

**Last chance to see Lao endemics,
Kong Lor caves, Laos:
February, 2019**



Kha-nyou (Laotian rock rat)

After living in Laos for the last 12 years and given my imminent relocation to Nepal, I wanted to share with fellow mammal watchers one of the few sites in Laos where it is possible to see some of the country's unique fauna. The extraordinarily biodiverse Annamese mountains that form the eastern border between Laos and neighboring Vietnam were thrown into the conservation spotlight in the early 1990's with three large mammal "discoveries" in quick succession. The Saola was without doubt the most astonishing find, and was duly placed in its own Genus.

In the early 2000's, Laos had its own unique mammal discovery. New mammal species discoveries are rare, discovery of a new Genus is extremely rare but a new Family? The Laotian rock rat, was first

described based on a specimen found for sale in a food market and belongs to an ancient fossil family Diatomyidae, which was thought to have been extinct for 11 million years. What a find!

The jagged rocks and vertical cliffs that typify the karst limestone mountains of eastern Laos offers some refuge for wildlife as the terrain makes it difficult (but not impossible) for hunters to reach. Kong Lor caves in Khammouane province is one such place. A combination of tourism, a few local conservationists and a recent government decree banning the sale of protected species has resulted in a glimmer of hope for some of the endemic species found here.

It takes around 5 hours to drive from the capital Vientiane along highway 13 south turning off on highway 8 towards Lak Sao. The “rock viewpoint” or Phou Phaman viewpoint is along highway 8 and is the best place to see the endemic **Lao langur**. Both times I visited last year and also recent visits by friends in 2020, the **Lao langurs** were visible on the limestone pinnacles at a range of 50 to 150 meters. A recently installed zip line doesn’t seem to have frightened the langurs off and the owner has also employed local rangers to guard the animals which is a positive move. From here follow the road over the pass, taking the first right to Kong Lor caves. For those interested in birds, the bare-faced bulbul (recently discovered) can be seen at dusk on the rock pinnacles as you drive down the mountain.

There are a number of resorts in the area but you need to find a local ranger that will take you out and onto the cliffs in the evening. Although the first night didn’t prove to be successful, on the second day I saw three **Kha-nyou** (two grey and one black morph). The name “rock rat” seems completely inappropriate, as it looks more like a chinchilla albeit with smaller ears and a pointed snout. It is also extremely docile which is probably its most endearing and surprising feature.

See video below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHm5RzEInBo>

A few hundred meters from the hotel is the Kong LOR caves. This is a popular tourist site offering boat rides through a large cave system that exits at a viewpoint on the other side of the mountain. The caves contain a number of bat species but due to an impatient boat driver, the only species I could photograph and positively identify was the tiny **Trident roundleaf bat**. The forests around the entrance of the cave are well protected and I saw **Red-cheeked squirrel**, **Inordinate squirrel**, **Eastern striped squirrel** and also another group of **Lao langurs**. On the cliffs behind the hotel I also saw a small group of **Assamese macaques** high up and moving quickly to get out of sight.

Sadly for wildlife in Laos, rampant hunting, uncontrolled wildlife markets both in Laos and neighboring Vietnam and only one full time government paid ranger to cover the 20+ parks, most areas are devoid of wildlife. The recent (2019) announcement that tigers are now functionally extinct in Laos, is indicative of the faunal collapse.

During my last visit to Khammouane province I encountered an armed hunter, a group of 5 Kha Nyou hunters (they use nylon snares) and a local market openly sold a range of wildlife from elephant teeth to bats. I hasten to add, all of these were duly reported to either local or central government, and in the case of the market, a police raid occurred a few days later.

For those who are interested in visiting Lao and trying to see the Kha-nyou I can provide additional important information that is not included in this report. My email is stuartachapman@gmail.com



Lao langur

Itinerary:

15 February 5 hour drive from Vientiane to the Phou Phaman viewpoint, arriving at 5pm. Spent an hour scanning for and observing the langurs. Drove another hour to the resort.

16 February Early morning walk along the cliffs behind the resort with a local guide. Late morning boat ride in the Kong Lor cave looking for bats (there is no need to take the boat to the end of the cave – although it's worth it for the view – as the bats are in the first few hundred meters). Late afternoon walking the forests with the local guide arranged through the resort looking for squirrels.

17 February Early morning walk around the cliffs behind the resort. Afternoon return to Vientiane.

Mammals

Kha-nyou
Laonastes aegmaemus

Kha -nyou can be found in the limestone cliffs behind the hotel.

Lao langur
Trachypithecus laotum

One group of 8 animals seen just before dusk at the Phou Phaman viewpoint.

Assamese macaque
Macaca assamensis

Group of 5 animals seen on the cliffs behind the hotel, high and out of reach.

Lao limestone rat
Saxatilomys paulinae

One animal in the limestone rocks behind the hotel

Trident roundleaf bat
Aselliscus stoliczkanus

A few individuals seen in the Kong Lor cave.

Greater woolly horseshoe bat
Rhinolophus luctus

One animal in a cave within the grounds of the hotel.

Red-cheeked squirrel
D.rufigenis

Seen in the forest near the Kong Lor cave

Eastern striped squirrel
Tamiops marritimus

A pair seen in a tree in the grounds of the hotel

Inordinate squirrel
Callosciurus inornatus

One individual seen in the forest near the entrance to the cave

Kha-nyou

