

Central African Republic – April 2018. Trip report by Charles Foley.



What can you say about Dzanga Bai. Personally I think it's the 'Serengeti of the forest', as surely no other forest environment anywhere on the planet offers the same possibility of seeing large herds of stunning forest animals all in one place. Forest Elephants, Forest Buffalo, Giant Forest Hog, Red River Gog, and, of course the marvellous Bongo, can all be seen here. And I can't think of any other site in Africa where one can watch such large numbers (sometimes over 100) of Forest Elephants drinking, interacting and socializing in one area. It's a place that any nature lover and certainly all mammal watchers need to have on their 'must visit' list. My WCS colleague, Andrea Turkalo, had been studying the elephants in the Bai for close to 20 years and I figured that one day I'd make it out there to visit her on a work trip. However, we always end up meeting in boring places like NY or Nairobi instead, and last year she moved back to the US, putting the kibosh on the visit idea. When some friends in Tanzania mooted the idea of visiting, I decided the time was right and one had to seize the day. Bear in mind that the trip is eye-wateringly expensive; it's very far from anywhere and one has to pay for a charter flight to get there (the lodge has stopped taking drive-in guests, as any problems encountered on the roads ended up in their lap). But I convinced myself that it would be the perfect place for me to turn 50, and sending the kids to college is probably an over-rated idea anyway...

I went with five other close friends who I'd known for many years and who all work in the tourism industry. Ethan Kinsey, who leads safaris mostly in Tanzania and the Virungas, did most of the leg-work in liaising with the lodge and organising our visas. [Speaking of which, the Virungas offers far cheaper Mountain Gorilla watching than Uganda and Rwanda, and takes kids as young as 12, unlike most other places where you have to wait until they're 16. We'll probably do that over a long weekend next year when

our youngest turns 12. The Park is currently closed because of kidnappings of tourists, but hopefully it opens up again soon.]

The Central African Republic has had its fair share of instability, with large areas currently controlled by rebels, and these days it is seemingly held together by UN peacekeepers. Almost all of the planes at Bangui airport were UN aircraft, except for a few private charter aircraft. The UN troops and one of the main rebel groups started shooting at each other in Bangui a few days before we arrived, but, as is often the case with these types of incidences, they sound a lot worse in the news than they actually are on the ground and we experienced no problems during our time there. However, there is no telling how long the status quo will last, so I suggest you prioritise a trip soon if you want to visit.

I believe that previously people flying into CAR to stay at Sangha Lodge had to spend a night in Bangui, as the Air France flight arrived too late for the charter to make it safely to the lodge. However, Kenya Airways now flies from Nairobi (at some expense mind you), and the arrival and departure times mean you just need an hour or so at the airport. One of Rods fixers will meet you at the airport and guide you through the process. Oh I do love myself a good fixer! Its great to see them nudging, cajoling, facilitating, threatening and shouting their way through the airport, changing their demeanour according to the status of the person they're dealing with. This chap was great, and had ample opportunity to demonstrate his skill set. From the moment you go through arrivals till the time you get on your plane you pass through no fewer than 14 different desks, and your boarding pass, itinerary and passport end up covered in some wonderfully printed stamps. My favourite stop was having to wait for a mini-bus to drive us the 25 yards from the terminal to the plane.

An important point for those of us living in Africa, or places where CAR embassies are thin on the ground, is that the lodge can organise your visa for you. US citizens don't need them, but as a Brit I did, and our only other option was dealing with the nightmare that is the French Embassy in Dar. Just make sure you bring a passport photo with you as you'll need one to attach to your application.

A South African couple, Rod and Tamar Cassidy, arrived in CAR a decade ago on a birding trip (they are top notch birders), and decided to stay and set up a lodge. And thank goodness they did, because the only other real option is a government run lodge which is right next to the local village, meaning you'd almost certainly develop an intimate knowledge of the current Congo dance tune favourites emanating from the local discos if you stay there. I can't even begin to imagine the hassles one has to deal with running a lodge in a remote part of CAR, but Rod and Tamar seem to take it all in their stride and are there to stay. They have acquired a fairly large concession area, with a number of bais that they are intending to develop, but at the moment most of the activities concentrate within the nearby National Park (Bai visits and gorilla trekking) and on a series of trails they have opened up around or close to their lodge.

The highlight of my trip, and probably everyone else's too, are the visits to Dzanga Bai. The Bai is in the Park, and to get there you drive for about an hour, then walk for 40 minutes. As you approach the Bai you start hearing elephant sounds, and then you walk out of the forest to the research platform and the Bai opens up before you. We had specifically chosen to come in April because that is apparently that is the best month to see Bongo, and we weren't disappointed. The very first animals I saw in the Bai, as I started to climb up the platform, were two male Bongos chasing each other. They were part of a herd of 31 Bongo that spent the whole day in the Bai – or at least the time we were there, from morning to mid-afternoon. Rod says that Bongo are sometimes seen in March and May, but for some reason April is the preferred month for them to visit the Bai. People were seeing them approximately once every three days in the Bai in April, and we only saw them on our first day there.

I had never seen Forest elephants before so this was a key target species for me on this trip. I wasn't disappointed. There were mothers with calves, young bulls, old bulls, and even a mother with a calf a few hours old. The elephants spend a lot of time extracting minerals from the deep pools in the Bai. The adults extend their trunks as deep as they can into a pool, often kneeling and pushing their heads into the water, sometimes right up to their ears. This way they can probably reach 8 foot or deeper into the hole. They then blow air out of their trunks, which presumably helped release the minerals from the mud at the bottom of the pool, which they then carefully suck up in their trunks and deposit in their mouths. At one point there were over 100 elephants in the Bai, drinking, splashing mud and interacting. However, apparently these high numbers are unusual, and probably a symptom of poaching pressure in other parts of the ecosystem. Certainly we saw at least one family group with a demographic structure that clearly indicated the recent loss of an adult female.

The Sitatunga have disappeared from the Bai this year, but, in addition to the elephants, there was a small group of Forest Buffalo using the Bai pretty much the whole time, and we also saw two Giant Forest Hogs and 18 Red River Hogs, although the latter only at night. As others have mentioned, the sweat bees can be pretty annoying, so be sure to take a mosquito head-net with you if you're susceptible to them. Most of our party put on the nets after a while, although two didn't seem bothered by them.

We arranged through the lodge to spend a night at the Bai, which I would highly recommend. Apparently permission is at the discretion of the Park, but we were granted this seemingly without any hassle. We were walked to the platform at about 4 pm and left there with food, mosquito nets and some cushions. There is a video camera in one corner to keep an eye on you, but I don't know if it was working or not. You are not allowed to spotlight from the platform as it scares the hell out of the elephants, so if you want to make best use of a Bai night, I suggest you try to time your visit to coincide with a full or fullish moon. If that doesn't work, then use a thermal camera. We brought a Pulsar XQ30V model with us and it worked like a charm in this environment. We were able to keep an eye on all animals entering and leaving the Bai, and once they were within 200 yards or so, we could make out pretty much every detail of the animal. We watched a herd of 18 Red River Hogs come in and start rooting around for 2 hours or so, and could

easily distinguish them, even from the far end of the Bai, from the mother and juvenile Giant Forest Hogs that were also there at that time. The elephants of course stand out like light houses. I woke on my 50th birthday to the sound of Hartlaub's ducks flying into the Bai at 4.30 am, causing the elephants to trumpet loudly, and to the scene of elephants moving in and out of a dense mist that didn't lift until about 9 am. Overnighting in the Bai was certainly one of the highlights of my career in wildlife, and I hope they keep this option open for general tourists.

Most people staying at the lodge also visit Bai Hoku at least once, and probably twice during their trip; once to see the gorillas and once for a Bai walk and to see the Agile Mangabey group that the Park has habituated. You reach this Bai after a drive of about 2 hours or so on a pretty poor road. Seeing any gorilla in the wild is amazing, and this didn't disappoint. The second trip to the Bai was less rewarding. They take you to spend an hour walking along with mangabeys, but I think for most people 15 minutes would probably be enough. Credit to them for trying to diversify the range of activities though. We then walked through the open Bai's for about 90 minutes in the hot sun, and predictably saw very little wildlife. The area around Bai Hoku had the most wildlife sign of any area of the Park (other than Dzanga Bai), and I suspect that if you were able to walk there in the early morning and late afternoon, you would see a lot of interesting animals. However, there is currently no provision for tourists to spend the night in the area. Hopefully they'll change that in the future, as most of the people in our group would have dropped this second trip to Bai Hoku, particularly with the 4 hour round trip drive.

We did a couple of other guided activities – to a Picathartes nesting site and an area of large trees – and for the rest of the time we did night or day walks on a trail network around the lodge. You need patience to see the animals in this area, but over time we racked up most of the more common species. Just make sure you're alert to the presence of elephants on the trails – you can normally hear them from some way off. There was quite a bit of elephant activity along the Babongo river trail when we were there, although we never actually clapped eyes on them. Forest Elephants can be quite aggressive and can do a number on you if they catch you; two of my colleagues have been flattened by Forest Elephants, and I preferred not to make it a hat-trick. Running into elephants on an evening night walk, when you have your wits about you, is one thing, but bumping into them when you've got up at 4am and are half asleep is another, so I restricted my early morning walks to areas where I was less likely to meet them. If in doubt I suggest you take a Ba'aka guide from the lodge with you.

Jon mentioned that the Army ants were very bad when he went, and there were still a fair few on the move in April. I took gum boots, as I had discovered during my time working on Mt. Kilimanjaro that Army ants have a hard time climbing up gum boots, and I had no problem with the ants. Ankle high boots will do the trick, although the full-length boots were good for crossing streams. On another note, two of our group members came down with falciparum malaria after the trip, so you're best off taking anti-malarial prophylaxis for the trip (they didn't). Also the lodge is only 300 miles or so from the site of the latest Ebola outbreak in DRC. Not a problem for visiting, but something to think about if you're planning on trapping and messing about with fruit bats in the area.

And on a final note: Bloody squirrels! The whole damned family is turning into a nemesis group for me. Not only do they seem to hide whenever I look in their direction, but when I do get a good view, the taxonomy is so hazy that I can't identify the animal. I swear my next PhD student is not going to have anything to do with elephants and is instead going to have to sort out African squirrel taxonomy!

Species seen:

Western gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*). Bai Hoku.

Guereza (*Colobus guereza*). Heard at Sangha lodge.

Agile mangabey (*Cercocebus agilis*). Habituated troop at Bai Hoku.

Grey-cheeked mangabey (*Lophocebus albigena*). Saw two individuals, one on road to Bai Hoku and one at Bai Hoku itself.

Crowned guenon (*Cercopithecus pogonias*). Saw troop on the Pitta trail at 6.30 pm.

Moustached guenon (*Cercopithecus cephus*). One troop on road to Bai Hoku, and another seen from boat on Sangha river.

Putty-nosed guenon (*Cercopithecus nictitans*). Seen twice at Sangha lodge and once on road to Bai Hoku.

Milne-Edwards' potto (*Perodicticus edwardsi*). Common on the paths close to the lodge, where we saw one or two a night.

Southern needle-clawed galago (*Euoticus elegantulus*). Three seen on the Loop Trail on different evenings. A fairly large and slow-moving galago.

Demidoff's dwarf galago (*Galagoides demidoffi*). Abundant on the trails around the lodge. Typically found lower down in the vegetation than Thomas's galago, although very quick so difficult to get a good look at. We heard very few vocalizing.

Thomas's dwarf galago (*Galagoides thomasi*). Abundant on the trails around the lodge. Heard many calling.

Hammer bat (*Hypsignathus monstrosus*). Single animal seen in tree outside dining room at lodge.

Fruit bats. I'm still working on the identification of at least two different species that I was able to get photos of.

Black Hawk bat (*Saccolaimus peli*). Seen most nights at dusk flying over Sangha river. One seen flying over Babonga river at early dusk.

Taphozous spp. One in the anomalure tree on the way to the waterfall. Unfortunately we hadn't brought a powerful torch with us, so I couldn't get a good view of it.

Hipposideros spp. As above. Definitely a Hipposideros, but what species I've no idea.

Long-nosed mongoose (*Herpestes naso*). Crossing road on way to Dzanga Bai in late afternoon.

Giant forest hog (*Hylochoerus meinertzhageni*). Two individuals at Dzanga Bai.

Red river hog (*Potamochoerus porcus*). 18 animals at night in Dzanga Bai.

Blue duiker (*Philantomba monticola*). One on Loop trail at lodge at night, and one during day at Bai Hoku.

Bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus*). 31 in Dzanga Bai.

Sitatunga (*Tragelaphus spekii*). One juvenile at Bai Hoku.

African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer nanus*). One herd permanently resident in Dzanga Bai.

Black-bellied pangolin (*Uromanis tetradactyla*). Two released individuals seen along main road to lodge.

Forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*). Many seen in Dzanga Bai.

Red-legged sun squirrel (*Heliosciurus rufobrachium*). Two seen on Pitta trail.

Thomas's rope squirrel (*Funisciurus anerythrus*). One seen on Babongo river trail.

Lady Burton's rope squirrel (*Funisciurus isabella*). One seen on shortcut trail.

Congo rope squirrel (*Funisciurus congicus*). One seen outside Rod's house at lodge.

Green bush squirrel (*Paraxerus poensis*). One seen on lodge grounds.

Beecroft's anomalure (*Anomalurus beecrofti*). One seen on Loop road.

Lord Derby's anomalure (*A. derbianus*). One seen on main road at night, and mother and young seen in tree near waterfall.

African brush-tailed porcupine (*Atherurus africanus*). One ran between our group on the Loop road at night.

Beaded wood mouse (*Hylomyscus aeta*). One caught at lodge. Several others, probably of this species, seen along the Loop trail at night.

Little wood mouse (*Hylomyscus parvus*). One seen on Masesi's trail at night.

