

**Sun bear (finally!)
Kaeng Krachan National Park, Thailand:
12-14 January, 2018**



Although I live in Laos, the defaunation of its forests means I frequently cross the border into neighboring Thailand for a quick wildlife fix. Over the last ten years, I must have visited Thai parks on over 30 occasions split between Khao Yai, Phu Khiao and Kaeng Krachan in my quest to see Sun and Asiatic black bear and other Southeast Asian species. In January, I was transiting through Bangkok when I received a tip-off from a wildlife guide that a Sun bear had been frequenting the lower campground in Kaeng Krachan National Park. I decided to delay my flight back to Laos and give it a go.

Kaeng Krachan is Thailand's largest national park at nearly 3,000 km². Most importantly its part of a complex of connected parks on the border with Myanmar which creates a contiguous forest area of 175,000 km² where elephants and tigers still roam. This colossal area of tropical and sub-tropical forest is key to the persistence of the large mammal fauna coupled with the Thai government's impressive track record of protecting National Parks and also providing facilities for visitors.

On the first night in the park the bear stayed away but Golden jackal and Malayan porcupine were frequent visitors to the lower campground at Baan Krang. At 5.30 am the next day we were the first car up the steep mountain track to the upper campground. This requires a 4x4 vehicle and takes about an hour. Leopards are occasionally seen on this road and on this occasion we were lucky to see a small herd of gaur which caused a gaur-jam for about 20 mins as they ambled along. There are also opportunities to see mammals during the day and there are spectacular views of the forest clad mountains looking towards Myanmar.

Happy hour starts at 5.30 pm in Thailand with animals emerging in the fading light with the onset of cooler temperatures. Driving slowly on the way back down I arrived at the lower campground to find a group of tourists staring into the forest. Apparently, a sun bear had just moved out of view seconds before I arrived! Mortified I stayed in this spot for the next 4 hours but to no avail. I retreated to my tent in the early hours and had a fitful night's sleep admonishing myself for missing my chance. At 4.30 am I went back to the area behind the restaurant and noticed a dim patch of white moving around in the darkness which I presumed was a porcupine. I turned on my torch and couldn't believe my eyes. That moment when euphoria, joy and relief results in a fumbled panic to take a picture, video or just stare. Thankfully it hung around for the next 15 minutes so I managed to record the moment I had been waiting for all these years...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFy6DBO_oXM

This turned out to be my seventh bear species on my quest to see all eight species in the wild (just polar bear to go). On my trips to Thailand I have booked guides through Tontan travel and have found the owner, Ton, to be both knowledgeable and responsive. His guides are excellent and they know the parks extremely well (down to which fig trees are in fruit). They have guided me to see binturong, dhole, Asiatic black bear, leopard cat, Chinese serow and many other species. So if you are heading to Thailand and want to spend a weekend away from the beach or the bars, there are world class protected areas on your doorstep.

Tontan Travel Tours@TontanTravel.com

I returned to Kaeng Krachan the following month on a self-guided trip and stayed at the Baan Maka Nature Lodge. It's a great little place with clean rooms and good food. There are a number of birding hides nearby which also attract small mammals.

Baan Maka Nature lodge www.baanmaka.com

Itinerary for Sun bear trip

12 January Three hour drive from Bangkok. Arrived at the park entrance at 5 pm and drove 15 km to the Ban Krang lower campground. The ponds on the roadside a few kilometers after the park entrance are a great place for spotting. Tents are provided by the park and a restaurant offers basic but freshly made Thai food. Spotlighting around the campground.

13 January One hour drive to the upper Phanoen Thung campground at first light (the road to the top of the mountain opens at 5.30 am). Good wildlife viewing opportunities on the road and trails. Returned at dusk and spotlighted around the lower campground restaurant area from 7pm until 12.30 am.

14 January Pre-dawn walk around the lower campground. Departed at 11 am for Bangkok

MAMMALS SEEN

(on both trips in January and February for three days each)

1	Sun bear <i>Helarctos melayanus</i>	One animal seen at 5am in the lower campground behind the restaurant. It stayed for about 15 minutes.
2	Gaur <i>Bos gaurus</i>	A herd of 5 animals on the road to the top of the park at 5.30 am. As the first car up we were the only car to see them.
3	Red muntjac <i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	Seen near the ponds on the road to the lower campground
4	Malayan porcupine <i>Hystrix brachyura</i>	Seen several times near the lower campground at night
5	Spectacled (Dusky) langur <i>Trachypithecus obscurus</i>	Seen frequently inside the park.
6	Long-tailed macaque <i>Macaca fascicularis</i>	Seen near a temple on the road outside the park
7	Stump-tailed macaque <i>Macaca arctoides</i>	Large troupe seen on the drive into the park by the side of the road
8	Northern tree shrew <i>Tupaia belangeri</i>	Seen at the Loung sin hide near Baan Maka
9	Western-striped squirrel <i>Tamiops mccllellandii</i>	Seen near the restaurant in Baan Maka
10	Grey-bellied squirrel <i>Callosciurus caniceps</i>	Seen near the restaurant in Baan Maka
11	Red-cheeked squirrel <i>Dremomys rufigenis</i>	Seen behind the restaurant at the upper campground
12	Small Asian mongoose <i>Herpestes javanicus</i>	Seen on the road near the ponds
13	Golden jackal <i>Canis aureus</i>	One animal on the road near the ponds and a pair seen in the lower campground
14	Lesser false vampire bat <i>Megaderma spasma</i>	One seen in a culvert under the road near Baan Maka

A golden jackal near the lower campground.

