

Trip report Ethiopia

5 December 2015 – 23 December 2015



I completed my big cat list with snow leopard in Ladakh, India (2013), so what's next? My interest spreads out, besides the smaller cats, also to other nice mammals. The Ethiopian wolf and Gelada are some mysterious, not very known animals, but in some tv-documentaries they got me... So a new plan was made. In addition the fair good chances for serval in some parts made Ethiopia a destination for a three weeks trip ☺

I found and read some good reports on www.mammalwatching.com. Since I wanted to do things right and be efficient with travel time we took the southern route with several nature parks. The Simien mountains in the north would make an expensive extra and also would take some precious time, so we skipped this part and would not see the Walia ibex for sure. Skipping this part would mean more time to explore the other parts... This choice would pay off in some sightings in the end! We travelled together with three persons, two of them are birders so our trip also focussed on the endemic birds. We had to mix here and there in places in time. All of this worked out quit well in the end.

First of all I would not recommend to just hit and track around all parks for just one day each. Chances of missing specific animals is quit high, taking a bit more time gives more chances. Especially in the Awash area and also Bale and Gaysay you should spend some time. (obviously it also depends on your focus, for me it is photographing wildlife and just a brief sighting doesn't mean a good picture...)

Our trip route was: Awash area, Gaysay grasslands, Bale mountains, Hareenna forest, Senkele hartebeest sanctuary, the lakes: Awassa, Ziway and Langano, Debre Zeit (stop over place) and north of Addis Debre Libanos and Debre Birhan. We also visited Yabello and Negele in the south mainly for endemic birds.

For this trip we contacted some travel agencies. Most of them can organise these trips, going by 4 by 4. **Ethiopian quadrants** was the organisation that gave a good and reasonable offer and was pleasant in contact. As we were on a budget we asked for the option to camp to lower the costs. This was possible and so we camped half our tour and stayed in hotels for the other half, a good mix and it saves a lot of money!

Our driver was mr. Asrat, a friendly young man. He had good knowledge of the places we visited and also was an enthusiast wildlife watcher. Because of our budget we decided not to take an official bird guide since that would raise costs with around 100 USD a day. Asrat actually was also a guide more or less since he knew most places and also where to look for birds and mammals. He drove safe and was in contact with the office in case of any problems.

Safety

At the time we visited Ethiopia there was a drought in the eastern afar area and also there were riots in some cities. As we heard from Dutch news and text messages while we were there. In Ethiopia you cannot hear much local news, all information is shared by phone and facebook. What sometimes happens and is a bit worrying, is that the network is just switched off... One day we had to make a detour because of some trouble in a town. We were luckily able to pass the place next day. Beside these major problem situations in fact we felt safe all trip. The driver was accurate in telling were to be careful or not to take pictures.

Photography

Since photography is my passion I will always try to make a good picture of any mammal we spot during the trip. But if there is only just a glimpse, I'll try for a 'proof' shot. Also I photograph the land and people where possible. Most people do not want to be photographed, but sometimes it is ok.

Report

I will discuss each area briefly and don't write a full day by day report. I hope you will enjoy the photography, feel free to commend or ask questions!

Specially I want to thank www.mammelwatching.com again for presenting such worth full trip reports. It was again of great use and guidance and more or less I followed advice from previous trip reports.

Best regards,

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from Addis to Awash area including Bilen, Ali dege and filwoha hotspots

We arrived Dec 5 in the night and were picked up and went to hotel Ghion in Addis. The next morning we walked a bit around the hotel park and garden. You can see some nice birds here. Around 9.00 we left to drive to Awash falls Lodge where we would camp next 4 nights. We would stop for some birding here and there. We saw our first **olive baboons** along the road. You can see these baboons here and there, usually along the roadside. On the way Asrat stopped at a hotel where in the entrance stands a palm tree in which a group of **epaulette fruitbats** sleeps under the leaves during daytime. You can probably ask your driver for this place. Just before Awash park entrance gate there is a lake next to volcanic lava fields. We stopped here for some birding and found two *hamadryas* baboons. Between the rocks I saw a **mongoose** of which I do not exactly know the species, it was small and sand coloured but it was not clear what it was maybe just Egyptian. After this we arrived in Awash through the main gate to Awash falls (lodge) from here you can drive the solute plains loop which also ends near the lodge. We could see very well that it was dried out here because of the drought. Specially this area the Afar region was extremely dry. Almost all bushes had no leaves and the ground was more or less barren. So it was clear that the wildlife had hard times. Because of this the park gave an empty impression and animals were scarce. Cattle mostly goats were quite abundant still. On our drives we saw our first **salt's dikdiks**, usually two together. **Oryx** are scattered and **soemerrings gazelles** even more. Actually these are hard to find, we only saw them a few times next 3 days. **Warthogs**, *oryx* and *dikdiks* are more common. In this area we spotted a few **black backed jackal**. Also we found some **lesser kudu**, but only a few single animals. In a little bush of grass we spotted a **grass rat** while watching a *dikdik*. Close to the lodge there lives a group of **grivets**. They are best seen at the official camp near the river where also **Guereza Colobus** are found. *Grivets* also are around the lodge. We camped in the gated lodge. In the area behind the cabins there was a more tame group of *oryx* and *warthogs*. From the lodge we made several trips in the region to *ali dege plains*, an afternoon to *bilen area* and a morning safari to *Filwoha hotspots*. *Ali dege* was extremely dry it looked like a desert. Here we saw our only big herd of **soemerrings gazelles** (25) and a little group of **gerenuk**. Two **golden jackals**. While spotting a group of *ostriches* far away we tried to approach a bit of track to get more close. This was when a **spotted hyena** flushed and following moments were surprising, in view of binoculars also a **cheetah** ran off! Only this happened far away... It was only a short view, but great! *Grevy zebra* we did not see. In *Bilen area* we got a few **gerenuk**, a **ground squirrel** (probably an unstriped) and also **salt's dikdiks**. A big group of **hamadryas baboons** ran into the bushes, they seem quite shy here actually like most wildlife, it is not Kenia or Tanzania. On the cliffs you can find **rock hyrax**, look at the white colour of droppings. Since we were quite late here and had to go back early we didn't have the chance for watching in the best hours. To *Filwoha hotspots* you drive through very dry forest parts, no wildlife here besides two **black backed jackals**. On the way you pass the *kudu valley*, a small green place, here we found **three lesser kudu** and some *oryx*. Further the *filwoha place* is surprisingly green and palm trees cover the views. A **common Egyptian mongoose** crossed the road in the water area. A resident group of **hamadryas baboons** was foraging. In the reed beds just after the little village in the middle of the area a female **waterbuck** with young was briefly seen. Lots of cat tracks but it is difficult to stay late here or arrive early so chances are low. The hotspots are nice but quite a walk. A resident group of **hamadryas** is easy to photograph. Be careful, I almost got attacked, don't go too close and don't focus too much on the eyes. Around Awash falls lodge we made two night safaris to solute plains, this was nice and valuable we got a **bat-eared fox** quite some **Abyssinian hare** and an **aardwolf** and an **aardvark** (only its silhouette)! Also some *nightjar* and a *courser*.

Lake Langano + Abiata Shalla + Awassa

At Semba beach resort at Langano we found some **warthog** and a **porcupine** while spotlighting behind the cabins. Also we found our first **whitetail mongoose** here. **Porcupine** and **white tailed mongoose** we also found at Bishangari lodge on the other side of the lake the next evening. Also a **reedbuck** and **colobus** there. A **Gambian sun squirrel** in the trees while looking for *trogon*. In Abiata Shalla the **bright's gazelle** are easy, just as **warthog** and *ostrich*. Around Awassa 4 **hippos** were in the river that crosses the road just before you enter town. In the garden of the hotel (next to the lake) we spotlighted another **white tailed mongoose**.

Senkelle Swainson's Hartbeest Sanctuary

This nice place gives easy sighting of the **hartbeest**. They are a bit skittish though, just like the **oribi** that are a bit more difficult to find. Also a **golden jackal** here. A group of *Swallow tailed kites* are nice to mention.

Gaysay and dinsho

Here you easily see **mountain nyala** and **bohor reedbuck** as well as **warthog** in the grasslands and around *dinsho lodge*. We tried for **serval** several times in the grasslands but it was not easy until our final spotlight session ended with a superb sighting of this nice cat at the final moment for the return to camp. It was just by the little house where the sideway starts in the middle of the grasslands. Also a few **Duiker** we spotted but they are more shy than reedbuck. A **common jackal** in the grasslands. On a morning we could see a group of 10 **hyena** returning to their den in the woods on the valley side quite a nice surprise.

Bale Sanetti plateau

This is just a great place! In the lower forest some **colobus** in a treetop. As soon as you climb higher the landscapes changes dramatically from lower bushes into the great rocky plains. On the plateau a few **starck's hares**, some **giant mole rats** and in total 11 **wolves** in three visits. Sightings of wolves were not easy, it is just a matter of driving and scanning. Also the weather is important it can be misty... But we were lucky with one wolf that showed a bit of hunting and was not very skittish. Rats are abundant.. and I mean abundant! **Two klipspringer** were seen on the rocky outcrops on the right side just after you reach the plateau, they are skittish.

Haremma forest

After Sanetti we went down to the haremma forest. Again the landscape changes from misty forestpatches to more rainforest style. We made an evening drive here what turned out as a good choice, we found 4 **bush pig**, lots of **bushbuck**, young **common jackals**, **two civets** and our trophy: a big male **lion!!** The lion was laying in the roadside under some bushes. After a while it stood in the middle of the road (in dark)! My camera jammed \$#@% so I missed the full frontal shot of this big feline. Colobus we saw here in daytime. We missed the *bale monkey*... we didn't watch long and found no movement at the spot, we don't know if we checked all good places.

Negele and Yabello area.

This is a very, very long drive for not to many mammals. **Gunther's dikdik**, some **vervet monkeys** and **unstriped ground squirrels** are it. If you are not interested in endemic birds like *prince ruspoli's touraco*, *sodomo lark*, *stresemans bushcrow* and *whitetailed swallow* you better skip this part. To see the land it is a good detour though.

Debre libanos and debre Birhan (debre zeit)

To get to the *gelada* part above Addis we stopped over in Debre Zeit. We stayed in viewpoint hotel, a nice resort run by a Belgian guy. He was friendly to take us to a nearby lake to watch hundreds of cranes flying in for the night. A very beautiful experience. Next day we left to drive to *debre libanos gorge* where we stayed in *ethio german lodge*. From this place you have just stunning views over the gorge. We went to the monastery to watch *gelada* but to our surprise we didn't see any *gelada*! (in contrast to most reports). I was a bit worried since these mammals were more or less the reason for making this trip... After driving around we checked the other side of the cliffs. Just after the Portuguese bridge, approached from the main road we just before sunset spotted from three **gelada** at the cliffs edge. We could take some brief photo's before it was too dark. The next day we spotted the *gelada* on top of the cliffs near the monastery. Also we saw them in the fields just behind the viewpoint on the main road. In the afternoon I walked to the Portuguese bridge and found the three *gelada* on the cliff side and could make some nice pictures. Taking good photos of *gelada* is not easy since they turn their face away as soon as you show yourself a weird experience. The *gelada* were not as easy as expected here... maybe it was the drought? Next we went to *debre birhan* more or less for the little bird *ankober serin*, so I was not very happy to leave the *geladas*... To my surprise the place where the *ankober serin* live is a far better place for **gelada**!! Here a very big group of them foraged in the big mountain grass field near cliffs. The *ankober serin* were difficult to find and I used my time to focus on the *geladas*. What a beautiful and friendly animals. After a while we left to check for the birds on another spot. Here we could see them easily. Also a little **grass rat** was living under the cliffs at this second spot. We had to go back to the hotel, although I wished to stay a bit longer with the *geladas*... This was when our tour ended in Addis next day.

Places visited for wildlife:

- Awash
- Ali Degi Plains
- Bilen area
- Lake Ziway
- Lake Langano
- Gaysay Grasslands
- Bale mountains
- Hareenna forest
- Negele & Yabello area (mainly birds)
- Lake Awassa
- Senkele
- Debre zeit (stop over)
- Debre Libanos
- Debre Birhan

Mammal List Ethiopia

Abiata-Shalla (AS), Bale mountains Sanetti plateau (BM), Dinsho (DI), Gaysay Grasslands (GG), Harenn Forest (HF), Lake Awassa (LA), Awash (AW), Lake Langano (LL), Ali Dege (AD), Bilen (BI), Negele-Yabello area (NY), Debre Libanos (DB), Debre Birhan (DBH), Senkele (SE)

F = photo

- 1 Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibious*) LA (5) F
- 2 Bright's (Grant's) Gazelle (*Gazella notatus*) AS, 15+ F
- 3 Bohor's Reedbuck (*Redunca redunca bohor*) GG, DI, 30+ F
- 4 Warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*) AS, AW, LL, GG, DI 100++ F
- 5 Grivet Monkey (*Cercopithecus aethiops*) AW, 20+ F
- 6 Vervet Monkey (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*) NY, 5 F
- 7 Ethiopian Guereza Colobus (*Colobus guereza*) DI, AW, LL, HF, LA, 20+ F
- 8 Gambian Sun Squirrel (*Heliosciurus gambianus*) LL, 1 F
- 9 Ethiopian Bat-eared Fox (*Otocyon megalotis canescens*) AW, 1
- 10 Spotted Hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) AD, GG 11 F
- 11 Aardwolf (*Proteles cristata septentrionalis*) AW, 1 F
- 12 Aardvark (*Orycteropus afer*) AW, 1
- 13 Epauletted Fruit Bat (.....) LL, 5 F
- 14 Swayne's Hartbeest (*Alcelaphus swaynei*) SE, 50+ F
- 15 Sudan Oribo (*Ourebia montana*) SE, 10+ F
- 16 Guenther's Dik Dik (*Madoqua guentheri*) NY, 20 F
- 17 Mountain Nyala (*Tragelaphus buxtoni*) GG, DI 100+ F
- 18 Menelik's Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus meneliki*) DI, 5 F
- 19 Serval (*Leptailurus serval*) GG, 1 F
- 20 Red (Bush)Duiker (*Sylvicapra grimmia abyssinica*) GG, 6 F
- 21 Abyssinian Rock Hyrax (*Procavia abyssinica*) BI, AW, 16 F
- 22 Ethiopian Highland Klipspringer (*Oreotragus saltatrixoides*) BM, 2 F
- 23 Blick's Grass Mouse (*Arvicanthus blicki*) BM, 100++ F
- 24 Black-clawed Brush-furred Rat (*Lophuromys melanonyx*) BM, 100++
- 25 Ethiopian Wolf (*Canis simensis*) BM, 11 F
- 26 Common Jackal (*Canis aureus*) AW, AD, SE, NY, GG, 8 F
- 27 Black-backed Jackal (*Canis mesomelas*) AW, 6 F
- 28 Starck's Hare (*Lepus starcki*) BM, 3 F
- 29 Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis*) AW, 2??? F
- 30 Abyssinian or Scrub Hare (*Lepus habessinicus*) AW, AD, 20+
- 31 Giant Mole Rat (*Tachyoryctes macrocephalus*) BM, 25+ F
- 32 Hamadryas Baboon (*Papio hamadryas*) AW, BI 100+ F
- 33 Olive Baboon (*Papio anubis*) AW, LL, GG, NY, HF, 200 F
- 34 Beisa Oryx (*Oryx beisa*) AW, AD, 50+ F
- 35 Soemering's Gazelle (*Gazella soemmeringii*) AW, AD, 25+ F
- 36 Salt's or Harar Dik Dik (*Madoqua hararensis*) AW, BI 30+ F
- 37 Northern Lesser Kudu (*Tragelaphus imberbis*) AW, 7 F
- 38 Northern Gerenuk (*Litocranius sclateri*) AD, 2 F
- 39 Egyptian Mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*) AD, 1 F
- 40 Unstriped Ground Squirrel (*Xerus rutilus*) AD, NY, 6 F
- 41 Gelada Baboon (*Thereopithecus gelada*) DB, DBH, 150+ F
- 42 African Grass Rat (*Arvicanthus niloticus*) AW, 1

- 43 Ethiopian Grass Rat (*Arvicanthis abyssinicus*) DBH, 1 F
- 44 Waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*) AW, 2 F
- 45 White tailed mongoose (*Ichneumia albicauda*) LL, LA, 2 F
- 46 Porcupine (*H. africaeaustralis*) LL, 3 F
- 47 Lion (*panthera leo*) HF, 1 F
- 48 Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) BI 1
- 49 Bushpig (*Potamochoerus larvatus*) HF, 4 F
- 50 Civet (*Civettictis civetta*) HF, 2
- 51,52,53,54 unidentified bats : AW, LL