

SENEGAL 22 Feb -7 March 2017

In February of 2017 I traveled to Senegal with my friend Sarah on an Oceanic Society led tour to see African Manatees. This is a species a had put little thought into seeing, but like most of the group trips I end up on, I was tempted by an email from the organization. Oceanic Society has a variety of trips around the world, many dealing with conservation based projects. The trip was lead by Lucy Keith Diagne, PhD who along with her husband Tomas, runs the African Aquatic Conservation Fund. Not only do they work with manatees in Africa, but also have a stranding network started for marine mammals along the western coast of the continent. Tomas also runs the African Chelonian Institute that helps educate people about chelonians in western and central Africa, as well as doing rescue, rehabilitation and release with various species.

Day 1 – 22 Feb – left the United States from Washington, D.C. on an overnight South African Air flight. The only mammal was a random white tailed deer who thought hanging out in the Green long term parking lot was a good idea.

Day 2 – 23 Feb – we were picked up at the Dakar airport by Lucy and Tomas, and met up with our fellow passengers Andy and Paula Holman. From there we went to the hotel Gite l'Ancardier about 1.5 hours south of Dakar in the town of Saly. Saly is mainly a vacation spot for French tourists who come to relax on the beach. We spent the morning relaxing, then went to a close by nature reserve to the hotel along the beach. No mammals were seen. I did ask the manager of the hotel if she ever saw small mammals at the hotel, and was told except small bats at night, she had seen nothing. Sure enough at night small microbat species of bats were flying over the hotel pool to eat insects.

Day 3- Feb 24 – we had a morning visit to the Bandia Wildlife Reserve. The reserve is about 15 km from Saly, on the main road leading from the N1 to Mbour and Casamance. The Reserve is a fenced in facility started by a South African in 1990. The reserve originally started on 460 ha on a markedly degraded baobab reserve. They left the area to grow wild for a year, increased the size to 750 ha (and I was told the area is still growing) and between 1991-1997 they started introducing animals. Initially 11 species which were taken from other areas in Senegal, another 11 from South Africa. The best mammal came, in my opinion, was when the Society for the Protection of the Environment and Wildlife in Senegal along with the Giant Eland Conservation fund stepped in. In May of 1999 they radio collared two females in the Niokulo Koba National Park, then captured one male and eight females in 2000 to bring to Bandia for breeding to help put the species in a protected environment, and ensure stability for the species in the future. So far the project has been very successful and additional eland have been brought to the Fathala Reserve (also enclosed).



We spent the entire morning at Bandia. You are basically taken on safari type open vehicles with a guide. Wild Patas monkeys, African striped ground squirrels, Warthogs, and Green monkeys decided to move themselves into the

reserve on their own.



I was told by the staff that African Wildcats were common at night (currently the reserve does not offer night drives). Besides the before mentioned species we also saw both Common and Giant Eland, Common Impala, Burchells Zebra, Reticulated Giraffe, White Rhino, Greater Kudu, and Roan Antelope. The plan for the reserve was the animals would be self sufficient after an initial period of time where food was supplemented. Everything I saw was in good body condition, and there were babies everywhere. I never saw feeding stations for the animals and was told the rhinos are the only ones supplemented. I did see outside the restaurant where at the water hole they placed a few flakes of hay to attract wildlife for the diners. What it did attract when I was there, was one Roan Antelope and a very large troop of Green monkeys.



The Restaurant lies right outside the reserve and has good food, as well as very smart and quick Green Monkeys. Despite my best efforts, one turn of the head, for what seemed a second, meant no bread would be offered with my lunch.

That afternoon we had a tour of the African Chelonian Institute which houses various species of turtles and tortoises from western and central Africa, as well as had a presentation from Lucy and Tomas about their work in Africa.



Day 4 – Feb 25 -We left Saly and drove north, about 4 hours to the Geumbel Reserve, outside the town of St Louis, which was set up to breed endemic Senegal Antelope with the hopes of returning them to the wild. Along the way we saw more Patas Monkeys and African Striped Ground Squirrels along the road. The reserve has breeding herds of Scimitar horned Oryx, Dorcas gazelles, Addax and Dama Gazelles-Mohor subspecies (the last species we did not see). The Dorcas gazelles were kept in large pens with hides to see them, while the others were in large fenced in enclosures. The original animals came from the Barcelona zoo in Spain. So far some animals have been released in the Katane Reserve de Fauna. A 1000 ha fenced in area that also has free ranging Red Fronted Gazelles. The

visitor center listed species seen at night including Desert Hedgehog, Crawshays Hare, Lesser Gerbil, Pale Fox, Egyptian Mongoose, Crested Porcupine, African Wildcat and Libyan Striped weasel. I suggested to Lucy that looking into a night drive might be a good idea.



From the Reserve we drove into St Louis, a French Colonial town, had lunch then drove to the Hotel Gite d'Etape on the banks of the Senegal River. The hotel sits close to the border of Mauritiana. From St Louis to the hotel we drove along the Richard Toll Road that borders large sugar cane fields. I saw multiple small rodents scurrying in and out of the fields as we were driving. At night, micobats were feeding along the banks of the Senegal River by the dock at the back of the hotel.

Day 5 – Feb 26 – we drove to the Tocc Tocc Community Nature Reserve about 30 minutes from the hotel which is located along the Lac de Guiers. The reserve was set up by Tomas and the local community about ten years ago to help protect the wetland habitats in the area. Now Tomas and Lucy work to help study and protect

local turtle and Manatee populations in the reserve. In the morning we took a canoe ride into the reserve and helped release some young Adanson's mud turtles that Tomas had raised in the Chelonian Institute. From there we walked around the reserve, then had lunch in the traditional village of Toleu. In the morning, I missed a Scrub Hare by seconds We did see more Ground Squirrels, as well as a Egyptian Mongoose in a cane field.

Day 6 – Feb 27 – Full day tour of the Djoudj National Park which lies in the northwestern corner of Senegal. The National Park is listed as one of the best bird sanctuaries in the world, but did have some nice mammals to offer. Driving into the reserve, just before the main gate, three African Wolves were standing next to the road. They were easily spooked, but we did get good views of one individual who turned around to stare at us briefly.



We did a quick stop at the very run down Sanctuary Hotel to pick up a bird guide that Andy had recommended to help us find Black Crowned Cranes (Honorary Mammal of the trip). While I was standing in front of the hotel, Lucy came running from behind a building to tell me she had located a rat. She later told me that this was the first time she had ran in order to get someone to go towards a rat. A very obliging African Grass Rat was hanging out in a pile of rubble, and came out every few minutes to stare back at me.



We ended up driving around the reserve and saw another African wolf chewing on some dead bird remains, an Egyptian Mongoose along the side of the road, as well seeing some of the most beautiful Warthogs I had ever seen.



Paula saw briefly a fox in the underbrush. We stopped at the Lac de Gainth picnic area for lunch. At this point I asked our guide if he ever saw any bat roosts in the park. He jumped up and walked with me to an abandoned building just to the left of the parking area where multiple

Gambian Slit faced bats were roosting.

After lunch we took a short boat ride to a White Pelican rookery. Prior to boarding the boat, there were more, very habituated, warthogs hanging out by the dock. Thousands of pelicans were present when we were there, and it turned out to be the avian highlight of the trip for me (the cranes were nice as well).

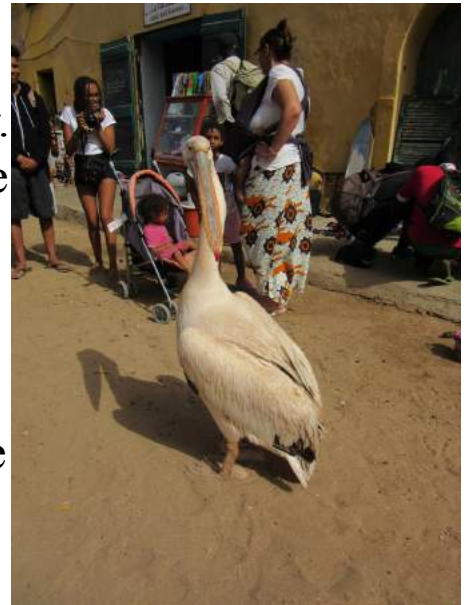




After the visit in the park, we drove back to St. Louis and spent the night at the Hotel Mermoz.

Day 7 – 28 Feb – we drove back to Dakar. The ride should have taken 4.5 hours, but took closer to 6.5 with traffic. From there we took a short ferry ride to the Ile de Goree. This was our cultural stop on the tour, as the island is now a tourist destination with a variety of shops, restaurants, colonial buildings as well as a museum on a former slave house where slaves were shipped to the new world. I watched at one point a large white pelican walk itself into a nice restaurant, then have to be escorted out by three people. This pelican, along with a kitten, then proceeded to walk up to anyone with food begging (honorary mammal individual).

We then went back to Dakar and picked up the overnight ferry from Dakar to Ziguinchor. The ferry ride takes about 14 hours. You have a choice to book small rooms with bunk beds and private bathrooms, or be in an open seated area with 50 other people. We opted for the room. Despite the ferry being pretty nice with a bar and full service restaurant, the best piece of advice I can give anyone here is pay the extra money and book a room.



Day 8 - March 1 – Sarah and I woke up as the boat was leaving the Atlantic ocean and heading up the Cassamance River. We spent the morning watching Bottlenose dolphins swim in the boats wake to arrive in Ziguinchor around noon.

From there we went to the Hotel le Flamboyant to relax and spend the remainder of the day.

Day 9 -March 2 – We left Ziguinchor for a 3 ish hour boat ride to the small village of Point St George. A small freshwater spring sits about 50 meters from the shore of the village. Twice a day at low tide, African manatees come to the spring to drink. January -April is the best time of year to see the manatees. The salinity of the river is actually higher than the ocean making this a necessity for the manatees. Sometimes 20-30 manatees have been documented at the spring during one tide. About 8 years ago the L'Oceanium Dakar, a non profit organization ,donated a tower to the village for manatee viewing.



The tower is also used by people like Lucy. The majority of the tourists are currently day trippers from the nearby resort town of Cap Skirring who do not always have the best manatee watching behaviors. It was found that the manatees are easily spooked by boats trying to get close to the spring (which we watched this first day in displeasure as some French tourists were taken by their speed boat right to the spring, only to make the manatees disappear for a lengthy period of time), so sitting in the tower and watching from shore are the best vantage points. We watched as multiple manatees came to dive down towards the springs. Females would leave their calves on the surface while they dove, so we did watch several calves breathing on the surface. The watery is murky, so views are mainly of backs, tails, and part of faces as they come up to breathe. We did however get to see an adult breach out of the water (sadly during a camera resting on my lap

moment), something Lucy had never seen.



While I was there, the village was in the process of making small dorm type rooms right on the river for tourists. In the center in the village there was also a large Tamarind tree that was filled with roosting Gambian Epauletted Fruit bats. That night we went back to Ziguinchor to spend the night.



Day 10 March 3– we drove from the hotel to the ruins of an abandoned hotel on the River to take a day long boat ride. No mammals were seen. We spent the night at the Alouga Lodge. I was told by the manager of the lodge that Clawless otters come on occasion to a small watering hole in front of the rooms. We also after dinner, and multiple bottles of wine, went on a mammalless spotlighting trip along the woods to the back of the lodge.

Day 11 – March 4 – We left the Alouga lodge and within 30 minutes were surrounded by a large pod of very playful bottlenose dolphins. This was the first time I had ever been in a small boat with this species so close. We then went back to Pt St George in the morning and had more views of manatees from the tower (and no French tourists). We also went back to the tamarind tree to photograph the fruit bats. I learned that looking up when bats start flying after being aroused by screaming village children is not a good idea. Luckily my mouth was closed..... From there we went back to Ziguinchor to spend the night.

Day 12 – March 5 -We took the overnight ferry back to Dakar. We were warned by Lucy that the ride back would be rough. Thanks to an extra large dose of meclizine, I was fine, but I have never seen so many sea sick people boat in my life.



People were lined up sleeping in hallways and on the outside of the boat from the sitting area. Again, best piece of advice, pay for a private room.

Day 13 – March 6 – after docking in Dakar we took a short boat ride to the Iles de la Madeleine which is listed as the smallest national

park in the world. While no mammals are on the island, we did see nesting Red Billed Tropicbirds as well as a dwarf baobab tree that is reported to be over 400 years old. Despite not having mammals, it is still a beautiful place to take a walk.

That night we flew home.

A couple thoughts about my trip -

- To count animals in large fenced in areas, or to not count, that is the question. I had a conversation with Jon while we were in Brazil about this. The Giant eland in Bandia were from Senegal, were not fed like at a zoo, and have provided countless offspring. Prior to human development they were thought to be there. I decided to count them. I decided not to count the animals at Guembel as they are fed and were in enclosures where the fences were clearly visible. I have been to reserves in Kenya that were also fenced and Jon pointed out that Etosha in Namibia is fenced. The mandrills at Ledeki in Gabon are in a fenced in area, and some of the founders were lab animals. When I finally make it to Gabon, I want to count those mandrills on my life list.....I could keep listing places but I think in the end this is something as individuals to decide.
- I know I am not supposed to talk about food here, but Senegal seriously had the best food/dishes I have every had in my numerous trips to Africa. If you go with someone who loves food and mammals (Amber?) this might be a good destination for you.
- I think this spot in Senegal is THE place to see the African manatee. I talked to Lucy about Lake Ossa in Cameroon which is also a spot for them. Lucy currently has students working with the African Marine Mammal Organization in Cameroon that she said could show

tourists the manatees (obviously fishermen there know of good spots as well, but having some of your funds go to conservation is worth while), but she stated you won't see multiple manatees at one sitting and the views are brief as compared to the ones in Senegal.

- Yelling calmly then with multiple phrases I can not write on this forum at French tourists close to African manatees does nothing but raise your blood pressure and have you up with precious mammal watching moments ruined with no mammals regardless.

Trip List

1. African Striped Ground Squirrel – *Xerus erythropus*
2. Patas Monkey – *Erythrocebus patas*
3. Green Monkey (Callithrix monkey) – *Chlorocebus sabaeus*
4. Common Warthog – *Phacochoerus africanus*
5. Common Eland – *Taurotragus oryx*
6. Giant Eland (lord Derby) -*Taurotragus derbianus*
7. Common Impala – *Aepycerus melampus*
8. Burchells Zebra - *Equus quagga burchellii*
9. Reticulated Giraffe – *Giraffa reticulata*
10. White Rhino – *Ceratotherium simum*
11. Greater Kudu – *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*
12. Roan Antelope – *Hippotragus equinus*
13. Egyptian Mongoose – *Herpestes ichneumon*
14. African Wolf – *Canus anthus*
15. African Grass Rat – *Anuicanthis niloticus*
16. Common Bottlenose Dolphin – *Tursiops truncatus*
17. African Manatee – *Trichechus senegalansis*
18. Gambian Slit faced bat – *Nycteris gambiensis*
19. Gambian Epauletted Fruit Bat – *Epomophorus gambianus*