

## SIERRA LEONE 2018

After the successful trip of Jon Hall in Sierra Leone I wanted to try and see a **Pygmy Hippo** or just to see footprints (seeing signs of a rare animal in its habitat is important for me and not nothing). When I wanted to book my stay in **Gola National Park** and **Tiwai Island Reserve** I found me in front a wall as it is often in **Western Africa**. Despite my many emails it proved very difficult to contact somebody. They are websites, but nobody responds. Finally I was in contact with Benjamin Barca who is working in **Gola**. Benjamin gave me a lot of informations and after that I bought my flight for a stay the 2 first weeks of March. I had asked like others that salt was provided at one place to attract ungulates and it seemed easy to arrange it in **Gola**. **Tiwai** never responded at this time. Benjamin asked me to contact him again at the end of the year, what I did. And I was very surprised to be told I had to cancel my flight (not possible and quite expensive), because **Gola** will be closed at this time due to elections. Finally Benjamin told me it was risky to come, but I decided nevertheless to go there. Benjamin told me I could only stay 3 nights in **Gola**, then I had to go **Tiwai** for 3 nights, return to **Kenema** and then to **Gola** for 3 nights. I agreed. Benjamin booked my stay at **Tiwai**. Just before I left France, finally Tiwai responded to my last email.

I flew the 28<sup>th</sup> of February to **Freetown**, arriving at the beginning of the night. I arranged my transfer by boat, then by taxi to Freetown itself (the airport is on one island). As often in this part of **Africa**, things are not easy, you have to bargain and are outrageously overcharged for everything. You have also to be all the time looking at your belongings. The following day I reached the bus station by moto taxi. I saw twice how thieves are violently beaten. I arrived in **Kenema** in the afternoon, catching another motorbike taxi to reach **Gola National Park** Office. I was surprised that nothing seemed to have been arranged. I was asked to come back the following day at 10am! The following day it was the same. When the guide was present, the driver was not and vice versa. I couldn't get any informations concerning the Pygmy Hippo. Finally we started (me, the driver and 2 technicians-guides) after 12am! The drive was without problem. Arriving in **Sileti** I asked to walk to the bridge where is the **Hammer-Headed Fruit Bats** lek. It took a little more than 2 hours. The 2 guides set up the tents and prepared the food (see Jon's trip report about that). But I was ready to accept anything. The most important was the wildlife. My guides had little knowledge about the wildlife except monkeys. At dusk the **Hammer-Headed Fruit Bats** began to call and you can't miss them, they are so noisy. I had good look of them. They are even too noisy (I used ear plugs to sleep). In the evening I spotlighted around the camp and saw: 1 **Thomas's Galago** and 2 **Demidoff's Galagos** and a **Potto** (poto sub-species). The following morning I went with my guides looking for wildlife and of course signs of Pygmy Hippo. I identified a **Red legged Sun Squirrel** and saw nearly on the ground the huge tail of a squirrel (West Palm, Slender ???). But how to identify these species and others squirrels, flying squirrels and rodents when you see different pictures for the same species (Handbook of the Mammals, Squirrels of the World, African Mammals of Jonathan Kingdon. We saw

(like every day in Gola), often glimpsed **Diana Monkeys** and **Western Pied Colobus**. Thanks to one of my guide I saw a dry **Pygmy Hippo** poo and only a handful of old footprints. View the very few signs of Pygmy Hippo I asked to my guides that we leave to camp at T8 transect . But they never accepted and wanted we walk to this place in the afternoon and come back by night (a waste of time and energy). We went there and saw no signs of Hippo and we came back before the night (hopefully because they didn't find immediately the way to go back). We slept again near the bridge with the noisy Hammer-Headed Fruit Bats. In the evening I saw 2 **Pottos**.

Early morning we left to a place called the camping-view point which is near the river. My guides told me it was good for **Pygmy Hippo**. There, after lunch I asked to my guides to look for signs of **Pygmy Hippo** upstream and on both sides of the rivers while I did the same downstream. Only 150m from the camp I found fresh footprints of the night. When I came back to the camp my guides told me they had found nothing and that it was too difficult to reach the river (one of them stayed at the camp and the other went fishing for all the afternoon like most of the days). I went upstream and saw it was quite easy to reach the river. I spent a good part of the evening at the spot with Pygmy Hippos footprints but just saw bats and something swimming upstream (may be a snake). At the camp I saw a **Thomas's Galago** and a small rodent. I also heard like during each night **Western Tree Hyrax** that I didn't managed to see.

The day after we returned to **Sileti**, glimpsing several time the same monkeys. There I took a motorbike taxi to **Kambama** (it is not necessary to return to **Kenema** even with a car). In **Kambama** I was welcome by a lady and soon met Alusine recommended by Jon Hall. He is a very nice guy, but also a very good liar. He told me that to see a Hippo we had to go by boat by night and told me he had seen it many times like this (at the end of my stay he recognized it was not the true, telling me they are poachers (but not from **Kambama!**). He also told me that finding footprints of the hippo was very easy! We crossed the Moa River to Tiwai Island. Just at the jetty there was a few footprints of **Pygmy Hippo** (of a week ago told me Alusine). The camp is nice with clean tents. But the food is unpredictable (sometimes fresh and "good", sometimes old and with dry cold rice; the breakfast can arrive at any time between 7 and 9, the lunch between 12 and 3pm...). I don't say more but agree people were nice. Concerning the better security in Tiwai than in Gola I can laugh.

So the 3 evenings we went by canoe by night, twice downstream (I was afraid for my equipment as there are rocks and the river is sometimes fast running) and once upstream. Of course we never saw any Hippo, seeing Fishing Owl several times plus an **African Dwarf Crocodile**. So not so bad.

The first evening after coming back from the canoe ride, I asked by night where was the trail to the Research Station where Jon Hall saw the **Anomalure**. I went alone but it is a maze of transects and I got lost for the first time of my life. By midnight after seeing a **White Bellied Pangolin** I stopped and waited for the sunrise and finally found the way back. Alusine was

already looking for me and we went for a walk seeing 2 **Common Cusimanse**, **Olive Colobus** (2), **Diana Monkeys**, **Western Red Colobus**, **Western Pied Colobus** and **Lesser Spot Nosed Monkeys**. All, except **Olive Colobus**, were common, but I didn't see a sign of Hippo. We found also many signs of **Red River Hog**.

At the camp there were **Striped Ground Squirrels**. I saw 4. Even I glimpsed several times tree squirrels, they were specially shy and I didn't identify any. In the forest near the camp I went alone and saw 3 **Maxwell's Duikers** together. With Ausine we saw signs of **Red River Hogs** and heard them. And one afternoon before dusk I saw 2 **African Clawless Otters** at the jetty. At the camp I got 2 **African Pottos** and 1 **African Palm Civet** (by night of course).

As we had missed **Campbell's Monkeys** Alusine told me we had a chance by canoe on our way back to **Kambama** and it was true. We saw a small group of them.

Like in **Gola** where the trackers were always saying Gola Malimbe when we heard any bird, Alusine had no knowledge calling young African Wood Owls in the forest as Rufous Fishing Owl... But Alusine is courageous and ready to do his best to help you.

And again I left by motor taxi and a short taxi brousse ride to **Kenema**. It was the day of the elections and it was quiet.

By 9am I was at Gola Park Office expecting everything was ready for my second transfer to Gola (Sileti). And again it was the same story. There was no car available and finally left by 1pm by motorbike taxi with my bags plus the food for 3 days and 3 people. In Sileti I met my guides and they stayed at the camp to prepare the dinner. I first went for a walk in the forest, seeing a **Fire Footed Rope Squirrel**, a **Green Bush Squirrel**, 1 **Sooty Mangabey**, 1 **Diana Monkey** ... At the border of the forest, close to the "main" road there was 2 **Green Monkeys**. After dinner I spotlighted the road between the camp and the "main" road. I saw 2 **African Palm Civets** together, a **Royal Antelope** and a **Demidoff's Galago**.

The following morning we left to camp at T8 transect. My guides show me where Jon camped and it is a good spot to see the rivers but again they didn't accept I camped there and wanted we all camped after crossing the river. It meant there was no possibility to see correctly the river by day or by night. Disappointing. There was a lot of people: old clothes, old fires, footprints...The day after we left to the campsite-view point along the river where we spent the last night. Again my guides didn't look for anything (in fact 1 was always spending his afternoon fishing disappearing even the last afternoon to the village or even **Sileti** which is very close). There was a lot of signs of people again. This area had been also disturbed. I stayed the beginning of the night at the spot where I had found the last time the fresh footprints of Pygmy Hippo but this time there was no fresh sign. I saw nothing.

The day after we left and I had again to bargain for a motor bike to **Zimmi**. As there was a couple of dutch tourists with their guide, after **Zimmi** we hired a taxi to **Bo** where I spent the night. There was some troubles in the city center (people were still waiting for the results

of the elections. After a quiet night I left by bus to **Freetown**. There was a lot of agitation, all the shops closed very early and locals were still waiting for the name of their new president. In the center I went to Cotton Tree, a huge old tree with hundreds of **Straw-coloured Fruit Bats**. I spent the night in the center and was happy to leave Sierra Leone which is really very disorganized. It doesn't mean I am not ready to return there!

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