

# The Congos, Gabon and Cameroon, March-May 2009

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In 2009, I spent a few weeks in four countries of Central and Western Africa with my friends Sarit Reizin and Alex Bernstein, trying to study the behavior of local crocodiles and see some wildlife. The trip was mostly a failure: we had very limited time and money, and travel in this part of the world requires plenty of both, as well as better knowledge of French (in part because the best travel guidebooks are all in French). At one point we spent almost a week in Brazzaville unsuccessfully trying to arrange a trip to any one of Congo's national parks. Still, we got to visit a few nice locations not yet "discovered" by mammalwatchers, so I thought it would be helpful to put together this brief account.

## 1. Democratic Republic of Congo, a. k. a. Congo-Zaire, a. k. a. Congo-Kinshasa, a. k. a. "Bad Congo"

The "Bad Congo" moniker is no longer deserved, since life in the "Good Congo" across the river is no longer any better. In Kinshasa people have electricity almost all the time, while in Brazzaville blackouts routinely lasted for two-three days at the time of our visit. The two capitals are separated by a broad, calm stretch of River Congo known as Stanley Pool. I highly recommend reading *The River Congo* by Peter Forbath before visiting the region to make sense of its complex and unusual geography and history. We visited DRC on an overnight trip from Brazzaville (where we got DRC visas); crossing the border in either direction proved very expensive and time-consuming.

The vicinity of Kinshasa is deforested for many miles in all directions, but there are three fenced patches of forest on the S outskirts of the city, all within walking distance of each other and accessible by taxi. Chutes de Lukia is a **bonobo** sanctuary; the bonobos are technically reintroduced (they occurred in Kinshasa area until the 1910s), but the forest is fenced and there is supplemental feeding. If you don't consider them countable, your main reason to visit the sanctuary is the colony of very rare **least bentwings** in a large tree inside the forest (you'll need some official-looking paper to be allowed inside). The forest had **Congo rope squirrels**, while **typical striped mouse** could be seen in meadows near the lake. Avoid weekends when the place is overrun by UN employees in luxury SUVs. Nearby is a larger forest patch called Lac Ma Vallee (access restricted, but we talked our way in), where two rare monkeys still occurred: **southern talapoin** (along the lakeshores) and **red-tailed monkey** of the nominate subspecies (in drier parts); both were very shy. It would be interesting to trap for rodents in the forest; we saw more **Congo rope squirrels** and a small mouse in a clearing that I tentatively identified as **Callewaert's mouse** (that was before the ongoing overhaul of small African *Mus* taxonomy; now it's totally unclear what that mouse was). There were also some **fruit bats** there at dusk, but I'm still uncertain about the species.

## 2. Republic of Congo, a. k. a. Congo-Brazzaville, a. k. a. "Good Congo"

Slightly less unstable than its larger neighbor, Congo is a failed Communist state with poor infrastructure. Tourist services are rudimentary and ridiculously expensive. Note that contrary to the official information online, you might be asked for proof of hotel reservation before issued a visa at Brazzaville Airport.

Brazzaville is surrounded by rolling hills looking amazingly similar to Wales; the grasslands are apparently natural. The city zoo has a small bamboo grove which is the only known location for the beautiful **velvet climbing mouse**; it officially known from just a few specimens, but to our surprise it wasn't difficult to see (arranging a nighttime visit took a couple days). **Natal multimammate mouse** is common in the woods surrounding the zoo. The grounds of the Ministry of Sustainable Development, Forestry Economy & Environment compound had three species of bats living in abandoned buildings: **halcyon horseshoe bat**, **hairy slit-faced bat**, and **African yellow house bat**.

After spending way too much time in the capital, we took a bus to Oyo and hitchhiked from there to Gabon via Okoyo and Bunji. It took a few days. The road was being built by some Chinese company at the time, but apparently was never finished and has all but disappeared by now (at least I can't find it in Google Maps or anywhere). It passed through beautiful wet savanna with patches of forest and few villages, with lots of interesting birds and some mammals, mostly in forest patches. As far as I could identify them, there were **turbo shrew**, **forest musk shrew**, extremely cute **Peter's epauletted fruit bat** (feeding in a tree at night), **large-eared slit-faced bat** (in a hollow tree), **black-legged mongoose**, **red-fronted duiker**, **blue duiker**, **green bush squirrel**, **rusty-bellied brush-furred rat**, and **Peter's striped mouse**. There was a **little freetail** colony in the car repair shop in Bunji.

### 3. Gabon

We entered the country near Lekoni where we saw a few **common duikers** along the road at night and **red-legged sun squirrel** in the morning. Under a bright light at the border checkpoint there was a **broad-headed pipistrelle**, hanging from the wall with a crane fly in its mouth.

Lekedi Park is a delightful reserve in southeastern Gabon with diverse forest and savanna habitats, cheap and easy access, excellent networks of foot and boat trails, and well-protected wildlife. The best trails are around the watchtower where you can camp. We spent a week in the reserve and saw 39 species of mammals, plus tracks of **leopard** and **African golden cat**. Somehow we missed the numerous small carnivores known to occur in the reserve, except for one semi-tame **servaline genet** near the boat dock. At the time of our visit there was ongoing research on **mandrills**, so some animals were radiocollared and troops were easy to find, but it shouldn't be a problem anyway. **Chimpanzee** reintroduction was being planned. Smaller primates were relatively tame, although photographing them was very difficult because forests at Lekedi are tall and dense. We saw **southern needle-clawed galago**, **Demidoff's galago**, **(Gabon) Allen's galago**, **agile mangabey** (apparently intergrade between nominate and yellow-bellied subspecies), **grey-cheeked mangabey**, **moustached monkey**, **sun-tailed monkey** (Lekedi is one of a handful of places where this recently discovered taxon is known to occur), **northern talapoin** (sometimes visible from boat), and **black colobus**. **Forest buffalo**, **kwana**, **kwana**, **kwana** and **sitatunga** were very easy to see in clearings; **red river hogs** could also be reliably seen as wild animals approached a pen with captive ones at dusk. **Bay**, **white-bellied** and **white-legged Ogilby's duikers** were also common but finding them took some time. Old-growth forests had lots of hollow trees where we found small colonies of **forest horseshoe bat**, **giant leaf-nosed bat**, **Bate's slit-faced bat**, and **mouselike pipistrelle**. The town where the office is located had colonies of **Egyptian fruit bats** in buildings. **Short-palated fruit bats** could be seen feeding in fruiting trees around the watchtower. Squirrels were abundant and included **ribboned** and **fire-footed rope squirrels** and **African giant squirrel**. Trapping for rodents wasn't particularly successful, but spotlighting was: we got **Lorrain dormouse**, **forest giant pouched rat**, **Congo forest mouse**, **fire-bellied bush-furred rat**, **eastern rainforest thicket rat**, **beaded wood mouse**, and **Jackson's soft-furred mouse**. We also saw a few shrews, but only one was seen well enough to attempt identification; it was a **lesser white-headed shrew**. The park is excellent for birding and herping (a rhinoceros viper we found there was probably the most beautiful snake I've ever seen). Lots of cool insects come to office lights at night.

Lope National Park is a huge park in central Gabon, full of wildlife ranging from endemic shrews to **forest elephants**. Unfortunately, our visit there was cut short due to a chance meeting with the infamously corrupt minister of housing, accommodation, town planning, the environment and sustainable development. The only mammals we saw were the ones that occurred in and around the park office: **Bini fretail**, **moustached monkey**, **Peter's duiker**, **Gabon rope squirrel**, and **African smoky mouse**.

On our way to Cameroon we saw a **Johnston's forest shrew** and a **green bush squirrel** in badly degraded roadside forest near Oyem.

### 4. Cameroon

A country I desperately want to get back to and explore better, Cameroon has outstanding habitat diversity, from lowland and montane rainforests to paramo-like alpine meadows, mangroves and deserts. We had less than a month there and visited mostly the western part, but saw over 80 species (although there were many uncertain identifications).

Korup National Park is one of the best forest parks in Africa, with tree diversity more typical of Neotropical rainforests. Note that tree height there is also Neotropics-like and the forest is very dense, so it's not a good place to photograph primates and other large mammals. The park has a few campsites connected by hiking trails; there is also an option (reportedly good for **otters**) of taking a boat through riparian forests and mangroves to the coast. We spent a lot of time trying to observe dwarf crocodiles at night in small forest ponds and streams; that proved a good strategy for seeing small mammals, but we had to sleep or hike between sites during daytime and so missed most of the park's long list of large ones. Mammals we tentatively identified included **long-footed shrew**, **Nigerian shrew** (in the campsite closest to the entry bridge), **rainforest shrew** (recently described from the shores of the small stream that runs by Ikenge Research Station, where it was common at night), **Franquet's epauletted fruit bat** (roosted in trees in campsite clearings), **halcyon horseshoe bat** (common in large hollow trees), **Noack's** and **cyclops roundleaf bats**, **dwarf slit-faced bat**, and **Mauritian tomb bat** (all caught in one hour by local students at the research station, using a tiny self-made mistnet that most bats easily avoided), **Demidoff's** and **Allen's galagos**, **white-collared mangabey**, **crowned**, **red-eared** and **putty-nosed monkeys**, **Preuss's red colobus** (the most commonly seen primate), **long-nosed mongoose**, **Ogilby's duiker**

(nominate subspecies), **blue duiker**, **orange-headed** and **fire-footed rope squirrels**, **African giant squirrel**, **Jentink's dormouse** (near the rockfowl nesting site), **pygmy scalytail**, **Congo forest mouse**, **rusty-bellied brush-furred rat** (in campsite clearings and around the park office), **target rat**, **big-eared swamp rat** (abundant along streams at night), **eastern rainforest thicket rat**, **Allen's wood mouse**, and **Tullberg's soft-furred mouse**. **Calabar angwantibo**, **potto**, **drill**, **chimp**, **bay** and **yellow-backed duikers**, **water chevrotain**, **forest elephant**, and **pangolins** are reportedly seen by some visitors.

Mount Kupe is a well-known birding and herping site and a great place to see mammals endemic to Cameroon highlands (although you need to also visit Mt. Oku farther north to get all of them). It's a community-run reserve, so guides are easy to arrange in the nearby village (see Lonely Planet's *Cameroon* for details), but the trail network is a bit limited. The main trail goes into montane rainforest with a bunch of rocky gulches and small caves, some of which are used as night roosts by bats. I think there were **upland** and **Lander's horseshoe bats** and **Eisentraut's pipistrelles**. These are all really neat, but if you are not interested in bats, these slippery gulches are still worth crawling into at night: we saw a **Hun shrew** and an **African brush-tailed porcupine** there, plus lots of interesting herps. During the day there wasn't much to see in the gulches, and the caves had only one **Cape pipistrelle**. Spotlighting in the forest got us **Cameroon forest shrew**, **Northern needle-clawed galago**, a possible **Eisentraut's striped mouse**, and two species of climbing mice: the one inside the forest was probably **banana climbing mouse** and the one in small clearings almost certainly **Cameroon climbing mouse**. The only diurnal mammals were **Lady Burton's rope squirrel** and **green bush squirrel**. **Drill**, various **guenons**, **African palm civet**, **duikers** and other large mammals are seen there sometimes. Watch also for green mambas and boomslangs, very common in the area.

Cameroon Volcano is probably the most endemics-rich mountain in Africa; there are also numerous species shared only with older volcanoes in the same chain that are now Gulf of Guinea islands. In 2009 it was not a fully protected reserve and large mammals had mostly been hunted out or were very shy. A year later it was declared a national park; I don't know if the situation has improved. In the forest and at the tree line we saw **Mt. Cameroon forest shrew**, **Mamfe shrew**, a dwarf galago (possibly **Thomas's galago**), **Preuss's**, **mona** and **putty-nosed monkeys**, **kevel bushbuck**, **Cooper's mountain squirrel**, **Mt. Cameroon brush-furred rat**, **Cameroon soft-furred mouse**, and **Eisentraut's striped mouse**. In high-elevation meadows there were **Cameroon climbing mouse**, **typical striped mouse**, and **Burton's vlei rat**, all difficult to see – this ain't Sanetti Plateau. **Western tree hyrax** occurred both below and above the tree line, but was easier to see higher up where it lives in rocky outcrops. We also saw a shrew very high up the mountain, in almost bare rocks; it was probably the little-known **Eisentraut's shrew**.

Limbe is a nice coastal town with a wildlife rehabilitation center (don't miss a chance to play with tame guenons there – you'll be amazed how light they are) and a small nature reserve on a seaside hill where we saw a **Peter's striped mouse** and a small mouse that I identified as **Temmink's mouse**. There was a small colony of **railer bats** under the roof of the Baptist church. As we left town and were riding a bus towards Douala, we got incredibly lucky: a large male **drill** was standing at the edge of a roadside forest, looking at passing traffic. It disappeared as soon as we made the driver stop the bus.

Kumba is a crossroad town in western Cameroon. Nearby is a large crater lake called Barombi; we saw a **red-legged sun squirrel** in shoreline forest there. On the outside of the crater rim there is a small lava tube cave which had a day roost of **bushveld horseshoe bat**, which is very rare and local in West Africa. There was also one **short-tailed roundleaf bat** and a few **common bentwings** (or whatever the African populations will end up being called). **African groove-toothed rat** occurred at the edge of the forest near the town.

Lake Ossa not far from Douala is the easiest place to see **African manatee**. It's a short walk from the road. There are usually a few boatmen ready to take you around the lake. The water is murky, so all you can expect to see is tip of a snout (but the animal looks identical to West Indian manatee anyway). It's a good idea to arrive before dawn, because the manatees are more active in the morning; also, walking around at night you can see **Peter's mice** and **greater cane rats**.

Mefou National Park is located close to Yaounde. Most people visit it for the primate sanctuary, but the forest has some nice wild mammals, including monkeys that have been released and hang around, mixing with the ones that come from the forest. At the time of our visit these included **grey-cheeked** and **white-collared mangabeys** and **crowned**, **moustached** and **putty-nosed monkeys**. **Large slit-faced bats** roosted in an old shed. There were lots of **squirrels**, including **western palm**, **Thomas's rope** and delightful **African pygmy**. At night we saw a **crested genet**, a **silent dormouse**, a **Dollman's tree mouse** and an **African wading rat**, and trapped a **fire-bellied brush-furred rat** and a **little wood mouse**.