

Ghana: 16th-30th November 2019



by Ben Chapple

Introduction

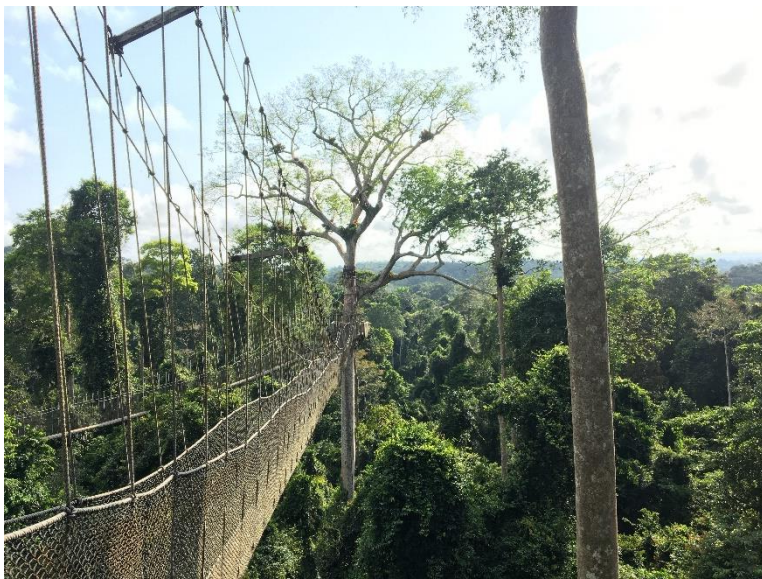
Attracted by the possibility of seeing a range of exciting West African birds and mammals – particularly Yellow-headed Picathartes and pangolins – we made a trip to Ghana in November 2019. Mouth-watering accounts on www.mammalwatching.com helped to inspire our decision, and it was through the details provided in Jon Hall's report that we got in touch with the famous Robert Ntakor, not-so-secretly hoping that he might be able to pull off some similar pangolin magic for us. Robert organised our two-week visit extremely well, and we would recommend him and his company (www.birdingtouradventures.com) very highly. As Robert himself was unavailable for the first five or six days of our trip, his brother Isaac filled in during this period. Both men were superb all-round naturalists, and Robert fully deserves his reputation as Ghana's best wildlife guide.

Our itinerary took us to Shai Hills, Kakum, Ankasa, Nyamebe (the Picathartes Forest), Bobiri, Mole and Atewa. Ashamed as I am to admit it, this was, in design and practice, mostly a birding trip, and we saw over 350 species during our time in Ghana. This meant amongst other things that we did relatively little active spotlighting. However, I had stressed to Robert that we also had a strong interest in mammals and, in particular, that we would gladly trade all the birds in Africa for a glimpse of a pangolin.

Trip Report

After a late arrival into Accra on the 16th of November and a brief night's sleep, our first morning was spent at the Shai Hills Resource Reserve, which is a pleasant area of mixed savannah, inselbergs and forest patches. Here we saw a small group of **Green Monkeys**, as well as decent numbers of **Kob** grazing in the open grassland. Several **Olive Baboons** were on the roadside as we left.

In the afternoon we visited the Winneba Plains area, where the only mammal interest was provided by a **Striped Ground Squirrel**. After dark we moved on to the Hans Cottage Botel, a comfortable hotel situated 30-40 minutes from Kakum National Park (and home to several rather intimidating crocodiles).



After an early breakfast the next morning (and an unexpected pre-dawn trio of Nkulengu Rails within the hotel grounds), we headed off to catch first light at the amazing canopy walkway in Kakum. The birds, views and general atmosphere were fantastic, although it was very quiet mammal-wise, with just a couple of **Slender-tailed Squirrels** showing from one of the platforms. As others have said, the canopy walkway is absolutely superb, rising to 40m above the forest floor and stretching for over

300m. The sheer drop below you as you cross the bridges is quite exciting, and the walkway started to get overrun with thrill-seeking tourists by mid-morning. When their terrified screams and desperate protestations became too much to bear (for us and the wildlife) we retreated back to the visitor centre. In fact, Isaac thinks that sightings of sensitive animals (particularly the large hornbills, but possibly mammals too) have declined in recent years as a result of disturbance.

After a lunchtime visit to the nearby Pra River, we were back on the canopy walkway in the afternoon. The hoped-for monkeys sadly failed to materialise, with **Olive Colobus** only distantly heard. At dusk we waited on the walkway for the emergence of a **Pel's Anomalure**, two of which eventually gave stunning glide-by views. Seeing these striking (and surprisingly large) flying squirrels so well was undoubtedly one of my favourite moments in Ghana. It was so exciting that we entirely forgot to look for Brown Nightjar, but that didn't feel like a great loss in the circumstances. After dark we slowly spotlighted back towards the park entrance, finding two **Pottos** and an **Emin's Giant Pouched Rat** near the visitor centre, and hearing **Demidoff's Galago** and **Western Tree Hyrax**.



The next day, we headed west for three nights in Ankasa, staying at Frenchman's Lodge just outside the reserve. On our first evening we did a bit of a night walk by the park entrance, seeing **Hammer-headed Bat** well from the bridge and **Demidoff's Galago** a little further into the forest. Over the next couple of days we found only a few new mammals, including **Green Bush Squirrel** and a troop of around six **Lowe's Monkeys** that ran across the road in front of our vehicle. Isaac had a brief sighting of a **Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey** near the 'first pond' (where birders stake out White-bellied Kingfisher and White-crested Tiger Heron), but all I really saw was a rapidly disappearing tail. There were plenty of signs of **African Forest Elephant**, including fresh footprints, dung and evidence of recent feeding activity, but they are rarely seen (the park ranger who accompanied us had last encountered one in November 2016). We heard **Common Cusimanse** one morning, moving close by through some dense undergrowth, but it remained frustratingly out of sight. Large numbers of **Straw-coloured Fruit Bats** flew over the forest at dusk, but serious spotlighting attempts were sadly interrupted by heavy rain on our second and third nights in Ankasa. Most of the mammals we did see appeared to be very shy, and it seems that Ankasa does suffer from hunting pressure. However, I'm sure that some exciting species could be found with more dedicated effort (especially if staying within the forest). According to Robert, Bongo and a small number of Chimpanzees are still present in the more remote parts of the reserve.

After leaving Ankasa, we returned to the Hans Cottage Botel near Kakum National Park, stopping off at Brenu Beach Road along the way, where a single **Slender Mongoose** dashed across our path. Robert joined us at Hans Cottage and (mostly because we were still missing Fraser's Eagle-Owl), we immediately set off for a nocturnal session around the edge of Kakum. In a couple of hours we heard several Western Tree Hyrax, saw another Emin's Giant Pouched Rat, and failed to find any owls.

For the first few hours of the next day, we explored a peripheral area of Kakum, seeing a number of excellent birds but no mammals. In mid-morning, we decided to go back to the Kakum Visitor Centre and wander some of the trails into the forest. We hadn't been going for long when we reached a fork in the track; we went right with Robert, and Isaac turned left, promising to let us know if he found anything of interest. A slow half-hour followed, punctuated only by a few uncooperative greenbuls and a showier **Gambian Sun Squirrel**.

Then, the incongruous sound of Robert's mobile ringtone shattered the silence. After a brief exchange, his eyes lit up and he uttered the immortal words "I think Isaac has found a pangolin". Rarely have I wished to run faster, and if I had known where I was going no aching legs or shortness of breath could have slowed my mad dash. In practice, however, we spent the next ten minutes following Robert through the undergrowth in a part jog, part frantic march, all the while trying desperately not to think of the awful possibility that it might all be in vain. Eventually, gasping for air and cascading with sweat, we found Isaac bearing witness to one of the most exquisite sights I have ever seen – a **Black-bellied Pangolin**, perched in the open just feet above the path, its impossibly long tail coiled ornately around an exposed branch. Motionless besides blinking eyes, its coal-and-amber scales flashed brilliantly against a background of dark fur. I honestly wasn't prepared for it to be so beautiful; this must be the most attractive of all pangolins.

When the initial delirium subsided and my limbs ceased shaking with untamed excitement, I was struck by how nakedly vulnerable the animal seemed; if I had wanted to, I could easily have plucked the poor thing from its branch, like a piece of ripe fruit. We are all aware of the pangolin's plight – this individual would have presented no challenge to a poacher, and we feared for its safety. Robert has experienced a significant decline in the frequency of pangolin sightings over the last ten years or so, although he said that protection remains at least moderately effective in formal reserves like Kakum and Ankasa (in sharp contrast to other areas, as we were to discover). It appears that mid-morning is the best time of day to look for this species; they seem to spend the first few hours of daylight sunning themselves in the canopy, before descending to lower levels to feed.



After a few more precious minutes we left the animal in peace, grinning wildly to ourselves and safe in the knowledge that this would be the undisputed highlight of the trip. We will be eternally grateful to both Ntakor brothers, but especially Isaac, for finding us a pangolin – it seems this is a knack that runs in the family! However, the day's excitement was far from over, as we headed off for an afternoon session at the Yellow-headed Picathartes nest site; around eight birds came in to roost, preening and parading themselves around the cave, often almost within touching distance. It was quite an experience and, together with the pangolin, made this one of my all-time favourite days in wildlife-watching.

The next morning was quiet on the mammal front, and we drove on after lunch to Bobiri Forest, across whose entrance road ran another **Slender Mongoose**. A couple of **Red-legged Sun Squirrels** were seen in mid-afternoon, and a night walk produced an upside-down **Potto**, heard-only **Western Tree Hyrax** and **Demidoff's Galago**, and a **Pel's Anomalure**, initially on a branch but subsequently in flight.

We left Bobiri early the next day to begin the long journey to Mole, which we eventually reached at around 4pm. We stayed for three nights at the Mole Motel, which has a swimming pool and spectacular views out over several waterholes and the c.5000 square kilometre reserve beyond. We spent our first evening scanning from the viewpoint, picking out the ever-present **Kob**, **Waterbuck**, **Bushbuck**, **Warthog**, **Green Monkey** and **Olive Baboon**. The last four were also regularly seen in and around the Motel, alongside the less common **Patas Monkey**. A loose group of six bull **African Bush Elephants** came to the waterhole on our second morning, only moving off in response to the large crowd of backpackers who were led down from the lodge for an "intimate on-foot encounter". Although the beasts never responded aggressively, the group got extremely close and it was clear that the elephants were uncomfortable.



Our excursions out into the park produced a broadly similar range of species. A **Striped Ground Squirrel** dashed across the track at one point, and we encountered a couple of **Kintampo Rope Squirrels** in an area of thick riverine vegetation. Spotlighting from the vehicle at night was frustrating from a mammal point of view, as the grass was extremely high, making viewing next to impossible. We ended up seeing nothing but unidentified eyeshine;

another group reported Side-striped Jackal and a genet of some variety. Overall, we were impressed with Mole, as it seemed to protect sizeable populations of several large mammals. Roan and African Buffalo are supposedly quite common around the Motel later in the dry season, and one would stand a much better chance of seeing smaller mammals once the vegetation has died back a bit.

Our last destination in Ghana was the Atewa Forest, which turned out to be the most sobering location of the trip. Up until this point we had seen very little direct evidence of hunting, but the road towards Atewa was swarming with bushmeat vendors. **Maxwell's Duikers, Greater Cane Rats** and francolins were by far the most prevalent victims, but we also saw a live **White-bellied Pangolin**, struggling pointlessly to escape while a man shook it by its tail at passing traffic. According to Robert, the price would have been no more than 50-100 cedis (around £7-14). Inevitably, we debated the possibility of buying and releasing it, but reluctantly decided that this might be counterproductive. Robert will sometimes purchase pangolins when he is en route to a well-protected forest, but as Atewa is apparently a free-for-all, he saw little point in doing so on this occasion. Although far from the only concerning sight we observed, this was the single saddest moment of the trip for us, standing in marked contrast to the euphoria we had experienced in Kakum.

That evening, as we approached our hotel, the sky was darkened by untold thousands of **Straw-coloured Fruit Bats** – an awesome spectacle. We saw no mammals during a full day exploring Atewa, although we did meet two men exiting the forest, rifles over their shoulders and weighed down by bulging backpacks – they smiled and said a breezy “good morning” as they passed. Another similarly equipped duo (with bags unfilled) were heading in the opposite direction as we left in late afternoon. Fortunately, however, the Ghanaian government has discovered a fool proof method to end poaching in Atewa for good – convert the entire forest into a Chinese bauxite mine!

If the project does go ahead, which seems almost inevitable at this stage, then not only will Ghana lose a unique part of its natural heritage, but over five million people's access to clean water will also be compromised. At the time of our visit, logging tracks had recently been widened, core samples had been drilled all over, and the sound of chainsaws was our near-constant companion. Robert was noticeably upset, and told us that he holds out little hope for Atewa's future. It was a shame that our visit had to end in this way.

Summary

We had an excellent time in Ghana, seeing more wildlife than we could have hoped for. Of course, finding the pangolin was the trip's outstanding moment; Ghana is undoubtedly one of the best countries in the world to see these extraordinary animals. The supporting cast, including both mammals and birds, also performed superbly on the whole. One of the only slight disappointments was our struggle with rainforest monkeys, as we saw none at all in Kakum and achieved only fleeting glimpses in Ankasa. If we had known how scarce they would be, we might have included the monkey sanctuary at Boabeng Fiema in our itinerary.

While Kakum and Ankasa seemed well-protected, there was a great deal of logging activity both immediately around these reserves and in other forested areas of the country; we frequently passed trucks hauling some of the largest trunks I've ever seen. We were surprised by how little bushmeat we saw in most of the country, but this just made its abundance near Atewa even more noticeable. The live White-bellied Pangolin for sale was sad to see, although we are aware that this is just the tip of the iceberg. In retrospect, getting to enjoy a wonderful sighting of a wild pangolin without having to confront the threats they face might have felt almost illegitimate – I find it's often too easy to ignore environmental issues when travelling for wildlife, especially as we tend to preferentially visit the world's best-protected areas. Speaking to guides and rangers, it seems that few hunters target pangolins specifically, but instead capture them opportunistically whenever they are encountered. This is worrying, as it suggests that search effort will not decrease as pangolins become scarcer.

Finally, we couldn't have wished for better guides (and company) than we had in Robert and Isaac. Their passion for Ghana's natural heritage was infectious, and it was clear that they cared deeply about ensuring its future. Ghana is a safe and easy country to visit, and most people we met were extremely friendly and helpful. Particularly striking as we travelled around was the astonishing religiosity on display – everywhere we went, countless signs advertised all manner of spiritual institutions, many looking suspiciously similar to the exploitative megachurches you get in America. More diverting from our point of view was a large billboard urging the purchase of a "fufu pounding machine".

Species recorded

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Striped Ground Squirrel
<i>Xerus erythropus</i> | Winneba (17/11) and Mole (26/11) |
| 2. Slender-tailed Squirrel
<i>Protoxerus aubinnii</i> | Kakum (18/11) |
| 3. Green Bush Squirrel
<i>Paraxerus poensis</i> | Ankasa (22/11), Kakum (23/11) and Bobiri (29/11) |
| 4. Gambian Sun Squirrel
<i>Heliosciurus gambianus</i> | Kakum (23/11) and Nyamebe (24/11) |
| 5. Red-legged Sun Squirrel
<i>Heliosciurus rufobrachium</i> | Bobiri (24/11) |
| 6. Kintampo Rope Squirrel
<i>Funisciurus substriatus</i> | Mole (27/11) |
| 7. Pel's Anomalure
<i>Anomalurus pelii</i> | Kakum (18/11) and Bobiri (24/11) |
| 8. Emin's Giant Pouched Rat
<i>Cricetomys emini</i> | Kakum (18/11 and 22/11) |
| 9. Greater Cane Rat
<i>Thryonomys swinderianus</i> | As bushmeat near Atewa (29/11) |

10. Common Cusimanse <i>Crossarchus obscurus</i>	Heard only in Ankasa (22/11)
11. Common Slender Mongoose <i>Herpestes sanguineus</i>	Brenu Beach (22/11) and near Bobiri (24/11)
12. Black-bellied Pangolin <i>Phataginus tetradactyla</i>	Kakum (23/11)
13. White-bellied Pangolin <i>Phataginus tricuspis</i>	Live individual for sale near Atewa (29/11)
14. Hammer-headed Fruit Bat <i>Hypsignathus monstrosus</i>	Ankasa (19/11)
15. Straw-coloured Fruit Bat <i>Eilodon helvum</i>	Ankasa (20-21/11) and Atewa (29/11)
16. Green Monkey <i>Chlorocebus sabaeus</i>	Shai Hills (17/11) and Mole (25-28/11)
17. Patas Monkey <i>Erythrocebus patas</i>	Mole (26-27/11)
18. Olive Baboon <i>Papio anubis</i>	Shai Hills (17/11) and Mole (25-28/11)
19. Lowe's Monkey <i>Cercopithecus lowei</i>	Ankasa (20/11)
20. Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey <i>Cercopithecus petaurista</i>	Ankasa (21/11)
21. Olive Colobus <i>Procolobus verus</i>	Heard only in Kakum (18/11)
22. Demidoff's Galago <i>Galagoides demidoff</i>	Kakum (18/11), Ankasa (19/11) and Bobiri (24/11)
23. West African Potto <i>Perodicticus potto</i>	Kakum (18/11) and Bobiri (24/11)
24. Kob <i>Kobus kob</i>	Shai Hills (17/11) and Mole (25-28/11)
25. Waterbuck <i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>	Mole (25-28/11)
26. Bushbuck <i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>	Mole (25-28/11)
27. Maxwell's Duiker <i>Philantomba maxwellii</i>	As bushmeat near Atewa (29/11)
28. Common Warthog <i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>	Mole (25-28/11)
29. African Forest Elephant <i>Loxodonta cyclotis</i>	Signs only in Ankasa (20-22/11)
30. African Bush Elephant <i>Loxodonta africana</i>	Mole (27/11)
31. Western Tree Hyrax <i>Dendrohyrax dorsalis</i>	Heard only in Kakum, Ankasa and Bobiri