

Abbott's duiker sighting – Tanzania February 2022. Charles Foley.



Earlier this month on a visit to Mt. Kilimanjaro, I was finally able to track down one of my nemesis species – the Abbott's duiker. This is a species that I'd wanted to see for over 30 years, but which, despite my best efforts, had always eluded me. The Abbott's is probably the world's rarest duiker, and certainly one of the hardest to find. Endemic to Tanzania, the estimated global population is only around 1,500 animals. Former populations in the Usambara Mountains and Nou Forest are now almost certainly extinct, leaving just three main strongholds on Mount Kilimanjaro, the Udzungwa Mountains, and Mount Rungwe. The Abbott's is a large duiker that probably occurs at low densities at the best of times, and being of good size and tasty disposition, it has been widely hunted across most of its range. Add to that the fact that it lives in dense forests and is generally shy, and you'll understand why live sightings of this species have been few and far between.

Several months ago I came across a Facebook post by a young Tanzanian guide called Shaban Mputa, who had taken a rather good photograph of an Abbott's duiker on Mt. Kilimanjaro. I reached out to Shaban who kindly agreed to help me track down the duiker when I was visiting Tanzania in February. He had seen the duiker at the first hut/ranger post on the Machame route up the mountain, and based on his discussions with the rangers there, he thought we would have a reasonable chance of seeing it again. While I originally contemplated spending a night or two camping at the ranger post, this proved logistically tricky, as one starts needing porters to carry up the equipment and food etc., so I decided on the next best option, which to stay at a hotel close to the entrance gate and walk up early in the morning. We spent the night at the Kilinopark Hotel, which was about a 7 minute drive to the Mt. Kilimanjaro park entrance at Machame. It was cheap, but noisy, and in the future I would use the Salinero Lodge, which is a nicer lodge situated right next to the park gate. We logged into the park shortly after 6:00am and then started the 10km hike up to the first hut. The trail is very well maintained and even has gravel for the first kilometer

or so, but it is all steadily uphill and you can expect the hike to take between 3 and 4 hours. To me, exercise is an activity always best left until tomorrow, and I only ever run when being chased, so I wasn't overly confident in my fitness levels, but we maintained a steady pace and made it to the first hut in just over 3 hours, arriving around 9:15am.

When we arrived at the hut, the rangers told us that they had seen the duiker on the previous two days, so our chances of a repeat seemed good. Apparently this individual typically shows up around midday when all of the campers have left to climb up to the second hut, and it wanders around feeding for a while and then disappears before the next group of climbers arrives in the early afternoon. The area around the hut consists of several large open areas where people pitch their tents, so we positioned ourselves in a strategic location which afforded a good view of the surroundings and sat down to wait. We figured we could afford to wait until about 2:30pm, which would give us enough time to get back down to the main gate before dark and was also when the first climbers were likely to start showing up.

The rangers, who clearly thought we were slightly batty, came round frequently to chat about the duiker. They said it had been coming for several months and that you would be practically guaranteed to see it if you spent 3 days in the area. That said, they were worried about the impact of the feral dog packs that had been showing up in the forest recently (and which were very difficult to remove). I later found some relatively fresh leopard scat by the main bathrooms, which pleased me. Village dogs would make far easier meals for a leopard than a wary duiker, so hopefully this threat will eventually be munched away.

After three hours of sitting and watching, the clouds rolled in and it started raining heavily with loud thunder claps crashing all around us, and my spirits, together with my hopes of seeing the duiker sank rapidly. After an hour the rain subsided and the clouds started to lift, and there, suddenly, miraculously, was an Abbott's duiker, standing nonchalantly at the edge of the opening, munching on shrubs. Wow, wow, wow! What a huge adrenalin rush. This was an animal I had been wanting to see for over 30 years and here one was sauntering around not 30 yards away from me. The rangers, who were very excited that the duiker had finally appeared, came rushing over talking loudly to each other, but the duiker appeared totally unconcerned by the noise and just carried on foraging. It meandered around the open area for about 20–25 minutes before disappearing off into the heather.

Once it had left we thanked the rangers profusely, warned them to expect more crazy duiker watchers showing up in the future, and headed back down to the gate. Right away we started bumping into hikers and porters coming up along the trail. They all looked highly miserable, and once again I wondered what on earth was the attraction of spending 5 days slogging up a mountain. Surely, they would all be much happier if they became duiker watchers instead? Ah well, 'ain't nowt as queer as folk' as they say in Yorkshire. We managed the walk down in about 2:30 hours, but it takes quite a toll on the knees; by the time we reached the main gate I was barely hobbling along. I had originally thought that if I didn't see the duiker on that day, I would climb up again the following day, but there is no way that was going to happen, as the next day I could scarcely get up a flight of stairs, let alone do another 20km round trip up and down the mountain. Camping at the huts would

therefore be a much better option if you want to allocate more than one day to try to see the duiker.

If anyone wants to try for the animal (and experience suggests that you shouldn't tarry too much if you do), then I suggest you reach out to Shaban who can organize a trip for you. He is an official Kilimanjaro guide and knows the rangers in the area. He will be keeping tabs on the animal over the next year or so. He speaks excellent English and is a very nice chap to boot, so I can highly recommend him. His email is <whiteafricanus98@gmail.com>.

Good luck, and let us know how you get along if you do try for it.

Abbott's duiker!!



Shaban looking irritatingly fresh after a 20km hike up and down the mountain

