

Report from Gabon trip July/August 2017

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Locations visited: Langoue Baï, Ivindo National Park; Lekedi Park.

Introduction

I have a background as a mammalogist, but the main focus of my trips is wildlife photography. Therefore, I tend to allocate most of my time to search for and work with a few selected species and spend longer time at fewer locations, rather than planning my itinerary after seeing as many species as possible. Thus, my species lists are far from as impressive as those seen in many reports on Mammalwatching.com. E.g., Vladimir Dinets in his report “The Congos, Gabon and Cameroon, March-May 2009” wrote that they saw 39 mammal species in Lekedi, Gabon. However, since Gabon is a relatively unexplored country and difficult to organize trips in I thought I’d share some experiences from my recent trip there as well as some interesting possibilities for mammal enthusiasts elsewhere in the country.

My reason for going to Gabon was to photograph mandrills. Lope National Park is the most famous place for mandrills and where they occur in huge troops sometimes numbering many hundreds. However, from the scant information I was able to gather beforehand I got the impression that the mandrills here can be quite tricky to find, let alone get close enough to get the kind of photos I’m looking for. Therefore I opted for a week in the Lekedi Park. In addition, I decided to fulfill another dream of mine, experiencing a baï, and included 5 days at Ivindo National Park to visit Langoue Baï.

Mammal species observed:

	Ivindo	Lekedi
African palm civet		X
African civet	X	
Marsh mongoose		X
Congo clawless otter	X	
Western lowland gorilla	X	
Chimpanzee	Heard	
Guereza colobus	X	
Mandrill		X
Moustached monkey	X	X
Puddy-nosed monkey	X	
Grey-cheeked mangabey	X	X
Galago sp.	X	
Dwarf galago sp.		X
Sitatunga	X	X
Bushbuck		X
Blue duiker	X	
Peter’s duiker	X	
Forest elephant	X	
Forest buffalo	X	X
Red river hog	X	
Western tree hyrax	Heard	Heard

Langoue Baï, Ivindo National Park

Getting to Langoue Baï is at present quite the adventure. From the capital of Libreville on the coast we took the night train to the town of Booue. Here we continued in 4x4 along dirt roads for an hour to a major river where we shifted into small boats to go upstream for another hour or so until reaching a small field station. Then another two hours by quad bikes full-speed along a small trail deep into the Ivindo rainforest – we were to our surprise equipped with

motorcycle helmets, but it quickly became evident why this was a good idea, with branches whipping against you as you dart along the overgrown path. On the quad rides we saw several **Peter's duiker** plus **gorilla** and various monkeys. Waiting inside the forest was a party of around 10 locals whom were to carry our food, luggage, etc., and accompanied by them we continued on foot along small trails for about two hours, crossing some steep hills, to finally arrive at Langoue Camp, a base camp in a clearing with a couple of primitive buildings. Here we spent the first night. They have an **African civet** wondering around the camp clearing at night; we even saw it in daylight.

From the camp, it is about 1.5 hour on foot further to the Langoue Bai itself. A simple watchtower with platforms at three levels (called Mirador) has been constructed at the forest edge and from here you have a great view of the Langoue Bai. If you spend more days here (which you should) you actually sleep in a tent on the platform. Due to the risk of running into forest elephants and gorillas you are not allowed to wonder around this part of the forest, so you are stuck on the platform a little like if you were on a ship. But there is lots to be entertained by. We spent two nights and almost 3 days in the tower and never had a dull moment.



The bai is full of **sitatungas**. For many hours each day you see **forest elephants** drinking and digging into the clay in the water to make minerals dissolve. A couple of times we were woken in the middle of the night by the loud screams of the elephants that sound quite unlike anything I have ever heard savanna elephants emit. We saw two different families of **gorillas** spending time in the open and had an old lone silverback munching away at the forest-edge vegetation for hours just at the foot of the tower. **Red river hogs** visited the clearing each day, one morning brought **forest buffalos** and I also saw a **Congo clawless otter** on the bank of the stream running through the bai. Daily we heard screams of (but never saw) **chimpanzees**.



We searched for monkeys for a couple of hours and found **moustached monkey**, **putty-nosed monkey**, **grey-cheeked mangabey** and **guereza colobus**. A night-spotting walk from the camp gave several observations of unidentified **galagos** plus a couple of **blue duikers**. I have no doubt that this pristine rainforest holds many interesting nocturnal species.

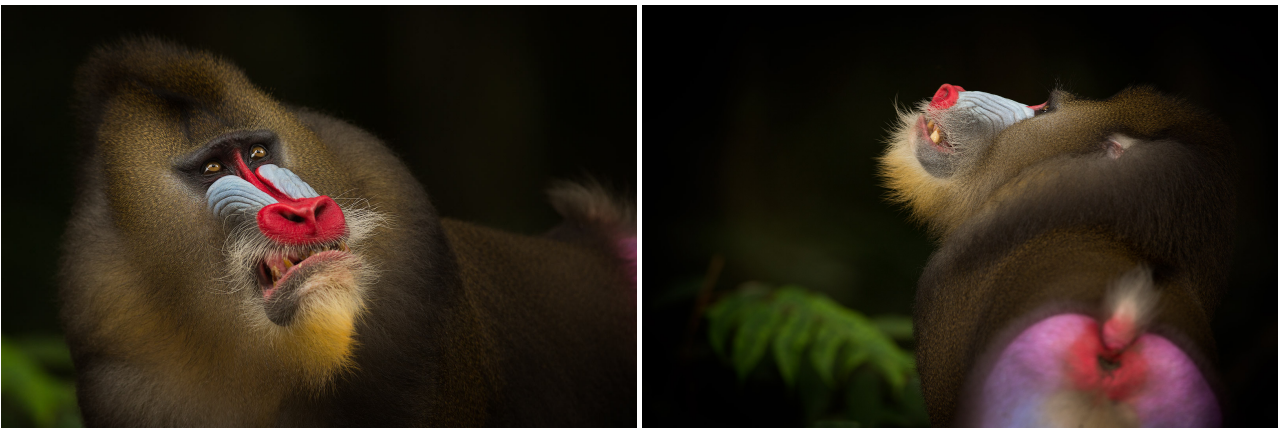
Lekedi Park

We took the night train from Booue to Moanda in the south-eastern corner of the country and from there had a transfer to the town of Bakoumba (1-h drive) where we stayed for a week at the run-down Impala Hotel (but great lunch and dinner). This is the gateway to Lekedi with one of the entrances a 15-minute drive away.



The 14,000 ha *Parc de la Lekedi* consists of a mixture of forest and savanna. The park is private and does not offer quite the same wilderness experience as Ivindo or Lope. It is fenced and divided into three sectors (modules) by fences, and when you drive around in the park you often see fences. However, the park is quite rich in native mammals. As mentioned above, Vladimir Dinets saw 39 species in the park. While driving around you frequently encounter **forest buffalo** and we also observed **sitatunga**, **bushbuck** and a **marsh mongoose**. A walk in the forest gave **moustached monkey** and **grey-cheeked mangabey**. We saw fresh tracks of **gorillas** that are supposed to occur naturally inside the park.

The main attraction of the park, of course, is the **mandrills** that live wild in the forest. The population is a mixture of wild-born and introduced mandrills. Some are equipped with radio collars and in the morning you get to drive out with rangers in a 4x4 and track the monkeys. The rangers call them in and feed them bananas and peanuts. Through this activity they have been habituated and are relatively relaxed around people. This makes it possible to get close to them in a way that you probably can't experience anywhere else, including in Lope.



Vladimir Dinet wrote that you could camp inside the Lekedi Park. We were informed that this is not possible anymore and night spotting in the park is not allowed. Instead we went for a night-spotting walk on the forest dirt road leading from the park gate to the main road and this gave a species of **dwarf galago**. Spotting along the main road back towards Bakoumba gave an **African palm civet** plus many eyes we didn't have time to stop and check out. We also saw African palm civet at night in a small clump of trees behind Impala Hotel and heard **tree hyrax** in the evening from the hotel.

From Lekedi we were driven to Franceville and from there flew back to Libreville.

Logistics

Gabon has a population of less than two million people and has very little wildlife tourism. So in terms of logistics you can expect many things not to go according to plan on your trip and things to generally be a lot more basic than what you'll find in for example East Africa. But you will have an adventure there for sure.

We organized our trip through Guillermo Casasnovas, Middle-Africa, Travel Experts in Central Africa, willy_2005@yahoo.ca, www.middle-africa.com. Our guide was Vianet Mihindou vianet_mihindu7@yahoo.fr. He is one of the best local guides I've had on my trips around the world. He is exceptional with birds, but also really good with mammals and plants. He has spent years doing fieldwork at Lope, including doing censuses on forest buffalos, has a vast knowledge of the protected areas of Gabon (he is employed by the national parks agency to survey national parks) and he has a large network of researchers and park rangers.

Other ideas for mammal watching in Gabon

Mandrills at Lope. Vianet told me that they have just fitted GPS collars on mandrills at Lope in contrast to the old-fashioned radio collars they used to wear. This makes them much easier to locate accurately. So this could open up for brand new opportunities for experiencing mandrills at Lope where they occur in much larger troops than in Lekedi. Vianet is in touch with the main researcher on the mandrill-tracking project so can give more information on the development and possibilities of going out with the researchers. Note that around November the big troops split up and the alpha males disappear into the forest and become very difficult to see. So the best period to see them in big troops seems to be July-October (this is probably not the case in Lekedi, though).

Habituated western gorillas. Vianet told me about a place close to Loango National Park where they now have habituated wild gorillas. If this was indeed the case it would be a very interesting place to experience the western lowland gorilla up close, similar to what is known from mountain gorilla tracking in Uganda and Rwanda. He will be able to supply more information about that.

Bongo et al. Vianet said that he also knows of a place in Gabon to see bongo (that you don't see at Langoue Bai, Ivindo). I told Vianet that the Mammalwatching.com community would also be very interested in seeing African golden cat and pangolins so he will start looking intently for opportunities for that. All in all, he is a good guy to watch and Gabon a very interesting country for elusive African rainforest mammals.