

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (March 2013)

The first time I heard of Dzanga Sangha in Central African republic was in Rockjumper brochure. When I read it was possible to see Bongo I sent emails to 2 addresses I found on the net to contact Sangha Lodge. I never received any answer. Then I read that some travellers who tried to reach the lodge from Cameroon gave up because of the Police always asking for bribes. Later I contacted Rockjumper, but they told me that their tour had never been run and that Bongo was far from guaranteed. Finally I saw different trip reports (very useful) in Mammalwatching and saw it was possible to go there, but that it was expensive. Mid year 2012 I contacted Rod Cassidy from Sangha lodge and a bit later I booked my stay for the beginning of March 2013.

By the end of year 2012 and the beginning of January 2013 the rebels had invaded most of the country and were only 50km from Bangui, the capital. I was sure that my trip was now impossible. But an international force from other African countries protected the capital from the rebels' advance. Then there were negotiations and finally the 2 parties agreed for a cease-fire and for new elections in 2014. Ouff!

I flew from Paris to Bangui with Royal Air Maroc that I used several times including when I went to Gabon. But the adventure began one day before the departure when I was informed that the flight from Casablanca to Bangui via Douala (Cameroon) was delayed. I informed Rod Cassidy of the new timing. But when I boarded the plane a steward told me: "Do you know you are going to Brazzaville in Congo?" But I couldn't get more information before reaching Brazzaville. In fact the plane landed in Brazzaville to bring something to repair a plane with a breakdown, then we flew to Douala (Cameroon) and then to Bangui (arriving by 10am). I was welcomed by Evelyne, Rod's employee, my driver and Amadou, Jon Hall's driver. I went to change money in a shop, got a fast lunch and we began the long drive. But it was too late to reach Dzanga Sangha and we slept in Boda like Jon Hall.

The following day by starting by 5h30am we arrived in Sangha by 1h30pm after many police controls without any problem. After meeting Rod, for the first afternoon I went in the forest next to the lodge. I heard a group of monkeys but didn't see them. Rod showed me a tree where a Lord Derby's anomalure is used to sleep. I check every day without luck: is it true that it had rained a lot before I arrived and that the "house" of the anomalure had no roof. By night I spotlighted along the access road and saw 3 small galagos: one at eye level and 2 in the canopy. According to the book guides and Rod, the low one is a Demidoff's Galago and the 2 high ones Thomas's Galagos. During dinner I met some other people, including 2 American women who saw a group of Bongos at Sangha bai. So the following day I started early. An American tourist had asked me to join me, so I was with his guide (Christian) and tracker. We rushed to Sangha bai where we stayed the full day. I heard a group of monkeys on my way in but didn't see them. At the bai I saw Forest elephants (max of 84), 23 Forest buffalos, 1 female Sitatunga and no Bongo. Disappointed not to see my target species, the following day I did the tour de Salines at Bai Hoku. My guide was Leonce and my tracker Moulaye and they were with me also the following days. Both spoke French which is normal for the guides, but rare for the Baaka trackers. And it was great because I was able to communicate directly with him and to exchange information. I saw several Blue Duikers, 1 Peter's Duiker, 30 Forest Buffalos, several Forest elephants, Crowned guenons, Moustached monkeys, Putty nosed monkeys, Grey cheeked magabeys and Guereza colobus. After we went to see the group of habituated Agile Mangabeys. When I arrived at the lodge a Swedish who had gone to Sangha bai saw around 23 Bongos and several Giant forest hogs on his first day. So the following day I rushed again to Sangha bai. Soon I got 1 Congo clawless otter following the border of the forest, then the same species that last time, plus 3 Guerezas monkeys. I began to desperate to see the Bongos and it is a little boring to spend too many days at the bai where you see always the same species and can't move.

Following day was Bai Hoku with the Tour de Saline morning and afternoon: all the same monkeys, plus one Gorilla heard (plus footprints), 2 Peter's Duikers, Blue duikers, 2 Black-fronted Duikers, 1 Bay duiker (identified at home with the Handbook of the Mammals of the world), 1 Yellow backed duiker just glimpse, but seen by my guide Leonce, Forest elephants, and the same 30 Forest buffalos, Leopard's and Bongos' footprints. By night I saw 1 African palm civet in the forest near the lodge and 1 Elegant needle clawed galago.

And the following day was the nightmare, where to go, Baï Hoku always very interesting, Sangha Baï for the elusive Bongo or the Gorilla tour. The Gorilla was not important for me because I saw lowland Gorilla in Gabon. I started with a Swedish tourist going to see the Gorillas. I decided to go to Baï Hoku. But when arriving at the junction to Sangha Baï I changed my plan and ask to be driven to the car park of this baï and it was a good decision. At the car park the eco guards told me they had seen 3 Bongos at the baï by 6am and to go fast there. And my dream realised. I got for the full day 42 Bongos of all ages, Forest elephants, Forest buffalos, Guerezas, and a lone female Sitatunga. By 5h30pm the trackers of Andrea Turkano (resercher on Forest elephant) who walked at the front of us found a Pangolin: it was like a ball hanging from a thin tree. My tracker caught it. It was a Long tailed Pangolin. We relased it. By night I saw another African Palm civet in a tree next to the lodge.

The last day I had decided to relax and spend the morning at the lodge looking for squirrels: I got. But as the lunch was delayed I went a last time in the forest near the lodge. I first found an African giant squirrel. Not far from the swamp I saw 3 De Brazza monkeys (1 adult, 2 juveniles). The adult was quite angry, going away and coming back calling several times. But I had to rush to the lodge to go with Rod on a motor boat where he knew a place for Lord Derby's Anomalure and Red headed Picathartes. During the short walk in the forest we went to 2 places where Picathartes nest during the rainy season. At the second place a waterfall pss over the rock shelters where are the nests: we sat down and waited. We got 3 differents Pacathartes, 2 of them flying each on in a different nest. It is true that the rain of the night and morning had improved our chance to see them. [Before and after that Rod showed me the tree where the anomalures are used to spend the day and we saw both.](#)

At the lodge there was a rescued young Blue duiker.

Every night I heard Western tree hyraxes.

I saw also:

Noack's round leafed bat at the waterfall near Baï Hoku

African woodmouse sp caught by Rod.

Hairy-faced slit-faced bat.

Squirrels that I saw (mainly at the lodge) were: Lady's Burton rope squirrel, Congo rope squirrel, Green bush squirrel, Red legged sun squirrel and African giant squirrel

On one night I spotlighted around Doli lodge, but heard only elephants. By day I saw an African giant squirrel.

Mammals I liked to see and I missed were:

Potto: surprising because seen commonly by nearly all people(seen in Ghana),

Giant forest hog (seen twice in Uganda): seen ocasonnally

Red river hog (seen in Gabon): seen ocasionnaly

African golden cat (seen well in Gabon): apparently known only from footprints

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Crested porcupine (only spine found at the Picathartes rockshelter). Rod knew a better place, but I didn't go.

My guide, Léonce and tracker, Moulaye were perfect.

I had realised that one headlamp of the car was not working and asked several times to the driver to change it and without success.

The last day we started by 5am to reach Bangui. One headlamp was not working and the other one very weak. After less than 1 hour the brakes didn't work anymore. The driver tried to repair, then went on a motorbike in a village to try to find something to repair but without success. So we drove to Bangui without brakes and 1 headlamp. It didn't prevent him to drive very fast, avoiding several times to kill people. We arrived by around 9pm in Bangui. At the last checkpoint the Police realised we had only one headlamp working. I didn't agree to pay as I didn't feel responsible of that (I told many times to the driver to change the bulb). Finally we were allowed to move. We tried to get the time of the flight at the airport, without success. Eveline to whom I phoned told me she didn't know the time of the departure. I had asked her to check and she told me she couldn't. I slept in Bangui, and went early to the airport. The Police checked my bags and money belt and wanted 100 euros. I didn't agree to pay that. After maybe 1 hour they asked me 20 euros for the customs. Afraid to miss my flight I gave 10 Euros and told them that I won't give more!!!

One week later, as I was at home I heard that the rebels had invaded Bangui.

If you are interested to do this trip, even in a cheaper manner, don't hesitate to contact me.

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