

Democratic Republic of Congo. (2022) Salonga region

By Koen Betjes

This report is not a typical trip report, but rather a summary of my observations while working as a biodiversity monitoring researcher in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for a couple of months. While this is not a traditional trip, I still feel it is interesting to share my experiences and observations from a country that is not often visited. During my time in the DRC, I was based at two field camps near Salonga National Park South block: Lui Kotale and Ekongo camps. These camps served as a home base for a team of scientists studying multiple groups of wild bonobos.

As part of my research, I was primarily responsible for conducting surveys of mammals in the region. However, I also spent months observing and recording species from a wide range of taxa. While I will focus on the mammals and will mention a few interesting rare birds in this report. Please note that the pictures I have included are not of the highest quality, as they were primarily taken for identification purposes.

I will start with the squirrels, a species group which is often forgotten. The most common species was Thomas's Rope Squirrel which was often scurrying across the forest floor. Two species of anomalures, of which the more common species is the Derby's Anomalure gliding through camp at night. The other species was Beecroft's Anomalure, only observed once during the day. Besides that the Forest Giant Squirrels are often seen higher in the canopy. Just near to camp I came across a striped squirrel that escaped vertically on a tree and identified as Boehm's bush squirrel, a species previously recorded only east towards Uganda. And Reg-legged Sun Squirrels were seen along the main Lokoro river and those were not described south of the Congo river.



Thomas's Rope Squirrel



Derby's Anomalure



Bonobo

The primate diversity is surprisingly rich in this region. Of course the bonobos were absolutely incredible to observe and while doing surveys far



Black Mangabey



Wolf's Monkey



Angolan Colobus

from camp we occasionally even encountered unhabituated bonobos. But I also had some unforgettable encounters with some of rarest and least known primates of Africa. At some point we came across a mega troop of Golden-Bellied Mangabeys. There were at least 100 individuals, although very hard to get an idea of group size in the dense forest. They are mostly terrestrial and did alarm calls when most of the group saw us. Other arboreal primates were often seen during surveys in mixed-species groups of up to 5 different species. Mostly Red-tailed Monkey, Wolf's Monkey, Thollon's Red Colobus, Black Mangabey and occasionally Angolan Colobus.

Two other diurnal primates were much harder to find as they are solely found in riverine and swampy forests which are very difficult to access. Both of them often are terrestrial and arboreal making them just incredible hard to find. One morning at Ekongo camp I walked towards the river and heard an alarm call of what I assumed Red-Tailed monkeys. I positioned myself hidden in the swampy vegetation and ready with my camera to capture some close up shots. I see some movement and look through the lens of my camera. To my surprise I am looking face to face with a male Allen's Swamp Monkey at just 6 meters distance. A group of around 10 individuals watched me and made sure everyone saw me. I took some pictures and recorded their alarm calls as they rare and a hardly observed species. De Brazza's Monkeys are occasionally seen along the Lokoro river and smaller rivers. There are 3 species of nocturnal primate known, but perhaps even more as not many nocturnal primate experts haven't focused on this region. Demidoff's Dwarf Galago are really common around the camps, running around at lower altitudes of the forest. I thought to have recorded Thomas's Dwarf Galago higher in the canopy, but

identification is difficult with the footage I took. Central potto were not as common as I thought and I only observed it once along the main river vegetation.



Allen's swamp Monkey



Thollon's Red Colobus



Golden-bellied Mangabey

There are so many interesting mammals, but one of the weirdest must be the Giant Otter Shrew. It is a nocturnal semiaquatic carnivorous mammal I observed once in small stream at night. Despite its name, it is not a true shrew and is most closely related to the tenrecs of Madagascar. It looks like an otter, but it is a bit larger than a normal rat, so it is very confusing to observe. The camp was great for some nocturnal species like the Aquatic chevrotains running through camp, Brush-Tailed Porcupines visiting the compost every night, African Civet, Marsh Mongoose, Forest Giant Pouched Rat and Blotched Genet are also other regular visitors. During the day close to camp you will get close views of Four-toed Sengi, when you hear them running through the undergrowth if it isn't the forest robins.



Red River Hog



Four-toed Sengi



Aquatic Chevrotain

When I was conducting transect surveys I would stay in temporary camps further away from camp. This is when I had most wildlife encounters as we covered many kilometers each day. A few times I came across groups of Red River Hogs if we were silent enough though. A unique sighting was a quick glimpse of an Alexander's Cusimanse. One early morning this

Long-Nosed Mongoose ran in front of me on the forest trail. All the duikers are very elusive, I did get glimpses of Blue Duiker, Black-fronted Duiker and Weyns's Duiker. We do see Bay Duiker and Yellow-backed Duiker on camera trap, but they seem even more shy. We do get footage of Sitatunga and Lowland Bongo, but they are also very hard to observe. I came across tracks of Forest elephants, but there aren't many. One day checked camera traps close to the main Lokoro river, which partially flooded at that time of the year. I was making my way through water and the water level came until my chest. Out of nowhere this Common Hippo appeared and luckily escaped in the opposite direction. Some nights I could hear territorial calls of leopards around the river areas, but never observed directly.



African Civet



Marsh Mongoose



White-bellied pangolin

One of my most wanted species was the Giant Pangolin. Eventually I did a get a potential sighting of one disappearing back into a burrow, which could have been be an armadillo as well. Unfortunately I also seen one giant pangolin freshly killed by locals. White-bellied pangolin was seen once when looking for nocturnal wildlife. On the walks at night you can often hear the Western Tree Hyrax and African Palm Civet calling. Another species you hear at night is not a mammal. One of the most unique birds, must be the Congo Peacock. Their calls echo through the forest late at night, but they seem to disappear during the day. I have seen one beautiful male on the edge of the swamp forest on a lower hanging branch. Other spectacular birds were Crowned Eagle, Palmnut Vulture, Golden-Crowned Woodpecker, Nkulengu Rail, Spot-Breasted Ibis and Grant's Bluebill.

There are a few more shrews, dormice, mice and bats which I couldn't identify.

This is the total list of 38 species seen, excluding the mice, bats, rats etc;

There are a few potential species that I didn't see. I do see African Golden Cat on camera traps, but also very rarely. I did spend quite some time waiting along wildlife trails, so could have been incredibly lucky with a sighting. A species I looked for on the larger rivers was the Congo clawless Otter, but never saw them. They are around according to the camera traps and locals seeing them. I was hoping for a random sighting of a Angolan Cusimanse or Central African Oyan. I never looked properly for lowland Bongo, but there are a few open spots in the forest where they have been seen regularly.

English name	Scientific name	
Wolf's Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus wolfi</i>	1
Angola Colobus	<i>Colobus angolensis</i>	2
Thollon's Red Colobus	<i>Piliocolobus tholloni</i>	3
Black Mangabey	<i>Lophocebus aterrimus</i>	4
Golden-bellied Mangabey	<i>Cercocebus chrysogaster</i>	5
De Brazza's Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus neglectus</i>	6
Allen's Swamp Monkey	<i>Allenopithecus nigroviridis</i>	7
Bonobo	<i>Pan paniscus</i>	8
Red-tailed Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus ascanius</i>	9
Common Potto	<i>Perodicticus potto</i>	10
Thomas's Galago	<i>Galagoides thomasi</i>	11
Demidoff's Galago	<i>Galagoides demidoff</i>	12
Derby's Anomalure	<i>Anomalurus derbianus</i>	13
Beecroft's Anomalure	<i>Anomalurus beecrofti</i>	14
Giant Otter Shrew	<i>Potamogale velox</i>	15
Four-toed Sengi	<i>Petrodromus tetradactylus</i>	16
Long-nosed Mongoose	<i>Xenogale naso</i>	17
Blotched Genet	<i>Genetta maculata</i>	18
Marsh Mongoose	<i>Atilax paludinosus</i>	19
African Civet	<i>Civettictis civetta</i>	20
African Palm-civet	<i>Nandina binotata</i>	21
African Brush-tailed porcupine	<i>Atherurus africanus</i>	22
Common Hippo	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>	23
Red-legged Sun Squirrel	<i>Heliosciurus rufobrachium</i>	24
Thomas's Rope Squirrel	<i>Funisciurus anerythrus</i>	25
Forest Giant Squirrel	<i>Protoxerus stangeri</i>	26
Boehm's Bush Squirrel	<i>Paraxerus boehmi</i>	27
Alexander's Kusimanse	<i>Crossarchus alexandri</i>	28
Black-fronted Duiker	<i>Cephalophorus nigrifrons</i>	29
Blue Duiker	<i>Philantomba monticola</i>	30

Water Chevrotain	<i>Hyemoschus aquaticus</i>	31
Weyns's Duiker	<i>Cephalophorus weynsi</i>	32
Giant Ground Pangolin	<i>Smutsia gigantea</i>	33
White-bellied Pangolin	<i>Phataginus tricuspis</i>	34
Forest Giant Pouched Rat	<i>Cricetomys emini</i>	35
Red River hog	<i>Potamochoerus porcus</i>	36
Western Tree hyrax	<i>Dendrohyrax dorsalis</i>	37
African Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	38
Shrews	2 species	
Mice	2 species	
African Dormice	<i>Graphiurus</i>	