

## MY ENCOUNTER WITH A WILD ANDEAN BEAR.

By:  
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Very few people have had the opportunity to come face to face with an Andean Bear in the wild. Generally they are hunters and farmers, and many of them describe the encounter in the following manner: "The bear instinctively climbed the nearest tree and looked for a place to sleep in the treetop, nervously groaning and blowing. After awhile the fear caused the animal to defecate and urinate, and also to bend and break branches to simulate making a nest. If the bear was shot or trapped for a long time, it was capable of jumping from the highest branch in the tree to an empty space in its desperation to escape".

Many of these declarations were confirmed when tracking rehabilitated and liberated bears in the Maquipucuna Reserve, located in the northeastern region of the Pinchincha Province, Ecuador. To the best of my knowledge, no bear has ever hurtled itself from the top of a tree. How different was my encounter with reality! The encounter happened at the Alto Choco Reserve, located in the Intag Zone of the Imbabura Province, Ecuador. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of July of this year I left from the base camp located at 2.145 m, with my assistant, Gustavo Tapia, to inspect bait, which had been placed to attract and trap a wild bear according to the plan of my Project. Upon arriving at the site, situated in the Andean forest at an altitude of 2.650 m, and two hours by foot from

our camp, we thought that a bear had just eaten the food at that very moment. We looked up and, to our surprise, a bear was beginning to climb a tree, so we watched curiously.

I quickly took some photographs, and just by looking could see that it was a female, weighing about 60 Kg and with a thin build relative to her fatter counterparts kept in zoos. Given the opportunity, we decided to trap the bear in the tree, having previously used this method to capture the liberated bears in the Maquipucuna Reserve. Unfortunately, all of our capture equipment -- darts, tranquilizers, balance, net, etc. -- were at our base camp. Although distance was our greatest obstacle, Gustavo decided to bring the equipment as fast as possible, while I stayed below the bear. With the passage of time and after about 20 minutes had passed, the animal became agitated and tried to descend. My yells and abrupt movements in the vegetation caused the bear to climb again. However, she searched for a way to get to the nearby trees to descend. I watched her jump from one branch to another, separated by spaces of up to about 1.5 m, but I made all the noise I could so she would not descend. Fifty minutes after our encounter, the bear broke and threw down medium sized branches from both sides of the treetops. After 65 minutes, she was in the far end of a branch, which she bit so it would break. Then she clung to the branch and balanced so her weight would help. She fell about 7 m, hugging the branch, over a large quantity of suro (*Chusquea* sp), which actually cushioned and broke her fall. She did not suffer any impact against the ground,

because she was able to jump up from the cushion, about 2 meters high. I watched stunned as the bear ran to escape. As it always seems to happen in any emergency, Gustavo arrived, totally exhausted, 10 minutes after the bear took off. I do not know if it was good or bad that we tried to trap the bear. If the equipment had arrived on time, it would be a different story. In any case, it proves that an Andean bear can jump from the top of a tree in its zeal to escape. What intrigues me about this encounter was that when the bear broke the branches in the treetops, it appeared to me that she was looking for and found a place

with leafy vegetation from which to effectuate her fall. In any case, it is burned on my retinas and lives on in my memory, my first encounter with a wild andean bear... ✍️



