

Central African Republic: 16 – 27 April 2012 and 28 species

It did not take us long to book a ticket to CAR after reading Jon Halls' trip report about Dzanga Sangha National Park. It sounded great, and, it was. We looked through the homepages of a few foreign offices and decided to believe the German and English rather than the Swiss. This part of the country is seemingly safe and we did not have any safety problems at all.

We arranged the trip through Rod Cassidy, the owner of Sangha Lodge - www.sanghalodge.com. On his home page you can get all information about getting to the park and activities and he can arrange a car and a driver for the 500 kilometres drive from the capital Bangui to the lodge. You have a very expensive option to fly, but as you need a car for many of the activities and we thought it would be interesting to see a bit of the country, we decided to go by car. Rod arranged a good Landcruiser to pick us up from our in Bangui (it did only break down once) for EUR 130/day plus diesel. Our driver Andraman we can recommend. He was always early and ready to work even at night when we drove for night walks at Doli Lodge. As we arrived late in the afternoon we stayed one night in Bangui in Karakandji, a nice guesthouse close to the very friendly and excellent restaurant Relais de Chasse.

It was dry season and the road was quite good and took us "only" 11 hours, including 11 more or less pointless police and military checkpoints. At each checkpoint we had to produce some sort of permit of travel, our passports and sometimes vaccination cards. Only at one checkpoint they asked for a donation. They wanted chicken. In general you should not pay, but what do you do when someone with a Kalashnikov has your documents, you are tired and you just want to continue.

We thought 12 days would give us ample of time to explore everything we wanted and even to relax a bit too. Not so. There are so many different activities and all of them pays-off doing again and again and again, and some of the animals you have to fight for to get a better look.

We stayed at Sangha Lodge which is a simple but comfortable lodge excellently situated on the banks of Sangha river. You even have hot water which feels surprisingly nice after a long day out. It probably is the best option to stay at if you want everything to work flawlessly and if you want some comfort. Rod is also doing conservation job trying to educate the locals about the value of keeping the nature.

Mammals around Sangha Lodge

Rod has cut a few trails around the lodge and more are in the planning. We walked the trails day and night and there is a lot of wildlife around, especially at night. We cannot say if one trail is better than the other. Maybe we did not see so many animals in the day time around the lodge as Rod was rebuilding the roof of the restaurant and it was quite noisy.

On our first day we did not have to walk far for our first mammal. In a hollow Ekobo tree, just beside one of the bungalows, a **Lord Derby's Anomalure** uses it as his day hide in the dry season. I guess a hollow tree in the rainy season is not that comfortable. Already on the first day we spotted one individual.



He did not come back every day, but we saw him regularly. He seemed to have a time-sharing deal with a **Commerson's Leaf Bat**, which carried a baby. If one where there the other was not, except on one occasion, when both sat beside each other.



Monkeys were not that easy to come by around the lodge. We heard several groups in the forest but seldom saw any. The only one we could identify for sure was the **Putty-nosed Monkey**, the most common monkey around. They often travel with other species so it pays to look around. They are quite wary about movements so if you see one you better stay still. We guess getting shot at do that to you. The bush meat trade is flourishing and we heard gun shots in the night on several occasions.

Squirrels were plentiful and on most walks we saw some **Red-legged Sun Squirrels** and **Lady Burton's Rope Squirrels**. On one occasion, following the path along the river, we saw one **African Giant Squirrel**.



The only tourist we saw during our 12 day stay. He had talked with some locals and asked them to bring Pangolins if they caught one instead selling it on the market. Pangolin is a delicacy here. One day hunters brought a **Tree Pangolin** caught in a trap to the lodge. We released it early in the morning and we follow it escaping up in the trees. This delayed us for over one hour, a price we were more than happy to pay.



Black Hawk Bats often hunt over the river at dusk. A very comfortable way of looking for them is sitting on the veranda with a cold beer, enjoying the sun setting over the river and the pristine rainforest, hearing the Chimpanzees and Tree Hyrax calling on the other side of the river. Three times we were lucky sitting on the deck. We never saw more than one on each occasion.

Night walks were very productive around the lodge and very special. Twice we had to turn back due to **Forest Elephants** and a few times we made the "Ants dance" as well. Never have we come across more aggressive ants anywhere. After a while you learn to look down before you stop to look up. On the first night walk (3 hours) we had only walked for 5 minutes or so before seeing our first Galago, probably **Demidoff's Galago**. Before the night was over we had seen 2 more. On the second night walk (3.5 hours) we spotted a **Tree Rat** and most likely a **Thomas's Galago**. On every night walk around the lodge we spotted at least a few Galagos. On the 2 last night walks we found **Pottos**. We also saw a few Pottos driving from the lodge to the main road.

We have an idea which the species below are, but if you have a definite answer, please tell us so.





Mammals around Doli Lodge

Doli Lodge is some 7 kilometres away from Sangha Lodge close to the village (town?) Bayanga, the regional centre. We did one afternoon walk and two night walks and found some nice species.

In other trip reports people had seen Civets and Linsang and Rod meant it could be good for De Brazza's Monkeys, but only early mornings. In the afternoon we did not see much. If you are lucky you can sit on the Doli Lodge veranda and see Hippos. We did not see them either, but we only tried once. Coming back from Dzangha Bai we spotted a group of **Moustached Monkeys** close to the WWF office, which is close to Doli Lodge.

The 2 night walks we did were more productive, especially on the path between Doli Lodge and the Bayanga. The trees seemed to be "infested" with Pottos and we saw 3-4 on each night walk (2-3 hours each).



There were plenty of what we believe is **Golden Fruit Bats**? Please correct us if we are wrong,



and on one occasion we saw one **Giant Pouched Rat**. On the paths behind the information centre we saw more Pygmy Galagos, but were unable to identify them.

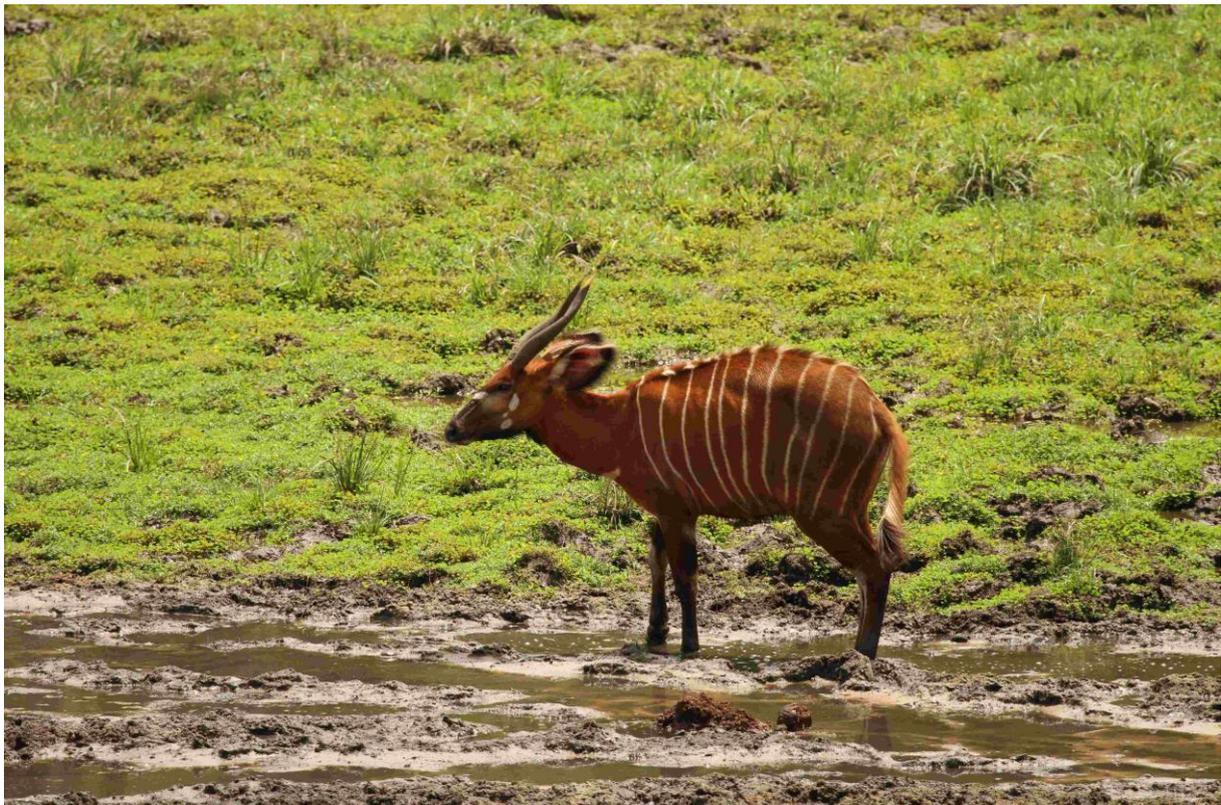
Once Léonce, our guide, took us to a swamp on the other side of the village which is supposedly good for De Brazza's as well, but we soon had to turn back due to deep water.

Mammals in Dzanga Sangha National Park

To do any activity inside the national park you must register at the information office close to Doli Lodge. You will be assigned a Ba'Aka tracker and one guide. Our guide Léonce was particularly useful and very nice. He really understood what we wanted and tried hard. We can really recommend him. Our Ba'Aka was very nice and knew his way around but probably saw more than he pointed out at us. It was charming though to be in a place where they are not that used to tourists.

Our first stop in the NP was the lovely Dzanga Bai not far from Bayanga on a bad dirt track. The roads in the park are terrible even in the dry season and it took us about 1 hour. It may take even longer if elephants have knocked down trees over the road. A few times we had to clear the road from fallen trees. The bai is some 2 km from where to park the car and you must wade through knee-deep water for a short while. We got to the bai early in the morning and left 16:30. The guides usually want to leave sometimes after 16 due to the Elephants. There are quite a few Elephants around, and many females with babies, so who can blame them. There should be a reasonable chance to be allowed to stay over night. You have to ask for permission at the WWF-office, but as I got ill we never got a chance. Next time, for there will be a next time.

Anyway, when we reached the bai the action was already on with about 50 Forest Elephants of all ages, 1 **Forest Buffalo**, 5 female **Sitatungas** and, maybe the highest price of them all, 2 **Bongos**. Of the species you are likely to see only Red-river Hogs never came, which was a shame. You sit on a platform some 7 meters above the ground and it was quite peaceful enjoying a place we had dreamt about for a long time.



A huge flock of African grey parrots left about 11, which they apparently always do, so if you want to see them, go there early.

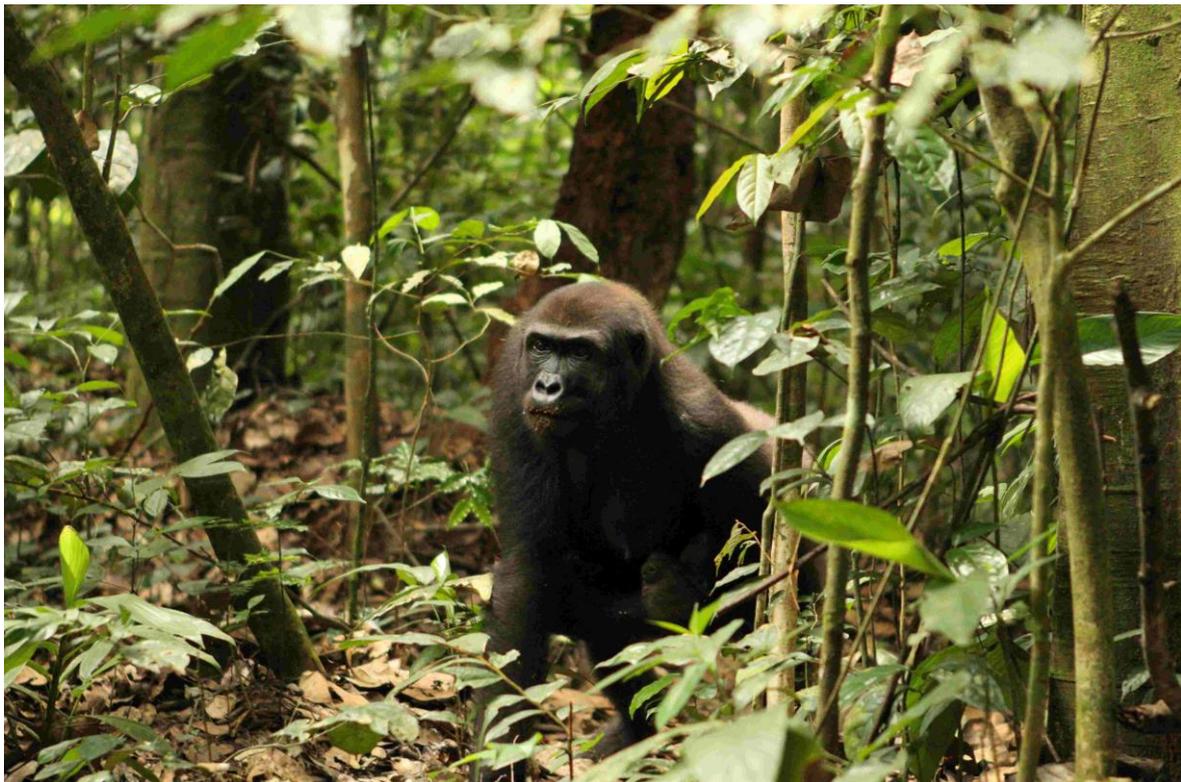


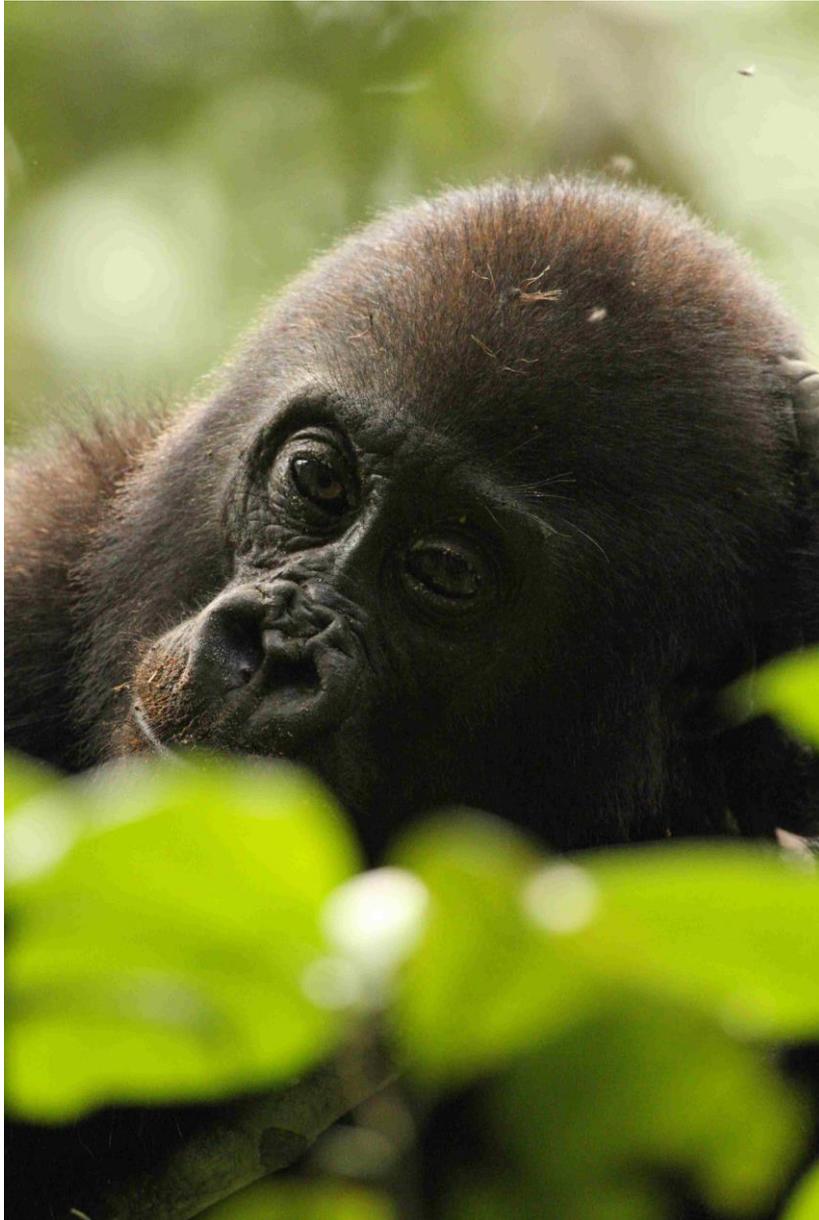
At about 15, a family of 10 **Giant Hogs**, with 2 babies the size of a Guinea Pig, entered the bai. We saw them at the same time both days we went there.



The world famous forest Elephant researcher, Andrea Turkalo came in the early afternoon. She is a very nice lady only all too happy telling about her research and answering questions she probably has answered many many times before and tell stories about her many years there. When she heard I got sick she went straight away to the internet looking if something could be done. She also told us that in the river you wade through getting to the bai is very good for otters and they have been thinking about setting up a platform for the purpose. We really wanted to go there observing but there was just not enough time.

Of course, no visit is complete without the gorilla trekking. You can do this in Bai Hoku or at Mangabe. As the gorillas at Bai Hoku were sick at the time, we had to go to Mangabe. There were no problems with the permits as we were the only tourists and it was very nice to be able to do the gorilla trekking by ourselves. Not many places you can do that. It is not a sure thing to find them and once out of 4 tries we did not. If you do not see them you will be fully refunded. The **Western Lowland Gorillas** were never far off and it never took us more than 1 hour to find the family of 15 individuals in the dense forest. To get an excellent photo was difficult as it was quite dark, but we really enjoyed our time with them. As usual you are allowed to stay 1 hour with the group and not allowed to get closer than 7 meters. The gorillas did not know about this rule and even the silver-back came within a few meters of us.





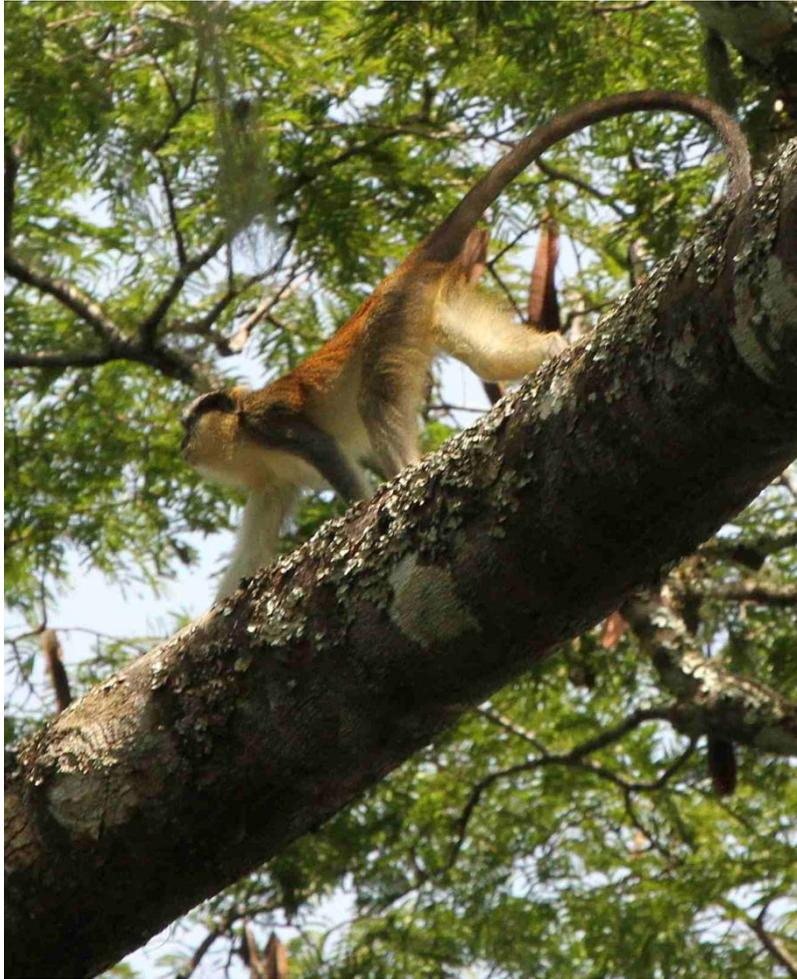
Gorilla trekking is the only activity at Mangabe, but as Mangabe and Bai Hoku is close, you can easily drive there.

Once we also saw a Chameleon at Mangabe coming out from one of the trekking.

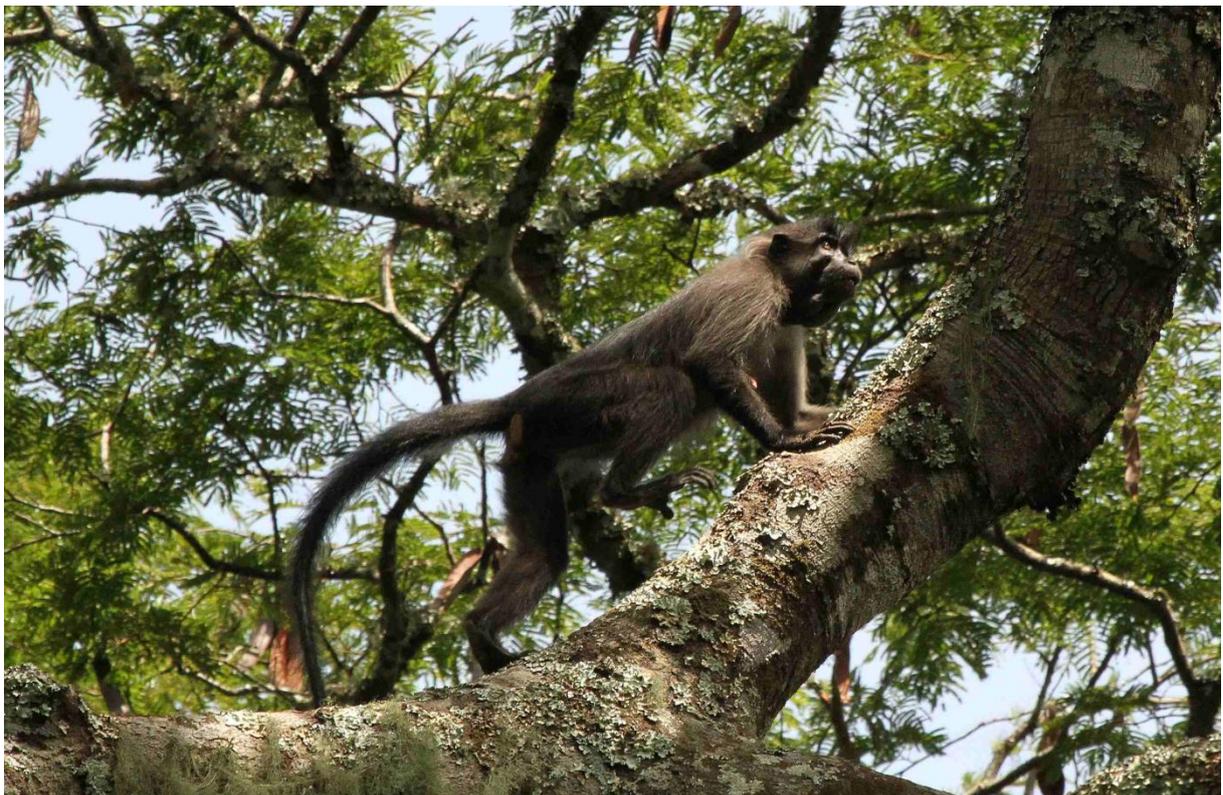


There are more activities in Bai Hoku and we went there twice. If we should choose where to do the gorilla trekking we probably would go to Bai Hoku as you have a chance to see the gorillas out in the bays, which you won't in Mangabe. The gorilla group size at Mangabe is larger though.

Bai Hoku was wonderful. The monkeys were less shy and already on the way in we saw a troop close to the road and we followed them into the bush, getting eaten by ticks. Carmen had a ball later that night pulling them out. In the same group we spotted a few **Crowned Monkeys**,



some Putty-nosed monkeys and some **Grey-cheeked Mangabeys**.



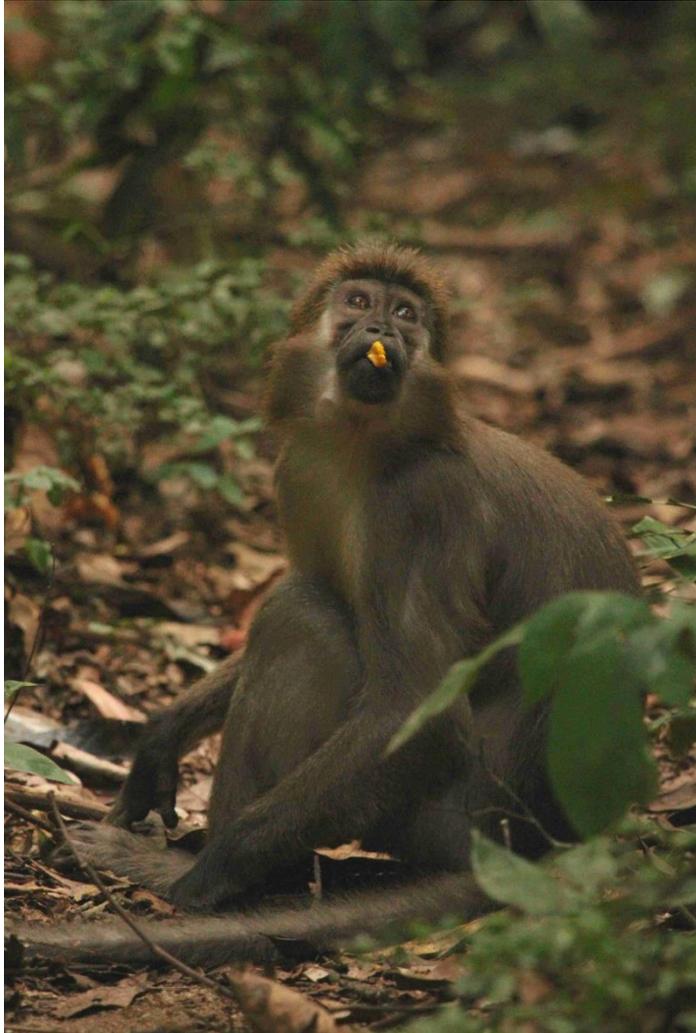
At Bai Hoku, in a cave behind the open-air shower, at least one species of bat can easily be seen, the **Noack's Roundleaf Bats**.



We were lucky to see a second species of bat beside the others, which no-one could identify. We have sent it for identification and if someone can tell us which species it is, please write us a note.



The **Agile Mangabey** walk is an easy trek lasting about 2 hours and when you find them you can stay 1 hour with them. On the way to them we also spotted some more Moustached Monkeys and Grey-cheeked Mangabeys travelling together as well as one **Blue Duiker** in the thick undergrowth. The Agile Mangabeys are very easy to follow as they spend a lot of time on the ground.

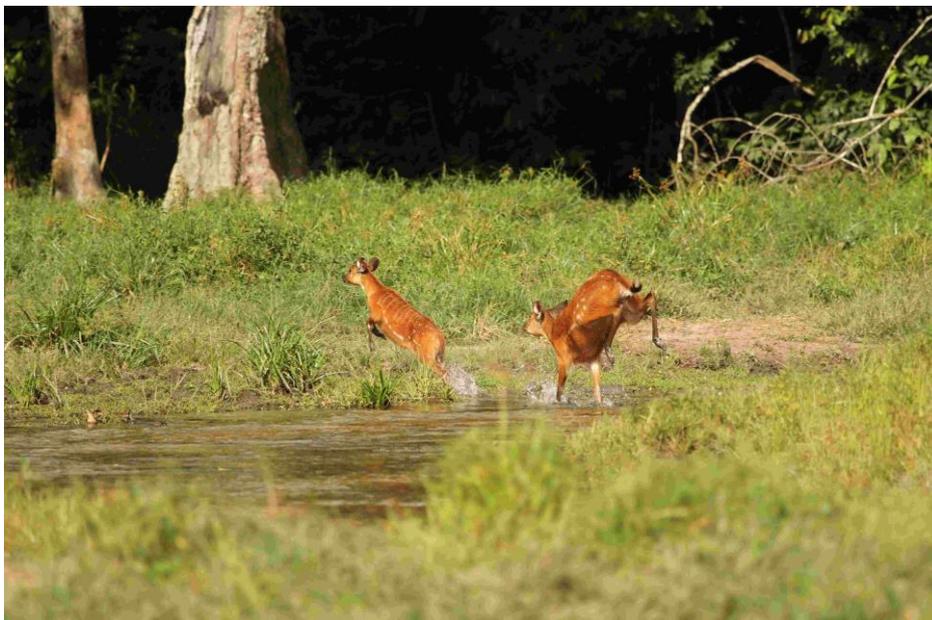


The Bai walk (tour de saline) takes you to 4 bais and took us about 3 hours each time. Even in the dry season the bais are filled with knee-deep in places. Hiking boots are not to recommend on this trek as you will get wet. We learned this the hard way.

We walked the bais three times, once in the morning and twice in the afternoon. In terms of wildlife the afternoon walks were better with more action. Of course, we only did the morning walk once and may just have been unlucky. We hoped for Gorillas out in the bai and possibly of Red-river Hogs, but were unlucky. There are plenty of Forest Elephants out in the bais and sometimes it is an ordeal to find a way around them.



We also spotted a few male and female Sitatungas on each walk, once a family of Giant Hogs and quite a few Forest Buffalos. The forest Buffalos are usually quite scared but on one occasion they ganged up against us and some 30 of them followed us. We walked quickly into the bush.





On the last afternoon walk some Elephants crossed our path in the forest too. We walked back briskly and took another path only to find some more Elephants. After a while we found a way out and also found a tree full of **Guereza Colobus**. They were on the way to the bai to feed. If we only could have walked down in the bai we would have got a nice view and maybe even some pictures, but could not. Another Elephant stood in our way and we had to go another trail through the forest.

Cultural activities

Usually we are not that much into cultural performances made-up only for tourists, but on the last day we decided to go and hunt with the Ba'As, a morning tour lasting for about 2 hours. They hunt with nets, which they bind together and makes a lot of noise to scare smaller animals into them. Twice we were told a Yellow Duiker escaped. In the end we did not have any hunting luck, something we were very happy with. Ba'As still hunt like this and it was a great authentic experience and we can really recommend it.



This is a great place and, we believe, as authentic as it gets. This is a wild place. Go there!

Until next time

Carmen and Torbjörn Lundqvist