

Cameroon and the CAR

Preface:

I thought that once we pass the highlands of Ethiopia, we'll be flying for hours over endless lowland rain forests, but no. Most of the CAR is mountainous with "streams" of forest in a generally brown mountainous landscape.

We flew over the DRC for about 15-20 minutes, and then crossed back over the river to the CAR, and right over Bangui. Only when we got closer to the border with Cameroon we started seeing endless continuous rain forests, which lasted continuously almost to Yaounde, except lone roads piercing through it, with tiny roadside settlements. As you get closer to Yaounde there's more deforestation, more houses and less forest, even though there are still surprisingly large tracts left even around the city

The Long adventure to Libongo and the CAR:

Sitting with Martial, to talk about tomorrow's drive, while finishing up my lunch at Hotel Azure was reassuring. I now realized that he was also himself a tour guide, has been to Sangha Lodge several times, and had some input about the wildlife. He once took some people to Lobeke (I think) and saw a Giant Pangolin crossing through a Bai! He told me to ask Rod for the pics. He also mentioned that later in the dry season (mid-march till April) should be a good time to try for the bongos at Dzanga Bai, which is what we banked on. He also mentioned that during the 2nd day of the drive to Libongo, you sometimes see Buffalo and duiker crossing the road, or even gorillas. I read one person's Lonely Planet trip report where she did see a gorilla on the road. Then of course Vladimir Dinet's mammal watching report, where he saw chimpanzees, bongos, a red river hog and a freaking African Golden cat on and off the road from Yokadouma to Libongo.

Cameroon is super nice to drive though, but of course it gets boring to see the same stuff for 13-15 hours in a row. While on the paved road to Bertoua you pass both forest and village sections, with some of the forest being picturesque and healthy looking. But Alain, our driver, promised us we'd see no animals until After Yokadouma (hence until tomorrow). We did see lots of birds that we didn't stop to photograph, such as several *raptors*, *hornbills*, *kingfishers*, *weavers*, at least *one bee eater*, and others.

If you go with Martial and his drivers, keep in mind that the goal is to get you to Libongo, not to schedule lunch breaks and bathroom breaks; you barely have time for them and we just bought lunch to go (hot sandwiches) in Bertoua, at a place called Grand Palace and they were actually good. At the end of Bertoua, the paved Road ends and real Africa begins. At least that's how it felt for me because the scene is replaced with bright red-sand unpaved roads, and infinite traditional roadside villages that are all within 2-5 driving minutes from each other. Hence, you don't get any continuous tracts of forest along this road. But the villages are 100% authentic

and really cool looking - nobody comes up to your car window and tries to sell you stuff, no souvenir stands, just people minding their business and bathing in roadside streams and puddles. Speaking of Martial, the transfer is by no means cheap - but it still beats the cheapest flight option, even if you "join" a group of 6-7 on a pre-booked flight. And it's important to mention that while there are indeed SEVERAL police/army checkpoints along the way, Martial's drivers are equipped with all the right paperwork to make these go by fast and not once were we asked to pay anything. This put my mind at ease because I read that these checkpoints were all corrupt and wanted bribes to stop harassing you. None of it was the case for us. I did spot a single **unidentified mongoose** dashing across the road at one point, Luc missed it, and I have no clue which species it was. It rained for less than an hour just as we passed Bertoua, and the road always has some challenging spots to traverse. Thankfully, Martial's vehicles and drivers are well-prepared for these, and they turned out to be no more than mini adventures. But I totally see how this road can take 3 days instead of 2 when in bad conditions.

In Yakadouma we slept at the most disgusting run down shithole of a hotel I've ever seen. I wouldn't even use the toilet there, not to even think about showering. Ew. I was nervous putting my head on that pillow but I had no choice of course. At night it was pouring down and thundering.. I thought 2 things: 1. There goes this "dry season" thing we tried so hard to time right for obvious reasons, and 2. How will this affect the road conditions for us to get to Sangha Lodge tomorrow? With regards to 1: I was under the impression that dry weather is crucial for bongos in the Bai, and for hearing white bellied pangolins in the leaf litter at night, since they make no noise and have no eye shine. But what can you do.. I had to stay positive.

We started at 6am from Yakadouma, with the weather having cleared for the most part. After Yakadouma you still drive for over 4 hours along villages with very small portions of forest reaching the road, so expect no cool animal crossings. But you do



see tons of cool birds such as my first group of *great Blue turaco*. Only about 75km before Libongo do you enter the forest concession which is clearly identified with a sign. Driving through the forest I immediately spotted a group **Guereza colobus**, and then about a minute or two later, our first of many **Grey-cheeked mangabay**,



followed by more **colobus** and several **mangabay**, one group which was next to a **putty-nosed monkey** group. Finally we saw another group of **putty-nosed monkeys** that I was able to photograph, so now we had pics of all of these species. Along the way, we also spotted some nice birds including my first ever *palm-nut vulture* and *Crested guineafowl*.

In Libongo we had to get our passports stamped and then after about an hour of fucking around and getting our boats set up by the people from both Sangha Lodge and Martial's drivers, we were on our way.

First you cross the river, and you have to stop by a first of two check points. Then further down the river is the official immigration office where you buy your visa. Then it's like a 2-3 hour boat ride, which is extremely picturesque and can also be productive for both bird and mammal watching. We saw our first **crowned guenons** along the boat ride, as well as our first photogenic *hornbills* and *African Grey parrots*. We reached Sangha Lodge about 18:30ish and were warmly greeted by Rod and Tamar who are extremely kind and have great energies. After a quick shower we had dinner, and then they sent us to their "North trail" to start our nocturnal search. But we also discussed the moon situation: according to Vladimir's recent experience, animal activity greatly reduces during full moon, and tonight was the night before full moon.. With the moon rising around 17:40-18:00 and setting around 12 hours later... Plus we were really tired from the past two days, so we did a 1-hour walk and all we saw was a distant pair of **Pottos** when we returned to the lodge gardens. They were too far for good views or a clear pic.. But the pics were enough for identification. The other thing that happened on that 1-hour walk is that we were deeply and personally acquainted with the biting ants, so we knew to watch out for them for the remainder of the trip.

Sangha Lodge – Day 1: Getting Acquainted with the Lodge and the Trails

I was up before dawn, hiking the North trail again but seeing nothing, and then I came to the river and waited for the supposed otters, but to no avail. I did see my first **red-legged sun squirrel** and **green bush squirrels** in the garden of the lodge right behind where I was sitting and waiting for the otters. I also saw some really cool birds including my first *African green pigeons* and *African pygmy kingfisher* in the gardens. There were lots of (probably **rope**) **squirrels** to be unidentified by me, at least for now. I ran into Rod before breakfast and he invited me to come see their newly rescued orphaned black-bellied pangolin, which they named Koki. Koki is short

for Cocobango, which is the Ba'Aka word for Pangolin. Well, at this point, Koki was still asleep but I did run into their two rescued and "prehabilitated" **blue duikers**, which had just come in from the forest, as they're spending more and more time on their own. They're really adorable, and Tamar and Rod have been doing such a positive thing by rescuing all these animals (who would have otherwise ended up on



someone's plate) and releasing them back into the wild in protected areas. Tamar brought Koki to breakfast, which was the first time I'd ever seen a real pangolin! That animal is so fucking cute!!! And it's also a beautiful animal, despite having lost a big part of her tail before she was found in a tree at the edge of a burned forest patch. I couldn't get over how cute she was, but I had to, because Tamar had to treat her tail, feed her, and let her forage on her own. After a delicious breakfast, the first activity was in fact to join the Ba'Aka who are watching over Pang, the now completely wild again **Black-bellied pangolin**. Pang is amazing! She really doesn't give a damn if you're

there or not, she is completely wild and forages in the trees, most of the time in the canopy, not coming near the people watching her nor retreating away. But if you spend some time with her, you will sometimes see her cross through areas where you can really enjoy seeing her clearly, and if the light is in your favor then you can even get some decent pics in. What an amazing encounter that is. The world's only readily viewable wild black-bellied pangolin!! Wow.



After lunch Rod took us around the trail system and showed us the swampy areas where lots of things are probably yet to be discovered. We did see some **putty-nosed monkeys** on the trail to the swamp (I saw them there every time I passed that place thereafter), and heard but missed by a few meters a *green-breasted pitta*. We also saw several squirrels on every walk, but we photographed only one, which was later identified as an **African Giant Squirrel**. At dinner we arranged to go to Dzangha Bai tomorrow since the weather had cleared up, and we were also warned about the sweat bees on the platform. Sweat bees? Nobody said anything about sweat bees!! Oh, but we were to find out about the sweat bees. Stay tuned... We did see a bunch of both *Bat Hawks* and **Hawk Bats** flying around just around the sunset.



We decided to hike the road coming into the lodge at night because it's wide and open, so you have visual access to all levels of the forest on both sides from the floor to the canopy. But tonight was the official full moon, and just as Vladimir had predicted, animal activity was scarce, and we only saw and poorly photographed one Galago, which was identified as most likely **Gabon Squirrel Galago**. An **Anomalure** glided past my light beam on the way back, which was most likely **Beercroft's**, because we will have seen that species almost at the exact same place later on. We also saw a large *nightjar*.

Sangha Lodge – Day 2: First Visit to Dzangha Bai

We had breakfast by 5:30 and were picked up at 6 to go into Dzangha Sangha. We both had bought crocks for the occasion, following the advice in Jon Hall's report (thank for that, Jon). We drove through Bayanga to pick up our guide Christian and a few other staff members who would



Apparently Gabon Squirrel Galago

be carrying our food and drinks to the platform and accompany us on the trip. The drive through the park is awesome - I immediately stopped to take some pictures of *blue-headed wood doves*, and a couple of **squirrels** crossed the road. I think that walking through THIS road at night or early morning should be interesting! They also see **gorillas** on occasion, rarely **bongos**, and more often **agile mangabays**, to name a few. Despite looking constantly, I spotted no monkeys along the way, but as soon as we reached the parking lot of Dzangha Bai, we heard and then saw our first **Mustached monkeys** right behind the ranger station. They provided views that were just barely satisfying, but I did sneak a picture in-between binocular views. The hike to the Bai is really cool and adventurous, hiking through the (elephant-poop filled) stream, and then through the rain forest for 20-25 more minutes. We saw a *Dwarf kingfisher* and tons of *Hornbills* along the stream, and a group of **Putty-nosed Monkeys** in the forest. Then the Bai.. Oh Dzangha Bai. First of all view is scenic and



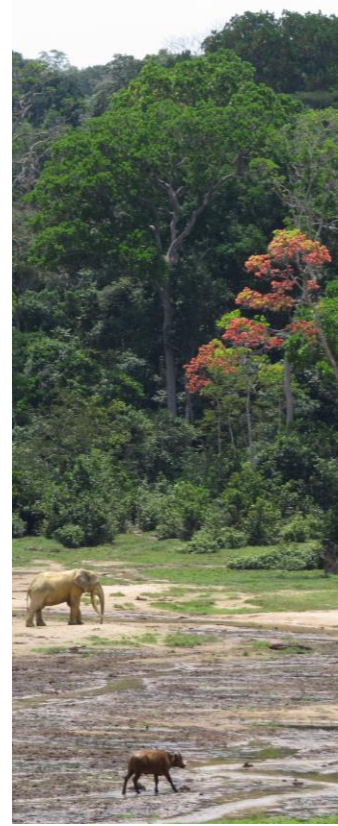
gorgeous, and definitely beats any day in the office. This morning elephant activity was not crazy, and after 20 minutes or less, they all hysterically ran into the forest, leaving the Bai with only a few **Buffalos**. I took a chair and sat on the back-facing side of the platform, looking into the forest and away from the Bai. Immediately, a beautiful *black bee-eater* that landed in perfect position for photography. I tried to multi-task by calling Luc over and also trying to photograph it, but failed at both. But other birds included *white-throated bee eaters* and tons of *sunbirds* of at least 4 species. Plus some *waxbills*, and LBJ's which I didn't try to identify. For the remainder of the day we only saw **elephants**, which came back in numbers later on, and **Buffalos**. Birdwise, the bai is full of small wading birds including *hammerkops* and some large *storks*, and the occasional *palm-nut vulture*. But what was most dominant about this day was the presence of sweat bees! Holy fuck. They are stingless, but they swarm you like crazy! Little by little we started covering up, putting on socks that I thankfully brought with me when I was warned about the bees, a long sleeve t-shirt, and finally a net-mask, similar to that of beekeepers! So by this point, I'm watching the elephants through a net, with constant buzzing in my ear, and bees on every millimeter of exposed skin. Also, once in a while a bee or two (they're tiny) would get inside the mask, and those guys go straight for your eyes! You have to pull them out of your eyes from time to time. Oh man.. Needless to mention, as far as today went, I did not have a great first impression of Dzangha Bai (but that was to change later, don't worry). Our guide, Christian, told us that the bees were abnormally numerous, even for the dry season. This must have meant that it was going to rain, according to him, even though it didn't look like it at all.

On the walk back we saw some **putty nosed** and **crowned guenons** again, which was cool because I actually was able to snap a picture of the crowned ones this time.

That night after dinner we went on another night walk, with the moon shining bright starting just after the sunset, and we actually saw no animals.

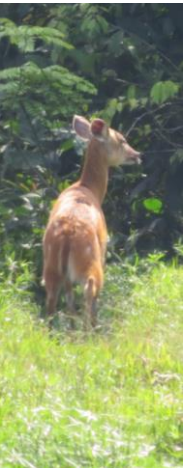
Sangha Lodge – Day 3: Bai Walk in Dzanga-Sangha

We were up again for breakfast at 5:30 and 6:00 pickup but we were 20 minutes late... We agreed to not let this happen again, especially during this critical time of the early morning when the animals are most active and we have to get going. Despite it being the "dry season" (more about



this later) it still takes just about 2 hours to get to Bai Hoku, and along the way a **gerbil** and a **mouse** crossed the road (some time apart) but we don't know which species. When we arrived, we had to wait to arrange a tracker, since they didn't arrange one for us. But that was partially our fault - we should have told Christian the day before that we would do the Bai walk, but we weren't sure yet.

We started the Bai walk about 8:30-8:45, and we offered the tracker and guide 2000XAF for every duiker species, mongoose species, pygmy and giant squirrel that we would see, and a 5000XAF for river hogs and pangolins. But the Bai walk was rather quiet. After less than 10 minutes a *supposed* **Marsh mongoose** crossed the path, but since the tracker was first, Christian second, followed by Luc and I, we didn't see it. Christian said it was **Marsh** but he wasn't always right on the ID. In the 2nd or 3rd Bai we finally saw our only **Sitatunga** for the trip. It ran as soon as it heard us, and I only got some back pictures.. But we did get better looks at it as it was running. Later on we scared off a pair of **blue duikers**, which again, being the 4th person in the group, I didn't see. They tried to make the duiker call for a few minutes but to no avail. They also scared off a little snake that I didn't see. We did stumble upon a very large group of **Agile Mangabay**, which we saw quite nicely. Later on we saw an **elephant** and a **squirrel** which Christian insisted was a Banded rope squirrel but I'm 100% sure it was a **Red-Cheeked** rope squirrel. And another **squirrel** which



ran into a hole in the tree, never to be seen again.

So a few things I learned about Central Africa: first, things that may seem obvious to you, aren't obvious here... For instance, even if your lodge supplies you with a bottle of water, and there's a staff member carrying your stuff on the long hike in the heat of the day, it doesn't mean that he'll be carrying your water. So you may find yourself without water for a 3-hour walk. Another thing is the information you get from people: one person would tell you that the best time to see Bongos at the Bai is from March to April, and another person will tell you they start coming in May.. A 3rd person would tell you end of March through May, and so on. Also, when does the "dry season" end seems to remain a mystery. More on that later.

At lunch I spotted the extremely beautiful *Red-bellied paradise flycatcher*, and then Christian took us to the waterfall with the colony of **Noak's Roundleaf Bats** behind it. On the road back out of the park we saw a few more groups of **agile mangabay**.

Then it started raining again.. At first it was light rain, but then it started to downpour throughout the afternoon until dinner. We were very worried about the fate of the rest of this evening, and of the gorilla tracking that was planned for the next day! After dinner, we chatted with Tamar, and since it was finally very dark, the moon wasn't coming out for another hour, and the rain was just letting off, Tamar told us: "go!" And was she right..!

We walked on the road again. Animal activity did prove to increase right after the rain a few times on this trip, and also the full moon theory pretty much proved itself. So after a few minutes of walking the entry road, we saw a beautiful **Potto** on a vine right above the road. What a creature! Then we spotted what I insisted was a



Galago, until I looked closer and realized, Duh! **Beercroft's Anomalure!** Hence the same animal glided past us 2 nights ago around the same place. What an awesome encounter!!! But then, to my dismay, my camera battery died and I left the other one in the other shorts. Stupid stupid me, because we had a wonderful encounter with a pair of noisy **Thomas's Galagos** for a few minutes, as they were calling loudly and jumping around in the bushes and trees, finally to disappear into the thicket. Upon continuing, we spotted a very small **mouse** all the way up the canopy. We didn't get perfect looks, and my camera wasn't working. But then as the moon



started to shine bright again, animal activity essentially ceased, and we turned around, spotting nothing on the way back. But the plan was to go to the room, take the charged battery and walk up one of the trails, which have been swept from leaves earlier today. When we crossed the bridge back to the lodge, Luc ahead and me behind, I spotted what must have been a **palm Civet** in a tree right over the river. I called Luc and shined my light at him. He came running back, but I wasn't successful at relocating the animal. So we walked up the path to the staff quarters, and tried to relocate it, but without success. But then the real bummer of the trip happened: as soon as we walked back down to the river to go up the stairs back to the lodge, I tried to find the animal again, only to realize that my super powerful new Led Lenser, which we had been using, had gone dead, never to revive again for the remainder of the trip! Noooooooooooooo!!! I only had my pocket Led Lenser which swallows batteries faster than [enter offensive and inappropriate analogy here]. And I didn't have spare batteries, nor did Luc... Even though his flashlight isn't bad, it does require more batteries which we didn't have. So the plan was to buy batteries in Bayanga after the gorilla trek tomorrow (before we knew they would have alkaline batteries there). Damn it. Needless to say tonight was over, but not without a few

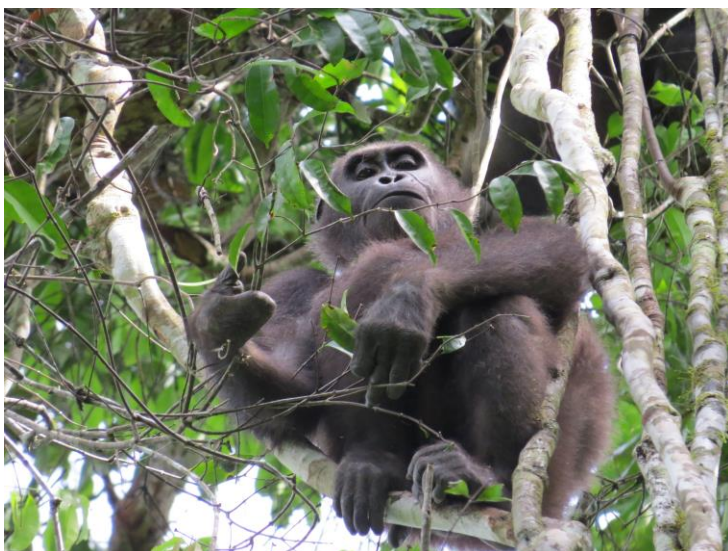
cool species under our belt. So we didn't go to sleep disappointed (but worried about the fate of future of night walks)

Sangha Lodge – Day 4: Gorilla Trekking

The next morning we were on time, being picked up at 6 and in the park by 6:30ish, but not before spotting the **mustached monkeys** again along the way, and another **red-legged sun squirrel** in the same tree. Inside the park, a **mongoose** and a **squirrel** quickly crossed the road, and we stopped twice to photograph *Plumed guineafowl*. Then we reached Bai Hoku by 8:20ish, and everything was ready for us this time. We were briefed for the gorilla walk, and off we went. After 20ish minutes we found the **gorillas**, but they were 20-30 meters up the trees. We tried to walk around and find the best viewing angle, but photo and viewing opportunities were rather limited and not particularly satisfying. I was wondering if the clock was ticking. In fact, it was. But after about 10 minutes of getting obscured views of the gorillas we were offered an option which I will forever remain thankful for, because it changed our gorilla viewing experience from unsatisfactory to FUCKING AMAZING. That option was simply to "go away", and be called again when the gorillas come down. Without even



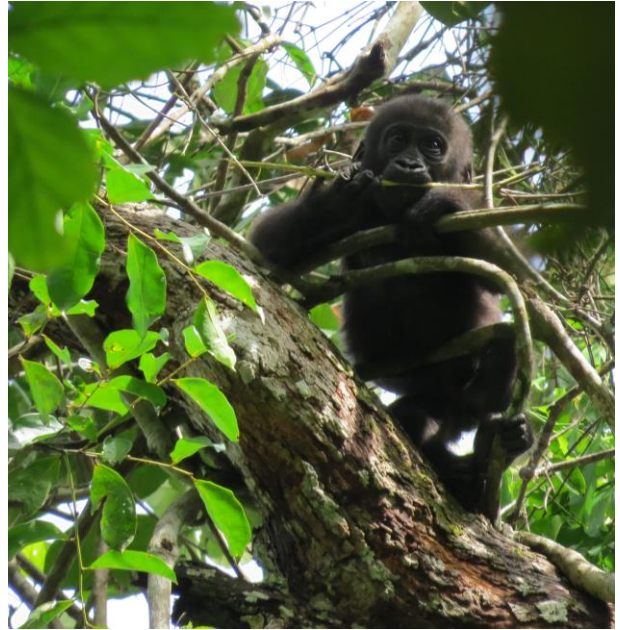
consulting with Luc, I immediately accepted that offer, and was anxious to get going, so they stop the clock. I could also see the look of disappointment on Luc's face with our gorilla encounter, and I knew this was clearly the right decision. We were taken a few minutes away and just sat and waited. I spotted some monkeys in the tree as soon as we sat down on a log.. A closer look revealed that, these were no monkeys, but in fact the **gorillas!** We now had a much better view of them, in fact, as we're



"off the clock" and just waiting. Wow! What a better way to spend our time 'waiting' for the gorillas than to watch gorillas?!?! After almost 30-40 minutes of "waiting" while watching a few individuals including the silverback from time to time, we were called back, because they were climbing down. We watched these magnificent animals, as they climbed down, always keeping our 7m from the silverback, but the littler ones had no problem getting much closer to us. We then followed them through the forest, the silverback, the mother

with a pair of twins riding on her back, and the rest of the group, as they moved

through the forest in what could easily be a montage in a Disney Jungle movie: crossing over streams on fallen logs, and walking elegantly through the forest, providing us with awesome views of their journey. Finally they settled down in a somewhat clearer area and we had perfect views of them. I can't actually use words to describe this encounter - this was my first encounter with any African ape, and I was speechless. At one point before we had to leave, Mr. Silverback wanted to get a little better acquainted with me, and walked directly toward me. Mind you, he was 7-8 meters away to start with, so this was coming a bit close. I actually took a step backwards but the guides told me not to move, until at one point he was within 2 meters of me. Holy fuck! This was so intense my adrenaline was through the roof. Of



course the littler ones were going around us, not keeping their "proper distance", and we were practically surrounded by wild **lowland gorillas**! It was at that point when I realized not all mammal species are equal, and the gorillas take the cake. This might have been the most intense wildlife experience I've ever had! I don't care what else we see, I was surrounded wild gorillas! What an experience. Wow. After a total of nearly *TWO

HOURS* with the gorillas, we were on our way back, getting a few final pics of mom & the twins. We had lunch by a waterfall and I also spotted a *shining blue drongo* in a tree.

That night, not having been able to fix my torch, and not finding batteries in the village, Tamar was kind enough to give us a pack of 8 energizer batteries, and we were assigned Armond, the manager of the staff and a stellar animal finder, on a night walk. We walked along the river trail for the first time, but only found a sleeping *white-bellied kingfisher* and only two new species: **Big-eared Swamp Rat**

and **Allen's Wood Mouse**. We decided that tomorrow we would have an early dinner, and start early in our night walk as the first few days after a full moon, the noon shines later and later in the evening but then stays until the morning, so the first few hours of the night are the darkest. This turned out to be a good decision.



Sangha Lodge – Day 5: OTTER!

The next morning I woke up at 4 and decided to hike down to the swamp alone, since Luc wanted to sleep in a little. I flash-lit my way there with my now new batteries but a pocket flashlight (which is sufficient for the denser trails, as opposed to the open road), but found nothing of interest along the way. I was at the swamp by 4:30 and waited quietly for miracles to happen. I waited by where Vladimir saw the Otter, but the only animals I saw between then and 6:30 were squirrels, as the rain forest started to wake up. I had another good view of a **Red-cheeked Rope Squirrel**, a few **Green Bush Squirrels** and photographed an apparent **Thomas's rope squirrel**, along with a possible **Lady Burton rope squirrel**.



After a *great blue turaco*-filled breakfast, we started hiking the river trail again, and got some excellent views of *Casqued wattled Hornbills* and other bird species. These huge Hornbills make an unmistakable sound when they fly, because their wings are so huge. We weren't seeing much except too-quick-to-ID



squirrels, and birds. At one point I just took one of the mini trails that cuts to the river off the main River trail, and Luc followed. There was what looked like the remains of a camp fire, and I suggested we just sit down for a few minutes and wait. Not 10 minutes went by before an **OTTER** swam into view!! Wow, my first species of any African Otter!! We weren't sure that this was in fact the **Congo clawless Otter** because it took a few long seconds for me to explain to Luc, who was looking off to another direction, doing some bird watching, that an Otter was swimming by. I said a few times: "Otter! Otter!" but he didn't understand what I was saying, until I "whispered" really loud "O-TER!!!!" and pointed at the turn in the river.

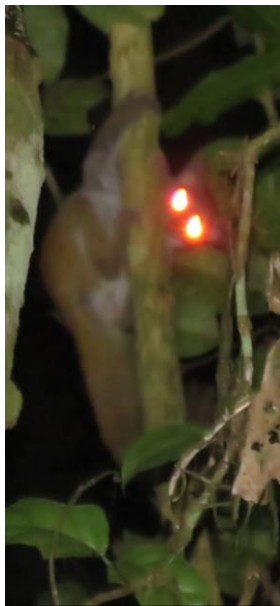
Finally, Luc turned his attention to the river and only got a last 2-3 second view of the Otter, which must have heard me because it turned our way and dove into the water, giving us a glimpse of its body and tail, never to be seen again! Damn it! I would have gotten a picture, but I really wanted to make sure Luc saw it too, because we were in this trip together.

We sat and waited for another 10-15 minutes, never to see it again. What an animal though!! It was also surprisingly late in the morning, probably around 10:30. After giving up, we continued up the river trail and sat at another spot where elephant signs were present and where Vladimir saw some interesting animals. We waited there no longer than 10 minutes and decided to head back for lunch. Back at the restaurant, we told Tamar about our encounter, and she was just about as ecstatic to hear about it as we were to have seen it. When we told her where we saw it, she told us that they had camera-trapped a **Congo Clawless Otter** exactly at that spot, which helped confirm our suspected ID. What a nice way to start the morning :) In the afternoon, after Tamar caught a **soft-furred mouse** just outside of Cabin 1, I returned to that otter spot alone, while Luc went to spend some more time with Pangy. I was sure that the Otter would come back and I would take a picture. I was there by like 16:00 and waited for over an hour, but the Otter never showed up again. I guess hoping to see the elusive Congo Clawless Otter twice in one day may

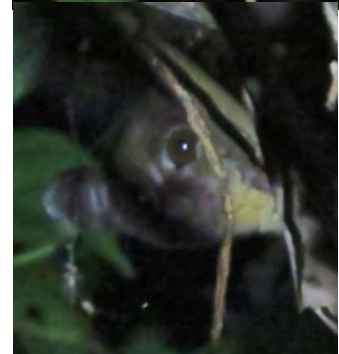
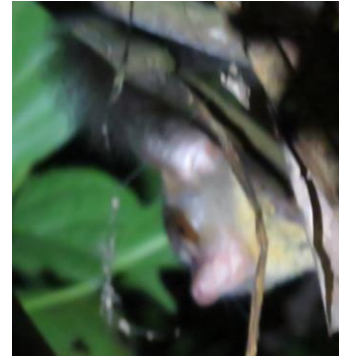
be pushing my luck.. But I did get some photos of the *olive-bellied sunbird* and *African pygmy kingfisher* back in the Lodge's Garden.

At dinner, I hurried Luc to put down his beer, so that we can start our night walk early. "We'll finish it to celebrate finding a Pangolin" we joked.

We met up with Armond, and set off to our night walk. So when you spend hours walking through the rain forest at night and barely see animals, the realization that 'just because most others before you saw such and such species doesn't mean you're gonna find them' starts to sink in. Animal activity changes drastically based on moon and weather conditions, and on the first 7-10 hours spreading over 5 nights of spotlighting we saw only a few species. But tonight our luck has changed. Armond was a star! First he found several Galagos. We must have seen 3-4 different species, cause they all looked and acted different, and were found in different microhabitats. We positively ID'ed **Elegant needle-clawed** and the tiny **Demidoff's Galagos**. One



thing I noticed is, whereas in Eastern and South Africa you have "greater" Galago and "lesser" Galagos, here there are lesser, dwarf, tiny, and microscopic Galagos. Well, maybe it just seemed like it to me. The next event was that we located a specific tree with a Tree Hyrax calling out of it for sure, as it was much higher than the surrounding trees, and the call came from it. However, after finishing his call he stopped as long as we had our light on the tree, and until after we had left, so we weren't able to see it. But then, after having spent 6 nights in the CAR, Armond



found a sleeping pair of **blue duikers**! Wow, how cool is it to see those guys out in the forest! We actually managed to



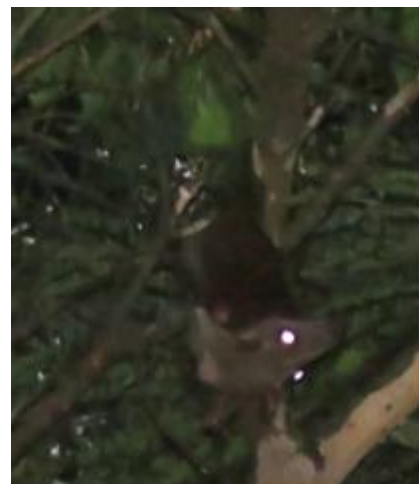
get a few pictures, and then Armond tried to get us to creep closer to them for a closer look. But an accidental small twig break, and off they went. Regardless, I was very happy. Tonight was already a success. But the true highlight was yet to happen... A little further down the trail, Luc heard something rustling through the leaves, and called me over. I couldn't see what he was looking at, and Armond, who had hurried back to where we

were said "Duiker?", to which Luc answered but I couldn't make up what he was saying, so I just repeated after Armond "Duiker?"

Without thinking twice, Armond JUMPED into the forest very noisily, and started chasing the animal. I thought "what is he doing?! He's making so much noise, he's gonna scare away the duiker!" but in less than 20 seconds, Armond was back on the trail, and with an animal in his hand?! I shine the light on it and.... OH MY GOD! A **WHITE-BELLIED PANGOLIN!!!** WOW! WOW! I must have repeated "wow" and "oh my God" the whole time while we were looking at, photographing and then releasing



the pangolin, and probably for 2-3 minutes afterwards! What a dream come true for me, to see a completely wild and 'unplanned' pangolin!!!! I mean, don't get me wrong, Pangi is definitely wild, and in fact, after the first time we went to see her, Luc went again on his own for 3-4 additional sessions, while I was out on the trails. But he never got to see her well again. One morning he actually waited for her with the trackers outside her sleeping hole, but as soon as she woke up, she went right to the other side of the tree, and never gave any good views. So she's a wild animal, not a show. And as a matter of fact, black-bellied pangolin is the more beautiful of the observable pangolin species at Sangha, and probably the coolest looking pangolin species anywhere. But regardless of all this, Pangi is findable, and when you go find her, you probably will, at least for now. And here I was looking at an un-prompted, untracked completely 'accidental' pangolin. Wow. It turned out that Luc had spotted the pangolin and knew what it was all along. I just didn't hear that he in fact told Armond "no duiker, pangolin!" which is what prompted Armond's sudden jump into the forest. Just wow. Luc and I laughed at how the first mammal he spotted on a night walk was our best nocturnal mammal, and my night felt complete. But the night wasn't over! We saw yet another **Galago** (probably Needle-clawed again) and then went back to the restaurant to part from Armond for the evening and have our celebratory beer that we had joked about earlier. But Luc reminded me that I had planned to walk with Armond until just before 10, and then let him go home and continue on our own for a short while up the road again and back. Well, if Luc was up to keep the evening going, who was I to say no. So we walked on the road, Luc now having the more powerful torch of the two of us, but we only saw two more animal for the remainder of the evening: First was an **African Palm Civet**!!! We both got great views of it with our binoculars despite the flashlight situation. But by the time I picked up my camera to try to picture it, it went out of view. Second was what is most likely a **Hammer-headed Bat**. We did not go to bed disappointed, to say the least!



Hammer-Headed Bat?

Sangha Lodge – Day 6: Waterfall Trail n' Stuff

The next morning I was back at the otter location by 6, but only saw more **squirrels** and birds, no Otter. This was the morning Luc went to wait for Pangii at her sleeping hole with the trackers. At breakfast we ecstatically told Rod and Tamar about last night's success, and they were obviously very happy for us. Then, after breakfast we went up the river to the Picathartes, Lord Derby's Anomalure, and brush-tailed porcupine sites. The waterfall hike is quite nice, and standing under the falls was welcomed since this was also the hottest and sunniest day we had there. Oh, and again, we forgot to bring water, not realizing that this was going to be a 4-hour excursion in the middle of the day. Damn it.

Well, the first site was really cool, with the **Lord Derby's Anomalure** along with two bat species (apparently **hairy slit-faced** and **cyclops roundleaf**, but I made no attempt to photograph them), and the waterfall itself. At the brush-tailed porcupine



cave we found no porcupine, but the guide with the machete saw a tree hyrax between the rocks under the vacant picathartes nests! Despite crawling deeply into the cave with the flexibility and determination that only Armond could have, he wasn't able to locate the hyrax for us, as it went further into the crevices. We waited a few minutes for it to resurface but it wouldn't so long as we're there, so we left to go back to the boat. So there's a second brush-

tailed porcupine cave down the river on the way back to the lodge, so we were gonna check that one in case we didn't see one in the first cave (which was now the case). That cave requires about an hour walk/climb each way, and mind you we did not have water on us or in the boat. So by the time we sweatily got to that second cave and saw no porcupine, we were ready to go back to the lodge for refreshments and it was just about time for lunch anyway. Despite looking out for the pygmy squirrel in both sites on that side of the river, we didn't see one. But we did see **monkeys** which disappeared too quick to identify, and a few non-pygmy **squirrels** which we didn't stop for. After lunch, Luc was going to take the afternoon easy, and I, of course, was going to go back and see mr. Congo Clawless. It started to rain again at 14:30 but I saw the far end of the rain cloud and knew it would stop soon, and bring on increased animal activity upon departure. And I was right! Birds were just going crazy, and while sitting by the river waiting for the Otter I saw both *African paradise* and again *Red-bellied paradise flycatchers*, *shining blue kingfisher*, and many other pretty birds which I don't know. Suddenly I noticed movement on the right side (our side) of the river and saw dark silhouette of very woolly monkeys moving really low on a fallen tree. I guessed they were agile mangabays, being so close to the ground, but they seemed a bit too hairy, so I picked up my binoculars

and took a look, only to find a **De Brazza's** monkey looking back at me from the bush!!! There was such a hype over De Brazza's monkey, that I felt so lucky to see them without even "trying", just by sitting and waiting. I looked at it a while longer to confirm my ID, overtaken with adrenaline from seeing yet another cool and exciting animal. Yep - 100% a De Brazza's monkey! There were at least two there, and the one I was looking at was looking right back at me, noticing my every move. I slowly put down my binoculars and started to raise my camera and zoom in, but they were gone in a second. Damn! But so what, I was so happy with just having seen them! Have I just learned that sitting silently can be a better tactic than hiking?! I think so. Being a somewhat impatient person with a constant urge to be on the move, it really took an unexpected Otter and two De Brazza's monkeys to convince me that sometimes the best strategy is to just sit silent and let nature happen, even just at a random spot in the middle of a dense rain forest. Wow, again (I keep saying that word on this trip, as it keeps exceeding all my expectations). When it was just time for dinner, I hiked back to the lodge with a huge smile on my face despite not seeing the otter again, and told everyone about my encounter. That night we went again with Armond, this time on the road because he said he saw several species on his ride home last night, including an African Civet and some Genet (well, when we asked him what species he saw, that's what he pointed out in the mammal book). So off we went, but didn't really see much besides two **African palm Civets**, one of which I got a crappy picture of, just for the record, and an even crappier video. We also had another good **Potto** but we were tired and already had perfect views of one earlier on.



Sangha Lodge – Day 7: Back to the Bai

On day 7 in Sangha we were off again to Dzangha Bai, only seeing a pair of large *cuckoos* (*Senegal Coucals*?) on the way into the park. And I don't even remember if any animals crossed the road on that day, but most days small rodents or the occasional mongoose would cross the road and remain unidentified. After the rains, and on this sunny day, activity in the Bai increased in terms of numbers of elephants, and I had a good feeling about this day. We saw tons of cool **elephant** behavior, including an elephant who decided to dress up as a Nyala (see below). Right around 11:00am I spotted something conspicuous walking on some roots. It turned out that like Vladimir and another recent visitor to Sangha Lodge, we also spotted a suspiciously diurnal **Servaline genet**. Based on the description and the illustration in



the book, I was seriously convinced that we had just discovered "Giant Genet" for the first time in the CAR. But it wasn't until after I returned that we realized it was in fact a servaline genet.. Anyway, it's a beautiful Genet, very cat-like (as the name



suggests, considering it is "servaline" after all). At this point I had high hopes for the remainder of the day, keeping in mind that Bongos were at the very top of Luc's targets, and of course very high up for me as well. We didn't see bongos, but as a consolation prize we had infinitely prolonged views of a family of **giant forest hogs** as they came out of the bushes very near to where

the Genet went off to. They came into the Bai, and started wondering around. Actually, over the next 2 days, they would circle the entire Bai perimeter, going in and out of the forest and out into the open, giving some spectacular views. But



bongos were not to be seen that day. Also on this day, the bees only started appearing around 13:30, and only by 14:30 it became really annoying again. but I made a deal with them: I'd let them hang out on my arm, as long as they stay away from my eyes. Well, most of them certainly listened, as I counted 21 "friends" on my left arm at one point (Ew). It was like fear factor, except you don't win anything for surviving. Not even a bongo. Of course a few of them didn't accept the deal and came to my eyes, but that decision proved fatal for them. By 16:00 the bees were out of control, which, according to Christian... meant it was going to rain again? We asked to stay until 16:30 to try for bongos, promising to walk fast back to the car and not stop for monkeys or anything along the way, but all the extra half an hour yielded was more bees. On the walk back to the car, the guy waking in front of us and carrying the lunch and stuff, spotted a pair of **blue duikers**. They sped like race cars through the forest but we could see them well for a few seconds because this area was thinly forested. At one point, they actually ran right in our direction and then crossed the path less than 5m behind us in a blurry (and impressive) flash. Crazy guys! You gotta love them. That night, a group of 12 Americans came to the lodge, and we had dinner and a beer with them and with Rod. Add our accumulating tiredness and today's exhaustion, with the fact that we have now seen so much, that we decided to do the unthinkable - to stay at the bar for a beer and not go on a night walk. We just hung out with Rod and the Americans, talking about conservation and wildlife. My contact lenses getting blurry and my eye starting to itch really badly didn't help the cause, and I went to sleep before 22:00.

Sangha Lodge – Day 8: One last attempt for Bongos...

On our last full day at Sangha Lodge, I woke up with a fucking irritating eye infection, which put a damper on my entire day. We were out at the Bai again to try to get



bongos, photographing some *Hornbills* on the way in, and the **Mustached guenons** again in the same spot, on the main road near the turn to Doli Lodge. This morning was cloudy and rainy at the Bai. At first, numerous *Grey parrots* came by, and landed in the 10's or 100's on trees just to the left of the Bai clearing, and they even flew in a massive flock over the Bai, but way off to the left, over a part which you can't really see well. It was cool nevertheless. We also saw more *shining blue drongos*, but as far as mammals go, we

saw only the same 3 species - **elephant, Buffalo** and **giant forest hogs**, who by now

circled half the perimeter of the Bai, and must have crossed somewhere behind the platform because they appeared on the other side of the Bai, continuing to follow the perimeter, but also venturing out into the open at times.

I was so ready with my tripod for the genet, which never showed up. The most dominant event of today (which had ZERO bees because of the weather) was the terrible itchy and aching left eye of mine, which got so bad that



I just took out my contacts and put on my glasses instead. Not having a case or solution for these contacts, so I knew they had just met their bitter end.

We didn't see any animals on our last night walk, walking in the wet forest. We tried to stop and wait at Otter point and elephant (River hog/chevrotain) spot and turn off our lights for a few minutes, but I could still barely keep my infected eye open for more than 30 seconds at a time and altogether it was just not a good night. But we thanked Armond for all his hard work and parted ways from him at the end of the night walk.

The Long Ride Back to Yaounde

The next morning we were out of the lodge by 6:00am, saying goodbye to Rod and sadly missing Tamar who has been down with Malaria for 2 days now. We took the car option to the village across from Libongo instead of the boat. Despite the constant rain, we definitely noticed that the road goes through some pristine (yet not officially protected) forest, and the guys told us that they sometimes see gorillas and other animals along the way. All we saw was another mouse-looking rodent crossing the road fast, but my eye was still bad (though better) so I just tried to sleep most of the way.

When we crossed the river by canoe back to Libongo, we still had some hopes up for adding a new species to our list in the Libongo Forest concession. After having our passport checked and finding our drivers, we were on our way. I second Vladimir's assessment of the Libongo forest concession, it's like 65-70km of road that pierces through pure awesomeness. While driving through, we saw this trip's only **Bay**

Duiker on the road, and it was surprisingly calm. I told our driver *arrete! Arrete!* But he only slowed down a bit and kept saying "*c'est un viche. Un Viche*" I already had my camera in my hand and ready but he never stopped completely, until we got too close and the duiker just went into the forest. Damn it! We had perfect views of it, but no pic. We got out of the car to search for it, and as soon as we were out of the car we also noticed some **putty nosed monkeys** again, and took some consolation photos of those. While in the LFC, we did stop over the first couple of bridges, one of which provided Vladimir with prolonged views of the Red River Hog, but we didn't get that lucky. We were also informed by our drivers that they saw a family of gorillas earlier that morning when they drove through the forest on the way to Libongo. It was also almost noon, and so animal activity was at its lowest of the day. But this place has so much potential! In a total of like 3 hours (1.5 each way) right in the middle of the day, we managed 4 mammal species, 2 of which we only saw there! I can see how this might be the place for golden cats.

The rest of the way back to Yaounde was long and torturous, because obviously we didn't have that initial excitement that we had on the way in, and it was much dustier, so even after a shower (at the really disgusting Elephant Hotel in Yakadouma) my towel still turned dusty brown. Luc reported the same. And the following day we were stopped at just about every check point and asked for our passports and vaccination cards. At one of them we were asked to open our suit cases and bags so that they could search through them, but then they let us go. At another one just about 2 minutes later, they took our documents and our drivers talked to them for almost 10 minutes and ended up giving them some bribe money to get our passports back. That made me very nervous for the rest of all the check points, even though after Bertoua we had no problems. About 60km out of Yaounde another **Mongoose** crossed the road, and this time we were almost certain we could finally identify it as a **long-nosed mongoose**, which was to be the final mammal sighting of the trip. About 40 km out of Yaounde the headlights went out, and as it was already dark out we stopped in what seemed like a not very good place to stop. For over 15 minutes, they tried to fix the lights until finally they managed a temporary fix. We also had the less better of the two drivers drive the rest of the way to Yaounde, and I was constantly nervous about being stopped at checkpoints, especially since they now had to use their high beams the entire time, and we were constantly being blinked at by cars behind us and coming toward us. Finally, after reaching Yaounde and driving another 30-40 minutes inside the city, we reached Hotel Falaise, which was a great and modern relief to this long and torturous day (literally 15.5 hours of driving through dust, bumps, and check points..). I realized that the next time I visit Dzangha-Sangha is when I'm rich enough to just fly in and out. Finally after a long shower, we celebrated this amazing, amazing experience with a cold beer and a nice dinner.

So despite the lack of Bongos, I'm very thankful and feel privileged to have had such an amazing experience in such an unusual and remote location. This trip exceeded all my expectations and what I loved the most was the diversity of mammals from different groups, from galagos and pottos to pangolins and otters, and even pigs, civets and elephants.. it was just amazing! I want to thank Rod and Tamar Cassidy first and foremost, for the warm hospitality, for being resourceful and telling us where to go to see what animals, and really for fulfilling all our needs during our

stay! They're doing as much as they can to try to save local wildlife and to raise awareness etc.

Also the staff, both in the National Park and in Sangha lodge were really awesome. Also thank you to Martial for arranging the longggggg drive from Yaonde to Libongo and back. The crew did a really good job navigating through the dirt roads and getting us through all the check points.

I also have to thank everyone who wrote trip reports about Dzangha Sangha and who shared information with me prior to the trip, notably Venkat and Vladimir, Jon and Jean-Michel, Dominique, The Smith and the Lundqvist families, and Sjef.

And finally, last but definitely not least: Thank you Luc Van Den Bergh for being a great travel companion, keeping up with the pace, FINDING A PANGOLIN, and being an all-around fun guy to travel with!



Mammal List:

Hammer-headed Fruit Bat (*Hypsignathus monstrosus*)

Black-hawk bat (*Saccolaimus peli*)

Hairy slit-faced bat (*Nycteris hispida*)

Cyclops roundleaf bat (*Hipposideros cyclops*)

Noak's roundleaf bat (*Hipposideros ruber*)

Milne-Edwards' potto (*Perodicticus edwardsi*)
Southern needle-clawed galago (*Euoticus elegantulus*)
Demidov's dwarf galago (*Galagoides demidoff*)
Thomas's dwarf galago (*Galagoides thomasi*)
Gabon squirrel galago (*Sciurocheirus gabonensis*)
Agile mangabey (*Cercocebus agilis*)
Grey-cheeked mangabey (*Lophocebus albigena*)
Crowned guenon (*Cercopithecus pogonias*)
Moustached guenon (*Cercopithecus cephus*)
De Brazza's monkey (*Cercopithecus neglectus*)
Putty-nosed guenon (*Cercopithecus nictitans*)
Guereza (*Colobus guereza*)
Western gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*)
African palm civet (*Nandinia binotata*)
Servaline genet (*Geneta servalina*)
*Marsh mongoose (*Atilax paludinosus*) – Possibly seen by us; apparently seen by Christian
Long-nosed mongoose (*Herpestes naso*)
Congo clawless otter (*Aonyx congicus*)
Giant forest hog (*Hylochoerus meinertzhageni*)
Bay duiker (*Cephalophus dorsalis*)
Blue duiker (*Philantomba monticola*)
Sitatunga (*Tragelaphus spekii*)
African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*)
Black-bellied pangolin (*Phataginus tetradactyla*)
White-bellied Pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*)
Forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*)
Red-legged sun squirrel (*Heliosciurus rufobrachium*)
African giant squirrel (*Protoxerus stangeri*)
? Fire-footed rope squirrel (*Funisciurus pyrropus*) – Questionable ID based on bad pic that was posted on the blog

Thomas's rope squirrel (*Funisciurus anerythrus*)

? Lady Burton's rope squirrel (*Funisciurus isabella*) – Questionable ID based on bad pic that was posted on the blog

Red-cheeked rope squirrel (*Funisciurus leucogenys*)

Green bush squirrel (*Paraxerus poensis*)

Beecroft's anomalure (*Anomalurus beecrofti*)

Lord Derby's anomalure (*Anomalurus derbianus*)

Allen's wood mouse (*Hylomyscus alleni*)

Big-eared swamp rat (*Malacomys longipes*)

soft-furred mouse species (*Praomys sp.*)

Gerbil Species



Soft-Furred Mouse