long days in the field, ultimately resulted in us observing at least one new mammal species on every full day of the trip, which might not sound particularly impressive, but is actually incredibly rare, certainly on a tour of this length. It has to be said, that on a couple of occasions we did have to cheat slightly and rely on some of Juan's bat roosts to keep the record going, and on one



memorable night, having seen nothing at all for six hours, we finally encountered a new mammal on the last five metres of road, but even so, I cannot remember the last time that this occurred and it is a record I very much hope to maintain when I return next year, however unlikely. Of course, in a country of more than 530 mammals, we obviously could have seen more, including another twenty or so carnivores, but in reality 71 species was already considerably more than I would have identified on my own, as I do not usually even include bat sightings and given that I would not have been able to identify most of the rodents without Juan's expert assistance, my final total would have been nearer 41 than 71. Not that I have ever overly cared about the exact number of mammals I find, as these trips are more about what you see and how well and this applies to all wildlife. Indeed, given the often impossible conditions at night when the vast majority of mammals are active, I probably spent more time on this tour photographing reptiles and birds and Mexico itself is equally impressive as a general wildlife destination. We were particularly fortunate regarding a dazzling array of snakes and lizards and this is a country where there is always something magical vying for your attention. As such, and instead of simply listing everything I saw and where, the remainder of this report will feature a few of my main highlights, some of which were selected on the strength of a location, as much as any individual sighting.



Volcanic Bunnies

Of the fifteen species of rabbit and hare that occur in Mexico, I would have the opportunity to search for five on this first trip, beginning with the barely-known and endangered volcano rabbit, which can only be found in small fragmented populations south of Mexico City. This is almost the definition of endemic and exactly why these mega biodiverse regions are so important, as this little rabbit exists nowhere else on earth and once it is lost here, it is lost to the world. As per its deceptively appropriate name, the volcano rabbit, which also happens to be the second smallest rabbit on the planet, only occurs on four volcanoes and is usually found between about 3,150 and 3,400 metres, although it has been recorded as high as 4,250 metres. Habitat destruction and other human activity, particularly in terms of farming, logging and even hunting, has severely diminished rabbit numbers and the last volcano rabbits endure across sixteen disparate sites within those four remaining mountainous strongholds. My search would take place on a relatively large community reserve at Volcán Pelado, which turned out to be an inordinately pretty mix of rocky outcrops, tussock mountain grassland and small patches of pine forest. The morning was crisp and bright and after a somewhat mixed tour in Scandinavia, I was just thrilled to be out doing what I love again, particularly as the volcano rabbit is such a distinct and unusual species. Not only does its existence on earth outdate man, but it is the only rabbit species able to vocalise and has very small litters of usually just two young. With short stubby legs and equally minute ears, it does not even particularly resemble a rabbit and looks more like a petite teddy bear than a bunny. Given their dwindling numbers and scattered population, finding one without Juan would clearly have been tricky, even if I had known approximately where to look, but he has visited this area on many occasions and was able to call on one of his legion of contacts to guide us. As such, we were watching a pair of these rather special lagomorphs within a few minutes of our arrival and although they were difficult to photograph in the thick bunch grass, we had an excellent view at less than twenty metres and I did eventually manage a couple of reasonable reference shots, one of which I have produced here. It was the best possible start to the campaign and during the course of our morning visit, we also encountered eastern cottontail, Mexican grey squirrel and merriam's pocket gopher, which was viewed running beyond its burrow system at a lower altitude on the way down. Bird species included a greater roadrunner and the Sierra Madre sparrow, another endangered endemic and again, a speciality of this important reserve. We were destined to be lucky with all five potential rabbits and hares, which are known as jackrabbits across North America, and I really do mean lucky, as only the eastern cottontail was viewed with any regularity. Instead, our white-sided jackrabbit and Mexican cottontail encounters all took place on a single evening on the outskirts of Totalco and the cottontail sighting was what you would call fleeting, as it dashed across the road directly in front of our headlights. You never complain of course, however you get to see something and our fifth and final bunny, a gabb's cottontail, was even more fortunate, given that it was spotted at the side of the road in truly biblical rain at Oxolotán, where, ironically enough, we had been spotlighting for a water opossum. I have no idea why it was sitting out in the open in that kind of desolate weather, but these are the breaks that you need on a tough tour and this one had begun as well as I could have hoped for.



Is That A Gopher In Your Pocket?

If our first major foray had incorporated some pretty spectacular scenery, the same could not be said of the public parks that we visited the next day, initially in the suburbs of Mexico City and then at Pachuca, which lies about 90 kilometres north of the capital. The parks themselves were all perfectly fine, but they were not wild and Juan had only included them to guarantee a few easy squirrel sightings, as well as hopefully a smoky pocket gopher, another endemic that we would not have an opportunity to observe as soon as we moved on. As predicted, the squirrels were all fairly straightforward and we quickly encountered rock squirrel, Mexican ground squirrel and the Mexican grey squirrel that we had already bumped into at Volcán Pelado. We even enjoyed an extended period with a typically statuesque burrowing owl, one of more than 30 owl species found in Mexico, but sadly, no gophers. For those who are not aware, pocket gophers are relatively sizeable burrowing rodents that live within extensive tunnel complexes. They are usually only spotted when they scurry from one entrance to another above ground, which is obviously neither that necessary nor, accordingly, that common. Instead, your best chance of seeing one is by positioning yourself at one of the burrows and staring intently, or indeed intensely, in the hope that a gopher head might suddenly appear, quickly followed by the remainder of the animal. As you can no doubt imagine, this can be a somewhat soul-destroying occupation at the best of times and it certainly does not get any easier in the middle of a playground, with young children running between the swings and the slide and their suspicious mothers carefully watching the strange gringo with the big camera. When your own guide, and the only person who can explain what you are doing when the police arrive, tells you to remain with the clearly sugar propelled kiddies while he searches elsewhere, you begin to fear that you may have picked up that nasty coloured wrong end of the stick. As it was, and to be entirely fair to Juan, he was right all along, as the burrow that he believed was active, actually was and after about half an hour, not to mention a few dozen concerned scowls, a beautiful rusty head and a huge set of teeth appeared, although not necessarily in that order. My relief was palpable, and although the gopher disappeared before Juan returned, he has seen these animals on countless occasions and at least I was able to prove why I was sitting in the middle of a crowded playground with a camera, as per the evidence that appears here.



Indiana Juan and the Clandestine Caverns

So far these trip highlights have appeared in chronological order and this brief diversion took place the next morning as we travelled east from Pachuca to Totalco, where I would go on to encounter Oriental basin pocket gopher and Perote ground squirrel. Both species are what is known as microendemic, which basically means that they only occur in a tiny region, and the ground squirrel is also endangered, as would become apparent as soon as I saw the severely degraded habitat in which it somehow clings on. Given his love of bats, on the way Juan suggested that we stop at the Barrancas de Aguacatitla cave complex, which is home to the Aztec fruit-eating bat and the greater long-nosed bat. I was more than happy to agree, as the caves descend deep into the most spectacular cliffs and reaching the bats was clearly going to be an adventure in itself. In fact, it looked as if it would prove to be impossible and we would have to turn back, as the final passage was completely flooded and I thought that we might have to leave all our equipment behind and swim into the caverns. As exciting as this would have been, it was not ultimately necessary, as one of the local guides opened up a type of rudimentary wooden sluice gate and the water began to drain away, revealing a secret path that beckoned us on. I almost expected, or perhaps hoped, to find Lara Croft on the way down and as we descended further into the gloom, I had visions of some evil mastermind, almost certainly a birder, closing the sluice gate and condemning us to a watery grave. Providentially, the mammals prevailed once more, as not only did we find both bat species, we made it out alive to tell the tale.



At The Zoo

Visiting a zoo to look for wild species may appear somewhat incongruous, but in reality, most zoos and botanical gardens are home to genuinely wild animals and when I told Juan that I was hoping to see a Mexican agouti, he did not hesitate to recommend the zoo at Tuxtla Gutiérrez, despite the fact that it had not been included on our itinerary and was in the wrong direction entirely. For all his undoubted qualities as a biologist, Juan's flexibility as a guide is legendary and nothing fazes him or is too much trouble, not even an unplanned journey and several additional hours driving. Juan really just wants everyone to see the animals they are hoping to see and, in any case, one of his colleagues informed us of a short cut that would take barely three hours. So we set off in excellent spirits and this enthusiasm was only slightly dampened by the 30-minute delay experienced at the first town we attempted to drive through, which was in the middle of its annual carnival. From that point on, it was difficult to estimate exactly what delayed us more, from the landslides, the flooding, the crashes, the routine maintenance, the domestic animals and mountain roads so narrow, one slip and you



instantly become part of the mountain. In fact, at times the journey was so mind-numbingly horrific, I was seriously tempted to ask Juan to do us both a favour and just drive over the edge. Even Juan was appearing moderately frayed and when we did eventually arrive, after, in my opinion at least, literally seven hours of hell on earth, the zoo was closed to all new arrivals. This is where I have Juan to thank for the fact that I am not serving several life sentences in a grim Mexican jail for multiple homicide, as Juan is generally calmness personified and within minutes, and about eleven phone calls, we not only had permission to enter, we had our own private guide. Mercifully, both from my own perspective and in terms of the rest of humanity, from this point on the agoutis were guaranteed and although the light was now beginning to fade and they were rather challenging to photograph, I was delighted to spend the last half an hour of daylight with these fantastic rodents, particularly after Juan had made so much effort on my behalf. As it was, our last minute decision also provided an outstanding and almost bonus view of a family of three white-tailed deer, which I had initially expected to observe at several destinations, but that we would actually not encounter anywhere else.



The Eye of the Beholder

It can often be the case that an apparent disaster will produce surprisingly positive results and this was again the situation when we attempted to visit the El Corchito Ecological Reserve, which is home to a population of northern raccoons, as well as three enticing cenotes, basically natural sinkholes containing permanent water. There are believed to be thousands of cenotes across the Yucatán Peninsula, some 2,200 of which have been officially registered, and although many occur deep underground, others, including at El Corchito, are situated on the surface in a glorious jungle setting. Given the outstanding quality of the water from which they are fed, rainwater slowly purified as it filters through the soil, the water of the cenotes is always crystal clear and it is therefore very easy to a) throw off your clothes and jump in and b) see anything else that happens to live in the water. That would usually be fish of course and at El Corchito we were more interested in raccoons and possibly a white-nosed coati, until, that is, we arrived and were immediately informed that our six-hour round trip had been for nothing, as the reserve can only be reached by boat and the water level was apparently too high for the vessel to dock safely. To rescue the situation somewhat, and to perhaps spare the life of the official who just shrugged when we asked when the reserve was likely to reopen, Juan suggested that we visit a couple of sites near Merida that he knew were good for a variety of bats, one of which, was also home to another microendemic species, the Mexican blind brotula. To be entirely accurate, the blind brotula actually lacks eyes, as opposed to being blind and this cavefish only occurs within certain cenotes of the Yucatán Peninsula. Although clearly not at the expense of visiting El Corchito, which we would finally reach a few days later, I had been hoping for an opportunity to look for one of these strange subterranean creatures and was thrilled when I did catch a brief glimpse of what appears to be an almost translucent organism. This outlandish appearance is due to a lack of pigment in the skin and whilst I can see why these fish are never described with any affection, to me this single little being was as memorable as any of the other precious life forms encountered throughout my travels.

Monkeys and Mayans

Of all the sites included on this first tour, I was particularly looking forward to our stay at the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, partly because this is one of the largest areas of essentially undisturbed rainforest in Mexico, and well beyond when you take the contiguous protected areas of the Maya Biosphere Reserve into account in neighbouring Guatemala, and also because the reserve is one of the most important Maya archaeological sites in the country. Abandoned at the beginning of the 10th century, for several hundred years Calakmul had been one of the most significant cities of the Maya civilisation and was home to up to 50,000 people. Rediscovered from the air towards the end of 1931, almost 7,000 ancient structures have been identified at Calakmul, including towering pyramids, the tallest is more than 45 metres high, temples, tombs, palaces and vast reservoirs, one of which, at 242 by 212 metres, is the largest Mayan example. Set within dense tropical jungle, the biosphere reserve protects the greatest abundance of flora and fauna in the country and is one of only two combined natural and cultural UNESCO World Heritage Sites in all of Mexico. We would have just one night and morning here, primarily because very little of the rainforest can actually be accessed from the main Calakmul archaeological site, but would spend far longer at two adjoining locations, Laguna Om and Tres Garantias, which are basically part of the same extraordinarily diverse ecosystem. Our single night included spotlighting along part of the entrance road to Calakmul, which produced our first views of grey fox, kinkajou and grey four-eyed opossum, as well as a stop at the Balam-Kú Reserve, a cave complex that is home to up to nine species and several million bats. Known, rather appropriately, as the 'Bat Volcano', Balam-Kú is a wonder in itself and every evening enthralled visitors watch as a multitude of bats pour out of the caves and turn the sky black. It was quite a spectacle and the next morning I was treated to another, as we explored the ancient splendour of a once lost civilisation. We did not have a great deal of time sadly, but we tarried for a few hours and made a point of climbing each of the main pyramids, from where the views across a luxuriant expanse of jungle were as breathtaking as you can imagine. Much as I had hoped when planning this section of the tour, we even encountered a group of geoffroy's spider monkeys at the summit of one of the pyramids, from where we had the rare opportunity to observe these distinctive and often curious primates at eye level. Having found a group of mantled howler monkeys earlier in the trip at Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve, we also completed the set of all three Mexican primates at Calakmul, but the Yucatan black howler monkeys spotted on the way out were observed in more customary fashion, with craned necks as we stared up from the forest floor.





Chaac Mate

In complete contrast to our brief but rewarding time at Calakmul, and by way of a sadly depressing postscript, we had arranged to visit another remarkable Maya site towards the end of the tour. Indeed, Chichen Itza, home to the magnificent Temple of Kukulcán, would be an entirely fitting way to conclude at least the cultural side of the trip, if that is, the rain would ever stop. Our first attempt ended in failure when they actually closed the entire tourist complex due to the extreme weather and when we tried again, on basically the last day available to us, the heavens opened within less than a kilometre of the site, at which point, we just looked at each other, shook our heads and turned around.



Right Place, Wrong Time

Calakmul, in the guise of the main biosphere reserve and the contiguous protected areas at Laguna Om and Tres Garantias, would produce several of the main highlights of the tour, but when you consider the astounding biodiversity that occurs here, we barely scraped the surface. Indeed, on just two relatively short jungle trails at Laguna Om, Juan's camera traps recorded jaguar, puma, ocelot, margay, tayra, grey fox, tapir, two brocket species, white-nosed coati, northern tamandua, white-lipped peccary, spotted paca, Central American agouti and a variety of opossums and other small mammals. Puma and ocelot appeared on both trails and all four cats were photographed within maybe a hundred metres of each other on the second, which we traversed both day and night. When I checked the times of some of the records, specifically the cats and tapirs, I could see that a jaguar had been within perhaps 250 metres of where we had been spotlighting at exactly the same time the previous evening and during the day we regularly came across jaguar, puma and tapir tracks. Ironically, given that we could see what we were missing on a daily basis, Laguna Om was our least successful major destination of the entire tour and of the carnivores that were appearing on the camera traps, we would encounter just a single male white-nosed coati. This improved significantly at Tres Garantias and on one of the hikes that I took without Juan to give him the opportunity to rest, I was able to sit and watch as ten white-nosed coatis individually crossed my path. Having missed them earlier in the trip at Perote, where they are spotted with reasonable regularity around the ground squirrel colonies, I did think that our opportunity to see a long-tailed weasel had probably disappeared, but we saw two over consecutive days at Tres Garantias, despite the fact that Juan had never seen them here previously. We would also encounter our only tayra here, although we were not certain of it at the time and on this occasion got very lucky, when an animal dashed across the road whilst we were driving, but so far away it was practically impossible to identify with any real conviction. I even thought that it might be a jaguarundi, which incidentally had been the only one of the five cat species that occur here, not to appear on any of the camera traps, but again it was too far to tell and we would never know. That, at least is what I assumed, but as we rapidly approached the area where the animal had broken cover, it suddenly reemerged and doubled back on itself, which almost never happens. That it was a tayra was now beyond any doubt and Juan would see another on that same day, as he drove to meet me after one of my solo walks.



Better Late Than Never

As I have already touched upon, our spotlighting activities, so generally a combination of long drives and shorter walks, were as challenging and unproductive as I have experienced and we often went several hours without seeing a single animal, let alone any of the major or rare species we were hoping to observe. The incessant rain was definitely part of the issue, but that literally comes with the territory and I have always considered rainforest to be the most difficult habitat in which to search for mammals, particularly in terms of the rare cats and other iconic carnivores that most visitors are desperate to find. It is usually just a question of persevering and trying to make your own luck and this was very much the case on this tour, when somehow, we kept salvaging a succession of seemingly desperate situations with last minute sightings. There were several examples of this, including an incredibly frustrating stay at Laguna Om, where three long nights had seemingly produced just one young grey fox on several occasions and a grey four-eyed opossum, which was actually spotted on the walk back to my room after another fruitless evening. We thought that was probably going to be it after an equally blank final night, but as we pulled off the forest trail to drive back to the accommodation, a nine-banded armadillo shuffled across the road directly in front of the vehicle. If an armadillo does not seem particularly impressive to anyone reading this, I have to say that to us it was everything and this is exactly what you have to do in these testing conditions, remain patient and dedicate as many hours as possible to the cause. Nothing else works unfortunately and the story was much the same in terms of our three-night stay at Tres Garantias, where we saw very little on our first night drive until I illuminated a Central American red brocket deer at the side of the road. It was a really nice view of an exceptionally attractive animal, but two evenings later it was still the only mammal we had encountered within basically one of the most diverse ecosystems in the Americas. We were finding more owls than mammals, including a stunning and typically serene pygmy owl, until mercifully the rain stopped, albeit briefly, and in that one short window on our last night, the highlights included two individual kinkajou sightings, a glorious view of an equally impressive spotted paca crossing the road in our headlights, the only northern tamandua of the tour, ambling happily along the edge of the forest, and a Central American agouti, which we disturbed whilst trying to see the tamandua again on foot. The paca was just the second that Juan had ever seen and although he spends barely any time spotlighting, it does still give you an idea of just how difficult some of these species can be. Even when the rain returned with a vengeance on the way back, we drove past two bedraggled Virginia opossums, an inquisitive grey fox and finally a big-eared climbing rat, which was more hopping around in my spotlight than actually climbing. As I describe in more detail further on, we did enjoy some nocturnal success at Sian Ka'an, but our final night drive would take place on the only track in the western part of the reserve, so much closer to a major urban region than the remote coastal area that we stayed at, which is basically paradise perched on the Caribbean. We had tried this road before, but not for long and after a completely desolate six hours, we both knew that we would not be returning. We literally did not see another living creature during the entire drive and the situation became so disheartening, that as we drove back to the sanctuary of our hotel in town, I stopped spotlighting and joined Juan in the front of the vehicle. To make matters even worse, we had not encountered a new mammal that day and were about to lose our record of having recorded at least one new species on each day of the trip. It was consequently a fairly gloomy end to the evening and with barely 150 metres of the forest dirt road remaining, the streetlights and tarmac were clearly visible, a spotted skunk somehow appeared in the middle of the road. I did not see it wander out, it was just there and after taking a quick look up at us, it disappeared into the undergrowth. The entire ridiculous episode probably lasted less than five seconds, but it could have been five hours as far as we were concerned and we both slumped back in our seats, too exhausted and incredulous to even speak. Juan would later mention that this was again only the second time he had ever seen this skunk, which had recently been split from the southern spotted variety, *spilogale angustifrons* and was now known as the Yucatan spotted skunk or *spilogale yucatenensis*.





Life's a Beach

Stretched along approximately 120 kilometres of exquisite Caribbean coastline, Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve is one of six UNESCO natural World Heritage Sites in Mexico and is home to a huge diversity of life across a wide range of habitats. Incorporating vast swathes of essentially intact rainforest, palm savannah, mangrove and pristine wetlands, the reserve is one of the largest and most important protected areas in the country and comprises an exceptional combination of terrestrial, coastal and marine ecosystems, all of which are intrinsically linked. Beyond the sand dunes and idyllic beaches, Sian Ka'an protects part of the vast Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, as well as deep seagrass beds, essential habitat for the small population of American manatees that endure here and were the main reason for our visit. For all the basic detail, and as you can imagine in terms of an unspoilt tropical forest nestled up to sandy Caribbean beaches, Sian Ka'an is a little patch of heaven and by no means the worst place in the world to look for wildlife. The actual rainforest is largely inaccessible, no bad thing in a way, and most of the terrestrial exploration involves a ravishingly scenic drive south from Tulum to Punta Allen, a great deal of which takes place along a spit of land with alluring blue waters lapping at both shores. As I have already described, there is another access road on the periphery of the western side of the reserve, but that section of forest is much closer to major human populations and is clearly far less undisturbed. I would only ever return to the remote Caribbean side of Sian Ka'an and although even on that road you would be unlikely to encounter a great deal when it is busy, as we regrettably experienced, it did look more promising late at night and would ultimately produce one of the best sightings of the tour. Having already chanced upon a young northern raccoon digging in the road, I thought for a split second that I had seen another just within the forest, but when my spotlight fully illuminated the entire animal, I could immediately tell that it was a margay. So having so far searched for almost three weeks, we had finally discovered one of the five felids we were hoping for, but whether Juan was going to see it as well was another matter entirely, as he was again driving and by the time that he was able to scan with me, the little cat had vanished. Fortunately, and to our immense collective relief, it reappeared within just a few seconds and Juan confirmed 'margay' the moment he saw it. As with both the spotted skunk and spotted paca, this was only the second margay that Juan had ever encountered and we both savoured good views for around a minute, as it is far easier to watch animals in dense jungle with binoculars than to photograph them, as per the photographic testimony that I have reproduced here. The only access road aside, most of the wildlife watching at Sian Ka'an takes place by boat and our two marine tours produced a series of common bottlenose dolphin, crocodile and turtle sightings, including an unforgettable view of a hawksbill turtle swimming beside our boat and just beneath the surface, in a spectacular kaleidoscope of colour and light through the crystal waters. Four turtle species occur here in all, hawksbill, green, loggerhead and leatherback and our avian highlights included both black and turkey vultures, multiple squadrons of pelicans and several ospreys, one of which was observed on the water from just a few metres. In some senses, Sian Ka'an could even be considered the best general wildlife area in all of Mexico, as the contrasting habitats produce an equally complementary collection of fascinating creatures and our visit included an outstanding array of life, from iguanas and other reptiles to scorpions and crabs, two different species of crocodile, American and the Mexican or morelet's variety, a multitude of fish and greater bulldog bats swooping low over the water in an attempt to catch some of them. It is also the only place in Mexico, at least that I am aware of, where American



manatees can be seen all year round, although the population is tiny and consequently sightings are not guaranteed. According to the latest count, which includes the four calves born this year, only 28 of these docile creatures survive within the actual reserve and they spend much of each day out at sea, beyond the mangroves and lagoons. As such, it is possible to watch them depart with the tide in the morning and there is a particular bridge that they are often observed swimming under. We tried this potential viewpoint on a few occasions without success and a far better option are the local guides, who have lived here all their lives and therefore know the seagrass beds where the manatees feed. As I have always maintained, there is never any substitute for local knowledge and our guide was able to show us a group of between six and eight of what are basically ultra gentle sea cows, which we spent roughly half an hour engrossed by as they surfaced for air around our boat. It was a magical experience for us both and for those who are not familiar with the term 'lifer', which originated in birding parlance, it refers to a species that an individual has just encountered for the very first time. Thanks to his great knowledge and hard work, I had already discovered a number of species endemic to Mexico, all of which were 'lifers' to me and I was now delighted to return the favour, as Juan had never visited Sian Ka'an previously and this was subsequently his first ever manatee sighting.



Run, Cougar, Run

As a child, two pioneering wildlife films had a profound effect on me, largely in terms of the way that I came to view the natural world and the hunters who somehow feel that they have the inherent right to dominate and kill whatever they choose. One was *'The Belstone Fox'* and the other was *'Run, Cougar, Run'* and both involved basically defenceless animals attempting to outrun and outwit the men trying to kill them. A red fox was the undoubted hero of the British made *'The Belstone Fox'*, which was an animal that I already felt a great deal of affection for and was used to seeing in my own country. Obviously enough given the title, a cougar, or puma as I came to realise it was known beyond North America, was the main protagonist of what was an American film and I knew next to nothing about these beautiful cats. I learnt as much as I could as quickly as I could and more or less instantly developed an affinity for this animal that has always remained. As ridiculous as I understand it to be, at times it has seemed as if this affinity has almost been reciprocated, as I have encountered these secretive animals in multiple countries and some extraordinary situations, including within just a few metres on more than one occasion. I never expect to see them of course and I never expected to see one less than in Mexico on this trip, where the spotlighting had already been incredibly tough and actually got worse towards the end of the tour, when even our supreme patience was failing to produce anything and we saw nothing at all at some locations. In fact, over the last five nights of the trip, all of which were spent at different destinations, we devoted approximately 25 hours to the cause and were basically rewarded with two major species. The first was the lone Yucatan spotted skunk that I have already described and the second, well the second was a puma. No matter where I travel, if pumas occur there, I will invariably end up staring at one and I think that Mexico is now the eighth country in which I have encountered my favourite cat. This one was seen on the penultimate night, when I caught it clearly in the spotlight and just had time to watch it look directly up at the light, at which point it leapt from all fours in a single characteristic movement and was gone. I tried desperately to get Juan to reverse just in case we could snatch another quick glimpse, and we tried the same area later that night and again the following morning, but all to no avail and Juan had sadly missed what would have been a first ever view of these captivating and athletic predators. He was delighted for me of course and as I mentioned at the time, there are a lot of pumas in Chihuahua and an entire host of amazing creatures for us to search for when I return to this phenomenally diverse region next year.









No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Puma	<i>Puma concolor</i>	Brief view at night at the Cuxtal Ecological Reserve.
2	Margay	<i>Leopardus wiedii</i>	One in the spotlight and then hiding at Sian Ka'an.
3	Grey Fox	<i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>	Eight sightings of nine animals at Calakmul, Laguna Om, Tres Garantias and on the drive to Chichen Itza.
4	Tayra	<i>Eira barbara</i>	One in the morning at Tres Garantias and another encountered only by Juan later the same day.
5	Yucatan Spotted Skunk ¹	<i>Spilogale yucatanensis</i>	Brief view of one crossing the road at night on the edge of Sian Ka'an.
6	Northern Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>	Two at night at Sian Ka'an and several small groups during the day at El Corchito.
7	Pygmy Raccoon	<i>Procyon pygmaeus</i>	Three at the edge of the mangrove on Cozumel Island and one at a restaurant by the beach.
8	White-nosed Coati	<i>Nasua narica</i>	A single male in a tree in the Laguna Om region and a family of around ten crossing a forest trail at Tres Garantias.
9	Cozumel Coati ²	<i>Nasua narica nelson ssp</i>	Two individuals at a restaurant on the beach at Cozumel Island.
10	Kinkajou	<i>Potos flavus</i>	Five individuals at night across three sites, Calakmul, Tres Garantias and Hacienda Chichen Resort.
11	Long-tailed Weasel	<i>Mustela frenata</i>	Daylight views of two individuals running across the road on successive days at Tres Garantias.

12	Northern Tamandua	<i>Tamandua mexicana</i>	One walking along the side of the road at night at Tres Garantias.
13	Yucatan Brown Brocket Deer	<i>Mazama pandora</i>	One in the Playacar area of Playa del Carmen.
14	Central American Red Brocket Deer	<i>Mazama temama</i>	A single animal in the spotlight at the side of the road at Tres Garantias and another seen only by Juan during the day in the Laguna Om region.
15	White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	A family of three among several species living wild within the jungle grounds of the zoo at Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
16	Mantled Howler Monkey	<i>Alouatta palliata</i>	A small group in the early morning rain at Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve.
17	Yucatan Black Howler Monkey	<i>Alouatta pigra</i>	A single animal on the drive to Calakmul and several at the Maya site, plus groups at Tres Garantias and within the grounds of the zoo at Tuxtla Gutiérrez.
18	Geoffroy's Spider Monkey	<i>Ateles geoffroyi</i>	Encounters at the Calakmul Maya site, Laguna Om and at the Punta Laguna Reserve.
19	Stump-tailed Macaque+	<i>Macaca arctoides</i>	Three introduced animals on Tanaxpillo Island in Lake Catemaco.
20	Central American Woolly Opossum	<i>Caluromys derbianus</i>	An extended view of a single animal at Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve.
21	Common Opossum	<i>Didelphis marsupialis</i>	Initially encountered at Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve and regularly thereafter.
22	Virginia Opossum	<i>Didelphis virginiana</i>	First observed at a small reserve near Cordoba and on several subsequent occasions.
23	Grey Four-eyed Opossum	<i>Philander opossum</i>	Two confirmed sightings, one on the jungle road to the Maya site at Calakmul and one by my room at Laguna Om.
24	Nine-banded Armadillo	<i>Dasypus novemcinctus</i>	A single animal crossing the road at night in the Laguna Om region.
25	White-sided Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus callotis</i>	Good views of two animals whilst spotlighting from the vehicle at Totalco.
26	Mexican Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus cunicularius</i>	Single animal running across the track whilst spotlighting at Totalco.
27	Eastern Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	One in the early morning at San Pablo Oztotepec and single animals at night and during the day at Totalco.
28	Gabb's Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus gabbi</i>	A brief view of one in the road whilst spotlighting in heavy rain at Oxolotán.
29	Volcano Rabbit	<i>Romerolagus diazi</i>	Two in the morning at San Pablo Oztotepec and a third seen by the local guide.
30	Mexican Ground Squirrel	<i>Ictidomys mexicanus</i>	One in a public park in Mexico City and several in another public park at Pachuca.
31	Perote Ground Squirrel	<i>Xerospermophilus perotensis</i>	Around twenty in two or three colonies at Totalco.
32	Rock Squirrel	<i>Otospermophilus variegatus</i>	Several sightings around Mexico City and Totalco.
33	Mexican Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus aureogaster</i>	One at San Pablo Oztotepec and several in a public park in Mexico City.
34	Deppe's Squirrel	<i>Sciurus deppei</i>	One each at Los Tuxtlas, Calakmul, Tres Garantias and the Hacienda Chichen Resort.
35	Yucatan Squirrel	<i>Sciurus yucatanensis</i>	One in the lodge grounds on the main entrance road to Calakmul and a second on an afternoon hike at Tres Garantias.
36	Oriental Basin Pocket Gopher	<i>Cratogeomys fulvescens</i>	Prolonged views of a single animal in the morning at Totalco.
37	Smoky Pocket Gopher	<i>Cratogeomys fumosus</i>	An individual observed in a public park at Pachuca.
38	Merriam's Pocket Gopher	<i>Cratogeomys merriami</i>	Two views of one beyond its burrow from the vehicle at San Pablo Oztotepec and another sighting by Juan only at the same destination.
39	Mexican Agouti	<i>Dasyprocta mexicana</i>	Several living wild within the jungle grounds of the zoo at Tuxtla Gutiérrez and another seen only by Juan at Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve.
40	Central American Agouti	<i>Dasyprocta punctata</i>	Several in the Playacar area of Playa del Carmen, one in the morning outside my room at Laguna Om and one on a night drive at Tres Garantias.
41	Spotted Paca	<i>Cuniculus paca</i>	One crossing the road in front of the vehicle at night at Tres Garantias.

42	Desmarest's Spiny Pocket Mouse*	Heteromys desmarestianus	Single animal running across the road whilst spotlighting at Tres Garantias.
43	Gaumer's Spiny Pocket Mouse*	Heteromys gaumeri	Individual at night for several minutes within the grounds of Hacienda Chichen Resort.
44	Big-eared Climbing Rat*	Otodylomys phyllotis	One by my room at Laguna Om, another at Tres Garantias and a single and a pair whilst spotlighting at Cenote Kax Ek.
45	Oaxacan Rock Deer Mouse* ³	Peromyscus amplus	A least two whilst spotlighting at Totalco.
46	Southern Deer Mouse*	Peromyscus labecula	Several spotlighting at Totalco.
47	Black Rat	Rattus rattus	Several in the large trash bins at a public park in Pachuca.
48	Toltec Cotton Rat*	Sigmodon toltecus	Individual crossing the road in the morning in the Laguna Om region.
49	Aztec Fruit-eating Bat*	Dermanura azteca	The main species observed at the Barrancas de Aguacatitla cave complex.
50	Greater Long-nosed Bat*	Leptonycteris nivalis	Fewer, but clearly observed within the same Barrancas de Aguacatitla cave system.
51	Black-winged Little Yellow Bat*	Rhogeessa tumida	Regularly observed whilst spotlighting at Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve.
52	Seba's Short-tailed Bat*	Carollia perspicillata	Two in a building near the river at Oxolotán.
53	Broad-eared Free-tailed Bat*	Nyctinomops laticaudatus	The only clearly identified bat of up to nine species and millions of bats emerging from the Balam-Kú cave complex near the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve.
54	Woolly False Vampire Bat*	Chrotopterus auritus	A single bat roosting at the Calakmul Maya site.
55	Greater Sac-winged Bat*	Saccopteryx bilineata	Another individual bat roosting at the same Calakmul Maya site.
56	Yucatan Yellow Bat*	Rhogeessa aeneus	Routinely encountered whilst spotlighting at Tres Garantias.
57	Great Fruit-eating Bat*	Artibeus lituratus	Observed whilst spotlighting at Xocén Reserve.
58	Common Big-eared Bat*	Micronycteris microtis	A pair flying in a cave near Xocén whilst searching for Mexican hairy dwarf porcupine.
59	Jamaican Fruit-eating Bat*	Artibeus jamaicensis	A colony of around 100 in an abandoned church near Merida.
60	Cozumelan Golden Bat*	Mimon cozumelae	One of four bat species in a cave complex at the Cuxtal Ecological Reserve at Merida, three of which were new for the trip.
61	Vampire Bat*	Desmodus rotundus	The second new species at the same cave system at Cuxtal.
62	Hairy-legged Vampire Bat*	Diphylla ecaudata	The third and final new species within the caves at Cuxtal.
63	Mexican Greater Funnel-eared Bat*	Natalus mexicanus	Commonly observed whilst spotlighting at the Amazili Reserve at Tzucmuc.
64	Hairy-legged Myotis* ⁴	Myotis pilosotibialis	Flying in and out of a cave whilst searching for another Mexican hairy dwarf porcupine at the Amazili Reserve at Tzucmuc.
65	Lesser Dog-like Bat*	Peropteryx macrotis	Single animal in a doorframe at the Ek' Balam Maya site.
66	Greater Bulldog Bat*	Noctilio leporinus	Observed from a bridge at dusk at Sian Ka'an.
67	Black Mastiff Bat* ⁵	Molossus nigricans	Single bat flying within the grounds at Hacienda Chichen Resort and then further bats emerging from a deep well.
68	Sowell's Short-tailed Bat*	Carollia sowelli	Low numbers within the cave system at Cenote Sac Ha at X-Can.
69	Merriam's Long-tongued Bat* ⁶	Glossophaga mutica	Several within the same cave system at Cenote Sac Ha at X-Can.
70	American Manatee	Trichechus manatus	Group of around eight for approximately half an hour at Sian Ka'an.
71	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	Tursiops truncatus	Two individuals on a boat tour at Sian Ka'an.

* All of these species were identified by the biologist Juan Cruzado Cortés, often by sight and in some cases with the assistance of photographs.

I have only recorded the first location that each bat was observed at and many were encountered at multiple destinations.

Every species was observed by us both with the exception of the puma, gabb's cottontail, smoky pocket gopher and gaumer's spiny pocket mouse, all of which were seen only by me. The puma would have been a first for Juan and the gopher and pocket mouse were identified from my photographs. In turn, Juan encountered Mexican agouti, red brocket deer, merriam's pocket gopher and tayra without me.

¹ Split from the southern spotted skunk, *Spilogale angustifrons*.

² Considered a full species by some sources.

³ Formerly considered a subspecies of *Peromyscus difficilis*.

⁴ Formerly considered a subspecies of *Myotis keaysi*.

⁵ Formerly considered a subspecies of *Molossus rufus*.

⁶ Formerly considered a subspecies of *Glossophaga soricina*.

A number of rodents and bats were observed but not identified, including up to eight additional species emerging from the Balam-Kú cave complex within the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve region.

Whilst I do not generally include dead animals on these reports, I did make a note that we also discovered the body of a coyote near Totalco, principally because these adaptable canids are spreading south and are now being regularly observed on the Yucatán Peninsula.

+ The Stump-tailed Macaques observed on Tanaxpillo Island in Lake Catemaco Lake are descendants of a small group introduced there by the University of Veracruz in 1974 as part of a research project. Although the monkeys originally thrived, they are now fed by dozens of tourists on a daily basis and are so obese they can barely move. The same unforgiveable fate has befallen a troop of native spider monkeys on a nearby island and I would strongly urge visitors to avoid the entire armada of tourist boats that ferry people out to feed these unfortunate creatures, as this is one of the most unpleasant tourist style wildlife encounters I have experienced.







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