

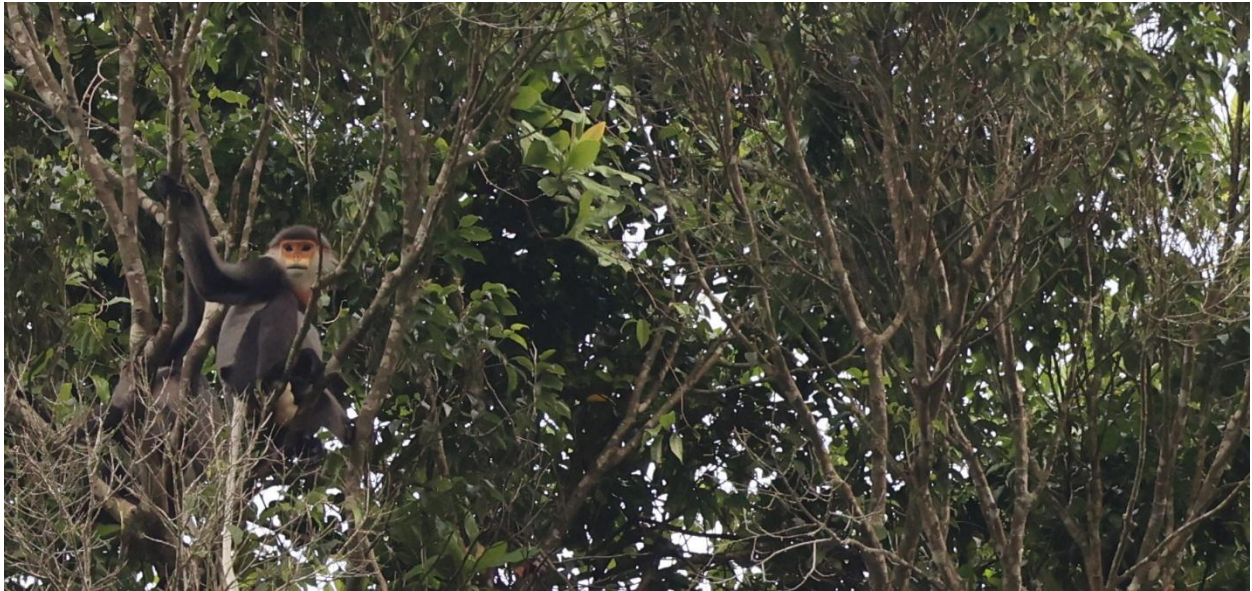


I first visited Vietnam in 1995. I loved the food and the landscapes. I didn't love the wildlife viewing, because I didn't really see anything apart from creatures being offered up at restaurants. Even asking about the possibility of seeing animals didn't seem to get anywhere. However, after seeing recent reports from the country, I figured it was time for a return visit.

The flight via Singapore was uneventful and on time. The lines for immigration in Ho Chi Minh City were long, but I managed to get in the fastest moving line, an unusual occurrence for me. The domestic terminal was similarly packed with people and I was worried about missing my connection, but again the line moved more quickly than I expected. Entertainment at the departure gate was provided by a woman who had missed her flight but kept insisting to the gate staff that she was always on time, I assume following the theory that if you repeat something enough times it becomes the truth, a popular approach in politics these days. Thanks to the efficient folks at HiVOOC, a Vietnamese company focused on primate tourism, a driver was waiting for me in Danang. I remembered Danang from my last visit as a small city. It now has a population of several million. We drove past the Phuc Long Hotel. I was tempted to stop and see if they had hotel stationary for sale, but my more mature instincts prevailed just this once and we continued to the Nguyen Dia Hotel, my home for the next couple of nights. A message from HiVOOC suggested a departure time of 4:30 the next morning, so I showered and tried to get some sleep.

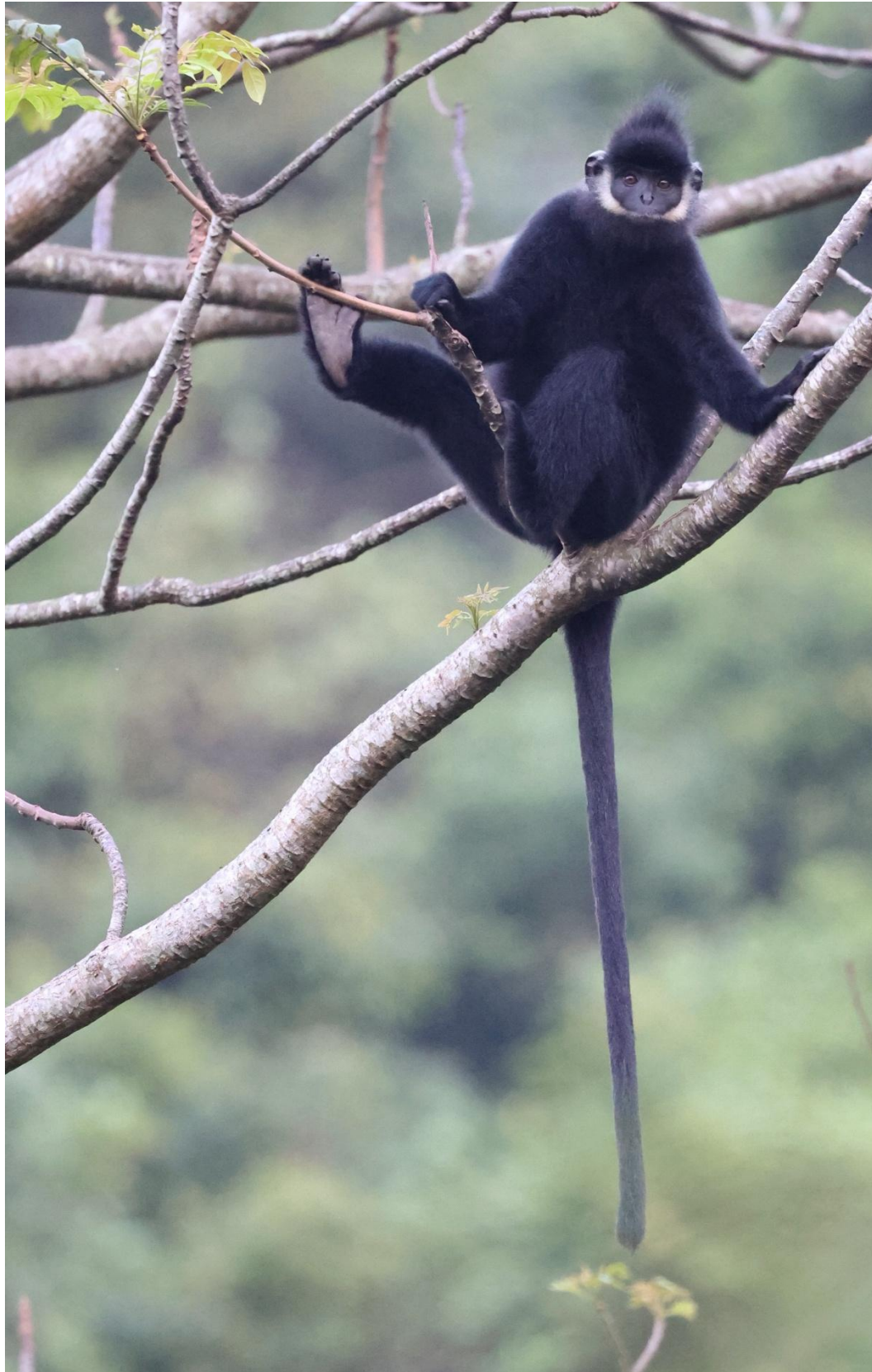
I met Tuan, the founder of HiVOOC the next morning. Tuan is from a local village and studied biology at university, eventually doing a Master's degree in Primatology. After working for various

NGO's he founded HiVOOC, which focusses on primate conservation and tourism. We stopped for pho about 6:30 and then continued to the Grey-shanked Douc Langur (GSDL) site, a community reserve a couple of hours from Danang. Once there, Tuan and a local guide headed off on one motorcycle while I jumped on the back of another and headed to a different spot. We soon got a call to meet Tuan, who had spotted a mother and infant Grey-shanked Douc in a distant tree. We watched them for a while, then moved back down the trail and found a Rhesus Macaque. After some leisurely bird-watching, we received a call from the spotters who had found some GSDL's in another spot on a distant hillside.



By about 11:00 the sun was hot and we headed to a small farm owned by a friend of Tuan's where he had stayed for three years while doing primatology fieldwork in the area. A lovely pool beckoned. There was no one around so I stripped off and had a brief swim, before noticing that the farmer's wife was heading over with lunch, precipitating a hasty exit and gathering up of clothing. After lunch and a nap, we returned back to the spot where we had seen the GSDL's that morning. They had moved into different trees and I was able to get some better, but still distant, photos. Afterwards it was back to the farm for dinner and then the two-and-a-half hour return drive to Danang for the night.

There is now a new highway leading north from Danang. So new, in fact, that Tuan said it hadn't been open when he was last in the area two months previously. We arrived in Thach Tiou village in time for lunch and a nap, then headed out to check a couple of nearby areas. The second area we visited contained a group of five or so Hatinh Langurs, which, interestingly, aren't actually found in Hatinh. A call from one of the langur trackers notified us of a sighting closer to the road, so we headed over there for some better photo opportunities. After a dinner of rice, shrimp and omelette we drove to Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park. The entrance to the park was announced by a garish "Hollywood"-like sign which came as a bit of a shock. Phuong Nan Hotel was comfortable apart from such a large population of cockroaches that it should certainly feature on any "commensal insects of Vietnam" tour.



I was up at 3:00 am and had a shower so uncontrollably hot that I barely avoided second-degree burns. We left at 4:00 am and drove into the park through the darkness. We heard gibbons calling on a distant ridge and headed towards them, stopping a couple of times to walk and listen. A couple of animals appeared beside the road, which turned out to be Yellow-throated Martens, one of my bogey species and a truly welcome sight. We also found a couple of Pallas's Squirrels and a nice range of bird species. A group of Red-shanked Douc Langurs was sighted but the monkeys quickly fled. Near the front gate we did a hike to look for Stump-tailed Macaques but there was some road work going on in the area and we didn't see any primates. We departed soon afterwards for the long drive back to Danang. I ended up having a dinner that contained all the bits of chicken and fish that I don't normally eat, such as cold chicken skin, but this was happily counterbalanced by coming across a place having 2 for 1 ice creams.





I was up early the next morning to visit the Son Tra peninsula. This protected forest is minutes from downtown Danang and contains a large population of habituated Red-Shanked Douc Langurs. The RSDL's were easy to find, as were Rhesus Macaques. Pallas's Squirrel was the only other mammal seen. I had a noon flight to catch, so I reluctantly said goodbye to Tuan and to the Doucs and headed to the airport. There was no line-up this time and an uneventful flight to Ho Chi Minh city. The city traffic was awful and it took me 40 minutes by taxi to get to the Western bus station. I found a sleeper bus leaving for Cat Tien at 5:00 pm which sounded comfortable. Unfortunately, I had forgotten that, at 6'3", I was considerably taller than the passengers for which the sleeper berths had been designed. Passengers have to remove their boots, so I was crammed into a compartment about 5'8" with my boots and camera bag. The bus took at least two hours just to get out of Ho Chi Minh traffic and we didn't arrive at Cat Tien until 11:20 pm. Fortunately, Green Hope Lodge was wonderful, as others have remarked on this website. Despite the late hour, I was asked if I needed dinner and placed in a comfortable cabin overlooking the river.



I was awakened by gibbons calling, then had eggs, baguette, bananas and coffee, all included in the \$11.00 USD room rate. I picked out a mountain bike, stashed my pack at the lodge and rode down to the park office to pay the entrance and ferry fees, 60 000 dong. The bike was charged 100 000 dong, I assume to encourage people to rent bikes in the park instead, but the park bikes have to be returned in the evening and thus are not available for nocturnal expeditions. I went over the park headquarters and found a room for the night, then started riding down the paved trail in the park. A pair of Southern Buff-cheeked Gibbons rapidly disappeared into the vegetation, while a family group of Black-shanked Douc Langurs were a bit more obliging. I saw several Pallas's Squirrels and a large snake that disappeared before I could get a photo, possibly a *Ptyas*.



I hiked a trail to an observation tower and had a brief look at a Crab-eating Mongoose that crossed the trail in front of me. The tower was in poor shape and surrounded by garbage, which was a pity as

it overlooked a small forest pond and would have made a nice observation spot. I headed back to park headquarters, coming across a family group of Northern Pig-tailed Macaques along the way. After a pit stop to remove leeches, I had lunch at the Golden Bamboo restaurant and a brief break. The afternoon walk produced several groups of BSDL's and an unidentifiable squirrel.

A night walk was more productive. I cycled to the Heaven Rapid trailhead and then walked the trail, finding a Common Palm Civet and a pair of Malayan Porcupines. A walk the other way past the park HQ revealed some Sambar Deer.



I cycled back to Heaven Rapid and then to the Crocodile Lake trailhead early the next morning, seeing two Lesser Mousedeer, BSDL's, Northern Pig-tailed Macaque and a Pallas's Squirrel. I returned for a leisurely breakfast and booked a bird hide for the afternoon. I chatted with two young Vietnamese guides I had met the previous day who were taking a couple of clients to the bird hide that afternoon also. The clients, Emily and Sally from Australia, showed up about 2:00 pm and we headed to hides 3 and 4. On the way to the first hide we had a brief view of a Cambodian Striped Squirrel, while at the hide itself we found an Indochinese Ground Squirrel and a Northern Treeshrew (Tupai). Germain's Peacock Pheasant was the avian highlight of the birds and, I'm told, the main reason why birders visit the hide. The second hide contained a Greater Woolly Horseshoe Bat which obligingly posed for photos. A Northern Slender-tailed Treeshrew appeared and spent several minutes foraging in front of the hide. It started to drizzle, putting a damper on further wildlife observations, and we went back to the Golden Bamboo for dinner. After dinner it was still wet but we went out for a hike regardless. We found a Long-tailed Macaque in a tree and a terrestrial grey rat which was probably a Black Rat, although I tried hard to convince myself it was something more

exciting. The highlights of the night were actually reptilian – a Giant Asian Pond Turtle and a Reticulated Python. Numerous fruit bats were flying around but I was unable to get good photos of them.







Given that it had taken over six hours to get to Cat Tien from Ho Chi Minh city, I figured I should catch the earliest possible bus in the morning, which departed at 5:00 am. I therefore took a late boat over to the village and went back to Green Hope Lodge and another comfortable night. The bus actually arrived at 4:52 am the next morning and the driver drove as if he were trialing for Formula One contention, passing vehicles that were themselves passing other vehicles, all on a narrow two-lane road. At one point he started driving in the narrow motorcycle lane. If there had been a sidewalk I'm guessing he would have tried to drive on that if it appeared to offer the possibility of passing another vehicle. We made it back to the Ho Chi Minh bus station in less than four hours and I was at the airport with enough time for a leisurely pizza before heading on to Singapore, Jakarta and then to Sulawesi.

The most gratifying thing about this trip was seeing a conservation ethos growing amongst at least some people in Vietnam. My thanks to Tuan and the other folks at HiVOOC for their help with guiding and logistics and to Green Hope Lodge for their wonderful hospitality. I am already making plans for a return visit to seek out some of the species in the north of the country that I didn't have time to look for on this visit.

Ian Thompson

Victoria, BC

Mammal species seen:

1. Northern Treeshrew – *Tupaia belangeri*
2. Northern Slender-tailed Treeshrew – *Dendrogale murina*
3. Hatinh Langur – *Trachypithecus hatinhensis*
4. Grey-shanked Douc Langur – *Pygathrix cinerea*
5. Red-shanked Douc Langur – *Pygathrix nemaeus*
6. Black-shanked Douc Langur – *Pygathrix nigripes*
7. Rhesus Macaque – *Macaca mulatta*
8. Long-tailed Macaque – *Macaca fascicularis*
9. Northern Pig-tailed Macaque – *Macaca leonina*
10. Southern Buff-cheeked Gibbon – *Nomascus gabriellae*
11. Great Woolly Horseshoe Bat – *Rhinolophus lunatus*
12. Yellow-throated Marten – *Martes flavigula*
13. Crab-eating Mongoose – *Urva urva*
14. Common Palm Civet – *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*
15. Lesser Mousedeer – *Tragulus kanchil*
16. Sambar Deer – *Cervus unicolor*
17. Indochinese Ground Squirrel – *Menetes berdmorei*
18. Pallas's Squirrel – *Callosciurus erythraeus*
19. Cambodian Striped Squirrel – *Tamiops rodolphii*
20. Black Rat – *Rattus rattus*
21. Malayan Porcupine – *Hystrix brachyura*