

Pygmy Hippo Expedition May 2024 Trip Report

As part of Royle Safaris commitment to organising and running some of the most specialist mammalwatching trips as group tours around the world, we returned to Tai Forest in Cote d'Ivoire for a second Pygmy Hippo Expedition in May 2024. This would be our third trip to the park and after success with Pygmy Hippo sightings on the previous group tour we were hopeful.

We once again had our guide (the wonderful Zarek Cockar) working with the local rangers and lodge manager Karl to take our group (Chris Scharf, Colin Mostert, Carrie Pretorious, Julie Grosso, Lesley McLennan and Sophie Smither) deep into the park in search of the enigmatic Pygmy Hippo and other rare animals of this diverse and pristine rainforest park.

The below is largely edited by Zarek.

In May this year (2024), I led an enjoyable 2 week wildlife viewing trip in Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). The primary targets were Pygmy Hippo, Western Chimpanzee, Jentink's Duiker, Zebra Duiker, and a host of unique primates, squirrels, and other rodents. Although it wasn't a birding trip, the rainforests of western CI always offer some excellent birding too, and I'm always on the lookout for interesting herps, as well as spiders, scorpions, and other invertebrates. Having led one trip here last year, I knew what to expect, for the most part, but any nature expedition has surprises, wildcards, and disappointments.

BANCO NATIONAL PARK / ABIDJAN

Once all members of the group had arrived in Abidjan, a few of us took a short morning expedition to Banco National Park, north of the main city. Unfortunately, we were advised by the hotel managers that the park doesn't open until quite late in the morning, so we didn't get there until almost 9 am, when the heat and humidity was rising, and the majority of the birds and mammals were probably finding deep shade. Banco is a fantastic 30 km² patch of dense, humid Guinean rainforest surrounded by the bustling Abidjan. It's home to a host of primates, including Western Chimpanzees and the very unique-looking Roloway Monkey.

Unfortunately, for the first few kilometres from the main entrance gate, the only path is a small public road that runs through the park, so most of the wildlife likely steers clear of it (it's not super busy, but busy enough with motorbikes, tuktuks, a few small cars, and some noisy pedestrian traffic). We did get lucky with a very brief glimpse of a few **Lowe's Monkeys** near the entrance, but didn't find any other mammals for the next few kms. Not long before we decided to turn back to get back to the hotel in time for our afternoon flight, we did get to see a family of **Common Cusimanses** run across the road. It all happened quite quickly, and none of us managed to get photos, but they weren't far and we had a good view before they disappeared into the undergrowth. Another single **unidentified mongoose** shot across the road just before a passing car, but we weren't able to confirm its identity.

SAN PEDRO / DRIVE TO TAI FOREST

After an ultra-chaotic, but ultimately humorous taxi journey back to the hotel, we made our way to the airport for a flight to the city of San Pedro, west along the coast. There are no real targets in San Pedro, but it's a stop-over on the way to Tai Forest National Park, our primary destination. If you arrive early enough in San Pedro, there are some nice little forest patches and wetlands for some birding, but we were arriving at dusk, and it had been a long day, so we didn't have a chance. We settled into the hotel, had some dinner, and got an early night's sleep in preparation for a long drive the following day.

The drive from San Pedro to Ecotel Touraco, on the edge of Tai Forest takes roughly 6-7 hours, and while you start off on a brand new tarmac road, every half hour further down the road you get, the worse the state of it seems to be. One new mammal species was recorded along the road, a **Green Bush Squirrel**. Eventually, we arrived to a warm welcome by Karl, the owner, and his team in time for lunch.

TAI FOREST NATIONAL PARK

A heavy afternoon downpour meant finding wildlife would have to wait until evening, so just before dark, half the group climbed into the lodge's boat to head up the river to look for likely Pygmy Hippo spots, while the other group hung back until after dinner to go for a night walk.

Just before nightfall, we heard and caught a brief glimpse of our first **Campbell's Monkeys**. The boat group didn't pick up much, but managed a reasonably good view of an **African Civet** while at their first hippo stakeout. Those of us on the night walk were treated to a host of mammalian species including Bosman's Potto, **Demidoff's Galago, Maxwell's Duiker, Beatrix's Bat, Thicket Rat, Lord Derby's Anomalure, African Palm Civet**, and **Western Tree Hyrax**.

The next 2 days, the two groups took turns on the boat and doing night walks, with some morning walks for those who had the energy (the boat group would often spend the whole night out, coming back in the morning).

The main deck at Ecotel Touraco is a great place to watch the life of the forest on parade, and is surely one of the best places to watch and photograph hornbills. We all enjoyed watching the noisy antics of Black-casqued, Yellow-casqued, White-thighed, Western Pied, and Piping Hornbills flying by.

On our walks, on the boat, and from the deck we also saw **King Colobus**, Eastern Spot-nosed Monkey, **Red River Hog, Long-footed Swamp Rat, Olive Colobus**, **Forest Giant Squirrel**, and **Sooty Mangabey**.

On the 3rd night out, the boat group had a brief glimpse of **Pygmy Hippo** in the river before it disappeared under the water. On the 4th night the rest of the group also caught a brief glimpse of a **Pygmy Hippo** near the river bank.

On the 5th day, we packed light, set out in the morning, and took a multi-hour walk through the forest to get to the Chimp Camp some 7 kilometres away. The staff move back and forth between the two camps in probably an hour or an hour and a half, but they're not stopping for birds, monkeys, duikers, and squirrels (and they're much fitter and more accustomed to the humidity that we are!). It was a productive walk, providing good views of **Punctate Sun Squirrel, Western Red Colobus,** and **Diana Monkey** (which was high on everyone's wishlists), along with several other species we'd already seen. Plenty of nice birds, too, and a Seraphin's Caecilian along the path, which was a big highlight for me (I LOVE amphibians). Once settled at the chimp camp, we tried, mostly in vain, to cool down in the afternoon before a night walk, where we saw many of the same nocturnal mammal species, along with a few new species, including two **Beecroft's Anomalures** and a **Hammer-headed Fruit Bat**. Roosting with the bat was a small flock of White-headed Guineafowl, which was high on a couple of people's wish lists.

The following day, the group left camp early (around 4:30 am) to trek to where the resident chimpanzee troop had roosted overnight. Unfortunately, I had picked up a stuffy nose and scratchy throat from one group member (who was worse off than me and recuperating back at Ecotel Touraco), so I thought it best not to join the group and expose the chimps to whatever infection I had. They had a great time with the **Western Chimpanzees** that morning, spending just over an hour with them before it became too difficult to follow. While I was back at chimp camp, I enjoyed some great birding, with Rufous-sided Broadbill being a highlight. I also had good views of **Firefooted Rope Squirrel**. Once the rest of the group was back, we had fun trying to photograph Blue-headed Doves and an immature Long-tailed Hawk.

After dinner, our guide, Ble, mentioned that the local resident 'Atherure' was around, so we went to investigate near where the staff throw out their organic waste. There we had not one, but four **Brush-tailed Porcupines**! My French is poor, but it helps knowing the scientific names of many of these animals, as the French name often corresponds somewhat – in this case, Atherurus africanus.

After enjoying them calmly going about their business for 20 minutes or so, we decided to go for our final night walk from chimp camp. Many of the same species as previous nights with the addition of a very shy **Johnston's Genet** and **Nagtglas' Dormouse**. We ended the night with a roosting flock of Western Crested Guineafowl.

The following day, we took a pleasant, mostly downhill walk to the river, where we met Kevin, the boatman and pygmy hippo spotter extraordinaire. Cruising down the river in the morning was much easier than the 7km walk and provided a welcome change of scenery and some excellent birding.

No new species on our final day, but two members of the group decided to go out for one last boat trip for a chance of another view of the Pygmy Hippo. While they didn't see the hippo, they did get good views of **Water Chevrotain** along the bank. Strange that this only showed up on the last night as on my previous trip we'd seen them regularly almost every time we went out on the boat at night.

The following morning, we left well before dawn to make the 7 hour journey back to San Pedro and catch an early afternoon flight to Abidjan for our international departure.

Summary & What We Missed

The sheer diversity of species in any tropical rainforest means there'll always be lots of species we miss on a 7 night trip. The primary target for this trip was Pygmy Hippo, and overall we had 4 sightings, so in that regard, it was a resounding success.

Tai Forest is home to around 140 mammal species, and we picked up just over 30, so the list of what we missed is quite extensive. Unfortunately bushmeat poaching with wire snares and shotguns (to feed a large migrant gold-mining population) is rife, so most animals are VERY shy, and the medium-large ungulates are in short supply as many of them, especially near the boundaries of the forest, have been poached. The Zebra Duiker which was somewhat regular near Chimp Camp, that Jon and Charles were looking for, is suspected to have been killed.

Although one of our duiker sightings MAY have been a Black Duiker (only saw it in the red light and through a thermal, so colours/markings weren't very apparent, but it seemed too big to be a Maxwell's Duiker), we couldn't be sure. So out of 8 potential duikers in the forest, we could only confirm the ID of one. I was surprised we didn't see any Pangolins.

The only primates we missed were Putty-nosed Monkey and Thomas' Galago. Tai has a great diversity of squirrels, but we only picked up a couple of species.

None of the group members were too interested in bats, shrews, or smaller rodents, so we didn't spend too much time looking for them, and consequently only found a few by chance.

All in all, a very successful trip resulting in a great list of 32 mammal species, 97 bird species, and 18 reptiles and amphibia

So below is a list of our sightings, as mentioned this trip was largely focused on Pygmy Hippo and the mammal list for a more general trip could be increased somewhat, the birds are also good and we only recorded incidental sightings and as much of our time looking for hippos was at night the bird list is lacking. Reptiles and amphibians can also be very good here and once again we only recorded a few as we were not looking for these. All in all anyone wanting to visit Tai for either general wildlife or just the Pygmy Hippo will thoroughly enjoy the trip and stand a very good chance seeing some of the world's most endangered and rarely seen mammals in the whole of Africa.

We are planning to return to Tai in April 2025 (3-13 April 2025), we have availability on this trip for anyone interested. So if you are interested please let us know as there limited availability on this unique expedition style group tour. You can contact us at info@royle-safaris.co.uk and we will happily provide information and answer any questions.

Species List

Mammals

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Beecroft's Anomalure	Anomalurus beecrofti
2	Lord Derby's Anomalure	Anomalurus derbianus
3	African Brush-tailed Porcupine	Atherurus africanus
4	Sooty Mangabey	Cercocebus atys
5	Campbell's Monkey	Cercopithecus campbelli
6	Diana Monkey	Cercopithecus diana diana
7	Lowe's Monkey	Cercopithecus lowei
8	Eastern Spot-nosed Monkey	Cercopithecus petaurista petaurista
9	Pygmy Hippo	Choeropsis liberiensis
10	African Civet	Civettictis civetta
11	Western Black & White Colobus	Colobus polykomos
12	Common Cusimanse	Crossarchus obscurus
13	Western Tree Hyrax	Dendrohyrax dorsalis
14	Fire-footed Rope Squirrel	Funisciurus pyrropus
15	Demidoff's Galago	Galagoides demidovii
16	Johnston's Genet	Genetta johnstoni
17	Beatrix's Bat	Glauconycteris beatrix
18	Thicket Rat	Grammomys buntingi/kuru
19	Nagtglas's Dormouse	Graphiurus nagtglassi
20	Punctate Sun Squirrel	Heliosciurus punctatus
21	Water Chevrotain	Hyemoschus aquaticus
22	Hammer-headed Fruit Bat	Hypsignathus monstrosus
23	Forest Elephant (Tracks only)	Loxodonta cyclotis
24	Long-footed Swamp Rat	Malacomys cansdalei/edwardsi
25	African Palm Civet	Nandinia binotata
26	Western Chimpanzee	Pan troglodytes verus
27	Green Bush Squirrel	Paraxerus poensis
28	Bosman's Potto	Perodicticus potto potto
29	Maxwell's Duiker	Philantomba maxwellii

Tai Forest National Park
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San Pedro – Tai Forest
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Tai Forest National Park

30	Red River Hogs	Potamochoerus porcus
31	Western Red Colobus	Procolobus badius badius
32	Olive Colobus	Procolobus verus
33	Forest Giant Squirrel	Protoxerus stangeri

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Note: Some bats identified 100% at roosts or with good views. Others identified with spectrograms in combination with sightings (no spectrograms without visual confirmation are recorded as a sighting), behaviour and habitat – so not 100% but best educated guesses. For more information please email me.

Birds

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	Common Name	Binominal Name	
1	Great Sparrowhawk	Accipiter melanoleucus	
2	African Goshawk	Accipiter tachiro	
3	White-breasted Guineafowl	Agelastes meleagrides	
4	White-tailed Alethe	Alethe diademata	
5	Mouse-brown Sunbird	Anthreptes gabonicus	
6	Sharpe's Apalis	Apalis sharpii	
7	Little Swift	Apus affinis	
8	Honeyguide Greenbul	Baeopogon indicator	
9	Hadada Ibis	Bostrychia hagedash	
10	Olive Ibis	Bostrychia olivacea	
11	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	
12	Yellow-spotted Barbet	Buccanodon duchaillui	
13	Striated Heron	Butorides striata	
14	Piping Hornbill	Bycanistes fistulator	
15	Grey-backed Camaroptera	Camaroptera brachyura	
16	Lesser Striped Swallow	Cecropis abyssinica	
17	Black-throated Coucal	Centropus leucogaster	
18	Senegal Coucal	Centropus senegalensis	
19	Black-casqued Hornbill	Ceratogymna atrata	
20	Yellow-casqued Hornbill	Ceratogymna elata	
21	Forest Scrub Robin	Cercotrichas leucosticta	
22	Blue Yellowbill	Ceuthmochares aereus	
23	Fire-bellied Woodpecker	Chloropicus pyrrhogaster	
24	Diederik Cuckoo	Chrysococcyx caprius	

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Location
Foret du Banco
Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
Enotel Beach - San Pedro
Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
En route to Ecotel Touraco
Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
Enotel Beach - San Pedro
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Foret du Banco

25	African Woolly-necked Stork	Ciconia microscelis
26	Olive-bellied Sunbird	Cinnyris chloropygius
27	Winding Cisticola	Cisticola marginatus
28	Pied Crow	Corvus albus
29	Great Blue Turaco	Corythaeola cristata
30	Malachite Kingfisher	Corythornis cristatus
31	Blue-shouldered Robin Chat	Cossypha cyanocampter
32	Western Plantain-eater	Crinifer piscator
33	Red-chested Cuckoo	Cuculus solitarius
34	African Palm Swift	Cypsiurus parvus
35	White-faced Whistling Duck	Dendrocygna viduata
36	Velvet-mantled Drongo	Dicrurus modestus
37	Ansorge's Greenbul	Eurillas ansorgei
38	Little Grey Greenbul	Eurillas gracilis
39	Yellow-whiskered Greenbul	Eurillas latirostris
40	Blue-throated Roller	Eurystomus gularis
41	White-browed Forest-Flycatcher	Fraseria cinerascens
42	Western Crested Guineafowl	Guttera verreauxi
43	Palm-nut Vulture	Gypohierax angolensis
44	Blue-breasted Kingfisher	Halcyon malimbica
45	Woodland Kingfisher	Halcyon senegalensis
46	Collared Sunbird	Hedydipna collaris
47	Nkulengu Rail	Himantornis haematopus
48	White-throated Blue Swallow	Hirundo nigrita
49	Western Long-tailed Hornbill	Horizocerus albocristatus
50	Green Hylia	Hylia prasina
51	Brown Illadopsis	Illadopsis fulvescens
52	Spotted Greenbul	Ixonotus guttatus
53	Lizard Buzzard	Kaupifalco monogrammicus
54	Fraser's Eagle Owl	Ketupa poensis
55	Sooty Boubou	Laniarius leucorhynchus
56	Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill	Lophoceros camurus
57	West African Pied Hornbill	Lophoceros semifasciatus
58	Grey Longbill	Macrosphenus concolor
59	Red-headed Malimbe	Malimbus rubricollis
60	White-throated Bee-eater	Merops albicollis
61	Black Kite	Milvus migrans
62	Cassin's Flycatcher	Muscicapa cassini
63	Cassin's Spinetail	Neafrapus cassini

En route to Ecotel Touraco			
Foret du Banco			
Enotel Beach - San Pedro			
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Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl			
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64	Western Nicator	Nicator chloris	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
65	Chestnut-breasted Negrofinch	Nigrita bicolor	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
66	Western Oriole	Oriolus brachyrynchus	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
67	Northern Grey-headed Sparrow	Passer griseus	Enotel Beach - San Pedro
68	Leaf-love	Phyllastrephus scandens	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
69	Village Weaver	Ploceus cucullatus	Enotel Beach - San Pedro
70	Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird	Pogoniulus bilineatus	Foret du Banco
71	Speckled Tinkerbird	Pogoniulus scolopaceus	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
72	Red-fronted Parrot	Poicephalus gulielmi	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
73	African Harrier Hawk	Polyboroides typus	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
74	Square-tailed Saw-wing	Psalidoprocne nitens	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
75	Timneh Parrot	Psittacus timneh	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
76	Hartlaub's Duck	Pteronetta hartlaubii	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
77	Common Bulbul	Pycnonotus barbatus	Enotel Beach - San Pedro
78	Sabine's Spinetail	Rhaphidura sabini	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
79	Rufous-sided Broadbill	Smithornis rufolateralis	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
80	Black-and-white Mannikin	Spermestes bicolor	Enotel Beach - San Pedro
81	Bronze Mannikin	Spermestes cucullata	Enotel Beach - San Pedro
82	Laughing Dove	Spilopelia senegalensis	Enotel Beach - San Pedro
83	Slender-billed Greenbul	Stelgidillas gracilirostris	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
84	Crowned Eagle	Stephanoaetus coronatus	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
85	Orange-breasted Forest Robin	Stiphrornis erythrothorax	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
86	Finsch's Flycatcher-Thrush	Stizorhina finschi	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
87	Red-eyed Dove	Streptopelia semitorquata	Enotel Beach - San Pedro
88	Yellow-billed Turaco	Tauraco macrorhynchus	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
89	Black Spinetail	Telacanthura melanopygia	Foret du Banco
90	Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher	Terpsiphone rufiventer	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
91	Swamp Greenbul	Thescelocichla leucopleura	Foret du Banco
92	African Green Pigeon	Treron calvus	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
93	Hairy-breasted Barbet	Tricholaema hirsuta	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
94	Blue-spotted Wood Dove	Turtur afer	Ecotel Touraco - Tai National Park, Cl
95	Blue-headed Wood Dove	Turtur brehmeri	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl
96	Tambourine Dove	Turtur tympanistria	En route to Ecotel Touraco
97	Long-tailed Hawk	Urotriorchis macrourus	Chimp Camp - Tai National Park, Cl

Reptiles

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Rainbow Agama	Agama agama
2	Banded Leaf-toed Gecko	Hemidactylus fasciatus
3	Tropical House Gecko	Hemidactylus mabouia
4	Home's Hingeback Tortoise	Kinixys homeana
5	Cameroon Dwarf Gecko	Lygodactylus conraui
6	West African Slender-snouted Crocodile	Mecistops cataphractus
7	Dwarf Crocodile	Osteolaemus tetraspis
8	Senegal Skink/Mabuya	Trachylepis affinis
9	Nile Monitor	Varanus niloticus

Location	
San Pedro	
San Pedo	
Tai Forest National Park	

Amphibians

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Brown Fishing Frog	Aubria subsigillata
2	Western Long-fingered Frog	Cardioglossa occidentalis
3	Seraphin's Caecilian	Geotrypetes seraphini
4	Tiger Frog	Hoplobatrachus occipitalis
5	Western Tree Frog	Leptopelis occidentalis
6	Limbe Grass Frog	Ptychadena aequiplicata
7	Mascarene Grass Frog	Ptychadena mascareniensis
8	Egyptian Toad	Sclerophrys regularis
9	Togo Toad	Sclerophrys togoensis

Location					
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Diana Monkey















African Palm Civet



Beatrix Bat



White-crested Tiger Heron



Black Bee-eater



White-breasted Guineafowl



West African Pied Hornbill



Woodland Kingfisher





African Dwarf Crocodile



West African Slender-nosed Crocodile