



Pictus Safaris Trip Report – Liberia, January 2024

Abstract

Liberia is certainly not best known for its wildlife – in the popular consciousness, it is perhaps most commonly associated with the extensive unrest in the country between the 1980s and early 2000s. But, now that political stability has been established for many years, and following extensive and admirable work from numerous conservation NGOs including FF and more recently the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation, the future of Liberia's wildlife and wilderness areas looks a little brighter.

Sapo National Park is the second-largest tract of primary rainforest remaining in West Africa, after Tai National Park in neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire. Historically, the infrastructure here that would allow a productive visit has been limited when compared to other forest wilderness areas in the region (e.g. Tai, Gola, Tiwai Island), but this has now changed with the opening of the lovely Sapo Ecolodge, at the edge of the park. This lovely lodge consists of three wooden cabins, each with electricity, running water and a double bed (one can also camp on sheltered platforms, with shared bathroom facilities, should you desire).

The lodge is a profoundly difficult place to get to. Even in the dry season, the drive from Liberia's capital, Monrovia, can take over ten hours over rough roads, which are often blocked by stranded trucks. A 4x4 is absolutely necessary. During our visit, the drive took eight hours, owing largely to a large stretch of dirt road having been recently graded by a mining company. On arrival at the park headquarters in Jalay Town (called Jatia Town on Google Maps), it is then a 45-minute walk to the ecolodge.

The mammal-watching in Sapo is tough, there's no getting away from that. Unlike Tai, the trails are not regularly used by researchers, and can therefore be difficult to navigate. The trail network is also fairly limited. The mammal densities are lower than in Sapo, and the wildlife that does persist is generally skittish. Interestingly, though, the viewing of several species is unexpectedly better in Sapo than anywhere else in the region. In particular, this is clearly one's best bet right now for zebra duiker – brief views were had of this superb mammal on our first day in the park. The established tactic of seeking out diana monkeys feeding on fruit, and staking out the base of those fruiting trees, seemed to be reliable (if and when monkeys could actually be found). Jentink's duiker are not reliable here, and Tai is clearly the far superior location for pygmy hippo – our January 2024 tour to Tai recorded pygmy hippo sightings more often than we recorded pygmy hippo sign in Sapo. For those looking to race through West African forest species, and especially for those looking to photograph them, Tai is the place to be, for now.

For primates, Sapo appears to have higher densities of sooty mangabey and Campbell's monkey than other nearby protected areas. By contrast, king colobus and olive colobus seemed much rarer, as do chimpanzees. The trails within Sapo did not allow for effective night walks, but walks on the clearer trails near the lodge produced West African potto, Demidoff's galago (tentative ID, only one sighting), Emin's pouched rat, brush-tailed porcupine and, most reliably, water chevrotain.

There was ample sign of large mammals including elephant and bongo, but as is usually the case this seemed to date from the wet season. Leopard and golden cat are never seen. Lovely bonuses within the park were common cusimanse and African clawless otter. En route to the park, drier stretches of road surprisingly produced Egyptian mongoose and common slender mongoose.



When it comes to birding, the Sinoe River, overlooked by the lodge, was good if not spectacular. Highlights included African finfoot, spot-breasted ibis, palm-nut vulture and shining-blue kingfisher. The forest, however, offered some of the best birding I've experienced in West African forests. A highlight was easily recording Gola malimbe within just a few minutes of looking, as well as mixed flocks of shining drongo, blue-billed malimbe and red-headed malimbe, plus blue-throated brown sunbird and white-crested hornbill.

At a Glance

Dates	January 28 th – February 6 th , 2024
Number of Clients	1
Countries Visited	Liberia
Key Target(s)	Zebra Duiker, Jentink's Duiker, Pygmy Hippo
Total Mammal Species Recorded	25



Itinerary

Day	Destination	Accommodation
January 28 th , 2024	Monrovia, Liberia	Libassa Ecolodge
January 29 th – February 4 th , 2024	Sapo NP, Liberia	Sapo Ecolodge
February 5 th , 2024	Monrovia, Liberia	Libassa Ecolodge
February 6 th , 2024	Tour End	N/A

Mammal List – 25 species

Species	Scientific Name	Location(s)*
Carnivora – 4 species		
African Clawless Otter	<i>Aonyx capensis</i>	SNP
Common Cusimanse	<i>Crossarchus obscurus</i>	SNP
Egyptian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>	ER
Common Slender Mongoose	<i>Herpestes sanguineus</i>	ER
Cetartiodactyla – 4 species		
Brooke's Duiker	<i>Cephalophus brookei</i>	SNP
Bay Duiker	<i>Cephalophus dorsalis</i>	SNP
Zebra Duiker	<i>Cephalophus zebra</i>	SNP
Water Chevrotain	<i>Hyemoschus aquaticus</i>	SEL
Chiroptera** – 4 species		
Buettikofer's Epauletted Fruit Bat	<i>Epomops buettikoferi</i>	SEL
Little Collared Fruit Bat	<i>Myonycteris torquata</i>	
Veldkamp's Dwarf Epauletted Fruit Bat	<i>Nanonycteris veldkampii</i>	SEL
Banana Pipistrelle Bat	<i>Neoromicia nanus</i>	SEL
Pholidota – 1 species		
Black-Bellied Pangolin	<i>Phataginus tetradactyla</i>	Withheld
Primates – 7 species		
Sooty Mangabey	<i>Cercocebus atys</i>	SNP
Campbell's Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus campbelli</i>	SEL, SNP
Diana Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus diana</i>	SNP
Spot-Nosed Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus petaurista</i>	SEL, SNP
Demidoff's Dwarf Galago	<i>Galagoides demidoff</i>	SEL
West African Potto	<i>Perodicticus potto</i>	SEL
Western Red Colobus	<i>Piliocolobus badius</i>	SNP
Rodentia – 5 species		
African Brush-Tailed Porcupine	<i>Atherurus africanus</i>	SEL
Emin's Pouched Rat	<i>Cricetomys emini</i>	SEL
Fire-Footed Rope Squirrel	<i>Funisciurus pyrropus</i>	SEL
Red-Legged Sun Squirrel	<i>Heliosciurus rufobrachium</i>	SNP
Forest Giant Squirrel	<i>Protoxerus stangeri</i>	SNP

*LEL – Libassa Ecolodge, ER – En route to Sapo NP, SEL- Sapo Ecolodge, SNP – Sapo National Park

** Bat identification based on field characteristics, but also use of handheld 'bat detector' – IDs are therefore tentative.



Bird List – 75 species

Species	Scientific Name	Location(s)*
<i>Accipitriformes – 6 species</i>		
Red-Chested Goshawk	<i>Accipiter toussenelli</i>	SNP
Cassin's Hawk-Eagle	<i>Aquila africana</i>	SEL, SNP
Palm-Nut Vulture	<i>Gypohierax angolensis</i>	ER, SEL
Yellow-Billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>	LEL, ER, SEL
African Harrier-Hawk	<i>Polyboroides typus</i>	ER, SEL
Long-Tailed Hawk	<i>Urotriorchis macrourus</i>	SEL
<i>Apodiformes – 3 species</i>		
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	SEL
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	SEL
Cassin's Spinetail	<i>Neafrapus cassini</i>	SEL
<i>Bucerotiformes – 7 species</i>		
Brown-Cheeked Hornbill	<i>Bycanistes cylindricus</i>	SEL
Piping Hornbill	<i>Bycanistes fistulator</i>	ER
Black-Casqued Hornbill	<i>Ceratogymna atrata</i>	SEL
Yellow-Casqued Hornbill	<i>Ceratogymna elata</i>	ER, SEL, SNP
White-Crested Hornbill	<i>Horizocerus albocristatus</i>	SEL, SNP
Black Dwarf Hornbill	<i>Horizoercus hartlaubi</i>	SEL
West African Pied Hornbill		ER
<i>Caprimulgiformes – 1 species</i>		
Plain Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus inornatus</i>	LEL
<i>Charadriiformes – 4 species</i>		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	SEL
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	LEL
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	LEL
Rock Pratincole	<i>Glareola nuchalis</i>	SEL
<i>Columbiformes – 5 species</i>		
Western Bronze-Naped Pigeon	<i>Columba iriditorques</i>	SEL
African Green Pigeon	<i>Treron calvus</i>	LEL
Blue-Spotted Wood-Dove	<i>Turtur afer</i>	ER
Blue-Headed Wood-Dove	<i>Turtur brehmeri</i>	SEL
Tambourine Dove	<i>Turtur tympanistria</i>	SEL
<i>Coraciiformes – 6 species</i>		
Shining-Blue Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo quadibrachys</i>	SEL
Blue-Breasted Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon malimbica</i>	SEL
Woodland Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon senegalensis</i>	ER
African Pygmy Kingfisher	<i>Ispidina picta</i>	SEL
Giant Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle maxima</i>	SEL
White-Throated Bee-Eater	<i>Merops albicollis</i>	ER
<i>Cuculiformes – 1 species</i>		
Whistling Long-Tailed Cuckoo	<i>Cercococcyx lemaireae</i>	SNP
<i>Gruiformes – 1 species</i>		
African Finfoot	<i>Podica senegalensis</i>	SEL
<i>Musophagiformes – 2 species</i>		
Great Blue Turaco	<i>Corythaëola cristata</i>	SEL, SNP
Yellow-Billed Turaco	<i>Tauraco macrorhynchus</i>	SEL, SNP



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Passeriformes – 32 species		
White-Tailed Alethe	<i>Alethe diademata</i>	SNP
Mangrove Sunbird	<i>Anthreptes gabonicus</i>	SEL
Little Green Sunbird	<i>Anthreptes seimundi</i>	SEL, SNP
Black-Headed Rufous Warbler	<i>Bathmocercus cerviniventris</i>	SEL
Red-Tailed Bristlebill	<i>Bleda syndactylus</i>	SNP
Green-Backed Camaroptera	<i>Camaroptera brachyura</i>	SEL, SNP
Yellow-Browed Camaroptera	<i>Camaroptera superciliaris</i>	SNP
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	LEL, ER
Blue-Throated Brown Sunbird	<i>Cynaomitra cyanolaema</i>	SNP
Fraser's Sunbird	<i>Deleornis fraseri</i>	SEL
Shining Drongo	<i>Dicrurus atripennis</i>	SNP
Velvet-Mantled Drongo	<i>Dicrurus modestus</i>	SNP
Rufous-Crowned Eremomela	<i>Eremomela badiceps</i>	SEL
Yellow-Whiskered Greenbul	<i>Eurillas latirostris</i>	SNP
White-Browed Forest Flycatcher	<i>Fraseria cinerascens</i>	SEL
Green Hylia	<i>Hylia prasina</i>	SEL, SNP
Brown Illadopsis	<i>Illadopsis fulvescens</i>	SNP
Spotted Greenbul	<i>Ixonotus guttatus</i>	SNP
Western Wattled Cuckooshrike	<i>Lobotos lobatus</i>	SNP
Grey Longbill	<i>Macrosphenus concolor</i>	SNP
Gola Malimbe	<i>Malimbus ballmanni</i>	SNP
Blue-Billed Malimbe	<i>Malimbus nitens</i>	SNP
Red-Headed Malimbe	<i>Malimbus rubricollis</i>	SNP
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	SEL
Cassin's Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa cassini</i>	SEL, SNP
Western Nicator	<i>Nicator chloris</i>	SNP
White-Breasted Nigrita	<i>Nigrita fusconotus</i>	SNP
Red-Fronted Antpecker	<i>Parmoptila rubrifrons</i>	SNP
Northern Grey-Headed Sparrow	<i>Passer griseus</i>	ER
Chestnut-and-Black Weaver	<i>Ploceus castaneofuscus</i>	ER
Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	LEL
Capuchin Babbler	<i>Turdoides atripennis</i>	SNP
Pelecaniiformes – 5 species		
Intermediate Egret	<i>Ardea brachyrhyncha</i>	ER
Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>	SEL
Spot-Breasted Ibis	<i>Bostrychia rara</i>	SEL
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	ER
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	ER
Piciformes – 1 species		
Lesser Honeyguide	<i>Indicator minor</i>	SNP
Psittaciiformes – 1 species		
Timneh Parrot	<i>Psittacus timneh</i>	SNP

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Misses

Pygmy hippo is much tougher in Sapo than in Tai – sightings are still recorded on patrols fairly regularly, but sign in the park was limited. I would expect any realistic chance of a sighting to require an extensive stay deep in the park. When it comes to duikers, there was no recent sign of **Jentink's duiker**, and we did not see **black duiker**, **yellow-backed duiker** or even **Maxwell's duiker**, even though the latter is reported to be the most commonly seen and poached species.

Primate-wise, **olive colobus** and **king colobus** were not seen, and we also missed **chimpanzee** – this was likely just bad luck, coupled with relatively low densities. Only one galago was encountered, although **Thomas's dwarf galago** should be present. The density of small mammals in the park, particularly carnivores, seems low – we did not record any **genets**, nor **palm civet** or **mongooses** (although common cusimanse was seen).

Most other mammal 'misses' were expected – species including **forest elephant**, **bongo**, **leopard** and **golden cat** are present, but any sighting would be a minor miracle.

Bird-wise, it was disappointing that no recent sign of **white-necked picathartes** colonies had been recorded despite some excellent-looking habitat.

Contact Details

Pictus Safaris can be contacted by email at contact@pictus-safaris.com or via our website at www.pictus-safaris.com. We are a tour operator specialising in small-group and private departures across Africa, with a focus on rare and elusive wildlife.

Our destinations in the remainder of 2024 include Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique. Spaces remain on small group tours to several of these destinations, and we are able to offer private wildlife-focussed tours to over thirty African countries.