

(Rare) primates in Vietnam (Febr-March 2023)

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Vietnam has been on our list for a long time, but we were a bit scared of going there. Why? Because there is still intensive poaching and hunting in the country, both for birds and mammals. Wildlife sightings will therefore be few and far between and generally for a short time and from a big distance. But on the other hand there are beautiful monkey species in Vietnam, which are endangered or even critically endangered, so it is actually a no-brainer for us as monkey lovers not to visit the country...

Before you continue reading: in contrast to the authors of most trip reports on this website, we are no fanatic mammal watchers. We organize the trips ourselves, take it easy, stay at least 3 or 4 nights at every location and are focused on (diurnal) primates. In Vietnam we also visited cultural places like My Son and the Imperial city of Hue. That is the reason we don't add a detailed itinerary to this report. But in the end we saw nearly all the diurnal primate species we wanted to see, so the trip was very successful!

General impression of the country

This was our first visit to Vietnam, but we have been in a bunch of other Southeast Asian countries before. The people in Vietnam are friendly and helpful and we never felt unsafe during our 5 week trip. We used all kind of transport to travel from Ho Chi Min City to Hanoi and Cat Ba: private taxis, public busses, a domestic flight, a ferry and a train. Locally we used private taxi's, bicycles, motorbikes and Grab (the Southeast Asian Uber). So there is no shortage in transport and any guesthouse can organize transport to your next destination or local transport. There is no need to book transport in advance.

Vietnam's economy is developing at a rapid pace and construction is taking place everywhere.

Weather

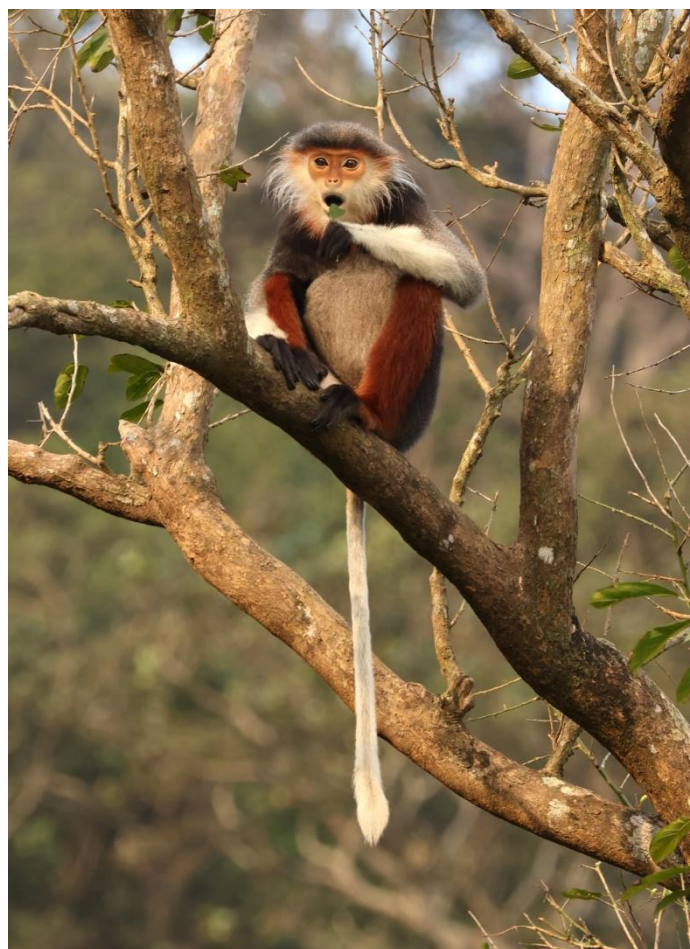
Be aware that the climate in Vietnam is a bit complicated. The climate charts for Ho Chi Min City (south Vietnam) and Hanoi (north Vietnam) show quite good (dry) weather from November to April. But... Danang in Central Vietnam has a somewhat different climate with heavy rains in the period October-December and sometimes into January. So February and March seems to be the ideal months to visit the country.

PLACES VISITED AND PRIMATES SEEN

1. Cat Tien National park

This is a well organized national park. Be aware that the national park is on the west side of the river and most of the accommodations are on the east bank, where you have a wide choice of accommodations. We stayed in the Green Hope Lodge, an excellent choice. On the side of the national park there are plenty of bungalows, which can be booked directly with the national park. In the weekends they are all booked by Vietnamese who escape the heat of Ho Chi Min City. During weekdays the place is empty. There is also an expensive lodge on the park side of the river.

A ferry is crossing the river from dawn to dusk. The only exception to this ferry schedule is when you have booked a gibbon tour with the national park. This tour starts before it's getting daylight and the ferry will take tourist to the national park around 5 am. The gibbon tour was a disappointment. The tour is quite



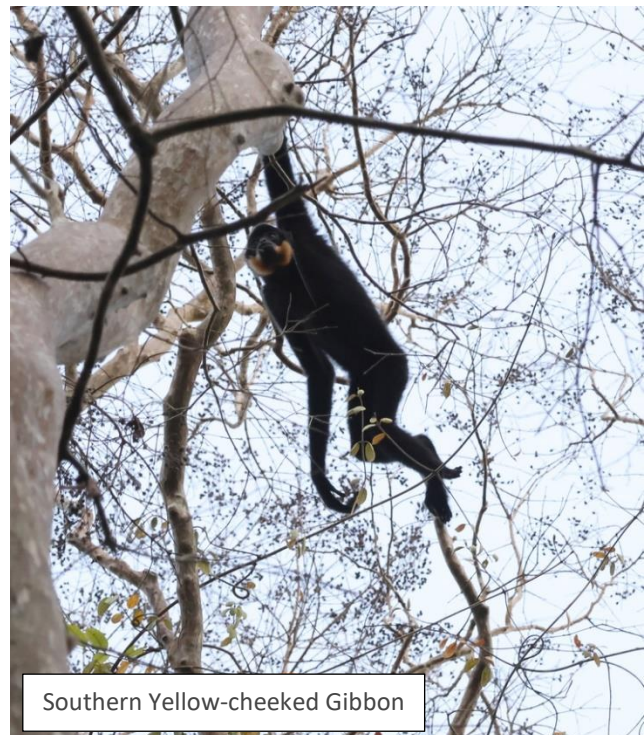
expensive and lasts only 1 hour. The guides only speak some English and will not bring you (during our tour) in the best position to take pictures. You start early (when it's still darkish) and wait until the gibbons start singing. The gibbons usually are close to the headquarters, but there are just a few trails where you can walk by yourself, so booking a tour to have a decent look at the gibbons is advisable.

You can walk on your own in the national park, a guide is not necessary. Or you can rent a decent bicycle for half a day or a full day. In the dry season there are hardly any mosquitoes and no leeches. In the wet season, it's different.....

We spent 3 days in the park and spotted 4 species of primates (and 2 species of squirrel).

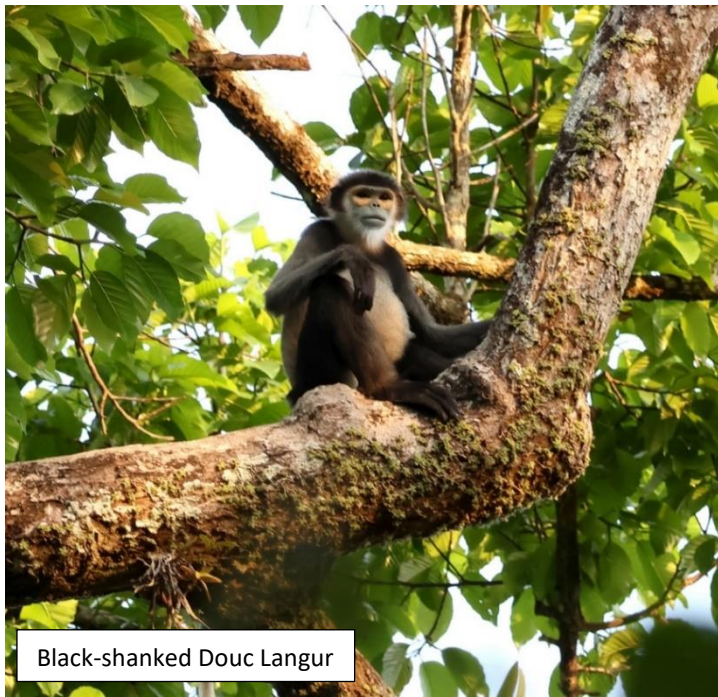
Primates seen:

- **Northern Pig-tailed Macaque** (*Macaca leonine*). When we cycled slowly on the main road, 2 animals crossed the road. We stopped and after waiting for 15 minutes some more animals crossed the road. It was hard to get good views when they were in the forest, they were very shy and alert.
- **Long-tailed Macaque** (*Macaca fascicularis*). 1 group was seen in a tree along the track to the rapids. The monkeys panicked, dropped from a great height from the trees and fled. Behavior that indicates that hunting is still taking place in the park. We also saw this species during a boat trip on the river.
- **Southern Yellow-cheeked Gibbon** (or Red-cheeked Gibbon) (*Nomascus gabriellae*). A family of 3 was seen during the gibbon walk which is organized every morning by the national park. Our guesthouse has booked this tour for us. There is also a sanctuary near the park headquarters and these gibbons are more vocal than the wild ones. So not every gibbon song you here during the day comes from a wild gibbon.
- **Black-shanked Douc Langur** (*Pygathrix nigripes*). We have seen this species on 2 occasions (see BSDL on the map on the next page):
 - a group high up in the trees just before the Rapids. They were spread over several trees, so unfortunately no 'group photo'.
 - on the island across the Green Hope Lodge. The doucs were feeding and resting in bamboo on the southern tip of the island. We saw them during the boat trip on the river (organized by the Green Hope Lodge). In contrast to both species of macaques the Langurs were a bit more relaxed, so we had pretty good views of them.

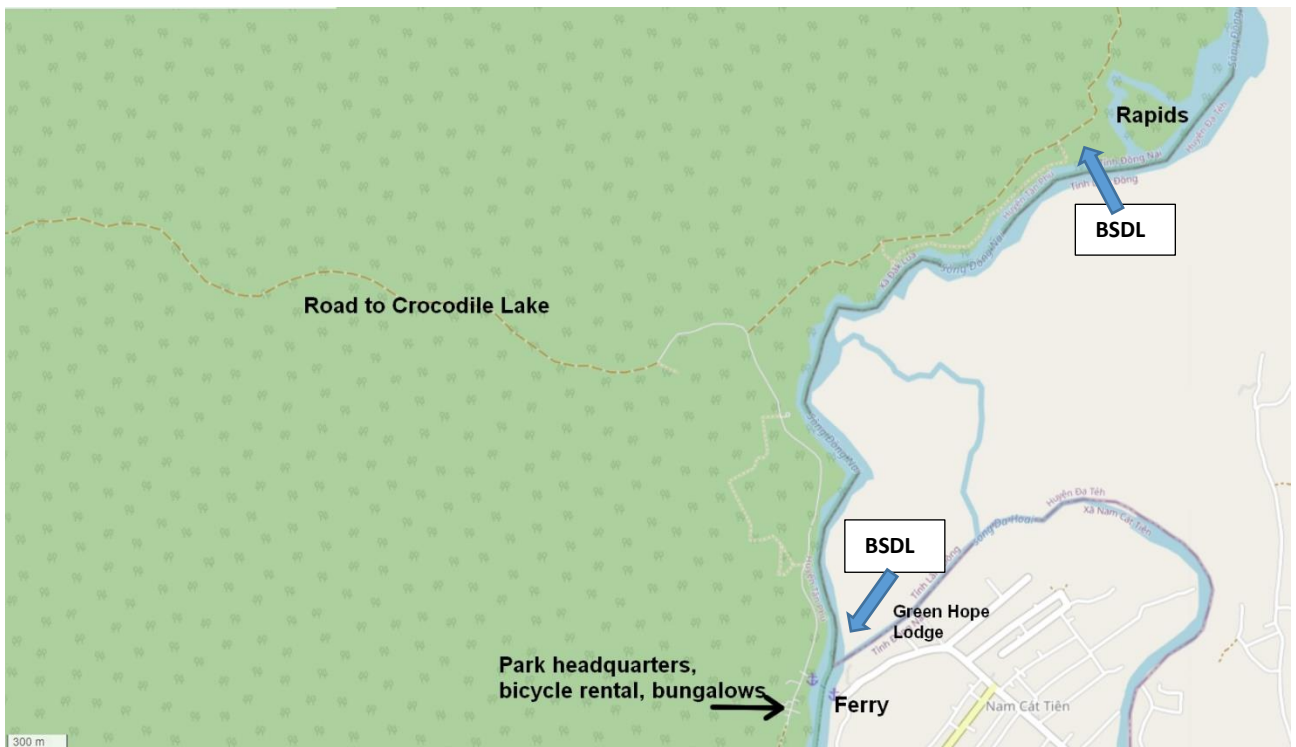


Southern Yellow-cheeked Gibbon

The usual spot for the BSDL is about halfway the walking trail towards Crocodile Lake. First you take the bus from the NP or bicycle towards the start of the walking trail (about 10 km from park HQ). From there the walking trail of 4 km to the Crocodile Lake starts. You need to buy an extra ticket for the walking trail.



Black-shanked Douc Langur



Primates **NOT** seen in Cat Tien NP:

- **Pygmy Slow Loris** (*Nycticebus pygmaeus*). To see this species, you actually have to sleep on the west side of the river because then you can look for the loris in the bamboo vegetation along the road in the evening.
- **Elliot's Silver Langur** (*Trachypithecus margarita*). According to a park ranger, this species is difficult to find in the dry season. The forest around the tourist area of the park is partly deciduous forest. Because this primate species almost only eat leaves, in the dry season it migrates to other areas of the park with evergreen forest. A few weeks after our visit, a group of birders had a very short sighting of this species along the road after the rapids.

2. Danang/Son Tra Peninsula (Red-shanked Douc Langur + Rhesus Macaque)

One of the most spectacular primates species lives on the Son Tra Peninsula close to the big city of Danang: the **Red-shakend Douc Langur** (*Pygathrix nemaeus*). The best way of seeing them at close range is to get in contact with Tuan Bui. Finding the red-shanked doucs without him is quite difficult for a number of reasons:

- Tuan has studied the douc langurs for a long time and the langurs are familiar to his presence. They will probably take much more distance or go deeper in the vegetation without his presence.
- It's not allowed to go into the reserve with a (semi-)automatic motorbike. if you are not used to a manual motorcycle then it is quite a walk to the area where most of the langurs live.
- The most northwestern road on the peninsula was closed to traffic and people due to landslides during our visit (march 2023). Tuan has permission from the local authorities to use that road. In the period that we were there, an American tourist was arrested because he had walked onto the closed road. He spent one night in prison and was not allowed to leave the country for a period after his release.

We visited the langurs twice with Tuan: one morning and one afternoon and both times we saw the monkeys really beautiful. In short, contact Tuan Bui and he will give you an unforgettable time with the langurs. Moreover, he is also the man for a visit to the Grey-shanked Doucs and the Hatinh langurs.

Contact details Tuan Bui:

- Whatsapp: +84 914000940
- Email: tuan.buivan201286@gmail.com
- FB: Tuan Bui (Wildlife Photography)

We stayed in the Navy Hotel on the southwestern tip of the peninsula. We thought we could walk up the mountain from there, but that is impossible as the entrance gate to the reserve not far from the hotel is closed. The hotel self is quiet, good, not expensive and has a nice beach. They don't serve dinner in low season, but we ordered food by Grab. On the property of the hotel you have a good chance to see **Rhesus Macaques** (*Macaca mulatta*). Another good place to see them is the Buddhist temple Chùa Linh Ứng on the southern part of the peninsula.



3. Dong Hoc (Grey-shanked Douc Langur)

Unlike the Red-Shanked Douc Langur, finding the Grey-shanked Douc is not so easy. Together with Tuan we took a taxi to the area of Dong Hoc, a 2 hour drive southeast of Danang. There are still small fragments of natural forest in this area, but the vast majority of the area is used for agriculture. We parked the car and walked about 20 minutes uphill to a small forest fragment on a steep slope (too steep to be used for agriculture). We had distant views from a family of grey-shanked Douc and I was able to take 1 (bad) picture. Unfortunately the langurs quickly disappeared into the forest, although we were not at close distance from them. Although we walked around the forest, which is very small, we did not see any langurs during our half day visit. To take good pictures, you should spend at least a few days here and probably need a shelter/hide.

Close to the site of the Grey-Shanked Douc is a friendly family run guesthouse with basic, clean and cheap rooms. On Google maps it's called Trang trại sinh thái Dung Danh (15.375850653699327, 108.57613474427254). If you would like to stay here for a few nights, it can be arranged by Tuan Bui.



4. Phong Nha - Ke Bang National Park

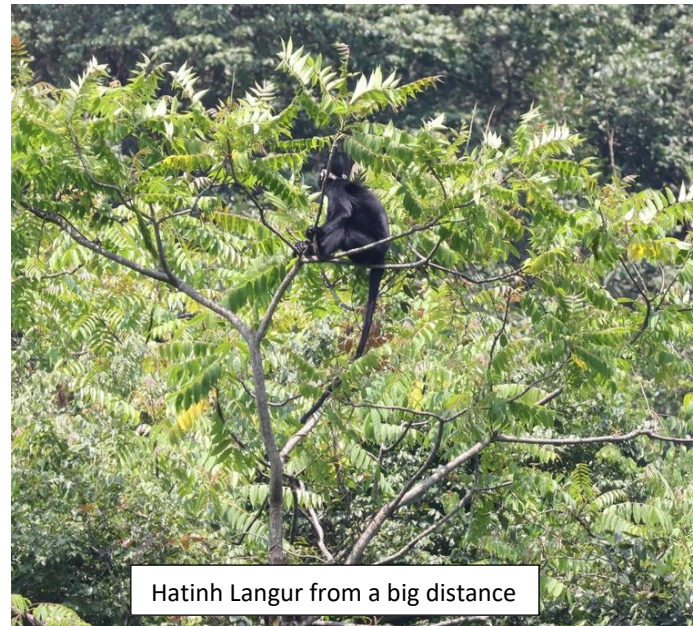
This is not a place often visited by mammalwatchers. We visited the area because of all the beautiful caves and the nice landscape in the area. There are primates in the national park, but the chances to see them are slim. We rented a car and driver from our hotel (Greenfield Ecostay, highly recommended). We walked along the QL15 from the Tro Moong Ranger Station to the southwest. This road runs through a beautiful karst area, where Hatinh langurs are occasionally seen. We were unsuccessful there. Another good spot is the Eight Ladies Cave and temple, but we couldn't find any Hatinh langurs there either.

Wild or not wild?

At the end of the day the driver took us to the police station at Km 40 (17.483, 106.330). Close to this police station is a dirt road (closed with a barrier) which goes to a large fenced area, in which a group of Hatinh langurs live. They were released there in the past as part of a rehabilitation program. The program has ended a few years ago, there is no longer any power on the fence, the animals are not fed and they can easily jump over the fence. Are these langurs wild? Well, they were alert when they saw us and stayed at big distance. We consider these langurs at least as semi-wild, but in fact they are wild because they can easily leave the area as (small) trees are growing close to the fence.



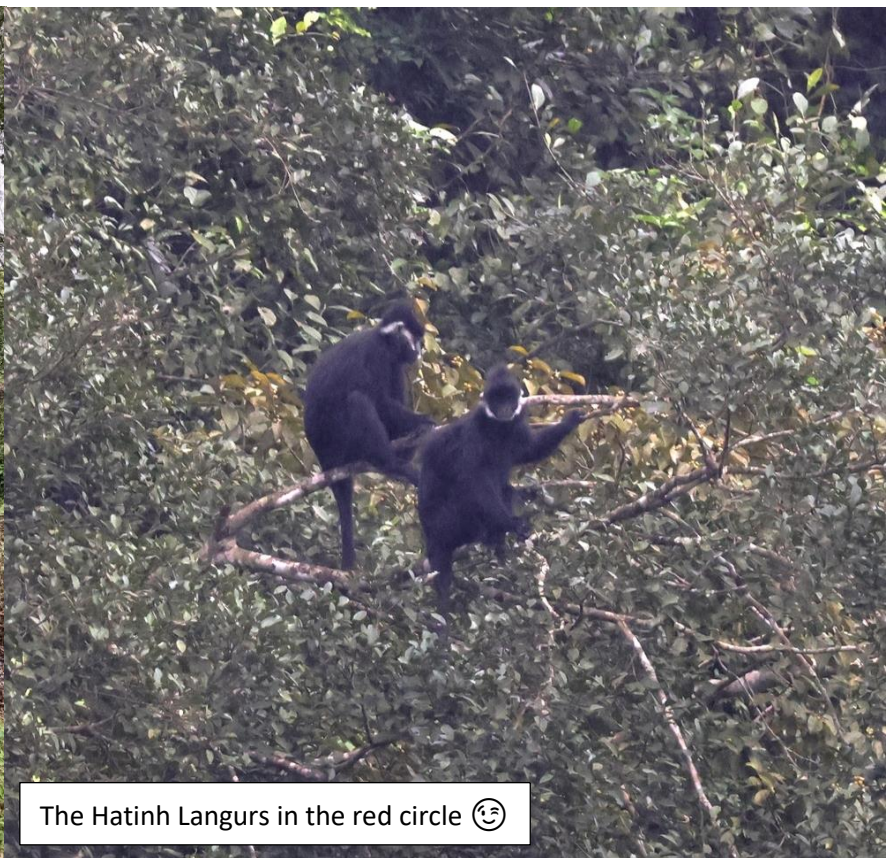
Just a low fence around the area of the Hatinh Langurs



Hatinh Langur from a big distance

5. Đồng Lê (Hatinh Langur).

The best place to see the Hatinh Langurs is about 10 to 15 km southeast of the small city of Đồng Lê. Don't go there on your own and try to find the langurs yourself. There is a very small chance of seeing the langurs from the public roads. To have a good chance of seeing these beautiful primates you need to walk closer to the karst mountains across private land, which should only be done with a local ranger. The best thing to do is to get in contact with Tuan Bui (see Red-shanked Douc Langurs/Son Tra Peninsula for his contact details). He can organize a homestay in a village close to karst area where the Hatinh Langur live. The costs for the homestay (very simple, but clean and safe) are very reasonable and the owner (Mr. Tu) and his family are very friendly. Keep in mind that most of the communication is by Google Translate only. Mr. Tu is head of the ranger team and will take you to the karst area with his motor bike. The Hatinh Langurs live on the



The Hatinh Langurs in the red circle 😊

karst and you will see them from the agricultural area around the karst, so no strenuous walks are needed to see the langurs. You can also stay in a hotel in Đồng Lê and travel to the small village where the ranger lives by car or motor taxi (20 minutes).

We were a bit unlucky as we had rainy weather (drizzle) and only had distant (but prolonged) views of the Hatinh langurs.

The Greenfield Ecostay near Phong Nha - Ke Bang National Park arranged a private taxi to the homestay (1,5 tot 2 hours) for us. From the homestay we took a taxi to Đồng Lê where we continued our trip by train to Ninh Binh. Train tickets were also organized by the Greenfeld Ecostay.

6. Von Long Wetland Reserve (Delacour's Langur)

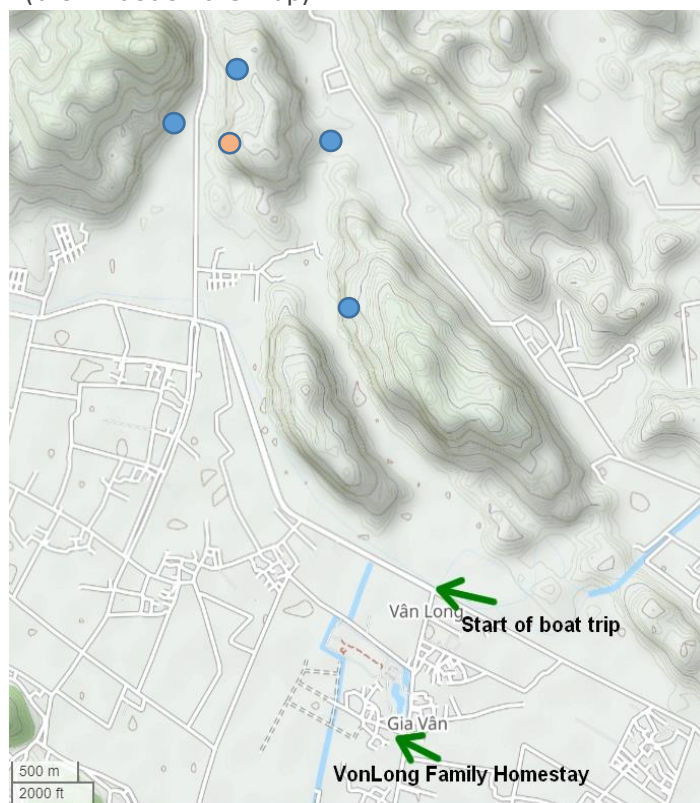
This is the only place to see the rare Delacour's langurs (*Trachypithecus delacouri*). The area around Ninh Binh and Tan Coc is very touristic with plenty of nice accommodations. We decided to stay close to the Von Long Wetland Reserve to maximize our chance of finding the langurs. We stayed in the VonLong Family Homestay. They have 5 rooms and you can use (free) bicycles to get around. It's a lovely family and we had a great time with them.

There are 2 strategies to find the langurs:

- take a boat ride through the protected wetland. It starts near the Van Long Green Hotel. The ticket counter is not at the start of the boat trips, but 100 meter towards the village. We went on the (rowing) boat trip 2 times (both times late in the afternoon) but we didn't see or hear the Decalour's Langurs. According to local people the weather was too cold for them, so they hide in or near caves. Sometimes tourists see the langurs close to the boat and you can take excellent pictures of these beautiful species.. Keep in mind that the boat takes a certain route and it's not possible to deviate from this route.
- take a bicycle and cruise around/near the nature reserve on your own. The roads are flat, so the cycling is not strenuous. In total we saw the langurs 4 times (spread over 2 days). Unfortunately quite far away or/and at the end of the day, so the pictures are not great. Nice to see that one of the groups had 4 babies and 1 young animal (brown fur). The places where we have seen the langurs are indicated on the map with blue dots. As a complete surprise we also saw a beautiful group of Assamese macaques, a new species for us (brown dot on the map).



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A family group of Delacour's langurs was released a few years ago on an island (about 1,5 to 2 ha) opposite the Đền Trình temple in the Tràng An Landscape Complex near Ninh Binh. You can choose from 3 routes (rowing boat) here and route 1 (the least tourist one) will in any case pass the island mentioned. There are now young born in the group. We do not know whether there are plans to release the monkeys in semi-freedom or complete freedom in more places in the karst area around Ninh Binh.

Cat Ba (Cat Ba Langur)

The Cat Ba Langur (*Trachypithecus poliocephalus*) is one of the rarest primates in the world. The species lives in a few places on the island of Cat Ba. Due to hunting and poaching the population dropped to just 40 animals in 2003. Mainly due to the efforts of the Cat Ba Conservation project, the number of animals has since doubled to around 80. This year was good with 7 births (until June). We had the opportunity to go with the boat of the conservation project and saw the Cat Ba langurs very nicely. The lighting conditions were not very good and taking pictures from a wobbly boat was not that easy... I got permission from the director of the conservation project to use his pictures 😊

Be aware that the parts of the island where they live are off limits to tourists to protect the vulnerable population. So the chances of seeing this species on a regular tourist tour are very small.



Other mammals seen

We saw a few other mammal species during our trip:

- 1) black giant squirrel (*Ratufa bicolor*). Seen in Cat Tien NP and in Phong Nha Botanic Garden. The latter one is a nature reserve and doesn't feel like a botanic garden.
- 2) Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*). It was walking around at dark in the gardens of our guesthouse near Cat Tien NP. After consultation with an official from Cat Tien national park, it was decided to capture the animal and transfer it to the other side of the river, where the forest is protected.



Final thoughts

As expected most of the primates seen during this trip were quite shy/alert and far away because of the continuous hunting and poaching. But in the end we were satisfied with 3 species of Douc Langur and the 3 rare langur species in the northern part of Vietnam (Cat Ba, Hatinh and Delacour's) on our list. As a bonus we saw a nice group of Asammese Macaques. Hopefully the attitude towards nature in general and animals in particular will change. Otherwise the future for most of the primates in Vietnam doesn't look good.

If you would like to have some information about our trip, please get in contact with us:

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