

THAILAND, gibbons and dugongs (February-March 2024)

During a 1 month stay in Thailand, I have visited 2 places for mammalwatching.

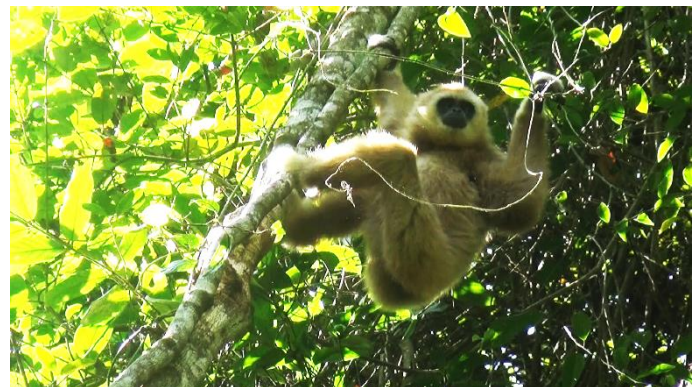
1. Khao Yai N.P. (February 18 – February 22)

I booked a guide through Tontan Travel for 3 full days inside the park. He (named Lek) was excellent, being very knowledgeable about mammals in Khao Yai. They also organized the transfers between Bangkok and Khao Yai. There are now many accommodations for every budget outside the park. I booked with booking.com the very nice and comfortable Recall Isaan Isan Concept Resort situated in Mu Si at less than 1 km from Khao Yai north entrance. During all the stay, the weather was dry with a mix of sun and clouds. I visited Khao Yai during week days (Monday to Wednesday). During the midday, it was only a bit crowded on the main road, around the visitor center and near the waterfalls.

My main target was the gibbons. Lek knows extremely well where to find the different species of gibbons. I saw both (white-handed and pileated) every day. White-handed were more frequently seen than pileated gibbons.



Pileated gibbon



White-handed gibbon

But in Khao Yai, things are more complicated about gibbons. Khao Yai National Park is the only place in the world where the two species of gibbons live in the same area. Consequently, hybridization occurs between white-handed and pileated gibbons. Hybrid gibbons are usually identified by their mixed-species vocalizations. The male gibbon in the picture below is a hybrid one.



Hybrid gibbon

Besides the gibbons, I met several troops of northern pig-tailed macaques along the road. During the day, I also saw sambars, red muntjacs, Finlayson's squirrels, 2 black giant squirrels and a group of 5 smooth-coated otters, fishing in a lake (seen from the Nong Phak Chi watching tower).



Sambar



Red muntjac

Individual spotlighting is banned in Khao Yai N.P. and the organized "night safari" has received mixed reviews. It does not go far away from the Visitor Center and lasts no more than 50 minutes. It consists of a long chain of vehicles, causing a lot of disturbance when spotlighting. Nevertheless, I decided to give a try twice. On the first evening (Monday) there were between 15 and 20 vehicles. The drive produced several sambars, 1 asian elephant and a pair of golden jackals. On the second evening (Wednesday) there were no less than 50 vehicles! Indeed, just before the start, 10 buses arrived with a lot of young people filling up the safari vehicles very quickly. Although it is nice to show animals in the wild to students, it was not ideal for the quietness. However, I saw on this night safari: sambars, 1 malayan porcupine and, again, a pair of golden jackals (maybe the same). Lek said that, if golden jackals were rare in Khao Yai 15 years ago, they are now more common and regularly seen on the night safari.

Conclusion: horrible conditions but decent results.

I am dreaming of how productive could be an individual night drive on a quiet road far from the headquarters....



Asian elephant



Golden jackal



Malayan porcupine

During a stay in Khao Yai N.P., a visit before sunset to Khao Luk Chang bat caves is a must. The place is located 35 km from Khao Yai N.P. north entrance. Just before dark, 2 to 3 millions of wrinkle-lipped free-tailed bats emerge from the caves, forming a continuous ribbon for about 1 hour. What an amazing show! It was really a great moment of mammalwatching.....



Wrinkle-lipped free-tailed bats

2. Ko Libong (March 4 – March 7)

Searching on the web, I found that Koh Libong is the place to go to see dugongs in Thailand. The island, in the Andaman sea, is home to a small muslim fishing community and has a few west-coast resorts, and no experience of the mass tourism. The majority of the island is still completely untouched...a real paradise. I booked the beautiful and welcoming Andalay Beach Resort. They also arranged the transfers between Trang airport and the hotel.

But..... currently, there is no one dugong around Koh Libong anymore! A few months ago, they moved to Koh Mook (or Koh Muk) island, 15 kms north of Koh Libong, probably, to find more seagrass. To see dugongs from Koh Libong, one needs now 2x a 50 minutes longtail boat ride. This is not really a problem. I booked one of the boat of the resort. It was a bit more expensive but, besides the boatman, they also provided a spotter who was more than useful. I went to Koh Mook twice and observed respectively 3 and 4 dugongs in clear waters.



Dugong

Another option would be to stay on Koh Mook, with more lodging opportunities but a bit more crowded than Koh Libong. In this case, it is also possible to watch dugongs from the Koh Mook observation tower.
