

Costa Rica 2019

Manzanillo. We arrived on the Caribbean coast in the evening after 36 hours of travel. None-the-less we had a beer with Daniel who rents a small house and then sublets to us. He has a little 4 years old daughter, Sara, who wears white butterfly wings all day long and speaks English. In the morning after a game of dominoes with S and D we went walking in the nearby forest. Daniel pointed out a green and black dart frog and an eyelash pit viper who was sunning itself on a limb about 4 metres off the ground.



The look of victory. Why does she always win?



The Eyelash Palm Pit Viper

The next day after putting on gumboots we trekked up to a cabin where we

were to live for the next four days. In the morning we woke to howler monkeys. They sound a bit like a dump truck on the steep grade of a gravel road. Our cabin is a roof and floor with just a few haphazardly placed walls. There are no other people around. That is a good thing because the shower is on the front porch and not meant for those with sensibilities.

There are lots of sounds around us. We are not very good at identifying them. Is that a monkey, a bird or a frog?

Some are quite melodious, but the larger birds are just raucous · like the Montezuma Oropendola (Golden Oriole).

We set off on our first walk in the jungle. It is primary forest with tree trunks that are up to 3 metres in diameter. The path winds through a wall of ferns and vines which little spots of sunlight manage to shine through. Some of the trees are covered with spikes that would make them impossible to climb. Others have sheets of roots that fan out and criss-cross forming little bathtubs of water. In one of these was a colony of dart frogs. The black and green dart



Squirrel Cuckoo

frogs can be seen carrying a tadpole on their back which they place in a brachiopod pool of water 20 metres up. They are only mildly dangerous unless ingested. Not like the yellow dart frogs of Columbia where one ten millionth of a gram will kill a human. The locals there use them on the tip of their blow gun darts (hence the frogs name). The stricken animal then tumbles paralyzed out of the tree.

It is steep going and we take little pauses after every few steps. We aren't really going anywhere so there's no rush. The animals move around anyway ·

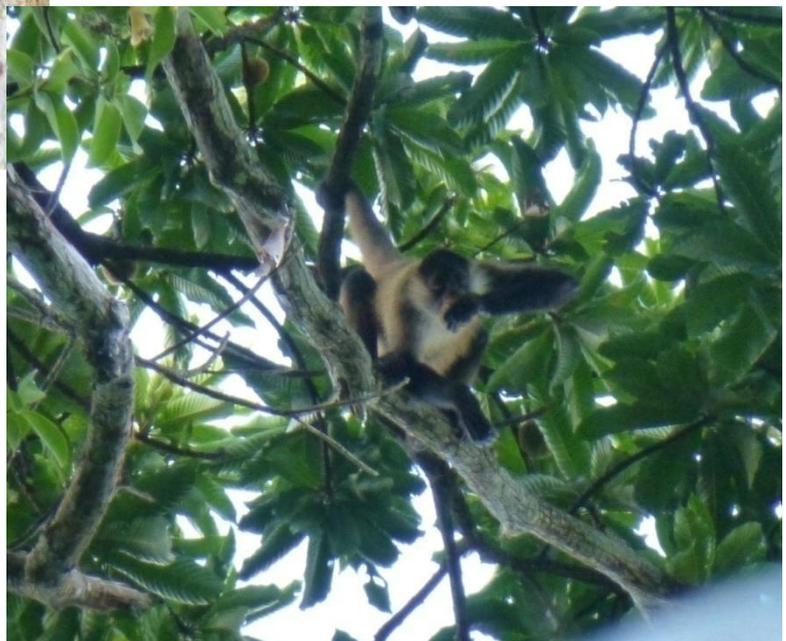


Black and Green Dart Frogs

so we let them come to us.

It is a little difficult to see far, but Karin managed to glimpse a spider monkey through the foliage.

Then Karin spotted a Keel Billed Toucan. I don't know if you are aware but 'spotting' is associated with honour. No spot. No honour. So far my only spots were the sweat spots on my T-shirt.



Spider monkey

But then, through the smallest window in the leaves, I spotted a flowing veil of pale hair of the woodland jungle fairy. Actually, it is the seed strands of the Walker Palm. It starts out as a giant green bean pod (seen to the right on the tree) then splits open revealing the long tresses.

We took a picture of leaf cutter ants. Their trails can go hundreds of metres into the forest. The trail is completely clean of any rubbish. Their story is interesting. The leaf cutters give their produce to a group of specialist ants that lick and clean the leaf piece. Then it goes to another group for chewing to make a ball of gunk. This is passed to a special chamber where a fourth group puts fungus spores on it which then grow into mushrooms for eating. The mushrooms are susceptible to mould but the ants have a fungicide that they smear on the product. Interestingly when ants find a new kind of leaf, it is delivered to a lab group that tests it. If the documentation is OK, they send a regiment of several thousand cutters to get more. Something odd that I don't understand is that some ant trails are covered with pieces of cut leaf. Maybe it is a way of making a highway to follow and they have little twig signs that say 'Go Slow' and 'Curve Ahead'. I also noticed that at 6 am in the morning a trail will be covered with ants and then at 7 am you can't find a single ant. Do they send out a signal and everybody drops their leaf bits to hide from the sun? That would explain how some trails are covered with leaf bits. Much research still needs to be done.



Walker palm

The fellow we rent the cabin from warned us that there is only one dangerous animal in the forest. "The pit vipers." I said knowledgeably.

He shook his head 'No.'

In Norwegian he would have said 'Pit Viper. Pytt Pytt.'

It is the Fer·De·Lance snake. It can grow up to 2.5 metres long and is aggressive. It will attack you and moves quickly. Karin and I glanced at one another and thought 'gosh and golly gee' or something to that effect. Later in the day he showed us the moulted skin of a large specimen. 'I found it while clearing brush around your cabin. It's a big one judging from the scales. (!!!)



Bullet Ant on our veranda.

Also beware of the bullet ants (2.2 cm) they have the most painful bite and there is a toxin in the pincers'



Turkey Vulture - wingspan 2 metres but weigh only 2.5 kg.

the floor we found the pod in pieces. We now know that when the sun shines on the pod it will burst and throw out thumbtack like seeds with great gusto. The Jabillo tree was used to make a sea going canoe in the old days. It has a latex-like sap which makes the tree difficult to work with because if you get some in your eye it will blind you. This is probably to protect the tree from insects (and boat builders). There is an antidote according to old wisdom - put breast milk in



Grumpy Howler Monkey

Well, despite all the pain and death the view is terrific. Lots of hummingbirds that feed on the hibiscus flowers. Black and Turkey Vultures visited a dead branch in front of our veranda as did the Curassow - the largest bird in Costa Rica.

We picked up an odd looking nut in the forest and brought it home. It is the Jabillo seed pod. We placed it in the cabin and went outside. Suddenly there was a loud bang like a firecracker. We rushed back in and on



Jabillo seed pod

the eye.

Jaguar

breast milk? No. Just ordinary.

In general the animals seem quite lively if not downright happy, especially the birds. There is one exception - the howler monkey. He has a sour look that says 'I should have bought those Coca Cola stocks when I had the chance.'

Cahuita · Here there is a park on the edge of the

Caribbean. To a large extent you are walking between a swamp interior and a sandy beach. Our guide, Carlos, pointed out an iguana that was about my size. It was a female ready for mating because she had turned yellow.

On her back she had a little grey male of unimpressive proportions. Carlos lifted a Palm leaf and showed us a tiny bat that was only 4 cm. long. There are a number of species of tiny bats in Costa Rica.

We were also shown medicinal plants. One of these was for

‘cleaning dirty kidneys.’ I asked him if the medicine tasted good · ‘No medicine tastes good, my friend. That’s why it’s called ‘medicine’. Carlos was brought up with 15 brothers and sisters and his mother would say, ‘you better do that or you will get your medicine.’



Iguana mama

We have found two animals to be quite elusive · not because we haven’t seen them but because they are so hard to get on film. They are the hummingbirds and the sloths. One because it is so quick and the other because it is so slow.

The slow one rolls itself into a furry black ball on the top of a tree. Finally in Cahuita there was a sloth in motion (slow motion) that was (miraculously) in a short tree. I begin to be impressed with how much animals struggle. The sloth is a case in point. It is infested with mites. It has been claimed that they can die of mites. So it has moths living in its fur who eat the mites, BUT the sloth has to defecate on the ground so that the moth can lay its eggs in the dung. It is a deal between them – at great risk to the sloth. (Some moths have mouths, others don’t like the Atlas and Luna).



Three Toed Sloth



Hummingbird

The fast one (Hummingbird) was captured by sitting for an hour next to a flowering bush. This was in La Selva, a research station in northern Costa Rica. A forest ranger said that you have 3 seconds to aim, focus and snap. I found the best was to focus on a particular flower with your camera in burst modus and hope that the hummingbird would choose to land there. We seldom agreed.

Selva gave us a lot of surprises · several peccaries (small forest pigs that are quite aggressive in large groups). A strange 'starburst' plant and a large turkey like bird · the Crested Guan.



Starburst



Crested Guan

Selva is a bit expensive. So we found a beautiful B&B nearby with a property abutting the park.



Great Blue Heron

It is run by Mariano. The property has a river running by which you access through a bamboo forest. Mariano arranged a boat trip down the river which is lined with sand banks and trees festooned with Spanish moss. The river is probably the best way to see wildlife because you can see long distances. We caught sight of a caiman, a great blue heron, a Sunbittern among others. The river is full of fish and they can make a bubble bath of activity at times.

Mariano pointed out a fish that was over a meter in length. He once asked his

father if it was a shark. The father answered, 'Don't be a moron.'

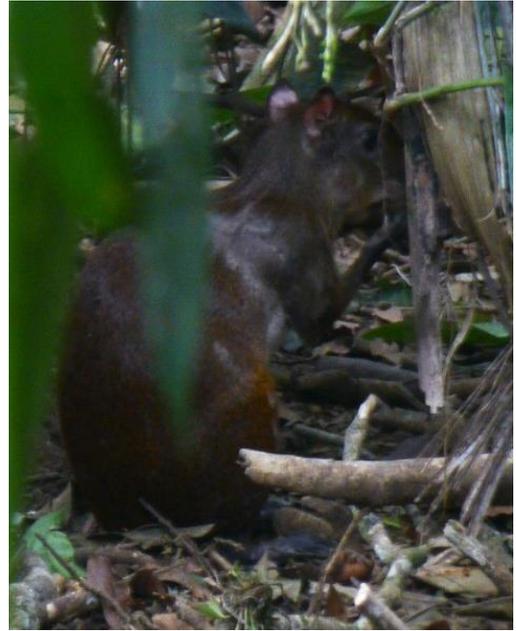
We booked 3 times for longer stays at Mariano's place. He said he would really appreciate a review, so we wrote three. It really is a great place but a little inaccessible and in a part of Costa Rica that is little travelled. It's our last night in the north

and also Valentines day. So we had some homemade cards with wine on the veranda as the sun set.

Costa Rica has no military. They also have a gasoline tax that goes to planting trees. The electric company has the unusual business practice of charging more per watt the more you use. All in all the Costa Ricans seem to have their head in the right place.

Quetzal

Traveling through the southern mountains, we got off near a road called Cerro de la Muerte (Hill of Death). The reason it has this name is that it is at 3450 metres and people trying to cross in the old days often froze to death. This is an area where there is the legendary bird called the Quetzal. The Quetzal is a symbol of freedom because it is said that it will kill itself if captured.



The shy Agouti

We were told that if we walk down a steep path we will come to a wild avocado tree where the Quetzal will come to eat between 4 and 5 o'clock (???really??) It was quite warm and we set off with our cameras in T-shirts and shorts. Karin settled down under the tree and I found a spot on an embankment where I placed a plastic chair and could look straight across at the tree. This was a little after 3 pm. The forest around is quite beautiful with the gnarled trees, flowers and humming birds. Gradually though, it grew colder. The sun slipped behind the mountain and though the sky was still bright the air was chilly. Finally, I picked up my chair and went down to Karin,

‘I’m cold. Let’s go home.’

‘But it’s only 4 o’clock. They could come soon!’

I’m thinking ‘Maybe his watch stopped.’ Also, this is a bird of legends. It’s a little like a Costa Rican Leprechaun.

‘Wait until 5.’

‘OK.’ I trudge back up to my embankment with my plastic chair and goose bumps feeling very ‘muerte’.

Suddenly there is a flash of red and white like a wild pinwheel. ‘What the ...?’ I scan the tree with my camera. There is definitely something odd. There seems to be something looking like very long tail feathers. See photo on right. Too long. Has to be some kind of Spanish moss.



Spanish moss?

Then again there is the somersaulting effect and there he is - the Quetzal. Really, there are not



words to describe the effect on your senses. My first camera pictures are just nonsense jerking. The bird looks like it is putting on a performance. It leaves its perch by tumbling backward to avoid dragging its tail on a limb. Then it swoops around to look for wild avocados which it then eats inside the foliage. When it finally got full, it came into the open and allowed us to take pictures. I ended up with 182 snaps.

The Quetzal is unusual for many reasons. The bird's tail is a meter long. Its head is very flat faced. The feathers on its back look like a jacket worn around the blue shoulders.

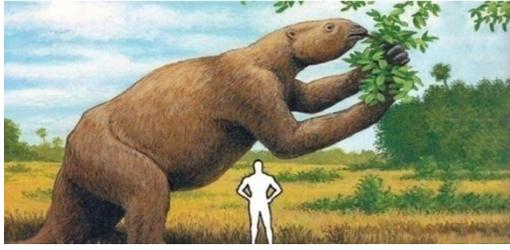
Corcovado is a national park on the Peninsula of Osa. It sticks out from the mainland like a

The Resplendent Quetzal

hunchback which is the meaning of *Corcovado* in Spanish. Most of the peninsula is national park. Like on the Caribbean there are trees with four inch thorns - the pakhote tree. Why do they have thorns? There is a theory. About 7 million years ago there were 6 metres tall giant sloths. They ate leaves just like the sloths of today. Because of their size and calorie requirements, they could devastate



Pakhote tree



Giant sloth 4 tons

educating the public because the biggest threat is poachers.

a whole forest. The only way the pakhote could survive was by evolving thorns. When the trees are too large for a giant sloth to climb they lose their thorns.

Corcovado has about 300 tapirs. They weigh up to 300 kgs. They are on the road to extinction, but there is an effort being made to save them - mainly by

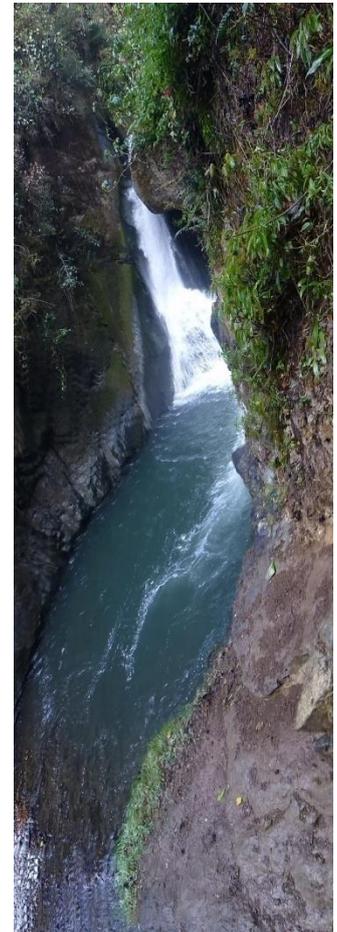


Trail quite rough

Rio Savegre. We went on a trail that was to take us to two waterfalls. At the first waterfall we saw the American Dipper bird which builds its nest on the edge of the cascading water. Then off we went to the second waterfall. This path became quite steep and rough and we needed the ropes that were placed along the trail to not slip off.

It seemed odd that the swaying suspension bridge above the 2nd falls had some hand rails missing and there were holes in the boards, but we tremulously got across.

We then started to go down the side of the falls. We didn't make it all the way, however, though there was a rope that allowed us to rappel a short distance. The rock was getting wet and you would have been soaked before reaching the bottom. We found out later that the hotels were advising against going to the 2nd waterfall as the path was no longer maintained. Probably also due to the fact that 4 tourists had drowned when they were knocked out when trying to swim in the cascading water that was falling from 15 metres up.



Difficult descent

Dos Brazos. There is a moth species in Costa Rica where the male metamorphoses from caterpillar to moth, but not the female (according to local knowledge – large pinch of salt required). Instead, she wraps some twigs around herself and then spins a cocoon around that again. The assemblage looks a bit like a pine cone. She can still stick out some feet to move the cone around and she can pull part of her body out in order to eat leaves, but otherwise she will never leave her little house. The male moth can mate through a hole in the bottom of the cone. She will give birth inside the cone. Soooo girls, if you ever get into a claustrophobic relationship remember the Costa Rican moth. It could be worse.



Cramped quarters

Bolita. We stayed in a camp full of young people and living a bit primitively. You have to hike there carrying your own food supply.

There are just curtains separating the sleeping quarters. You can hear everything another couple says and you realize that they are just like you are, when out of the public eye - a little like fruit bats when they try to settle down in a palm tree in the morning and are squabbling for position... 'You put your wet socks on my T-shirt!' 'MY toothbrush is the blue one!' etc.

Finca de Nada (Farm of Nothing). We arrived by boat and were dropped off on a beach with a wall of jungle behind. Our cabin is not far away. It has no door. Makes sense. Who needs doors when there are no walls. In the evening I read aloud from the kindle which has bugs crawling on the screen. A big grasshopper lands on the text. "Could you move your leg, I was reading that sentence.'

In the morning we hauled two kayaks down to the beach and set off along the shore. The sun was just coming up and the horizon was surrounded by huge pink-tipped cumulus. We aren't expert paddlers and there was a bit of bumper car action, but the currents kept us moving. And there was lots to see. A big manta ray leapt out of the water and a sea turtle surfaced nearby to watch us drift by. On shore the capuchin monkeys were throwing coconuts onto the volcanic boulders that were partly submerged in the sand. In the top of a tree a flock of toucans seemed to be squawking about something or other. After a couple of hours we returned for breakfast. The day was spent inspecting the surrounding jungle and taking pictures of whatever happened our way - a scarlet macaw, a light blue Morpho butterfly and a bat in the rafters. At sundown while sipping wine on the beach, a coati tumbled out of the jungle onto the beach and with doleful eyes limped toward us with his tail lowered. Usually animals in the wild look quite vigorous and avoid us, but this guy looked like he wouldn't have minded a cuddle.

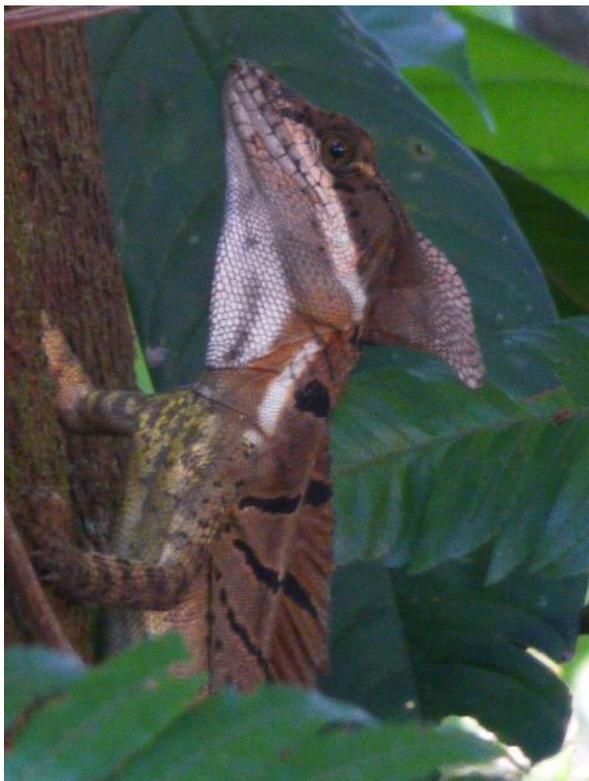
Avatar. This was our last stop before heading home. It's rather plush compared to our usual accommodations - the roof is held up by carved totem poles, there are large mirrors, a swimming pool and coffee always available.

Still the wildlife creeps in with its little surprises. That mirror that I mentioned had about 200 bugs on it that you can peruse while shaving in the morning. There was the most beautiful creature one morning with long antennae and about 8 cm in length – the harlequin beetle.

Of course just a hundred metres away civilization gives way to the teeming life of nature which is full of surprises. We came across a trail that seemed blocked off by a tree



Harlequin beetle



trunk and therefore not much in use.

Taking this, we immediately saw a sparrow hawk and then a whole troop of squirrel monkeys. Then we noticed something strange and new. It was a ghost-like creature that floated up and down through the trees. A very delicate insect which seemed to have whirling wings with yellow tips. It drifted across the path. It was about 15 cm. long. We have no idea what it was. Then Karin spotted a new kind of iguana which appeared to be wearing a bicycle racing helmet.

Next was a 300 year old garlic tree with a large vine that an elephant could swing on. Then there was a scarlet macaw nest in a hollow trunk high above the forest floor with the large birds poking their heads out.



Scarlet Macaws in their nest

Often we can see animals, but it is impossible to get a picture because they are high up or silhouetted against the sky. However on our last day we captured this picture of a Chestnut Mandibled Toucan brilliantly lit by the morning sun and drinking from a pond of water where a limb had broken off a tree.



Drinking Chestnut Mandibled Toucan

Were we ever disappointed? Never.

Until next time,

B and K



Green Basilisk Iguana



Green Iguana



Peccary



Frigate bird with friends



Capuchin



Summer Tanager



Gray-necked wood rail



Tarantula



Road Side Hawk



Brown Vine Snake



Jesus lizard



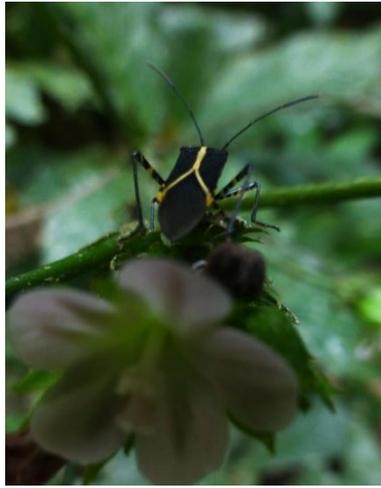
Volcano Hummingbird



Green Tree Anole



Stingless Honey Bee Nest



Stink Bug



Velcro leaf (sticks but is not sticky)



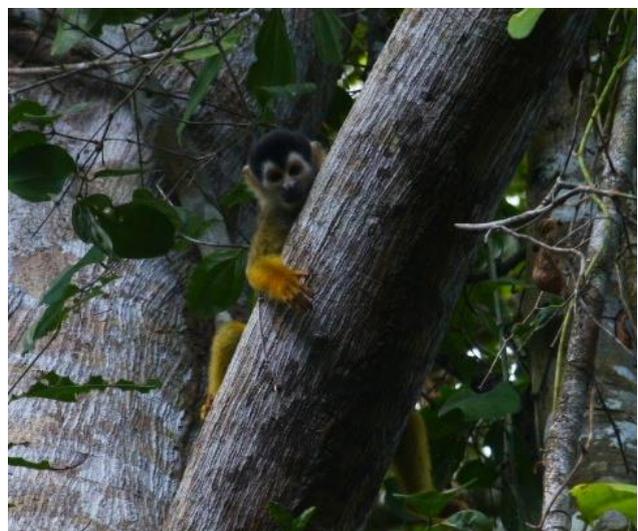
Blue Tailed Lizard



Yin Yang plant



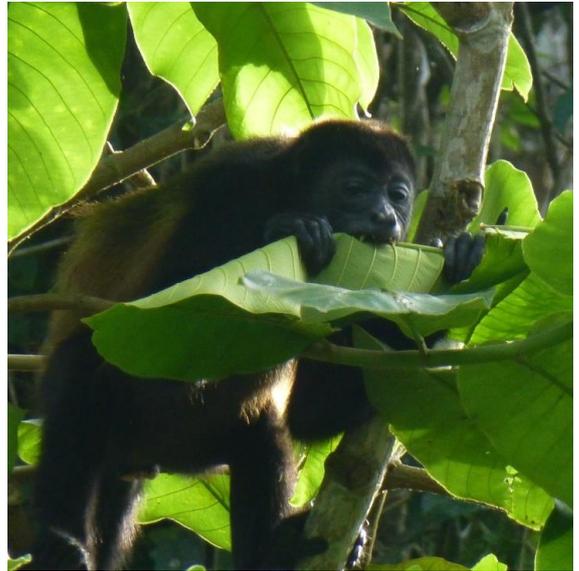
Red poison dart frog



Squirrel Monkey



Horse? No. Praying mantis.



Howler



Hummingbird



Dragonfly



Sparrow



Great Blue Heron



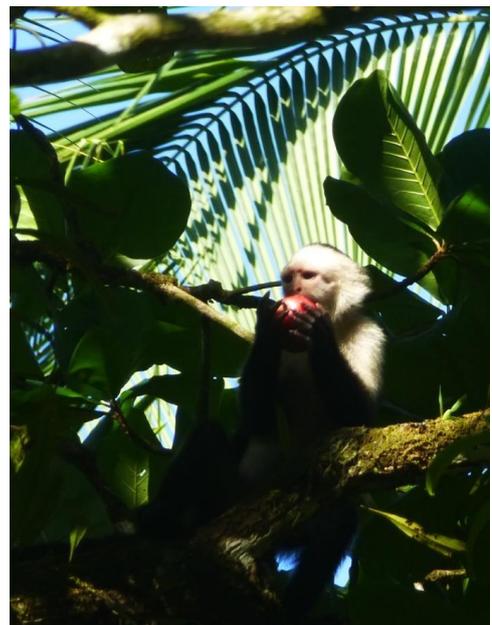
Hummingbird



Sceloporus malachiticus



Ameiva festiva



Capuchin



Morpho moth (brilliant blue in flight)



Mystery whirly bug



Basilisk Lizard

