

Vietnam



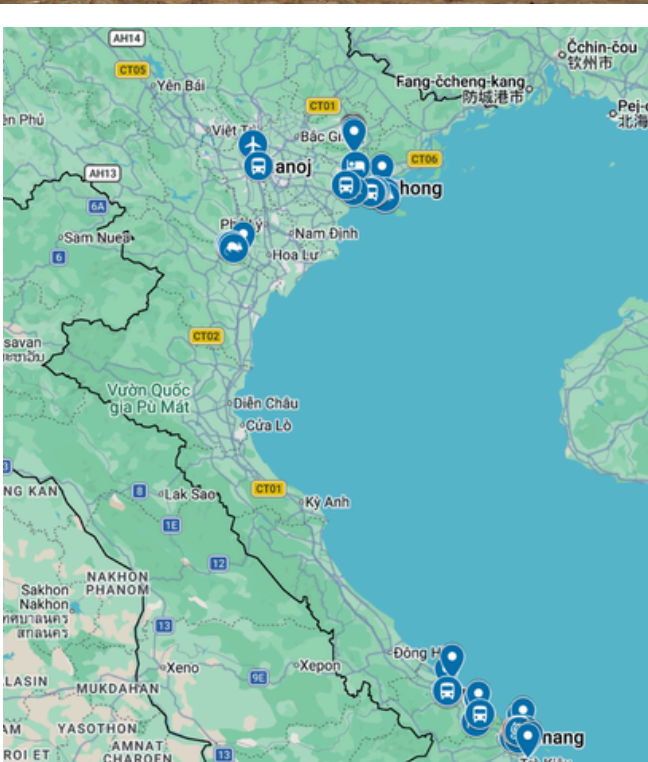
This year, because of work commitments, I honestly did not expect to manage any major trip at all. Originally, I was supposed to go on a short journey to Western Sahara with my partner. Our main goal was to see fennec foxes and sand cats (and of course some reptiles), and at the end I planned to spend a few extra days in Spain searching for Iberian lynx (again)

However, work obligations struck my travel companion instead, and suddenly I had to decide what to do with my already planned vacation. Western Sahara is not exactly a destination I wanted to tackle without a car (I am a terrible driver and I never rent a car when traveling alone), so somewhat unexpectedly, I ended up choosing **Vietnam**. I had never been to Vietnam before because I always considered it less than ideal for wildlife watching. Even though mammalwatching reports often looked impressive, none of my friends who had visited Vietnam had been particularly successful there. But right around the time of my vacation, Etihad Airways was offering flights at unbelievably low prices – because of the situation in the Middle East. So I decided to give it a chance.



So, I did not really expect much from the trip – more of a tourist journey focused on sightseeing than serious wildlife watching. In the end, though, I was quite pleasantly surprised. While the number of mammal sightings was not particularly high, the number of photos turned out to be even lower, because the animals in Vietnam are incredibly fast and gave me absolutely no chance to photograph them. That said, I was also traveling extremely light, with only carry-on luggage, so I did not bring any proper photography equipment – and the results reflected that as well.

Another great surprise was how incredibly easy it was to travel using local buses. Compared to my experiences in Thailand, where it was often really difficult to figure out where buses were leaving from and where exactly they were going, everything here felt remarkably straightforward. I honestly do not think there was a single time when I ended up stuck waiting somewhere.



For my first stop, I chose **Cát Bà Island**. A very special Eublepharid gecko species lives there, and I absolutely wanted to see it. I also considered trying to see the Cat Ba langur (*Trachypithecus poliocephalus*), but later discovered that all the organized boat tours targeting them were actually in conflict with conservation rules and essentially illegal. I was quite surprised that travel agencies openly offered these trips without hesitation – and charged fairly high prices for them as well. Still, I already know I would love to return there one day, so hopefully next time I will manage to arrange it in a more ethical way.

Cát Bà Island

Transportation from Hanoi was arranged directly by my accommodation with Daiichi Tours – all the way from the city center straight to the hostel in the center of the island, just a few kilometers from the national park. That evening, I simply headed along the road crossing the island to search for geckos. Along the way, I spotted a juvenile **Rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)**, although I am really not sure whether it was a wild animal or somebody's pet. It was sitting alone in the garden, but it was not tied up or restrained in any way. Apart from that, I only heard macaques, but never actually saw them.

After nightfall, I finally managed to see the gecko I had been dreaming about, Cat Ba leopard gecko (*Goniurosaurus catbaensis*), as well as two Many-banded krait (*Bungarus multicinctus*). As for birds, I only saw Greater coucal (*Centropus sinensis*) and Collared scops owl (*Otus lettia*).

The following morning, I headed to the national park right after sunrise. First, I stopped at the viewpoint, but it was incredibly overcrowded. After that, my plan was to hike all the way to Viet Hai Village and return in the evening.



Cát Bà National Park



South Vietnamese bug-eyed frog
(*Theloderma vietnamense*)



Cát Bà National Park



Rhinolophoidea



Rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)



Cat Ba leopard gecko (*Goniurosaurus catbaensis*)



Banded krait (*Bungarus fasciatus*)



Collared scops owl (*Otus lettia*)



Pallas's squirrel (*Callosciurus erythraeus*)

What started as a pleasant walk along a concrete road gradually turned from a sidewalk into stairs, then a narrow trail, and eventually into a rather insane rocky path that I definitely did not want to hike back in the dark without any phone signal. In the end, I never made it all the way to Viet Hai Village and turned around about two kilometers before reaching the village. On top of that, I did not see very much along the route – a few **Pallas's squirrel (*Callosciurus erythraeus*)**, several brief movements high in the canopy that I could not identify, one Vietnam bug-eyed frog (*Theloderma vietnamensis*), and an Indochinese rat snake (*Ptyas korros*) disappearing into the bushes. In the distance, I spotted a pair of huge glowing eyes and initially thought it might be a slow loris, but in the end it turned out to be just a rat, **Rat (*Rattus sp.*)**. Honestly, I cannot really recommend this trail – it felt more like suffering than enjoyment. On the way back, however, I added another krait species to the list: Banded krait (*Bungarus fasciatus*).

Originally, I had planned to stay on Cát Bà Island for one more day, but then I discovered the interesting **Yên Tử Nature Reserve**. The area is surrounded by temples and historical sites, but more importantly, it also seemed quite promising in terms of wildlife – potentially species such as Black-breasted leaf turtle (*Geoemyda spengleri*) and even a small population of Chinese crocodile lizard (*Shinisaurus crocodilurus*).

Yên Tử Mountain

So I decided to head to the harbor early in the morning and at least try for a short visit. I had to take a taxi to the port, but after that the buses connected almost perfectly. For the final section from Ông Bí to Yên Tử, I chose to use Grab because I wanted to reach the turtle habitat as early as possible. According to the locals, though, there is also a regular bus connection. When I arrived, I was horrified by the sheer number of people, but as expected, almost everyone took the cable car up the mountain, while the trail itself was practically empty. A slightly confusing moment came when I reached the ticket office and tried to buy an entrance ticket. They only seemed to sell tickets for the cable car, and apparently were not prepared for someone wanting to hike up to the ridge and return via the other side. In the end, the ticket cost far less than I expected, and I still do not know whether it was a mistake or if they simply do not charge hikers entering the temple complex on foot.

Unfortunately, I have to admit that even though the weather seemed ideal, I did not see very much there. To be fair, though, both of my target species were always more of a dream than a realistic possibility. Still, the area was absolutely beautiful. The reserve is said to host up to **45 mammal species**, including Raccoon dog (*Nyctereutes procyonoides*) and the globally threatened Owston's civet (*Hemigalus owstoni*).



Rat (*Rattus sp.*)



Yên Tử Nature Reserve



Yên Tử Mountain



Yên Tử Mountain



Long-tailed grass lizard (*Takydromus sexlineatus*)

Da Nang



Guentherpeter's butterfly lizard
(*Leiolepis guentherpetersi*)

The next morning, I had a flight to **Da Nang** in central Vietnam. I had a few herpetological targets there and also wanted to visit **Bạch Mã National Park**. Unfortunately, my arrival happened to fall on a Sunday, and the entire **Sơn Trà Peninsula** was absolutely packed with people. At first, I wanted to explore the western side of the peninsula, but that section was closed to the public, apparently because of landslides. So instead, I took a ride all the way to the summit. Even though the timing was not too bad – around 4 p.m. – I still failed to see any langurs, spotting only a single **Rhesus macaque** (*Macaca mulatta*) disappearing into the tree canopy. I waited until dark and combined the visit with a night walk along Monkey Pass. Apart from White-lipped pit viper (*Trimeresurus albolabris*), basically, I didn't see a thing. The traffic was absolutely insane even in the evening.



White-lipped pit viper (*Trimeresurus albolabris*)

Only near the very end of the main road, close to the end of the Sơn Trà trail, two **Yellow-throated marten** (*Martes flavigula*) suddenly burst out from the grounds of a nearby property. I have no idea whether it was courtship behavior or a fight, but they vanished just as quickly as they had appeared.

The following day, I spent my time waiting to see whether my target species, Spotted butterfly lizard (*Leiolepis guttata*), would emerge from its burrows on a public beach near Hoi An. Apparently, they decided that 29°C was not quite the right temperature, so they stayed underground all day.

The next day, the weather was definitely not suitable for Spotted butterfly lizard, so I decided to give the douc langurs on Sơn Trà Peninsula another chance. This time, the trip turned out to be much more successful. First, near **Lady Buddha**, I encountered an entire group of **Rhesus macaque** (*Macaca mulatta*). Then, a short distance beyond the gate of the national park, I finally spotted a small group of **Red-shanked douc** (*Pygathrix nemaeus*). I was already starting to worry that I would not see them at all.



Rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)



Red-shanked douc (*Pygathrix nemaeus*)

Bách Mã



A collection of taxidermy specimens - museum
Bách Mã National Park - almost alive 😊



Jade green snake (*Gonyosoma janseni*)

That evening, I moved on to **Huế**, where I planned to spend the next morning searching for another species of butterfly lizard, Reeves's butterfly lizard (*Leiolepis reevesii*), and also explore the famous Imperial City of Huế complex.

In the afternoon, I moved on to **Bách Mã National Park**. I already knew that a landslide had occurred there, which meant that all accommodation facilities were out of operation and it was also impossible to drive all the way to the summit area. The landslide is located at kilometer 12 ([16.2077022N, 107.8630631E](https://www.google.com/maps/place/16.2077022N,+107.8630631E)). Interestingly, nobody mentioned this situation at the entrance gate, so the person who had given me the information was simply dropped off by car in front of the landslide, and according to him, the climb afterward was absolutely terrible. Since I knew about it in advance, I tried to arrange everything ahead of time, and it turned out that even though the accommodation was officially closed – mainly because there was no electricity – it was still possible to organize both lodging (300,000 Đ/night), dinner (200,000 Đ) and breakfast if needed. It was even possible to arrange motorbike transport directly to the destination for 300,000 Đ round trip. A car transfer from the gate to the landslide would have cost 900,000 Đ round trip, although it was also possible to reach the landslide independently by private car or taxi. Rental automatic scooters, however, were apparently not suitable because the slope of the road was too steep.

Given all the warnings about the “unbelievably horrible hill,” I also paid for the motorbike ride, but honestly, it was not nearly as bad as I expected (especially compared to the trails in Yên Tử Nature Reserve and Cát Bà Island). It would definitely have been manageable on foot. I decided to order dinner there. I expected maybe an omelet or something similarly simple, but instead I received something like a five-course meal for five people. Everything was absolutely fantastic – until I stepped outside afterward, hoping to go on an evening wildlife walk. Outside, the **fog was so dense that I could barely see my own toes**, and my headlamp was completely useless against it. In the end, I chose only a **short trail around the waterfalls**, where visibility was at least slightly better in the lower sections near the river. Still, conditions were far from ideal for finding wildlife. The honorable exception was Jade green snake (*Gonyosoma janseni*).

I decided to set an alarm and hope that the fog might disappear by dawn, but that never happened – instead, it started raining (after all, this is considered the rainiest place in Vietnam). The fog barely lifted at all until around 8 a.m., and even then only in certain places. I headed onto the trail from the summit area, but at times the visibility was practically zero. Several times I could hear monkeys somewhere directly above me in the trees, yet I could see nothing except vague shadows moving in the mist. So in the end, I managed to see only one more Jade green snake (*Gonyosoma janseni*) than the friend who had visited the site a few weeks before me. And the beautiful local agamid, Natalie's pricklenape agama (*Acanthosaura nataliae*), remained unseen for us.

Bạch Mã



Bạch Mã trail (2)

It was unclear whether the fog would lift at all that day, so I decided to walk back down on foot, hoping I might spot something along the way. But apart from a few exhausted hikers emerging from the mist, not much else appeared.

On the way down, I at least managed to see a few birds – in fact, probably more birds than during the entire rest of my time in Vietnam. Among them were Rufous-throated partridge (*Arborophila rufogularis*), a drongo (*Dicrurus sp.*), Slaty-backed fork-tail (*Enicurus schistaceus*), a wren-babbler (*Napothera sp.*), a tailorbird (*Orthotomus sp.*), erpornis (*Erpornis sp.*), and Crimson sunbird (*Aethopyga siparaja*). In addition, several local runners encountered Pale-necked kukri snake (*Liopeltis pallidonuchalis*). I then returned to Huế, where an overnight sleeper bus to Ninh Binh was waiting for me.

Note: Everything – from transportation and accommodation to meals – could be arranged via WhatsApp +84 83 635 6669.



Reeves's butterfly lizard (*Leiolepis reevesii*)



Bạch Mã National Park



Bạch Mã National Park Visitor Centre

Cúc Phương



Pallas's squirrel (*Callosciurus erythraeus*)

My journey was slowly approaching its final major stop — **Cúc Phương National Park**. Based on reports, the place looked extremely promising, so I decided to head there. Once again, it was possible to stay directly inside Cúc Phương National Park (for 600,000 Đ/night), but I seriously underestimated the fact that it was Friday afternoon. The number of people in the park was absolutely unbelievable — the traffic felt more like a highway, and there were also huge numbers of people camping in the park center. Because of all the activity, I did not see very much on my way to the cabin, only one **Pallas's squirrel (*Callosciurus erythraeus*)**. After midnight, once things had calmed down a bit and most people had gone to sleep, I tried a short loop trail, but apart from a few agamas (*Acanthosaura sp.*), I did not encounter very much.



Large Indian civet (*Viverra zibetha*)

The following night, I decided to dedicate to walking back toward the entrance gate of the national park (there was no phone signal anyway, so calling a Grab was not an option). In addition, by early evening most of the visitors had disappeared, and the park suddenly felt completely empty, so it seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Before long, I came across a **Northern slow loris (*Nycticebus intermedius*)** and a **Northern hog badger (*Arctonyx collaris*)** not far from the restaurant in the center of the park. The badger paid absolutely no attention to me and was digging through the leaf litter less than a meter away from where I stood. A short distance from the reservoir, I encountered two more **Northern slow loris (*Nycticebus intermedius*)**. Later on, I also came across a **Large Indian civet (*Viverra zibetha*)** and a **Masked palm civet (*Paguma larvata*)** together with yet another slow loris at the same moment. Apart from that, something was constantly rustling in the leaf litter, but I never managed to find the source of the sound.



Masked palm civet (*Paguma larvata*)



Northern hog badger (*Arctonyx collaris*)

Cúc Phương

It also turned out to be quite a successful trip in terms of reptile encounters. I came across countless agamids of the genus Pricklenape agama (*Acanthosaura sp.*) and even the species I had been hoping for most, Vietnam False Bloodsucker (*Pseudocalotes brevipes*).

Originally, I had also planned to try to see the Delacour's langur (*Trachypithecus delacouri*) the following morning, but I was unable to find the exact location, so instead I decided to spend a relaxed day exploring Hanoi. I encountered several **Pallas's squirrel** (*Callosciurus erythraeus*) in the park around Khue Van Pavilion.

The number of species I managed to see could definitely have been better, but in the end I was very pleasantly surprised. I really enjoyed Vietnam, and I am certain I will return someday and do it all over again.



Northern slow loris (*Nycticebus intermedius*)



Vietnam False Bloodsucker
(*Pseudocalotes brevipes*)



Cúc Phương National Park



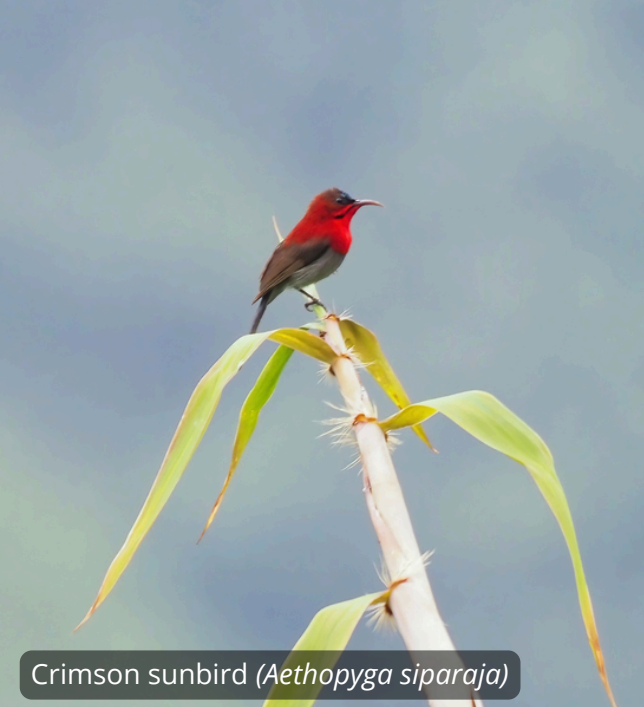
Pricklenape agama (*Acanthosaura sp.*)



Irrawaddy forest lizard (*Calotes irawadi*)

List of Mammals:


1. Rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)
2. Pallas's squirrel (*Callosciurus erythraeus*)
3. Red-shanked douc (*Pygathrix nemaeus*)
4. Northern slow loris (*Xanthonycticebus intermedius*)
5. Large Indian civet (*Viverra zibetha*)
6. Masked palm civet (*Paguma larvata*)
7. Rat (*Rattus sp.*)
8. Bat (*Rhinolophoidea*)
9. Northern hog badger (*Arctonyx collaris*)




Crimson sunbird (*Aethopyga siparaja*)

List of Birds:

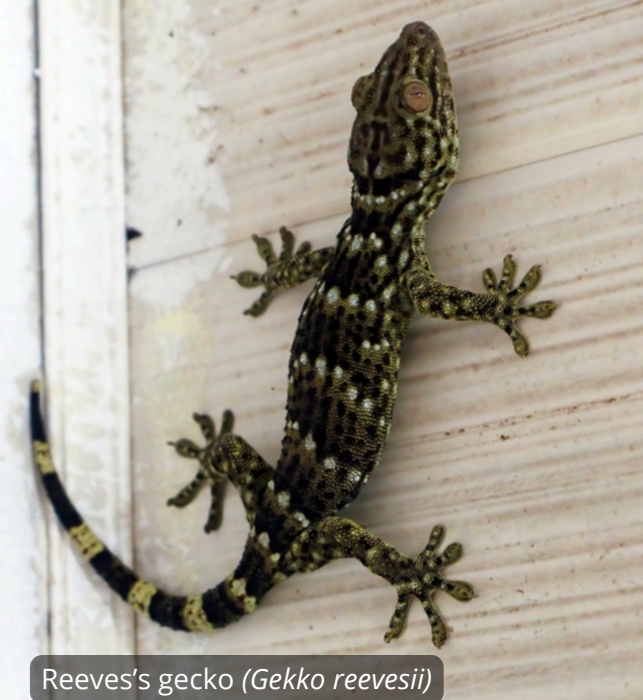
1. Black kite (*Milvus migrans*)
2. Rufous-throated partridge (*Arborophila rufogularis*)
3. Greater coucal (*Centropus sinensis*)
4. Large-billed crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos*)
5. Slaty-backed forktail (*Enicurus schistaceus*)
6. Eurasian tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*)
7. Streak-throated bulbul (*Pycnonotus finlaysoni*)
8. Sooty-headed bulbul (*Pycnonotus aurigaster*)
9. Wren-babbler (*Napothera sp.*)
10. Tailorbird (*Orthotomus sp.*)
11. Whistling thrush (*Myophonus sp.*)
12. Erpornis (*Erpornis sp.*)
13. Oriental honey-buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*)
14. Collared scops owl (*Otus lettia*)
15. Common myna (*Acridotheres tristis*)
16. Crimson sunbird (*Aethopyga siparaja*)
17. White-rumped shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*)
18. Greater racket-tailed drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*)
19. Red-bearded bee-eater (*Psilopogon lagrandieri*)
20. Stonechat (*Saxicola sp.*)
21. White-browed shrike-babbler (*Pterorhinus perspicillatus*)
22. Spotted dove (*Spilopelia chinensis*)
23. Olive-backed sunbird (*Cinnyris jugularis*)



Four-clawed gecko
(*Cyrtodactylus pseudoquadrivirgatus*)



Northern slow loris (*Nycticebus intermedius*)



Reeves's gecko (*Gekko reevesii*)



Common sun skink (*Eutropis macularia*)



Pricklenape agama (*Acanthosaura sp.*)

List of Reptiles:

1. Irrawaddy forest lizard (*Calotes irawadi*)
2. Long-tailed sun skink (*Eutropis longicaudata*)
3. Reeves's butterfly lizard (*Leiolepis reevesii*)
4. Brown pricklenape dragon (*Acanthosaura lepidogaster*)
5. Long-tailed grass lizard (*Takydromus sexlineatus*)
6. Common house gecko (*Hemidactylus frenatus*)
7. Indo-Pacific gecko (*Hemicactylus garnotii*)
8. Guentherpeter's butterfly lizard (*Leiolepis guentherpetersi*)
9. Many-banded krait (*Bungarus multicinctus*)
10. Tokay gecko (*Gekko gecko*)
11. Cat Ba leopard gecko (*Goniurosaurus catbaensis*)
12. Oriental vine snake (*Ahaetulla prasina*)
13. Radiated rat snake (*Coelognathus radiatus*)
14. Banded krait (*Bungarus fasciatus*)
15. Chinese gecko (*Gekko chinensis*)
16. Many-lined sun skink (*Eutropis multifasciata*)
17. Common sun skink (*Eutropis macularia*)
18. Chinese stripe-necked turtle (*Mauremys sinensis*)
19. Four-clawed gecko (*Cyrtodactylus pseudoquadrivirgatus*)
20. Short-legged false bloodsucker (*Pseudocalotes brevipes*)
21. Reeves's gecko (*Gekko reevesii*)
22. White-lipped pit viper (*Trimeresurus albolabris*)
23. Pale-necked kukri snake (*Liopeltis pallidonuchalis*)
24. Red-lipped mountain horned dragon (*Acanthosaura rubrilabris*)
25. Wang's forest lizard (*Calotes wangi*)
26. Jade green snake (*Gonyosoma janseni*)
27. Chinese rat snake (*Ptyas korros*)
28. Tam Dao mountain skink (*Plestiodon tamdaoensis*)

List of Amphibians:

1. Dark-eared tree frog (*Polypedates megacephalus*)
2. Asian common toad (*Duttaphrynus melanostictus*)
3. Annam tree frog (*Hyla simplex*)
4. Puddle frog (*Occidozyga sp.*)
5. Stream frog (*Limnonectes sp.*)
6. Rice field frog (*Fejervarya limnocharis*)
7. Odorous frog (*Odorrana sp.*)
8. Mortensen's frog (*Hylarana mortenseni*)
9. Banded bullfrog (*Kaloula pulchra*)
10. White-spotted bug-eyed frog (*Theloderma albopunctatum*)
11. Nongkhor tree frog (*Chirixalus nongkhorensis*)