

# Sierra Leone Trip Report, December 2016

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## 1 Introduction

For my first trip to Africa, I went to Tiwai Island and Gola National Park in Sierra Leone. My primary target was Pygmy Hippo. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful in that pursuit, and only heard one jump into the water while spotlighting from a bridge. However, I did have many wonderful observations, including two White-bellied (Tree) Pangolins, the rare and beautiful Pohle's Fruit Bat, lekking Hammer Bats, White-necked Picathartes, many night-roosting African Pittas, and Rufous Fishing Owl. My photos are at [www.tremarctos.com](http://www.tremarctos.com).

This trip report is written both for mammal-watchers and birders, but most of my observations were of mammals. I spent most of my time walking at night, and did not record many diurnal birds.

I strongly recommend that all visitors offset their carbon footprint by donating to Gola National Park, a certified REDD+ project: [\(link\)](#). Your donation will also help protect the largest remaining area of Upper Guinea Forest, and the many endangered species that live there.



*Trachylepis* sp



Rufous Fish Owl



Pohle's Fruit Bat



White-necked Picathartes

## 2 Other Resources

1. Trip Report by Jon Hall (2017): [\(link\)](#)
2. Trip Report by Dominique Brugiere (2018): [\(link\)](#)
3. Trip Report by Tobi Lundqvist (2016): [\(link\)](#)
4. E. Klop, J. Lindsell, and A. Siaki. The birds of Gola Forest and Tiwai Island, Sierra Leone. *Malimbus* (2010) [\(link\)](#)
5. J. Lindsell, E. Klop, and A. Siaki. The impact of civil war on forest wildlife in West Africa: mammals in Gola Forest, Sierra Leone. *Oryx* (2011)
6. C. Chappuis. Oiseaux d’Afrique (Audio CD). Société d’Etudes Ornithologiques de France, with the collaboration of the British Library.
7. [xeno-canto.org](#) (For bird sounds)
8. Macaulay Library (for bird and mammal sounds) [macaulaylibrary.org](#)
9. East Africa Primate Diversity and Conservation Program (for mammal sounds) [\(link\)](#)
10. iNaturalist, and in particular the AfriBats project: [\(link\)](#)

### 3 Logistics

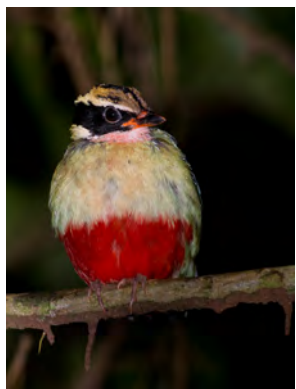
I flew in and out of the airport in Freetown, and arranged road transportation between the sites. It takes most of the day to travel by road from the airport to either Gola or Tiwai, as well as between Gola and Tiwai (despite their relative geographic proximity). Traveling by night is inadvisable. I'd recommend trying to arrange all ground transportation through Gola, as they will be the most conscientious when it comes to safety issues.

Note that the Freetown airport is well-known for baggage theft, so make sure you carry-on all expensive equipment. Also, it is unnecessary to visit the city itself (which is across a bay from the airport, and can be reached by ferry).

A visit to Tiwai Island can be arranged by emailing [info@tiwaiisland.org](mailto:info@tiwaiisland.org). To visit Gola, contact Pietro Sandini [Pietro.Sandini@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Pietro.Sandini@rspb.org.uk). I am not sure whether this is the best way to arrange a trip — you may also want to try emailing [info@golarainforest.org](mailto:info@golarainforest.org), or calling the tourist contact number listed on the website 232(0)78356061. Internet service in Sierra Leone is not always reliable, so it may take a while to hear back.

### 4 Health

Sierra Leone is largely undeveloped, so it may take a significant amount of time to reach medical facilities in the event of an emergency. In particular, helicopter evacuation may be impossible. As such, it is especially important to exercise the normal precautions for avoiding emergencies in tropical forests



African Pitta



White-bellied Pangolin



Potto

(such as snake bites). Also, travelers should obtain the usual vaccines for tropical illnesses, and take anti-malarial medications (note resistant strains may be present in the region).

Onchocerciasis (River Blindness) is transmitted by small black flies of the genus *Simulium*, which inhabit fast-flowing streams. These flies were abundant near Tiwai and Mahoi Bridge. I was told that there are no recent records of onchocerciasis in Gola, but travelers should still take precautions to avoid it. I took a single dose of the anti-parasite medication Ivectrim upon returning from Sierra Leone as a precautionary measure. Note that the parasite is easiest to treat early, when still in the larval stage.

Schistosomiasis is carried by freshwater snails found in stagnant water. It can be avoided by bathing only in fast flowing streams.

## 5 Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Pietro Sandini, Benjamin Barca, Colin Pringle, and the other members of the staff of Gola National Park for arranging the logistics of my visit, answering my many questions, and (most of all) for their work protecting Gola. I would also like to thank Mark Hulme, Jakob Fahr, Ben Phalen, Hugo Rainey, and Phil Taylor for providing very useful information about the birds and mammals of Sierra Leone.

## 6 Tiwai Island

Tiwai Island is located in the Moa River. It is the site of a long-standing primate research project, and is relatively well-protected. Most of the forest



*Dispsadoboa* sp



*Leptopelis* sp

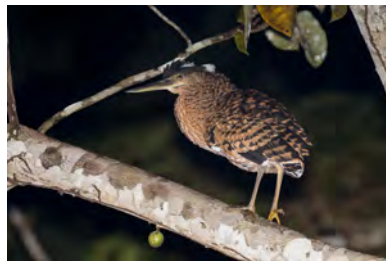
near the accommodation is scrubby secondary forest; there is better forest located toward the south of the island.

I spent about a week at Tiwai here, with Alusine as my guide. He is knowledgeable about the mammals (especially the primates — he is able to track them by scent!), and some of the birds. He knows where to find Rufous Fish Owl, and has discovered day roosts in the past. Do not expect him to know the smaller birds. I was also allowed to walk without a guide here. I stayed at the research station rather than the usual tourist area (camping in tents), which was perhaps easier because of my unusual sleeping schedule. I spent much of my time searching for Pygmy Hippo, both by canoe and by walking the trails. As a result, my observations of diurnal species were limited. My most notable mammal observations were White-bellied Pangolin (one seen on a night walk — they are quite noisy when on the ground) and a pair of Pohle's Fruit Bats roosting on a trail near the camping area (beautiful and exceedingly rare). Nocturnal bird sightings were fantastic, and included Rufous Fish Owl, Akun Eagle-Owl, Sandy Scops Owl (heard only), White-backed Night Heron, and White-crested Tiger Heron. I found many African Pittas roosting above the trail (up to five in one night!). They were much less conspicuous during the day — while several of my nighttime sightings were very close to the accommodations, I only heard Pittas a couple times during the day.

In addition to the Hippo, two notable misses were Red River Hog and White-breasted Guinea fowl. The former is easier to see on this island than at other sites, where large groups wander widely. There is also a *Picathartes* colony that may be reached as a day trip from Tiwai.



African Palm Civet

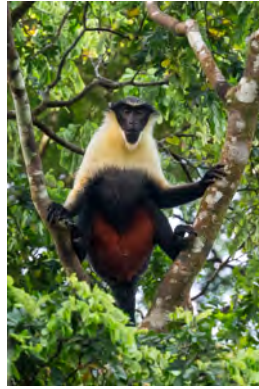


White-crested Tiger-heron, displaying





Campbell's Monkey



Diana Monkey



King Colobus

## 7 Gola

Gola National Park was declared in 2010, and is the largest remaining block of Upper Guinea forest. The park is administered by the RBSP, and is very well run. In particular, poaching has been substantially reduced in recent years. I did not hear any gunshots during my time at Mahoi Bridge, which I believe is very unusual for forested habitats in this part of the world.

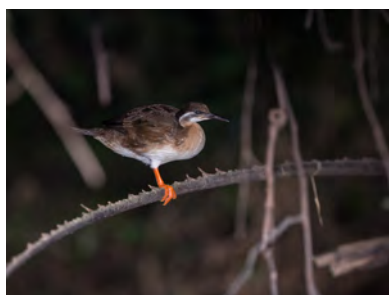
Gola National Park consists of three very large sectors, and one could easily spend months exploring them all. I split my time between Sileti (for Pygmy Hippo) and Lalehun (for Picathartes). A guide is required at all times, and I was accompanied by one of the park rangers and a member of the scientific support staff.

I spent two nights at Lalehun, where the highlight was a nesting colony of White-necked Picathartes. There are two nesting sites, and I went to the further and (apparently) more impressive one. After a wait, I saw several Picathartes coming to the nests (which had eggs in the them). This was definitely one of the highlights of the trip. My best mammal sighting in the area was another Tree Pangolin, also at night. The habitat was hillier than Sileti or Tiwai, and I probably would have seen more species of mammals and birds if I had spent more time here. The accommodations were new and very comfortable. Perhaps the best single site in Gola for Upper Guinea endemics in Gola is Malimbe Camp, which is close to Lalehun. I did not go there due to my focus on the Hippo.

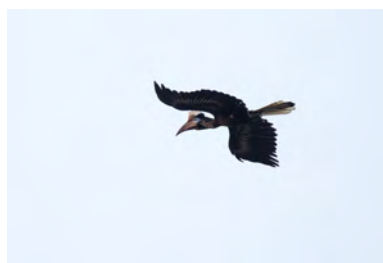
I spent 4 nights camping at Mahoi Bridge near Sileti, again searching for the

Hippo. Mahoi Bridge is about 9km away from Sileti, part of an old logging road that was completed just before the civil war (which is why the forest was never logged). The first few kilometers of the track are wide, and are great for seeing ungulates early in the morning. The bridge itself is in some of the most pristine habitat that remains in the Upper Guinea region. Park rangers had prepared a salt lick near the bridge before my visit, with the hope of attracting Pygmy Hippos. There were relatively fresh tracks, but a four night stakeout did not produce any sightings (or any new tracks at the salt lick itself). I did, however, hear a loud splash one night that the park ranger indicated was likely a Hippo. The next day, we found fresh tracks very close by along a small tributary that was just out-of-sight from my stakeout. Jon Hall and Charles Foley successfully saw a Hippo a few months later along this tributary (or a nearby one) with a thermal scope, though it fled as soon as they put a spotlight on it.

The highlight was the Hammer Bat lek located on both sides of the river at the bridge. These amazing bats — sometimes referred to as "flying larynxes" — congregated at night and called from around 3:00-5:00 AM each night. I spent even less time searching for diurnal birds here than at Tiwai, but Brown-cheeked Hornbill was very common, including one that was often in the vicinity of the campsite. I also heard what I believe was Long-tailed Hawk calling repeatedly (the call matched the recordings I have very well, but was repeated very often — perhaps it was a territorial or begging call?). White-breasted Guineafowl is also supposed to be present in the area. As for nocturnal birds, I heard Rufous Fishing Owl, Akun Eagle-Owl, and some mysterious screeches whose identity I will not speculate about. Overall, Mahoi bridge was a wonderful site and I hope to return again sometime in the near future.



African Finfoot



Yellow-casqued-Hornbill



Silk Moth

## 8 Species Lists

### 8.1 Mammals

1. Western Tree Hyrax (*Dendrohyrax dorsalis*)— heard only, all sites
2. West African Potto (*Perodicticus potto*) — common at all sites
3. Demidoff's Galago (*Galagoides demidovii*) — common at all sites
4. Thomas's Galago (*Galagoides thomasi*) — common in primary forest at Gola. Best identified by voice.
5. Green Monkey (*Chlorocebus sabaesus*) — in degraded habitats at Tiwai
6. Campbell's Monkey (*Cercopithecus campbelli*) — common at Tiwai, also seen at Sileti
7. Diana Monkey (*Cercopithecus diana*) — observed at all sites
8. Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey (*Cercopithecus petaurista*) — observed at all sites
9. Sooty Mangabey (*Cercocebus atys*) — seen at Tiwai, heard near Sileti
10. King Colobus (*Colobus polykomos*) — all sites
11. Western Red Colobus (*Procolobus badius*) — heard only at Tiwai (I should have been less nocturnal, in retrospect!)



12. Olive Colobus (*Procolobus verus*) — seen near Mahoi Bridge (very inconspicuous)
13. Western Chimpanzee — (*Pan troglodytes verus*) heard distantly near Sileti. Apparently easier to see at Tiwai in March/April when vocal.
14. Lord Derby's Anomalure (*Anomalurus derbianus*) — seen near Sileti. Also, a darker animal above the research station at Tiwai was likely this species (rather than Pel's).
15. Beecroft's Anomalure (*Anomalurus beecrofti*) — a few seen at Tiwai. Skittish in the spotlight.
16. Striped Ground Squirrel (*Xerus erythropus*) — seen in transit
17. Fire-footed Rope-squirrel (*Funisciurus pyrropus*) — seen or heard at all sites
18. African Giant Squirrel (?) — seen at Tiwai and near Sileti.
19. Grammomys sp (?) — between Sileti and Mahoi bridge
20. Forest Giant Pouched Rat (*Cricetomys emini*) — Tiwai and Mahoi Bridge
21. Straw-colored Fruit Bat (*Eidolon helvum*) — all sites, sometimes in large numbers
22. Hammer-headed Fruit Bat (*Hypsignathus monstrosus*) — heard all sites, seen Tiwai and lekking at Mahoi bridge
23. Pohle's Fruit Bat (*Casinycteris ophiodon*) — a pair roosting near the camping area at Tiwai
24. Buettikofer's Epauletted Fruit Bat (*Epomops buettikoferi*) — common at all sites
25. Sierra Leone Collared Fruit Bat (*Myonycteris leptodon*) — one seen at Tiwai
26. Cyclops Roundleaf Bat (*Hipposideros cyclops*) — a few seen at all sites. A perch-hunting insect bat!
27. White-bellied (Tree) Pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*) — one seen at Tiwai, another near Lalehun

28. African Palm Civet (*Nandinia binotata*) — common at all sites (strange voice)
29. Spot-necked Otter (*Hydrictis maculicollis*) — eyeshine only at Tiwai (identified by tracks) (not countable by me)
30. Red River Hog (*Potamochoerus porcus*) — heard running away at Tiwai, and eyeshine seen from Mahoi bridge at Gola. Much easier to see during the day! (not countable by me)
31. Water Chevrotain (*Hyemoschus aquaticus*) — near Sileti, running across a trail
32. Royal Antelope (*Neotragus pygmaeus*) — seen crossing the Mahoi road near Sileti.
33. Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*) — crossed the road on the way from Sileti to Kenema
34. Bay Duiker (*Cephalophus dorsalis*) — seen crossing the Mahoi road near Sileti. Another probable animal seen briefly at night near Lalehun.
35. Maxwell's Duiker (*Philantomba maxwellii*) — common at all sites

Also: Pygmy Hippo (*Choeropsis liberiensis*) — heard jumping into the water at Mahoi...

## 8.2 Notable Birds

1. Hartlaub's Duck (*Pteronetta hartlaubii*) — common at Tiwai
2. White-crested Tiger-Heron (*Tigriornis leucolopha*) — one seen just before dawn at Tiwai, very close to the research station. It was displaying: calling repeatedly while raising and lowering its crest. I think I flushed another one in the same general area.
3. White-backed Night-Heron (*Gorsachius leuconotus*) — one seen at night at Tiwai, by boat
4. Crowned Eagle (*Stephanoaetus coronatus*) — heard only, from the Picathartes site at Lalehun
5. Long-tailed Hawk (*Urotriorchis macrourus*) — heard only at Mahoi Bridge

6. African Finfoot (*Podica senegalensis*)— two seen at Tiwai. One male during the daytime, a female on the night roost.
7. Timneh Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus timneh*)— Tiwai
8. Yellow-billed Turaco (*Tauraco macrorhynchus*) — common
9. Fraser's Eagle-Owl (*Bubo poensis*) — one seen near Mahoi Bridge
10. Akun Eagle Owl (*Bubo leucostictus*) — one seen and one heard at Tiwai. Two heard between Sileti and Mahoi Bridge in Gola.
11. Rufous Fish Owl (*Scotopelia ussheri*) — one seen at Tiwai, also heard near Mahoi bridge and at another site near Sileti.
12. Sandy Scops Owl (*Otus icterorhynchus*) — one heard at Tiwai
13. African Wood Owl (*Strix woodfordii*) — common
14. Brown Nightjar (*Veles binotatus*) — common by voice
15. African Pygmy Kingfisher (*Ispidina picta*) — several seen roosting at night at Tiwai
16. Chocolate-backed Kingfisher (*Halcyon badia*) — common by voice
17. Red-billed Dwarf-Hornbill (*Lophoceros camurus*) — heard only near Lalehun and Sileti
18. White-crested Hornbill (*Horizocerus albocristatus*) — seen at Tiwai and near Mahoi
19. Brown-cheeked Hornbill (*Bycanistes cylindricus*) — common near Mahoi, also seen at Lalehun
20. Yellow-casqued Hornbill (*Ceratogymna elata*)— impressively common at all sites
21. African Pied Hornbill *Lophoceros fasciatus* — common
22. Piping Hornbill (*Bycanistes fistulator*) — common
23. Fire-bellied Woodpecker (*Chloropicus pyrrhogaster*) — seen at Tiwai and near Sileti
24. African Pitta (*Pitta angolensis pulih*) — many seen at night at Tiwai, a couple heard there. Two more seen at night near Lalehun.

25. Finsch's Flycatcher Thrush (*Neocossyphus finschi*) — seen at Tiwai, heard at Gola
26. White-tailed Alethe (*Alethe diademata*) — seen at Tiwai
27. Forest Robin (*Stiphornis erythrothorax*) — seen at Tiwai (including on night roost) and Gola
28. White-necked Picathartes (*Picathartes gymnocephalus*) — seen at nesting site near Lalehun

### 8.3 Herps

I would very much appreciate any feedback on the identification of the herps I photographed in Sierra Leone. See here: [\(link\)](#)

1. *Dispsadoboa* sp — in the research station clearing at Tiwai
2. Blanding's Tree Snake (*Toxicodryas blandingii*) — two sightings along the river at Tiwai
3. Central African Egg-eating Snake (*Dasypeltis fasciata*) — one seen at Tiwai
4. Mabuya Skink (*Trachylephis* sp) — at Tiwai
5. West African Rainbow Lizard (*Agama africana*) — in the village near Tiwai
6. Gecko (*Hemidactylus* sp) — in forest at Tiwai
7. Crowned Bullfrog (*Hoplobatrachus occipitalis*) — along the river at Tiwai
8. Forest White-lipped Frog (*Amnirana albolabris*) — near Lalehun.
9. *Leptopelis spiritusnoctis* — at Gola.
10. Big-eyed Frogs (*Leptopelis* sp) — several more species in addition to the one listed above, at both Gola and Tiwai.
11. *Sclerophrys* sp — at least one species. Common at Gola and Tiwai.