

In August 2023 I visited Vietnam and Cambodia for the first time. My goal was to experience the lush jungles and see as much wildlife as possible. Most of my travels thus far have consisted of either fishing trips or wildlife watching. This time however I was going to go with my girlfriend, who had never visited Asia, nor had ever set foot in a jungle. Though she liked the idea, she is not a big fan of spiders and the like and was afraid that we would encounter a lot of them in the jungle. So to get her on board we also visited other places on this trip, such as the Angkor Wat and Koh Thmei in Cambodia. As this is a mammalwatching site, I will only talk about the two parts of the trips that were wildlife oriented: 5 days in Cat Tien national park and 5 days in the Cardamom Mountains around Khum Chi Phat.

### **Cat Tien national park**

We took the bus from Ho Chi Minh City to Cat Tien. It is about a 4-5 hour bus ride that is fairly relaxed. During our 5 day stay, we stayed at Green Lodge Bamboo resort. A nice resort with these traditional pole houses above the Dong Nai river. The resort was comfortable, but had the disadvantage of being on the wrong side of the river to visit the national park. We thus needed to take the ferry into the park and pay the entrance fee every day. In hindsight I really wished we would have stayed in the more basic park accommodations on the right side of the river as this would have also allowed us to look for mammals at night. Once inside the park there are several activities you can book, including a gibbon tour, bird-watching activities and a night safari in a safari truck. You can also hire simple bicycles in the park to explore the park yourself or simply walk in and explore it by foot. The fact that you can just walk into the national park without being under the supervision of a guide is really cool in my opinion as you can truly "explore" the jungle on your own. To make sure we would not miss out on anything we also opted to do one gibbon tour and two night safaris.

Cat Tien National park has suffered heavily under poaching which is still ongoing to this day. The park's logo is the Javan rhinoceros, which went extinct in the park in 2010. There is also information about tigers, that also can no longer be found in the park. According to the park rangers, the park now only has two wild sun bears and only one wild Asiatic black bear remaining. Most animals in the park are extremely shy and difficult to see. Even **Gaur** will run from you when you happen to bike too close in their direction. The park still has around **25 Asian Elephants** from which we found fresh dung and tracks, yet the animals are seldom seen.

### **The gibbon tour**

The gibbon tour is well set-up, you leave really early with a guide to head into the park and look for the gibbons. In our case, we headed for about 30 minutes into the jungle before we took a random turn into the jungle and sat on our butts in the soil looking up into the tree canopies for gibbons. We quickly spotted some **Northern pigtailed macaques**, and after about 45 minutes we managed to catch a glimpse of the **Yellow-cheeked gibbon**. Our guide seemed to be content with showing us the gibbons and then sort of abruptly ended the tour. On our way back, I spotted a flying squirrel that our guide identified as a **Particolored flying squirrel**.



**Female Yellow-cheeked gibbon in Cat Tien NP.**

### **Night safaris**

The night safari seems to be a popular event in the park, as both nights that we went on safari were completely sold out. On our first night safari we had a very knowledgeable and capable guide and driver, and we saw a lot of species on this safari, including **Sambar**, **Large Indian civet**, **Small Indian civet**, **Common palm civet** and **Burmese hares**. The second night safari was completely different, the guide did not seem to know how his flashlight worked, was in a phone call when we already entered the safari zone and often missed species with the flashlight. If he would spot something, he would forget communicating this with his driver, so we would just drive by. On the second safari we did manage to see a couple of **Civets species**, **Sambar** and a group of wild **Gaur**.



**Wild Gaur that we encountered while cycling through Cat Tien NP.**

### **Exploring the park**

During our stay, we basically explored the park everyday by foot or by bike. Basically you can go two ways from the main building of the park. Heading left, towards the bear rescue center is a good idea to do late afternoon. Further down the road from the bear rescue center there are some open fields, where just before 17 (when the park closes) you can see a lot of the bigger game that the park has to offer, including **Gaur, Northern red muntjac** and **Sambar**. We also saw both **Longtailed** and **Rhesus macaques** on this road. If you head right from the main building, you can cycle for quite a while over the road, with several places where you can stop and walk around on small trails. You can also stop on this route and take the longer walk to crocodile lake. For the biggest part of the day we were out on these routes looking for wildlife, but sadly as our stay was outside of the park, we could not visit these routes at night, when I think that they would have great potential for mammalwatching. During our explorations on this side of the park, we saw several groups of **Black shanked duoc, Yellow-cheek gibbon, Northern pigtailed macaque, a Northern threeshrew, Longtailed macaques, two Yellow-throated martens , Pallas squirrels, Finlaysons squirrels, Indochinese ground squirrels and Cambodian striped squirrels.**





**Sambar are common in the park and can easily be spotted**

**The Cardamom mountains (Khum Chi Phat and the Wildlife release station)**

In total we stayed for 5 days around the village of Khum Chi Phat in the Cardamom mountains of Cambodia. Getting there is a bit tricky, you need to take a bus from Phnom Penh, and then ask the bus driver to drop you off at a random bridge, from where you take a private boat upriver for about 2 hours to the ecovillage of Khum Chi Phat. You can also go by motorbike, from the same bridge. The village of Khum Chi Phat is an ecotourism destination in Cambodia, where poachers are now working as rangers and guides. Wildlife Alliance, an NGO, also has a wildlife release station near the village that we visited for 3 days and 2 nights. While planning this trip, I contacted Wildlife Alliance to see if it was possible to see some of the wild Asian Elephants that are known to live around the village, and originally a trip was arranged to look for these elephants. They said that this was possible, but difficult. In the end this trip was cancelled as a WFF scientist got killed by the elephants about one month before our departure to Khum Chi Phat.



Juvenile longtailed macaque.

### **The wildlife release station**

From Khum Chi Phat, the wildlife release station is about 40 minutes on the back of a scooter on a small jungle path. No roads go to the release station, so the only way in or out is on the back of a scooter. The release station itself is beautifully located in the jungle and has a few simple cottages for tourists to stay. On the grounds of the release station, one can see longtailed macaques, two species of hornbills and green peafowl. While staying at the research station you can go and look at the animals that are currently kept at the station. Many of the species that are kept at this place have been rescued from poaching and the wildlife release station tries to successfully reintroduce the animals back into the wild. During our stay, they had a lot of **Pangolins**, two **Sunbears**, a **Northern pigtailed macaque**, a **Leopard cat**, and a young **Sambar**. There are also some animals around that have been reintroduced, but keep lingering around, like the hornbills and some longtailed macaques. All animals seem to be well taken care of, especially the bears who are being kept in a huge enclosure.





Sun bear in the release station ready to be reintroduced.

### Hikes around the release station

When staying at the release station, they offer to do a day walk through the jungle around the release station, and an evening walk, to go and look around the enclosures. I was really looking forward to the jungle trips, but they were a bit of a disappointment. In the release station there is basically only one guide who speaks English, and a couple of weeks before our arrival, he was attacked by a sun bear while guiding two young Brits through the jungle. Though in the end the bear did not get to him or his guests, they had to run off the path into the jungle and were covered by ants and spiders by the time they managed to get rid of the bear. The incident left a big impression on the guide, and while he was guiding us to the jungle he was making a lot of noise with his machete by hitting on trees and a metal bowl. The "day walks" would only last for about 3 hours and we did not see any animals, nor was any attempt made to see the animals we could hear. At one point we were really close to a family of **pileated gibbons** and we could see the tree that they were in, but the guide did not want us to leave the trail, as it would be too dangerous. Though I understand that safety should come first, I think that the goal of trekking through these leech infested jungles is to see some of its inhabitants. If you are this afraid that something might go wrong that you basically make sure that every animal in a 50m radius knows that you are there by making a lot of noise, and you do not want to go off trail even when gibbons are nearby, the trekking itself becomes a disappointing experience.



Hornbills are a common sight around the release station.

On the evening hikes you walk around camp for about an hour, we used flashlights to try and spot some wildlife. One evening we saw a reintroduced **Sunda Pangolin** walking on the path in front of us. Something that rarely occurs. We also spotted a **Bengal slow loris** though he was pretty high up in the trees, so identification of the exact species was difficult. Late at night, you could also spot some **Sambar** around camp. **Malayan porcupines** are also common visitors of the camp site, but sadly never showed themselves while we were at the release station. According to some of the rangers, a **Clouded leopard** lives near the release station and preys upon the reintroduced animals around the camp but we did not see it, nor did we find any prints or other indications that this might be true.

While staying at the release station, we would often go and explore ourselves around camp. During our explorations, we spotted a **Black giant squirrel**, **Finlayson's squirrels** and **Indochinese ground squirrels**, as well as some hanging **Great wooly Horseshoe bats**?

#### **A bird trip for mammal watching.**

After visiting the Wildlife release station, we stayed in Khum Chi Phat for one more day to do an early morning bird watching trip by boat on a river. I imagined myself going on a small comfortable boat up a river with somebody rowing us around while we could try and spot some birds and mammals. I could not have been more wrong! Instead we had to go in a tiny canoe that was propelled by a really noisy engine. I could not imagine seeing anything on this trip if we would create this much noise, but actually we saw a lot of species flying or fleeing from the noise of our boat. This included the Great slaty woodpecker, **Rhesus macaques** and two family groups of **Germain's langurs**. At some point we stopped near a ranger station next to the river to go and have lunch. The sun just came up and we could hear some **Pileated gibbons** singing in the distance. My girlfriend and I started talking about



the gibbons, and the guide who did not speak English made it clear to us that we could walk to the gibbons if we wanted. We quickly left our lunches behind and headed into the jungle. This was completely off-trail just following the vocalizations of the gibbons. It had its challenges but the guide used a machete to clear the way. At some point we encountered an aggressive Malayan pit viper, that the guide lifted with a stick and then threw a couple of meters away to clear a trail for us. After about 30 minutes, we saw two **Pileated gibbons** fleeing in the tree right above us. We followed them for a while, until we could see the adult pair of Gibbons pretty well through the binoculars at about an 80m distance. The gibbons however saw us as well, and when we tried to get even closer, fled deep into the jungle. I would have to say that this bird watching tour was the highlight of our stay in **Cambodia**. The fact that this guide, who did not speak English, was willing to take us completely off-trail to go and look for gibbons was amazing. I expected to have similar experiences at the wildlife release station, and that there we would see lots of wildlife as we were located in the middle of the jungle. But I guess the guides overprioritized safety to quality and now seeing any wildlife had basically become impossible. One could hope that the guides find their courage back, as I do think that this area has a lot of potential for wildlife watching in general. The fact that the local ecosystem can still support Asian elephants, as well as Banteng, that were being photographed on camera traps, says a lot about the quality of the environment.



The best photo we got of a fleeing Germain's langur.

Species name	Cat tien NP	Cardamom mountains
Northern three shrew	x	



<b>Longtailed macaques</b>	x	x
<b>Northern pigtailed macaques</b>	x	x
<b>Rhesus macaque</b>	x	
<b>Black shanked duoc</b>	x	
<b>Germain's langur</b>		x
<b>Yellow-cheeked gibbon</b>	x	
<b>Pileated gibbon</b>		x
<b>Burmese hare</b>	x	
<b>Pallas squirrel</b>	x	
<b>Finlaysons squirrel</b>	x	x
<b>Black giant squirrel</b>		x
<b>Indochinese ground squirrel</b>	x	x
<b>Cambodian striped squirrel</b>	x	
<b>Common palm civet</b>	x	
<b>Large Indian civet</b>	x	
<b>Small Indian civet</b>	x	
<b>Yellow-throated marten</b>	x	
<b>Northern red muntjac</b>	x	
<b>Sambar</b>	x	x
<b>Gaur</b>	x	
<b>Bengal slow loris</b>		x
<b>Sunda pangolin (reintroduced)</b>		x
<b>Great woolly horseshoe bat</b>		x