

Tai National Park – March 2024
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This is my version of events of the trip that Jon Hall and I took to the Tai Forest in Ivory Coast recently. For all useful details I refer you to Jon's write-up.

Tai has had a strong research presence for many years and, probably as a result, has been one of the best protected areas of forest in West Africa. Though best known for its habituated population of chimpanzees, the Park offers the opportunity to see several stellar species of rare mammal. Top of the list for Jon and I were two species of duiker – the Jentink's and the Zebra duiker. Duikers are a group of small to medium-sized antelopes found throughout the forests of Africa. They are usually shy and elusive animals which tend to live up to the derivation of their Dutch name 'duiken' meaning 'to dive', which neatly captures their tendency to dive into cover when approached. There are many beautiful duikers across the continent, but none match the Jentink's and Zebra in the looks department. The Jentink's is one of the largest duikers, with a black face and neck, white stripe across its shoulder which runs down its front leg, and a lustrous grey body. The Zebra duiker is, if anything, even more gaudy. It is a smaller, more delicate duiker with a red face and shoulders and black legs. Its entire back however is covered in thin black and white stripes, hence its name. These two species have almost identical distributions: both are restricted to the few remnant forests in Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Liberia, and both are highly threatened. Jon and I had asked about these species during our visit to Sierra Leone in 2017, but the guides there suggested that they were heavily poached and very difficult to see. All evidence suggested that the Tai National Park was our best bet for finding these animals, and we headed there with high hopes.

Jon, who is an organisational genius, had arranged all elements of the trip (while also planning several others), and we agreed to meet at a small hotel in the capital, Abidjan, with me flying in from Nairobi and him from Paris. I immediately liked the Ivory Coast; the people were friendly and there was a jovial, somewhat chaotic vibe to the place. That might have been because they had just won the African Football Cup of Nations, after spending a mind-bending one billion dollars on hosting the event. I had my dinner at an outdoor restaurant recommended by the hotel owner. It was next to a main thoroughfare for pedestrians and vehicles, and I was surrounded by traffic, courting couples, peddlers selling everything from phone cases to wall clocks, prostitutes, nursing mothers, beggars, and groups of older men settling down to the important evening task of beer drinking. Even the president showed up; or at least I'm assuming it was the president, who went speeding by in a convoy of at least 60 vehicles including armoured cars with impressively sized machine guns on the top. The city captured the steady beat of humanity, and felt a world away from the wintery suburbs of Minneapolis. The food was surprisingly good; freshly fried chicken, deep fried sweet plantain, and a slightly oddly flavoured couscous which apparently was all the rage in Abidjan.

Early the following morning I caught up with Jon, who's Air France flight had been delayed the night before and met our drivers for the trip to Tai. We first drove along the coast to San Pedro (which took about four hours), then switched vehicles and then headed north for another 6 hours. Our driver from San Pedro to Tai was a tall, bald Ivorian man with a very deep baritone voice that he put to good use haranguing all other road users as well as any policeman foolish enough to pull him over. He had a Toyota 4x4 which he drove with impressive and unrelenting speed. He had a fairly simple approach to the rules of the road: larger vehicles took precedence. When driving through villages he wouldn't slow down but would simply lay his hand on the horn and expect all pedestrians to leap out of the way. Motorbikes came in for particular scorn. He would drive up behind them and press hard on his horn. The smart ones would rapidly pull over. If they hadn't heard him coming the drivers would invariably jump in their seats and occasionally one would go into full 'wobble mode' and head off the road. Whether any of them ended up pitching headfirst into the ditch I never found out, as they were invariably engulfed in a large cloud of dust once we passed them. Large trucks on the other hand garnered respect and he would think twice about trying to beat them to a narrow bridge crossing. The true owners of the road however, were the buses. Whenever he saw one heading down a hill towards us he would pull the car as far off the road as he could. As I wiled away the hours in the car, I wondered what bus-related trauma lay in his past to have elicited such solicitousness. He was a technically accomplished driver and missed 98% of the potholes on the road. However, the remaining 2% he struck with impressive force and I'm fairly certain all of his profit was lost on replacement shock absorbers.

One of the things that struck us about the drive to Tai was how little native habitat there was left. We saw mile after mile of oil palm plantations and exotic tree plantations, yet barely a single patch of local trees or even bushes. Not surprisingly, even birds were in short supply. It was a relief therefore to reach our camp, called Ecotel Touraco, in the late afternoon, and finally see some true tropical forest. The camp was situated close to a large, lazily flowing river, and flocks of large hornbills could be seen from the lodge veranda. Here we met Kevin, our guide for the next 8 days. Kevin came from a village next to the Park and had spent 18 years working as a field assistant for various NGO's and scientific groups before becoming a tourist guide. He was very knowledgeable about the Park and its wildlife and was keen to try to find us our target species. That said, neither Kevin (nor any of the other staff at the two camps we stayed at) spoke much - or any - English, meaning we had to communicate in French. I last spoke French about 40 years ago when I was in secondary school. I spoke it badly at the time, and things have gone markedly downhill since then. When I was speaking with the camp staff, Jon would listen, and then - after contemplating for a while - would tell me what he thought I was trying to say, and what I had actually said. The correlative factor between the two was

generally low. Of course, things weren't helped by the (very childish) pleasure I take from mangling the language because it so obviously irritates the French. I'm afraid some habits picked up in English boarding school simply can't be unlearned. The Ivorians didn't seem to care about my terrible French though. They just thought I was a bit dim. That evening we went for a night excursion on one of the camp boats which was powered by a small outboard engine. We were only 5 minutes out of the launch site when Kevin spotted some eyeshine on the river bank. Upon lighting the animal up with our torches we saw an adorable, tiny brown antelope with white spots and stripes on its side. It was a Water chevrotain, a water dependent ungulate found only in the forests of west and central Africa. I'd missed this species on my past trips to Sierra Leone and Gabon, so was thrilled to get a really good view of it here. It was one of my target animals for the trip, which was off to a great start. The rest of the evening was fairly quiet, though we did catch a glimpse of a Brooke's duiker before it slunk away in the undergrowth.

The following day we had a relaxed morning as we waited to move to the next camp which was about 8 km away. A Dutch couple in their late 60's had arrived in the camp and Jon and I struck up a conversation with them.

'Where are you coming from?'

'We've just driven down from Holland on our way to South Africa.'

'Oh I see. How long will the journey take you?'

'We're not sure. Three or four years perhaps.'

'Ah, ok.'

'How about you, what are you doing here?'

'We're mammalwatchers. We are hoping to see some rare species of duikers here.'

'That's nice. We drove through the Ituri Forest in Congo in the 1970's and saw two wild Okapis'.

Silence.

'You mean, you saw the captive ones in the large enclosure they set up for them?'

'No, these were in the wild.'

Stunned silence.

'Have you finished packing yet Jon? No, me neither. Nice meeting you...'

Well that put us in our place. Nothing like chatting to an older Dutch couple to make one feel unadventurous.

After lunch we took the boat up to the next camp, Camp Chimpanzee, which was to be our home for the next 6 days. It was the dry season and the river levels were so low that we were constantly having to raise the propeller over tree stumps and slowly navigate our way through the small channels of deep water that were left. Eventually even that became impossible, and Kevin ended up getting in the water and pushing and pulling the boat upstream. Frankly we would have been better off walking the 8km, but Kevin seemed to enjoy using the boat, so we let him be. Taking the river route did allow us to see multiple signs of Pygmy hippo which are clearly common in this forest. Jon and I had seen the species before in Sierra Leone, so while we would not have averted our eyes had one crossed the path in front of us, we did not make any particular efforts to find one.

Camp Chimpanzee was thus named because it lies in the territory of a habituated group of chimpanzees which have been studied by researchers from the Max Plank Institute for many years. The few visitors that the Park gets each year come mostly to see the chimpanzees, spending an hour with them as they move through the forest. The camp consisted of several mid-sized tents – large enough for to stand in and accommodate one bed – as well as a central 'dining area'. A couple of years ago the camp was situated under some very large trees, which provided lots of shade during the day. However, apparently one of those trees was blown over in a storm and landed on one of the tents which had housed a German diplomat the day before. The trees were therefore all duly cut down. The lodge owner had plans to build thatch roofs over the tents, but hadn't quite got around to doing it yet, meaning that the tents were baking during the day, and far too hot to sleep in. The owner had sent a message a few days before the trip suggesting we brought hammocks to sleep in, but I was on safari in Tanzania and didn't get the memo in time. Jon had packed a hammock, and while I didn't take him up on his generous offer to borrow it occasionally, I did get to enjoy watching him go arse over-head and land in a heap on the ground as he re-familiarised himself with the delicate protocol of climbing into a hammock. We were very impressed to find that the camp had a shower stand as well as a flush toilet. That said, I discovered that the toilet, which was tilted at a 20 degree angle, wasn't actually bolted to the ground, meaning that several times I nearly pitched headfirst into the wooden wall, taking the loo with me. There were two ladies who prepared our food, which was generally quite good although they did push the boundaries of 'recommended nutritional content' somewhat when they served us a plate of chips and an apple for dinner. My daughters would have heartily approved mind you. The only time they slipped up dramatically was when they served us a tuna pasta. Neither Jon or I eat fish and had made this quite clear, so we were a bit surprised by this lapse and queried the cook about it. She agreed that it was tuna, but claimed it wasn't fish because it had come out of a can. This was a new type of logic for us. Regardless the non-fish tuna pasta was duly dispatched to the kitchen, untouched and unloved.

The camp doubled up as a research station for the Max Plank Institute, and when we visited there were two researchers, a Postdoc and a Masters student working on the chimps. The Masters student, a young woman from Holland, had set up a series of camera traps across the forest to try to film tool use in chimps. Apparently, the chimps in Tai Forest are unusual in that they use rocks to crack open wild nuts and she was hoping to document this. While she hadn't had much success with the chimps, she had inadvertently stumbled across a far more important and scientifically relevant discovery than how a bunch of apes handle their nuts. Specifically, she had figured out exactly

where within Tai Forest Charles and Jon could locate rare species of duikers. While she might not have immediately recognised the magnitude of her breakthrough, we certainly had and we spent a good deal of time pouring over her videos, ogling over the fantastic animals she had captured. We knew from experience that we were very unlikely to see one of the shy duiker species when we were crashing around along paths in the forest, so our best bet was to find a place to stake one out. The question was, where in this vast tract of forest should we situate ourselves? One of the researchers' camera traps was of particular interest to us. It had multiple captures of a Zebra duiker, with records both from the early morning as well as the late afternoon. Kevin knew the site and said it was only a 45-minute walk away. Bingo! We had found an area to focus on.

That evening we went for our first forest walk. When you walk through a forest in West Africa, you simply have to accept that you're going to sweat. A lot. In fact, within 20 minutes of doing any sort of exercise, day or night, you turn into a squelchy puddle of sweat, your clothes completely soaked through. I kept on having to clean and dry my binocular eye-pieces as I would drip sweat onto them continuously every time I walked somewhere. Beyond that though, the forest was fairly benign. Being the dry season there were virtually no mosquitoes, and I only discovered a handful of ticks on me. The vegetation had very few stingy, scratchy, clingy things, unlike tropical forests in South America where most plants seem to have evolved for all-out war on humans. Even the ants were rather gentlemanly; as one approached they would collectively start vibrating on the dry leaves around them, sounding uncannily like a creature scratching on the ground. Fair warning not to step on them, and much better than the Army ants of East Africa, which stealthily climb up your legs and sink their mandibles into your nether regions when you're least expecting it. That evening we found a number of interesting rodents using the thermal imager. There was a shy Nagtglas's dormouse hiding among some leaves, and a wonderful looking small rat-like animal, with long guard hairs on its back, called a Defua mouse. We also saw a couple of Lord Derby's anomalures, a large flying squirrel with a silky grey back and fluffy black tail. Around midnight we were walking along a narrow trail with me at the back when Kevin and Jon started calling excitedly to me. What, what, what? Up there. Where? There! And there indeed, 25 yards away and hanging from a vine directly above the path was a little pineapple of an animal with an extremely long tail. We had found my first ever, truly wild, pangolin. There are four species of pangolin in Africa, two ground dwellers and two tree dwellers. This one was the White-bellied pangolin, one of the tree specialists. I had previously seen Ground pangolins caught by villagers in Tanzania, and a rehabilitated Black-faced pangolin that was monitored daily by forest guards in Central African Republic, but I had never come across one completely by chance. I had been so focussed on the duikers that I hadn't given much thought to our chances of seeing a pangolin, so I was absolutely thrilled to see this one. This was a great start to Camp Chimpanzee.

The following morning we walked to the site where the Zebra duiker had been camera trapped and staked it out for a few hours. The only excitement came when we played a recording of a duiker call that the Batwa pygmies use to bring in duiker, and a curious Maxwell's duiker came to investigate. Maxwell's is a small brown-grey duiker and the most common ungulate across most of western and central Africa. Nice to see, but not our target species. Once the sun was high and the forest quiet, we stopped our vigil and had a look around. Not far away we found a small track with fresh signs of dung on it, and a vantage point slightly above the track which provided good views both of the track and the surrounding forest. This was an extremely promising spot and we agreed that we would return in the afternoon for a second go at finding the duiker.

After lunch we returned to the Zebra duiker location and ensconced ourselves in our preselected spot. Jon and I sat next to each other where we could overlook the path while Kevin selected a position about 10 feet away providing him with a slightly different angle. What happened next will live long in our memories. At about 5.45 a Zebra duiker emerged from the vegetation and walked up the path, black and white stripes flashing in the sunlight, stopping about 20 feet away directly in front of us. It stayed for some 15-20 seconds before it heard a noise and went crashing off into the undergrowth. Absolutely amazing! Or it would have been if Jon and I hadn't missed it. That's right, we were looking in the wrong direction and didn't even catch a glimpse of it. Kevin saw it coming and motioned to us, but we didn't see him. Eventually, out of desperation, he made a sound to attract our attention, at which point the duiker bolted, not to be seen again. It was the stuff of mammalwatching nightmares. Predictably the walk back to the camp was funereal. Kevin was aghast that we'd contrived to miss the animal, and clearly thought we were a pair of numpties. We'd attempted to portray ourselves as relatively proficient mammalwatchers, and here we'd missed our main target animal that was practically dancing the can-can right in front of our noses. Oh well, there's not much to do in these situations except move on and remind yourself that it's nothing that a couple of years of intense therapy won't cure. On the walk back we were heartened to come across a very tame and obliging Johnston's genet, a little-known West African speciality that was new to both of us. Shortly afterwards our moods further lightened when we spotted a Malacomys rat hunting for centipedes on the bank of a small stream. The Malacomys looks like Mickey Mouse on stilts. It has tall legs, a long, pointed nose, big ears, and a sizeable tail that it often carries pointing straight up in the air like a wobbly radio antenna. A very good species - if rats are your thing.

The thing about Jon is that he was born under a lucky star when it comes to mammalwatching. In fact, I'm convinced that in a past life he was some sort of saint, who rescued an entire village of people, or invented a new vaccine or something along those lines. He was suitably rewarded by returning to earth as a mammalwatcher blessed with luck at finding rare mammals. I call it the Mother Teresa effect. Jon, being a statistician, claims not to believe in luck, but given his astonishing record of finding incredibly rare mammals, he's starting to think I may be onto something. After our failure of the day before, we agreed we would focus all of our efforts on the Zebra duiker site. The following

afternoon we returned to the area and sat quietly waiting to see if the animal would return. This time we all sat within touching distance of each other to ensure that we could easily alert the others if we saw something. One hour went by, then two and finally three as the sun set and it got dark. A large troop of Western red colobus monkeys noisily settled down for the night close to our waiting spot, chirping and calling to each other, but otherwise there was no sign of any mammals. About 10 minutes after dark I saw some movement with the thermal imager. At first glance I thought that perhaps the duiker had re-appeared, but then the animal turned and I saw that it clearly had a longish tail, which suggested it was a carnivore. I nudged Jon, whispering that I thought it was a genet, and he started making very quiet squeaking noises to attract it. The animal was immediately interested and came rapidly towards us. When it was a few feet away we both lit it up with our flashlights. The animal came to a screeching halt, then turned and fled, while my brain started processing what I was seeing:

It's large and dark, not black and white, so clearly not a genet.
Look at the size of that snout, it's enormous.
Some facial markings.
What the heck is it? (Paraphrasing here a little).
It couldn't be a... "Liberian mongoose" shouted Jon and Kevin in unison.

In case the word 'Liberian mongoose' doesn't immediately make you go weak at the knees, let me provide a bit of context here. The Liberian mongoose was one of the last carnivores to be discovered on the African continent; the first specimens were collected in 1957 though the first live individual wasn't captured by scientists until 1989. The animal's range is tiny. It is only found in eastern Liberia, western Ivory Coast, and possibly in the southern tip of Guinea. There is little natural vegetation left within its range, so the total population is estimated to be only a few thousand individuals. It is also a very, very difficult animal to see. Kevin, who had worked in the Tai forest for 18 years, had only come across it once before. I hadn't mentally included it in the list of mammals that we might see, given its rarity, and here we'd had one almost run into our laps. I was stunned. Jon meanwhile was beaming and Kevin was jabbering on in rapid French about the only other time he'd seen one. What a sighting. If we'd seen the Zebra duiker the night before, we would not have returned to the site, and would have missed seeing the much rarer mongoose. Needless to say it was a far more jovial walk back to the camp than the night before.

Our next few days were spent trying to track down the Zebra duiker, but ultimately without success. On our final evening stake-out, Jon did see a duiker appear right in front of him through the thermal imager, but it vanished before we were able to get a light on it. We did however see lots of other interesting mammals. Jon mentioned wanting to see the rarely encountered Lesser anomalure (a small flying squirrel), and 30 seconds later a very cute juvenile appeared on a branch above our heads. We saw Giant rats wandering around in the camp, Jon found a Brush-tailed porcupine rummaging around in the rubbish pit, and we got good views of several good primates including the marvellously coloured Diana monkey, the slow-moving nocturnal potto and two species of dwarf galago. All together we saw 32 species of mammal which is a very decent return for a week in a West African forest. Unfortunately, there were plenty of signs of poaching in the Park. On several nights we heard gunshots, and human footprints along the paths along with discarded shotgun shells made it hard to ignore. The poachers seem to know not to touch the Chimpanzees and they also appear to leave the Pygmy hippos alone, but other animals are fair game and, according to Kevin, their numbers are declining. Invariably the easiest way of combatting that is by raising the profile of the Park and getting more tourists to go. Tai really is a wonderful forest and should be high on any mammalwatchers list of places to visit. Jon and I have been mulling over how best to clap eyes on the rare duikers and we will definitely return one day to look for them.

As an overly-muscled German man once said: 'I'll be back'!