

Sangha Lodge. Central African Republic

24 Nights. 8th July to 1st August 2018

Ewan Davies



In June 2018 I answered a Facebook Post from Rod Cassidy at Sangha Lodge. Several weeks later I found myself travelling there for one month to help out. This gave me an amazing opportunity to take my time and see the range of wildlife that can be found there. This document is an account of the mammals I saw there.

Travel to the lodge was via Royal Air Maroc from the UK to Bangui and charter flights from Bangui to Bayanga. These charter flights are best timed to coincide with Kenya airways flights, but the short notice of my trip meant that I was obliged to stay in Bangui for a night or two at either end of the trip.

As it was only 3 weeks between my first contact with Rod Cassidy and arriving on his doorstep, my preparation for the trip was minimal. Rod and his associate in Bangui made everything simple in terms of Visa and accommodation, where I was met immediately from the plane (before immigration) and accompanied to the hotel, then picked up in good time to reach the airport for the charter.

In total I spent 24 nights at the Lodge from 8th July and leaving on 1st of August. A working trip rather than a standard mammal watching holiday my access to Dzanga Sangha national park was limited to free days. In the evenings and early mornings however, the area around Sangha lodge were available to me.

Field guides for the mammals in the area not great for some classes of mammal so I am indebted to those who have been to the area before, and provided notes on what they saw and where they saw it, as well as to Rod for sound files used to identify some of the smaller primates. I hope that my notes will add to that body of knowledge.

The weather during my stay was unseasonably wet. Access to some areas was restricted by water levels, which rose by around 2 foot during my stay. I am intending to return in the new year, which will allow me to compare the different times of year and hopefully catch up on what I missed..

Main Locations:



Sangha lodge:

Situated on the banks of the Sangha River, the Lodge is a picturesque area of a dozen or so buildings accessed by a ferry pulled across the mouth of the Babongo river. Birding is good around the camp and Squirrels and other small rodents are sometimes seen. Monkeys are heard regularly. Mongooses do move through the camp at night and, at certain times of year, fruit eating animals will come in to feed.

Trails:

A network of trails as below runs to the North and West of the camp. Some of the trails shown previously were not findable or were unknown when I asked about them, a map of the main trails can be found in the bar. Many side trails and game trails also exist and cross the main paths in various places. The trails are clear enough that you shouldn't get lost if you keep to the named trails, although the long loop and swamp trail in particular can be overgrown. All are occasionally blocked by falling trees. These can be removed by the chainsaw team if required, within a day or two.

I walked for 2-3 hours on the trails most evenings, when it wasn't raining usually between 8 and 11. Early on the moon was not visible in the evening, but as it waxed, I sometimes moved my walks to the early mornings (3-5AM). I planned to do more early walks, to mix things up, but reverted to evenings when the skies became cloudier. I did not want to lose opportunities to the weather, as it often rained in the pre-dawn hours.

My walks were mostly solo, but on several occasions guests at the lodge would join me, and for 2 nights, one of the local vets who was recuperating at the lodge also came along (he was quite taken with spotlighting and we may have a convert).

The night walks produced a lot of Galagos, plus Smoky Dormouse, Beecroft's Anomalure, Milne-Edwards Potto, Tree Hyrax, Brush-tailed Porcupine and many unidentified bats, rodents and shrews. It was a pleasure to show these animals to my companions.

Daytime walks (early morning, midday and late afternoon) on the same paths, gave good views of Thomas's Rope, Lady Burton's Rope and red legged sun squirrels, as well as Putty-nosed monkey, Black and White colobus, Agile Mangabey and repeated views of a small group of De Brazza monkeys. One notable walk from 4-6 PM also flushed one Blue, and three Bay Duikers on the long loop.



Camera traps placed on the long loops and Babonga river trail also caught images of Yellow Backed Duiker and Marsh mongoose respectively.

I did not take the Babonga river trail as often as I would have liked at night. This trail was more overgrown and wetter than the others, which made it difficult to move quietly and listen.

Access road:

From the main road, Sangha Lodge is accessed by a 3 Km road running through good quality habitat. It's an easy walk on a path wide enough for a vehicle. I walked this road several times, sometimes getting a lift with the vehicles taking the staff home, and walking back from the junction. I would like to have done so more, but as the rains came more frequently, large puddles in the ruts along the track made it a muddier and more awkward route. Note that care should be taken if elephants are in the area.

During the evening walks I saw a number of Galagos (mostly Thomas's, twice Squirrel). I was disappointed not to encounter small carnivores crossing the road. As elsewhere I had a number of eyeshine contacts in the trees that were brief and I was not able to identify. Large numbers of bats were seen in flight but none identified, including several medium sized fruit bats.

During the day the tracked pangolins could sometimes be seen near the road, and on one occasion the trackers believed other pangolins were in the area by smell. They searched in the day but didn't find anything. I repeated the search at night, hoping for white bellied but was unsuccessful.

Daytime walks on the road also produced Blue Duiker, Lady Burton's Rope Squirrel, Moustached Monkey, Putty-nosed Monkey and Crowned Monkey.



Dzanga Bai:

One of the highlights of any trip here is a visit Dzanga Bai and probably the best place in the world to observe forest elephants. I was able to visit twice, the Bai is a one hour drive from the lodge, followed by a 40 minute walk with some shallow wading. Viewing is from a large purpose-built platform, elephant numbers vary through the year and through the day. I saw over 50 at some points and during my stay others saw up to 70. It is possible to organise overnight stays on the platform although I did not do so myself.

Animals seen there during my stay (not all by me) included Buffalo, Bongo, Giant Forest Hog, Colobus, Mangabey and Crowned monkey. People who stayed overnight saw small carnivores by using thermal imaging cameras, most likely Marsh mongoose.

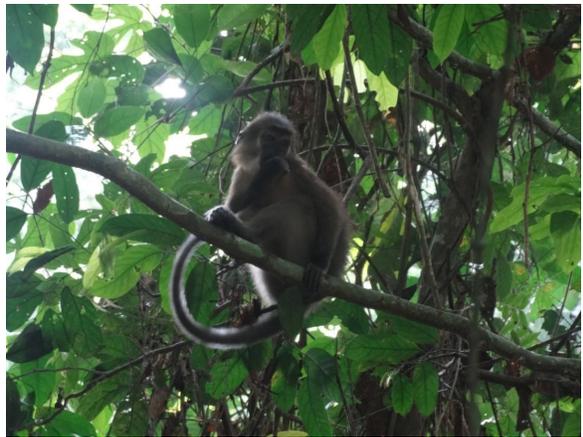




Bai Hokou:

The second main site within the park is the starting point for Trekking to see Western Lowland Gorillas and Agile Mangabeys. This is an hour further down the road to Dzanga Bai so is quite a trek. There is also another habituated Gorilla group at a further location (another hours drive).

The length of the trek depends on where the animals are. For me it was around one hour to the Gorillas, 5 minutes to the Mangabeys. Having previously visited Mountain Gorillas in Rwanda, this was a very different experience. There is far of a tourism vibe, and it is likely you will be the only visitors there that day. The camp at Bai Hokou is home to the Gorilla trackers and also to some of the researchers working at the park. Groups visiting the Gorillas are limited to 3 people and hands and feet are cleaned before and after the trek. Face masks are worn in the presence of the gorillas.



There are around 300 Mangabeys in the troupe, and these are often followed by other species high in the trees. I'm told by the researchers, that sometimes Red river hogs and other ground dwelling animals also follow them.

A third activity at Bai Hokou is the Bai walk, this consists of 2 to 3 hours walking between a series of clearings in the woods. You will likely see Elephants (of which you should be cautious) and various Duikers and Sitatunga are often seen. This would be a fantastic area to visit at dawn or dusk, but realistically you are doing well to get into it by 8.30AM. It's difficult to get things moving and even when I tried leaving the lodge at 6AM, late vehicles, late guides, car trouble etc all had an impact. It is for this reason that the possibility of camping at Libwe in the future could be a real boon.

Waterfalls:

Around half an hour by boat upriver from the Lodge, a short trek can be made to some waterfalls, this is predominantly noteworthy as there is a Picathartes nest site at the waterfalls (the birds were coming in to roost there when I visited, but had not yet started relining the nest. I did not see the bird, although others I was with, including the person sat nearest me did). Also at the waterfall, there is a den for brush-tailed porcupine, and Red legged sun and green bush squirrels were seen on the walk. Most notably from a mammal point of view (and as per several previous reports), a huge hollow tree on the way to the falls, is a roost for Lord Derby's Anomalure, this is shared with what have previously been identified as Cyclops Roundleaf, and Hairy Slit-faced Bats.

Libwe:

Outside of the lodge Rod has a large concession to the North East that can be accessed through a road near the village of Babonga. The is largely overgrown but now that the lodge has the first of several vehicles of their own. They are intending to open this area up for hiking and camping, it contains a number of smaller Bais and would be an ideal second base for mammal spotting, not least as camping would allow access much earlier than the day than can be achieved in the park.



We took a day trip 26KM this road to the bridge at Libwe Pont. As we were clearing the road of fallen trees as we went we made a lot of noise and saw little but during the drive and several short walks through the day we saw evidence of a host of mammals including the following: Elephant, Bongo, Forest Buffalo, Sitatunga,

Yellow-backed Duiker, Blue Duiker, White bellied Pangolin, Brush-tailed Porcupine, Cusimanse, Marsh mongoose, Putty-nosed monkey, Ribboned rope squirrel.

There is an old camping site at the furthest point we went to, which would make an ideal forward base for small mammal trapping, mist netting, etc.

Mammal list:

1. **Black Hawk Bat** (*Saccolaimus peli*)
Seen feeding from Sangha Lodge bar at dusk.
2. **Hairy Slit-faced Bat** (*Nycteris hispida*)
Roosting high in the hollow tree on the waterfall path with Lord Derby's Anomalure.
3. **Cyclops Roundleaf Bat** (*Hipposideros cyclops*)
Roosting lower in the hollow tree with Lord Derby's Anomalure.
4. **Noak's Roundleaf Bat** (*H. ruber*)
Roost of around 100 behind the waterfall at Bai Hokou that staff use as a shower
5. **Milne-Edward's Potto** (*Perodicticus edwardsi*)
One seen well at around 9PM at the start of the Masessi trail. Eyes in thick foliage but not moving. Left alone for 5 minutes and came back to find it overhead on open branches)
6. **Thomas's Dwarf Galago** (*Galagoides thomasi*)
Probably the commonest Galago, identified by call. Often in less thick growth than Demidoff's. easier to get a good look at.
7. **Demidoff's Dwarf Galago** (*G. demidoff*)
Harder to get a definite ID on than Thomas's, called from very thick growth, eventually 100% confirmed by following calls and movement until the animal was seen well while calling. Often heard at turn off for swamp trail.
8. **Elegant Needle Clawed Galago** (*Euoticus elegantulus*)
Seen on access road and trails. Often high. Larger galago and confirmed from calls.
9. **Gabon Squirrel Galago** (*Sciurocheirus gabonensis*)
Two sightings separately on the access road are believed to have been these. A larger galago than the dwarf species, seen at around 3-5 meters above the road. Running on branches, thicker tail than others.
10. **Grey Cheeked Mangabey** (*Lophocebus albigena*)
One of the commoner monkeys in the park. Took me a while to track down, eventually saw at least 3 high up above the habituated Agile Mangabey troupe.
11. **Agile Mangabey** (*Cercocebus agilis*)
Large group seen from the North trail and Long loop at Sangha lodge on several days. Large habituated group seen easily at Bai Hokou

12. **Crowned Monkey** (*Cercopithecus pogonias*)

Heard on Sangha trails, but I thought I had missed this one, until I discovered that one of my photos of Moustached Monkey was actually one of these. These seem to be most commonly encountered in mixed groups with other species.

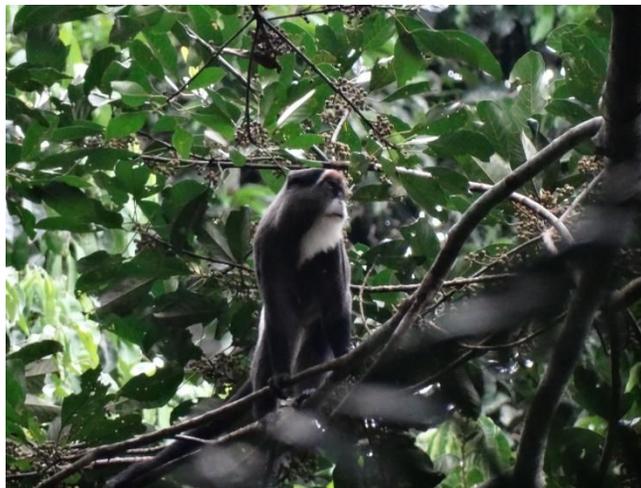


13. **Moustached Monkey** (*C. cephus*)

Small family groups seen at various points on the access road, also seen well low down near WWF staff buildings

14. **De Brazza Monkey** (*C. neglectus*)

Calling regularly at Sangha lodge. This one is often missed. A small group were roosting regularly around 100 meters west of Sangha Lodge along the river. Having seen them once they were easy to find again and they did not move far. Note that although the booming call carries, it does not sound much louder when very close. Second call of 3 clicks also heard.



15. **Putty-nosed Monkey** (*C. nictitans*)

The commonest monkey locally it seemed to me. Heard calling every day at the lodge. Commonly seen between the Masessi trail and the river in large groups. Heard pretty much everywhere.

16. **Central African Black and White Colobus** (*Colobus guereza*)

Family group seen at Sangha Lodge on the Swamp trail. Multiple groups also seen on Bai Hokou walk.

17. **Western lowland gorilla** (*Gorilla gorilla*)

Tracking of habituated groups can be done from Bai Hokou. I saw a group of 7 well for one hour. There are currently 3 habituated groups. If you are lucky unhabituated individuals can also be seen at both Dzanga Bai and Bai Hokou. Other people did during my stay.

18. **Marsh Mongoose** (*Atilax paludinosus*)

Tracks seen at most Bais. The only carnivore I caught on camera traps during my stay, commonly around the start of the Babongo river trail in the early morning. Seen when one wandered past the verandah of my cabin at 5.30AM.

19. **Giant Forest Hog** (*Hylochoerus meinertzhageni*)

Group of 4 (two adults, two young) were coming to Dzanga Bai daily during the time I was there at around 3.30PM.



20. **Blue Duiker** (*Philantomba monticola*)

Apart from the hand reared individual living in the camp. I saw 3 other individuals. One flushed on long loop at around 5PM. One ran across the access road at 6.30AM. One flushed from path on Bai walk at Bai Hokou.

21. **Peter's Duiker** (*Cephalophus callipygus*)

One seen on the Bai walk at Bai Hokou. Nice views as it moved along the path a way in front of us.

22. **Bay Duiker** (*C. dorsalis*)

Three flushed from base of a hollow tree at dusk on the long loop trail.

23. **Forest Buffalo** (*Syncerus caffer*)

Group of 13 were present on my second visit to Dzanga Bai all day. These are usually there but had been absent at the start of my trip.

24. **Long Tailed Pangolin** (*Manus tetradactyla*)

3 Re Released individuals were tracked near to Sangha Lodge (Pangi, Koki and Ndima). I was collecting GPS data on these most days during my stay, and although I had good views of all 3 they can be remarkably difficult to see well even when you know exactly where they are.

25. **Tree Hyrax** (*Dendrohyrax dorsalis*)

Commonly heard every night but difficult to see. One seen on the eastern end of the short loop at around 10PM on a moonless night

26. **African Forest Elephant** (*Loxodonta cyclotis*)

Always present at Dzanga Bai. Also commonly seen in the Bais at Bai Hokou, and one interrupted my gorilla viewing.

27. **Red Legged Sun Squirrel** (*Heliosciurus rufobrachium*)

Large Common squirrel at all heights and locations

28. **Thomas's Rope Squirrel** (*Funisciurus anerythrus*)

Commonly seen around Sangha Lodge particularly in front of the bar, the river crossing and anywhere near water

29. **Lady Burton's Rope Squirrel** (*F. isabella*)

Common squirrel easily identifiable by its squeaky toy call. Harder to see. Very common on the Lodge end of the access road.

30. **Ribboned Rope Squirrel** (*F. lemniscatus*)

Small terrestrial rope squirrel one seen on the Libwe road.

31. **Green Bush Squirrel** (*Paraxerus poensis*)

Small squirrel seen regularly near to the lodge, often on the north trail

32. **West African Smoky Dormouse** (*Graphiurus nagtglasii*)

Two seen well in a thicket just before the turn off to the swamp trail.

33. **Lord Derby's Anomalure** (*Anomalurus derbianus*)

Seen roosting with young in hollow tree on the way to the Picathartes waterfall

34. **Beecroft's Anomalure** (*Anomalurus beecrofti*)

Nice views of one on the Masessi trail when out with one of the clients. Landed on the tree in front of me, visible for three minutes. Unfortunately I held the torch while the client failed to get a picture.

35. **Little wood mouse** (*Hylomyscus parvus*)

One lived under Rooms four and five and was seen on several occasions. Another was found by the camp cat.

36. **Beaded wood mouse** (*H.aeta*)

Three were trapped around the Lodge stores and moved away from the lodge

37. **Brush Tailed Porcupine** (*Atherurus africanus*)

Excellent views of a family of three on the swamp trail during an early night walk.

