



## Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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### **ECUADOR – December 2014**

Our next stop would be Cayambe Coca Ecological Reserve, where we would be looking for the two remaining target animals for the trip, spectacled bears and mountain tapirs, with the assistance of Armando Castellanos, a biologist who has been studying spectacled bears, or Andean bears as he prefers to call them, since 1995.

The President of the Andean Bear Foundation, Armando was the first person to successfully return captive Andean bears to the wild and his research on bears and mountain tapirs has provided a critical insight into the behaviour and ranges of both species. As with the majority of researchers and conservationists, Armando tracks his study animals with the aid of radio telemetry, which means that each bear or tapir has to be captured in order to fit the collar they can be traced by.

Unfortunately for Armando, this worked against him on our visit, as I had already made two specific requests prior to my arrival. Firstly, I wanted to try to get as close as possible to each animal and I also only wanted to search for bears and tapirs without collars, which basically meant that Armando could not find them using the conventional and far easier telemetry method. To assist we had two local trackers with us, Felipe and Oscar, who proved to be invaluable during our six-day stay. Both appeared to be cast entirely from granite, they were impervious to rain and could walk uphill all day at altitude without pausing. They were also extremely adept at finding tracks and following an animal for long distances, particularly tapirs. In some respects this was both a blessing and a curse, as we would lose them for long periods throughout the day as they searched alone and would then have to rush to where they last saw an animal in the hope that it had not already secreted itself within a patch of thick forest. This was not always easy, as parts of Cayambe Coca are at an altitude of more than 4,000 metres and some of the climbs were reasonably steep. Getting to each location was not in itself a major problem, but getting there quickly before the animal could spot us and disappear was far more challenging, particularly as the vast majority of our sightings were from below and we could generally be seen climbing slowly towards each animal.

As you would expect, the bears were far more skittish than the tapirs and we ideally needed to spot one in a lower valley to provide us with the element of surprise necessary to get close. This did

happen on one memorable occasion, but sadly natural events beyond our control took over and we were thwarted once again. As it was, and despite the very best efforts of our two trackers, we had far more success from the road than searching on foot, as six of the seven bears that we encountered were spotted either from our vehicle or on walks along the road, as well as one of our two tapirs.

Armando had made it clear that tapirs were much harder to find than bears and this was substantiated on our very first afternoon when a large male bear was spotted from the vehicle and we proceeded on the first of many stalks directly up the side of a steep hill, which would typically turn into futile and frantic chases as soon as the bears became aware of our presence. We were never actually chasing bears or forcing them to flee and it was more a case of them constantly walking and that, even when moving relatively slowly, the bears were much faster on all fours than we could ever hope to be on two and covered even sheer slopes as if they did not exist. As often with nature, at times I felt very puny, although on this first occasion we did get to within about 100 metres and I was able to take a few photographs before the magnificent animal ambled quietly away over the brow of the hill and out of sight.

It was another amazing start and the adrenalin was still coursing through our veins as we descended to join an ecstatic Armando and our happy guides. The rest of the day proved to be uneventful, but on the next our extraordinary good fortune continued and we found a mountain tapir. Within less than four full days we had encountered all three major target species for the trip, as well as an oncilla and a long-tailed weasel. Tours rarely start this spectacularly and we had Felipe and Oscar to thank for the tapir sighting, as they found the animal for us and then kept it in view as the three of us climbed to meet them.

It was all going really well until James and I took up different positions in an attempt to intercept the tapir, which was moving again by this stage. Instead of us both having a great view of this highly distinctive mammal, James found himself isolated at the top of a hill while I worked my way down and managed to get within about 20 metres of the tapir. Photographs were still more or less impossible due to the long grass and unfortunately Armando was not aware of my exact position and attempted to inform me where the tapir was from the summit of the hill that James was perched upon, despite the fact that I was sitting watching it just a few metres away. The ensuing commotion alerted the tapir to my presence and it slipped into a section of forest and beyond my view. In a way this was a blessing in disguise, as it gave James the opportunity to join me at the bottom, where we waited patiently for the tapir to reappear. Of course wildlife viewing rarely goes strictly according to plan and instead of taking the easy route directly past us, the tapir climbed up through the thick tree cover and emerged half way up the hill. At first we could only see its head, but at least James had now seen it and over the next few minutes we were able to savour stunning views of probably the most captivating of the four known tapir species. The long grass again hampered my attempts to get decent photographs, but I did manage to get a few reasonable shots and this was as close as we would get to a tapir during our entire stay. We did have another chance a few days later when a second tapir was spotted on the edge of the forest by one of our eagle-eyed guides. Unfortunately the animal was again very high and, despite the fact that tapirs are relatively easy to get close to if you move quietly and stay downwind, it was not going to be a simple matter to get near enough to take the picture that I wanted.

We climbed most of the way before Armando suggested that we climb up and around another hill to look down on the animal without being observed. This made sense and I rarely go against the advice of my guides, but on this occasion I could see that the position that Armando wanted to take was still too far for the photograph that I was trying to take. I therefore decided that James and I would cross the lower hill directly towards the tapir, which was still sleeping at the forest edge. This was working well and we were gradually getting closer, when we were suddenly undone by our own stealth, as we almost stepped upon a white-tailed deer lying in the tall grass and the startled animal ran directly

towards the tapir, bellowing its traditional and all too familiar alarm call. We did not even get a chance to see the tapir run, but it obviously disappeared instantly and I had to return sheepishly to Armando, who providentially had more sense than to remind me of his earlier suggestion and the fact that we had wasted the best part of five hours on that one gamble to get closer. In reality the attempt was not really a waste, as my instinct has worked on plenty of previous occasions and for me the fun is being in the wild with these creatures and attempting to see them at close quarters. I would always rather try and fail to see an animal on foot than simply drive around all day and view them at distance from a vehicle.

Our luck, with tapirs at least, had run out, as a group of workmen following behind us stopped to mention that a tapir had crossed the road just a few moments after we had driven by and another tour group later told us that a tapir had stopped in the middle of the road less than twenty metres from their tour bus. This is the way that wildlife viewing can go and I was still extremely satisfied with our sightings, particularly as we were seeing bears reasonably regularly and had also encountered a second long-tailed weasel by this stage.

In fact, one of the reasons that I had decided not to climb any higher for the tapir was due to a similar incident with a bear the previous day, when we had again spotted the animal from the road and had gone round and up another steep hill until we were level with the bear. On that occasion I had suggested that we hold our position on the side of a hill that I thought the bear would probably pass, but Oscar advised that we scale another ridge for a view overlooking the unsuspecting animal. We did as instructed only to watch the bear disappear directly past the exact spot that I had wanted to remain at. Of course there was no guarantee that the bear would have gone that way had we stayed and for all the knowledge, experience and instinct that you rely upon in these situations, success with wildlife can still ultimately depend on a huge element of good fortune or otherwise, as in this particular case.

To further illustrate the point, on another day James and I were walking alone while the rest of the group were scouting, when I spotted a bear mooching leisurely along the valley floor beneath us. Finally, this was the perfect opportunity that we had been waiting for, as I could see exactly where the bear was heading and knew that it would be a simple matter to run around a nearby hill and position ourselves directly in its path. We were just about to move when the bear began sniffing the air and, to our complete consternation, suddenly took off in the opposite direction. At first I thought that one of our own party had probably disturbed it, but then James saw a second much larger bear approaching from the left. Two bears within the same landscape was more than we had possibly hoped for and we still had a good chance of getting close to the second, as long as it continued to walk along the valley and not directly up the mountain beyond.

Sadly, the gods were not with us and the bigger bear instantly turned and began climbing away into the distance. There was no hope of us catching it, but we still had an excellent view and, to our complete amazement, a third bear appeared and began following the second. As this point the rest of the group arrived and the five of us sat watching the two bears, the first had now completely disappeared, for more than half an hour. The third bear was much smaller than the second, which Armando identified as a large female. At one point she turned and ran at the smaller bear and we guessed that it might be a case of a young male following the female in an attempt to mate. However, given the significant size difference between the two, it more looked like a mother chasing away her young from the previous year, which I have observed on a couple of occasions with black bears in North America.

Whichever scenario was correct, and despite the fact that we had been unable to approach, it was a remarkable privilege to watch three different bears interact in this way. We saw two further bears during our stay, one on foot on an extended hike and another from the vehicle, and our final tally of

seven was more than I could possibly have hoped for when I first contacted Armando. Moreover, none of the bears or tapirs had collars and all were found due to a combination of our guide's tracking skills, excellent collective spotting and a large slice of good old fashioned luck.

Although the weather was as unpredictable as I have ever known, one moment you could be basking in sunshine and literally a few minutes later the entire horizon could be obscured by an impenetrable mist, and we probably lost about a third of our field time to heavy rain and persistent cloud cover, Cayambe Coca is a stunningly beautiful reserve encompassing a wide variety of distinct habitats that change dramatically as you climb higher into the mountains. Named after the snow-capped Cayambe Volcano that towers over the park at 4,690 metres, Cayambe Coca is largely a Páramo ecosystem, which is a specific term for a region in the Neotropics above the tree line but below the permanent snowline. Although the lower levels before the actual reserve are carpeted in thick luxuriant forest, as you ascend, so the trees disappear and you begin to encounter the shrubs and grasses so typical of an alpine biome.

The highest point we reached was 4,152 metres and to do so we passed a number of the picturesque translucent lakes that decorate the reserve. The grass was waist high in places, which made walking far more difficult and the conditions underfoot were even worse, as many areas that appeared perfectly traversable in the tall grass, were in fact relatively deep marsh and more than once I quickly sank beyond my knees. Falling over became a fairly regular occurrence for both myself and James and on one less than memorable occasion, I plummeted several metres when I involuntarily discovered that a dense patch of shrubs were in fact sheltering a deep, very muddy crevice. I came out looking like the creature from the black lagoon, but apart from a shredded pair of trousers and a rather dented ego, no real damage was done and my camera fortunately survived the fall.

Although we only saw five different mammals during our stay, the forest rabbit or tapeti was the fifth, we more or less exclusively concentrated our efforts on bears and tapirs and did not search in suitable areas for other animals. Nor did we spotlight at night, as Armando was not set up for this and you currently cannot do so in the reserve. This was one of the issues that I discussed with Armando when we began to plan future tours and the various options that will allow him to raise much needed funds for his important research and conservation projects.

Of the other possible mammal species, culpeo or Andean fox is the most likely to be observed and indeed I barely know a person who has visited Cayambe Coca without seeing one. On the first day that we entered the reserve, one of the rangers mentioned that a fox had been spotted just a few minutes earlier and each successive day I expected to bump into one. However, not only did we not have any luck with this usually common animal, but none of the other groups that I spoke to saw one either. If this was a surprise, missing some of the other resident mammals was less so, as dwarf red brocket deer, northern pudu, puma and oncilla all supposedly occur in or around the area, but all would be extremely difficult to find, even if you were looking specifically for them.

The glistening trout aside, which were visible in large numbers in the crystal clear streams, the other real wildlife highlight of our stay was a great horned owl, which appeared at exactly the same spot two days in a row. When visiting Cayambe Coca, Armando uses the small town of Papallacta as his base, which is more famous for its hot springs, despite the fact that it sits just a few kilometres from such an important ecological reserve. The town is pleasant enough, but it quickly became apparent that Armando's research is seriously underfunded and that he relies almost entirely on donations and gifts of often outdated equipment. No funding is made available for either his research or for the rehabilitation and eventual release of rescued bears and everything is currently being operated on an almost non-existent budget. Armando does not even own his own field vehicle and although he has an arrangement with a local who lets him use a 4 x 4 when it is available, this is often not the case and on three of the six days that we spent with him, we had to basically use a local taxi service to

explore the park. This is far from ideal given the experience required to drive in such a demanding environment and one of the vehicles that we used was in such poor condition, it could barely climb the more difficult hills and made an appalling commotion as it laboured up a succession of ever steeper gradients.

Armando was recommended to me by two eminent conservation biologists working in the Pantanal, Patricia Medici, who also studies tapirs, and Arnaud Desbiez, a giant armadillo researcher. Both are friends of mine and I have provided several photographs of lowland and baird's tapirs for a book that Patricia is currently working on. I therefore knew that their recommendation would be a serious one and it is clear that Armando is dedicated to the conservation of both the Andean bear and the mountain tapir, the latter of which is already endangered. However, his work is evidently being hampered by a severe lack of funds and I consequently intend to partner Wild Globe with his Andean Bear Foundation and to try to provide him with the guests necessary to help fund his important work. Armando hopes to be able to lead several small groups each year and his expeditions should be a perfect blend of conservation and environmental tourism, where his guests will have the opportunity to see two iconic animals in the company of one of the foremost experts in his field and, at the same time, contribute to the continued survival of the very species they are searching for.

The trips will be a unique experience for most people and Armando and I have discussed the possibility of him offering night drives for both his own guests and other tourists visiting Papallacta, as tapirs are far easier to observe in the evening than during the day and some tourists will simply not be able to manage the tougher walks at altitude that James and I participated in.

In addition, Armando is hoping to instigate a compensation scheme for local farmers who have cattle killed by bears, as Andean bears are adept at taking cows and the farmers generally retaliate by killing the bear involved. Others sadly get their retaliation in first and kill any bears they encounter, although this is slowly changing and a compensation scheme of this kind should further improve the situation. This needs to happen sooner rather than later though, as it has been discussed for some time now and attitudes towards bears will not improve until farmers are certain that they will be reimbursed for any losses.

I am hopeful that the majority of my future tours to Ecuador will include time with Armando at Cayambe Coca and further details of his Andean Bear Conservation Project can be found on the Conservation page of my website. On our final morning Armando kindly accompanied us to the airport at Quito for our flight to Coca, gateway to Yasuni National Park and the mighty Amazon Rainforest.

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