

## Cat Tien national park, December 2023. Vsevolod (Seva) Rudyi & Ekaterina (Katya) Sichinava.

### *Introduction.*

This trip to Vietnam was very exciting for us, to say the least. We're a couple of young wildlife lovers, and neither of us have been to the tropics before (not counting family trips when we were children and couldn't adequately watch the fauna). This is by no means a "serious" and "professional" mammal watching report – but we tried our best to see as much stuff as we could – not only mammals, but also birds, herps and inverts. On the vertebrate front, we ended up seeing 157 bird, 27 reptile, **18 mammal**, 12 amphibian and 10 fish **species**.

### *Itinerary.*

Dec 22: Arrival to Ho Chi Minh

Dec 23: Looking for wildlife in Tao Dan Park, and a night trip to Mã Đà forest to look for herps.

Dec 24: transfer to Green Hope Lodge (Cat Tien NP).

Dec 25 – Jan 1: Exploring Cat Tien NP.

Jan 2-4: Relaxing, mangroves and lazy birding in Vung Tau.

Jan 5: Departure.

### *Hotels:*

In Ho Chi Minh, we stayed in "Saigon Cozy Home "At Bui Vien Walking Street". It was a very nice and cheap hotel, with tasty breakfast, no noise (despite being located next to a crowded and extremely loud walking street), and a very helpful personnel that would go out of their way to help us.

In Cat Tien, we stayed at Green Hope Lodge, plus a couple nights in the park HQ apartments for night/morning trips. Green Hope was amazing. What's more important, the owner, Luan, helped us arrange a ton of things in the park, took care of my lost luggage being sent to the lodge, and is generally a wonderful person. Also, Green Hope is a very good place for those also interested in birding – probably way better, than any of the park's hotels. In the garden we found a couple of birds, that we didn't see in the park (e.g. Van Hasselt's Sunbird), and chilling near the river also allowed to expand our list significantly (we saw many birds from here in the mornings and evenings - e.g., Black Baza, Lineated Barned, Plaintive Cuckoo, etc.). I also recommend arranging a boat trip with the lodge – it's a good opportunity to see a lot of wildlife (and amazing sunsets, too!).

In Vung Tau, we stayed at Intourco Resort. It was OK, but if I went there now, I'd probably stay somewhere at Can Gio island, which has a lot to offer in terms of wildlife watching in the mangroves.

### *Weather and bloodsuckers.*

End of December – beginning of January are generally considered dry season in Vietnam. However, in Cat Tien it was still occasionally raining, when we were there. This resulted in somewhat elevated wildlife activity compared to "normal" dry season, but also leeches and mosquitoes were around. While leeches are annoying, but harmless, mosquitoes there can carry Dengue fever and malaria, so I highly recommend taking repellent and/or mosquito clothes with you! We didn't have leech socks, but it was alright – even nice in some way to contribute a little energy in the forest trophic chain.

### *Guiding.*

We were mostly exploring the park ourselves. However, we used some help of the local guides, too. For those interested in snakes I can recommend contacting [Nguyễn Huy](#). He can arrange you a herp-focused trip in his free time for a very reasonable price. He took us to Ma Da, and, despite it mostly being completely dry there, helped us to find some amazing snakes!

In Cat Tien, we used the help of [Ká Tuyền](#). She is an amazing guide, working for the park, but it's way better if you contact her directly (both for her and for your purse). Although the communication in English might not be easy at first (make sure to double check if you have the same dates in mind), she knows the area brilliantly, can track down a lot of creatures (from insects to mammals), and is very friendly, funny and lighthearted person. Also, she is truly one of the locals – being born in the Ta Lai village lying just outside the park. This is important, if you want to visit the Bat Cave, which lies on the villagers' territory and not within park borders.

And now – on to the mammals and others!

### Night of Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> and Dec 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Straight after arriving in Ho Chi Minh, meeting Katya and resting a bit, I couldn't resist going to the nearby Tao Dan Park. Katya arrived earlier that day and had already teased me with sightings of Golden Tree Snake, some birds and 3 squirrel species from there. So we went out, admired the walking street, which looked like a place out of a Cyberpunk novel, and then went on to the park.

There, we caught a glimpse of our first herps: [Oriental Garden Lizard](#), [Asian Common Toad](#), [Brown Tree Frog](#), [Flat-Tailed](#), [Four-Clawed](#) and [Common House Geckos](#) and [Oriental Long-Tailed Grass Lizard](#). The latter was the highlight for me – quite amazing to see a lizard with a tail three times longer, than its body! However, we also found a very cool mammal here!



*Oriental Long-tailed Grass and Greater Short-Nosed Fruit Bats.*

Using my headlamp, I spotlighted many bats conveniently nested in “tents” made of palm leaf with chewed frond. They turned out to be **Short-nosed Fruit Bats**, most likely **Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bats** (*Cynopterus sphinx*). There's another similar species, *C. brachyotis*, present in the area. However, based on their large size and ears that seemed long, we assumed that those were Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bats. We also saw a **Brown Rat** – not the coolest mammal ever, but a tick is a tick.

In the morning, we went to the park again. We added quite a few birds to our lists (including [Coppersmith Barbet](#), [Scarlet Minivet](#) and [Verditer Flycatcher](#)), and I caught up on all three squirrel species - **Pallas'** (*Callosciurus erythraeus*), **Cambodian Striped** (*Tamiops rodolphii*), and **Indochinese Ground** (*Menetes berdmorei*) squirrels. I have to say, all three species were dirt common in Cat Tien, too, so the only real specialty of this park were the bats. A new herp species, [Vietnamese Crested Lizard](#), was also added to the trip list – a very pretty creature, for sure!



Cambodian Striped Squirrel and Coppersmith Barbet.

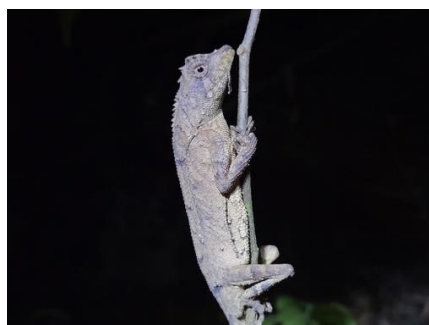
In the daytime it was too hot to do anything, so we just prepared for the night trip to Ma Da with Nguyen. I won't write too much about it, since no mammals were seen there, except for unidentifiable eyes far away.



We, however, saw four species of snakes – Ruby-Eyed Green Pit Viper, Laotian Wolf Snake, Common Mock

Viper, and hilariously looking Berdmore's Slug Snake! This thing, that looks like a very surprised sperm cell, was Katya's favorite herp of the trip. We also saw many frogs (see full list at the end of the report) and three new lizard species, including awesome Chinese Water Dragon and Crowned Pricklenape! Invertebrates were also out and about – especially gigantic *Heteropoda* and *Pandercetes* huntsman spiders, much to Katya's horror. We even saw one of them eating a frog! Bird list also grew a bit,

with the coolest thing we saw being a Great Eared Nightjar sitting on a tree trunk!



*Berdmore's Slug Snake*; *Heteropoda sp.* with a frog; sleeping *Pale-Legged Leaf Warbler*; *Vietnamese Bug-Eyed Frog*; *Lanternfly*; *Crowned Pricklenape*.

### Dec 24<sup>th</sup>.

We were back to the hotel at midnight and headed to Cat Tien with a car transfer from Green Hope Lodge at 12 in the morning. We didn't see any mammals that day, but the bird list continued to grow with goodies such as Oriental Pied Hornbill and Laced Woodpecker – it turned out, that everything starts to fly across the river just before sunset! Two new snake species (Deuve's Kukri Snake and Siamese red-necked Keelback) were also found in the garden, as well as many new frogs.

Dec 25<sup>th</sup>.

In the morning, at 5:30, we had a boat trip arranged. We saw a lot of birds, including Dollarbirds, Pied Kingfisher, Blue-bearded Bee-eater and Rufous Woodpecker, another Chinese Water Dragon, a Clouded Monitor, and the first primates of the trip – a troop of **Long-Tailed Macaques** (*Macaca fascicularis*). **Gibbons** were singing all around, filling the air with their otherworldly voices, and birds joined the morning choir – amazing experience!

We birded the lodge and the river in the afternoon (Katya also saw a **Finlayson's Squirrel** (*Callosciurus finlaysonii*), which I missed, and never refound) and moved inside the park in the evening. After checking in the rather dilapidated apartments at HQ, we met up with Ka, and went off for a night walk.

Apart from invertebrates, new frogs, lizards and some snakes (including a new for the list White-Lipped Pit Viper), we saw a very cool mammal! At first I thought, that the eyeshine up in the tree was a Loris of sorts, but then it turned out to be a **Common Giant Flying Squirrel** (*Petaurista philippensis*)! It was relatively far away, so no photos, but it did glide to the neighboring tree – a totally mind-blowing sight! I also saw what I think was a Civet of sorts, but no definitive ID on this one.



Dec 26<sup>th</sup>.

Next morning, we were barely able to get up at 5:30 for a gibbon trek with Ka and a small group. We found, heard and observed the **Southern Yellow-cheeked Gibbons** (*Nomascus gabriellae*) for some time, and the views were acceptable. Later, when the gibbons left, the group and then Ka left too. We stayed behind to photograph a Flying Lizard some birds (including a pair of Velvet-fronted nuthatches). Suddenly, Ka came back excited, and led us (and us only!) to a young male sitting very low in the tree, not giving a damn about us and providing great views!

After that, we rented a bike at the HQ and took a ride to the grasslands for some birds. Birds delivered (Lesser Adjutant, Indochinese Roller, Common Flameback and Lesser Yellownappe were among the highlights), we also saw and photographed another lifer mammal - **Northern Smooth-tailed Treeshrew** (*Dendrogale murina*) in a bamboo thicket on the side of the road! This was the only time we ever saw this species. Then we came back for the hotel for more porch birding.



*Southern Yellow-Cheeked Gibbon; Northern Smooth-Tailed Treeshrew; White-Lipped Pit Viper; Lesser Yellownappe.*

Dec 27<sup>th</sup>.

A driver picked us up in the lodge at 7:30 in the morning and drove to Ta Lai Village, where we were met by Ka and her brother. From here, we started the track to the Bat Cave (just after seeing an Oriental Darter on the lake nearby). Straight away we stumbled onto the tracks of an **Asian Elephant**, which, as Ka told us, was seen here by a couple weeks ago. She also told us, that it's easy to see the elephants near the village in the spring and summer.

The track was quite long, hard and uneventful (apart from seeing two species of Leafbirds, Green-billed Malkoha and a Paradise Flycatcher). I also had to crawl through corridors made of bamboo and nasty spiky vines, that were way too low for a 195 cm tall me to stand. However, the cave was amazing! We saw one of my favorite invertebrates – a Whip Scorpion, another Ruby-Eyed Green Pit Viper, and, finally, two new species of bats! Those were **Grand Leaf-nosed Bats** (*Hipposideros grandis*), hundreds of which were perched in the larger halls of the cave, and **Greater False Vampires** (*Lyroderma lyra*), which occupied narrow dead ends in groups of 3-4 individuals. The floor in those dead ends was littered with bird feathers and Leaf-Nosed Bat skulls, indicating, what the False Vampires love to feed on. Brutal!



*Grand Leaf-Nosed Bats; Greater False Vampires; Whip Scorpion.*

In the evening we had a night safari booked with the park. This was probably the worst experience we had in Cat Tien and Vietnam in general. The drive lasts only for an hour, the group couldn't shut up, the guide was as incompetent as it gets, and the driver didn't stop for some kind of Civet, which was in viewing distance! Sure, we saw **Southern Red Muntjac** (*Muntiacus muntjak*) and **Sambar deers** (*Rusa unicolor*), but we could have just driven to the grasslands by ourselves in a bike and see them, too... On top of all, it rained, so we were extremely cold and miserable, when the safari was over.

## 28<sup>th</sup> Dec.

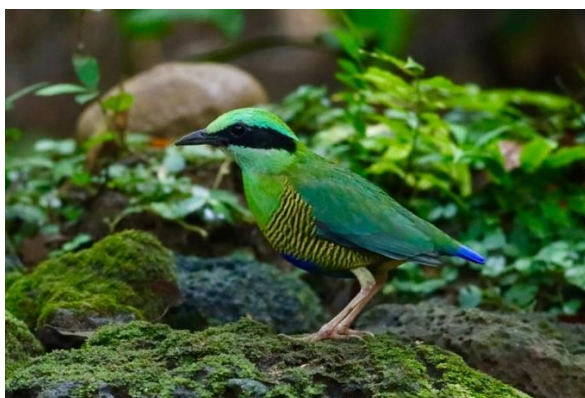
The next day we headed to the Crocodile Lake. We came to the walking trail around 9:00 (yes, we started early, but stopped our bikes a hundred times to look at birds). However, it was worth it – we saw goodies such as Collared Falconets and Black-And-Buff Woodpeckers! When we set our foot on the trail, we accidentally met up with Ka, who was guiding a large group of noisy tourists. We walked ahead of them, which gave us an opportunity to see Scaly-Breasted Partridges and catch a glimpse of Germain's Peacock Pheasant. But at some point, Ka caught up with us, while her group was behind us and pointed out a low-sitting, **Black-Shanked Douc Langur** (*Pygathrix nigripes*)! After thanking her, we enjoyed views of this endangered and awesome-looking primate, before the group came in. As we went forward, we found another one, too! I'd say, the trail is a perfect place to reliably see this species nowadays.



After arrival to the lake, we enjoyed close views of some Siamese Crocodiles and birds such as Bronze-Winged Jacanas. On the way back, we also added a **Northern Pig-Tailed Macaque** (*Macaca leonina*) to the trip list and our life lists.

## 29<sup>th</sup> Dec.

On this day, we booked three birds hides, to try for pheasants, Bar-Bellied and Blue-Rumped Pittas. Despite being ambushed by hundreds of leeches, we got awesome views of Germain's Peacock Pheasants and both Pittas alike! Many more birds species were also seen... together with two lifer mammals!



*Germain's Peacock Pheasant; Bar-Bellied Pitta; Woolly Horseshoe Bat; Northern Threshrew.*

The first lifer was a charming **Northern Threshrew** (*Tupaia belangeri*), which tried (almost successfully) to steal the show at the pitta hides. And the second one was another bat, which Katya found by sticking her head into a random hollow tree trunk. Fourth and final bat on the trip – a very cute **Woolly Horseshoe Bat** (*Rhinolophus luctus*)!

For the rest of the trip, we failed to see any new mammals, so I won't write too much about it. However, I'll mention an amazing place near Vung Tau – **Can Gio mangrove reserve**. You can travel there by ferry, and the place has some amazing wildlife – from Southeast Asian Bockadam snakes, to macaques, fiddler crabs, Malaysian Pied Fantails and mudskippers. I feel like it can yield a ton of stuff at night – sadly, we didn't stay there for a night due to lack of time...

**Full mammal list:**

Common name	Where seen
Greater Short-Nosed Fruit Bat	Tao Dan Park
Brown Rat	Tao Dan Park
Pallas's Squirrel	Tao Dan Park, Cat Tien
Indochinese Ground Squirrel	Tao Dan Park, Cat Tien
Cambodian Striped Squirrel	Tao Dan Park, Cat Tien
Finlayson's Squirrel	Green Hope Lodge
Indochinese Giant Flying Squirrel	Cat Tien (near HQ)
Long-Tailed Macaque	Cat Tien, Can Gio mangroves
Northern Pig-Tailed Macaque	Cat Tien, Can Gio mangroves
Southern Yellow-Checked Gibbon	Cat Tien (near HQ and trail to Crocodile Lake)
Black-Shanked Douc Langur	Cat Tien (Trail to Crocodile Lake)
Northern Smooth-Tailed Treeshrew	Cat Tien (trail to grasslands)

Northern Treeshrew	Cat Tien (Pitta hides)
Grand Leaf-Nosed Bat	Bat Cave
Greater False Vampire	Bat Cave
Wooly Horseshoe Bat	Cat Tien
Southern Red Muntjac	Cat Tien (Grasslands)
Sambar	Cat Tien (Grasslands)

### Full herp list

Common name	Latin name	Where seen
Oriental Garden Lizard	<i>Calotes versicolor</i>	Everywhere
Ayeyarwady Forest Agama	<i>Calotes irawadi</i>	Can Gio Mangroves
Vietnamese Blue-Crested Lizard	<i>Calotes bachae</i>	Tao Dan Park
Crowned Pricklenape	<i>Acanthosaura coronata</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
Chinese Water Dragon	<i>Physignathus cocincinus</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
Orange-Winged Flying Lizard	<i>Draco maculatus</i>	Cat Tien
Flat-tailed House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus platyurus</i>	Everywhere
Asian House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>	Everywhere
Common Four-Clawed Gecko	<i>Gehyra mutilata</i>	Everywhere
Tokay Gecko	<i>Gekko gekko</i>	Cat Tien
Cattien Bent-toed Gecko	<i>Cyrtodactylus cattienensis</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
Siamese Leaf-Toed Gecko	<i>Dixonius siamensis</i>	Ma Da
Bronze Mabuya	<i>Eutropis macularia</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
Common Sun Skink	<i>Eutropis multifasciata</i>	Cat Tien, Vung Tau
Spotted Forest Skink	<i>Sphenomorphus maculatus</i>	Cat Tien
Oriental Long-tailed Grass Lizard	<i>Takydromus sexlineatus</i>	Tao Dan Park
Clouded Monitor	<i>Varanus nebulosus</i>	Cat Tien
Golden Tree Snake	<i>Chrysopelea ornata</i>	Tao Dan Park
Laotian Wolf Snake	<i>Lycodon laoensis</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
Ruby-eyed Green Pitviper	<i>Trimeresurus rubeus</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
White-lipped Pitviper	<i>Trimeresurus albolabris</i>	Cat Tien
Berdmore's Slug Snake	<i>Pareas berdmorei</i>	Ma Da
Deuve's Kukri Snake	<i>Oligodon deuvei</i>	Cat Tien
Siamese Red-necked Keelback	<i>Rhabdophis siamensis</i>	Cat Tien
Common Mock Viper	<i>Psammodynastes pulverulentus</i>	Ma Da
SE Asian Bockadam	<i>Cerberus schneideri</i>	Can Gio mangroves
Siamese Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus siamensis</i>	Cat Tien
Brown Tree Frog	<i>Polypedates megacephalus</i>	Tao Dan Park, Cat Tien
Mada Paddy Frog	<i>Micryletta erythropoda</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
Dark-sided Chorus Frog	<i>Microhyla heymonsi</i>	Cat Tien
Large Pygmy Frog	<i>Microhyla berdmorei</i>	Ma Da
Mukhlesur's Narrow-mouthed Frog	<i>Microhyla mukhlesuri</i>	Cat Tien
Paddy Field Frog	<i>Fejervarya limnocharis</i>	Ma Da, Cat Tien
Annamese Flying Frog	<i>Rhacophorus annamensis</i>	Ma Da
Vietnamese Bug-eyed Frog	<i>Theloderma vietnamense</i>	Ma Da
Guangdong Frog	<i>Hylarana macrodactyla</i>	Cat Tien
Striped Sticky Frog	<i>Kalophrynus interlineatus</i>	Cat Tien
Asian Painted Frog	<i>Kaloula pulchra</i>	Cat Tien

Asian Common Toad	<i>Duttaphrynus melanostictus</i>	Everywhere
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See **bird list** [here](#).