



Vietnam: Mammals and other wildlife

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Overview

This is a trip report from a couple of weeks spent in southern and central Vietnam in late 2019/early 2020. This trip was happening in the early days of the Covid crisis and if it happened a month or so later who knows what would have happened? As it was our travels were quite successful and we got home satisfied and immediately cast into a strange new world of lockdowns and no travel. My fellow compadres included keen fellow animal watchers/photographers - Kat and Terry. We spent two weeks in the south and central parts of Vietnam searching for mammals, birds and herps, so I guess you could say wildlife in general. After a bit of internet consulting and various email exchanges we settled on the guiding services of Forest Birding (a local company). I had expressed an interest in finding reptiles and frogs in my initial requests and they came back with the itinerary which seemed like they were listening and not just saying 'yeah and we might see a snake'.

I had read previous trip reports noting the difficulty associated with seeing mammals (and even birds) in Vietnam outside of the parks and this was borne out in reality, particularly in the south where seeing quite common birds was actually a fairly rare experience, even in seemingly rural landscapes where the odd egret or two might be expected. Our trusty guide (Anh The) opined on several occasions that the Vietnamese hunt everything. Central Vietnam proved to be birdier in general although they were rarely common even in the parks (whose boundaries don't tend to stop hunting apparently). Mammals were definitely restricted to protected areas and the larger mammals were notably shy whenever we showed up. This fact and the weather in Central Vietnam made photography quite difficult.

At times this was an odd trip where in the south we spent long hours in makeshift bird hides some of which were located in the parks (legality best not to ask about) and strange night-time operations where we met up with people in odd pre-arranged locations and carried out evening 'raids' looking for creatures of the night. Nevertheless, all up we saw 27 mammals (give or take – bloody bats!?), 206 birds and quite a few herps (including some great snakes). We did our best to identify what we could of the herps via photographs but a lack

of guides to the area and taxonomic changes (particularly with the frogs) made certainty a difficult proposition. The following is a precis of our various experiences on the trip.

Southern Vietnam

Dong Nai Reserve/Cat Tien National Park - 3 days

Our guide Anh picked us up early in the morning from our airport hotel digs in Ho Chi Minh City and we headed out for a 5 hour drive to the Dong Nai Nature Reserve which is located close to the well known Cat Tien National Park. This area apparently saw a lot of activity during the Vietnam war and it was interesting (morbidly I suppose) to still see the evident results of the wartime defoliants used by the US on the often stunted forest in this area. This was more of a birding/herping experience where we were introduced to the enroute ritual of picking up bags of bird fodder (insect larvae) from pet shops that sold birds to locals that were evidently caught from the wild and generally kept in tiny cages.....but enough of that. On arrival at the secreted bird hide the bird fodder was distributed usually around a log or branch and then we waited. While this could be construed as a partly manufactured experience we did get to see some fantastic birds you would find incredibly difficult to see otherwise including Bar-bellied and Blue-rumped Pittas. A night-time walk in the forest brought several reptiles and frogs with the outstanding highlight being a Ruby-eyed Pit Viper. Mammals were restricted to 3 squirrel species: Giant, Variable and Pallas's Squirrel.



Blue Pitta – a stunner



Ruby-eyed Pit Viper – a scaly stunner

The next morning was spent back at the bird hide with a late morning trip to a strange Vietnam War memorial consisting of life size tunnels, trenches and dioramas of war-time happenings all set in what looked like quite mature forest compared to where we had been spending our time. Our guide had intimated a couple of times we should perhaps go to see this affair so we acceded as a gesture of respect given what happened all those years ago but when we got there we just wandered around and he actually didn't really seem all that interested. Odd.

After this we got our gear and headed to Cat Tien National park where we stayed in the park headquarters for a couple of nights. I had read some fairly indifferent reports about Cat Tien but it didn't disappoint us as we turned up 13 mammals including Black-shanked Douc langur, Annam Silver Langur, Leopard Cat (brief views during spotlighting), extended views of the park's prime target Pygmy Slow Loris (2 seen) during an evenings spotlighting and Northern Slender-tailed Treeshrew. A definite highlight was hearing the calls of the Buff-cheeked Gibbons in the early morning which is truly one of the more amazing calls I have heard in the natural

world. There is a gibbon rehabilitation centre at the headquarters. At least two groups appeared to hang around the area near the centre and we had prolonged views of a family group hanging around the centre itself as well as more fleeting glimpses of a group further away in the park forest. A fantastic experience. Another notable sight was a group of very cute Short-tongued Bats (*Cynopterus* species – unfortunately it seems they could be one of three species that might occur) hanging out in the roof of the open air restaurant at night. This seemed like quite strange behavior given they weren't there during the daytime. Both langurs were seen well on a lengthy walk to a lake where we had lunch in huts overlooking the lake and spied the rather rare Siamese Crocodiles which have been reintroduced to the area. An interesting accompaniment was the habituated Lesser Adjutant (a rather large chunky stork) which happily scooped down the cast off fish entrails from our lunch preparations.



Buff-cheeked Gibbon – a nicely coloured female



An ordinary photo of a Pygmy Slow Loris



A bunch of restless Short-tongued Bats behaving confusingly

Di Linh Plateau/ Bidoup Nui Ba National Park

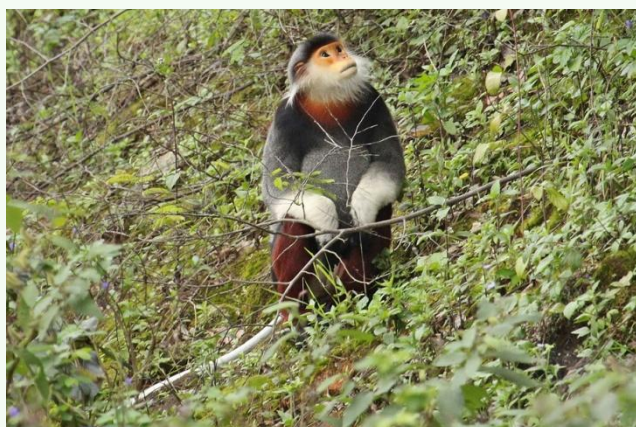
The next 3 days were spent birding and herping in the scenic montane environs of the Di Linh plateau (rainforest) and Bidoup Nui Ba National Park (mixture of alpine pine forests with dense rainforest). This involved a fair bit of the aforementioned sitting in bird hides (not great for a dodgy back) and midnight rendezvous with keen accomplices, one of whom was quite happy to show off the results of being bitten by cobras (apparently on numerous occasions). We saw plenty of great birds including several endemic laughing-thrush species, more pittas, White-browed Scimitar Babbler, Indochinese Green Magpie and a host of others. A handsome Brown Fish-owl had been trapped hunting around a fish farm located at the entrance to where we accessed the

National Park and thankfully our guide ensured it was released and not.....well.....who knows? Vogel's Pit Viper and Chinese Water Dragon were the herping highlights and we very much enjoyed these outings. Mammals were notably thin on the ground and restricted to Northern Treeshrew (spied hunting around the edge of one of the hides), and Red-cheeked, Giant and Eastern Striped Squirrel. Gibbons were heard calling in the rainforest in the morning but they were a long way off. Our final night before flying to central Vietnam was spent in the rather touristy although picturesque mountain town of Da Lat where we visited the famed night market which was kinda just a large street market selling not much I would call particularly interesting. This is a market geared to the locals rather than selling 'tourist tat' as such.

Central Vietnam

Da Nang

After a series of early mornings and latish nights we had a more leisurely start to the day and made our way to the airport to fly to the coastal city of Da Nang. Our hotel was located near the tourist strip along the beach and we had a bit of downtime to peruse the plethora of seafood markets/restaurants nestled along the shore where you can choose your dinner personally from a bewildering assortment of live seafood stored in tanks. In the afternoon we drove into the nearby reserve on the Son Tra Peninsula to hunt for the prime primate I wished to see on this trip – the Red-shanked Douc Langur. The park comprises a quite large but isolated patch of forest but most of it appears quite inaccessible. We drove around the only road that goes through a small section of the park for a little while and spied our only Rhesus Macaque of the trip. After one fleeting glimpse of a couple of langurs fleeing into the dense roadside vegetation we got a call and headed off. We parked the car a fair distance away from where the group were located so as to not spook them, moved closer slowly, and then proceeded to watch (and take a million photographs of) a group of 5 or 6 individuals for about an hour. What a great looking and distinctly coloured monkey. The maroon legs are such an odd colour. While we were there we met a European woman who was studying the langurs and she indicated the population is actually quite healthy and larger than our guide thought. Unfortunately it seems the peninsula is under pressure from some planned 'improvements' in the form of some likely unnecessary development. We then returned and had our obligatory gigantic seafood dinner. Safe to say throughout our trip the food was plentiful and fresh and weight loss was not an option.



Red-shanked Douc Langur on Son Tra Peninsula – surely one of the best looking monkeys in the world

Bach Ma National Park

The next morning we drove to the mountaintop of Bach Ma National Park. The route took us through a picturesque rural setting with lots of rice paddies and impressive tombs/graveyards (often strangely located i.e. almost anywhere) which seemed to be a feature of this part of Vietnam. Our lodging was in the rather decrepit Phong Lan 'Resort' hotel which has certainly seen better days with several buildings looking like they hadn't been used in a long time. The mountain itself has quite a history being covered in decaying villas (from the days when it was a French Hill Station) being gradually taken over by the forest. There is also a series of Vietcong tunnels leftover from the war. Bach Ma is covered in rainforest and rain it did. And if it wasn't raining it was often covered in dense cloud making birding rather a difficult task and there were several specialities we were after here. Unfortunately the birding and weather ended up being so poor we left a day early although we did manage to see one of our targets - a very cool Ratchet-tailed Treepie. I also managed to spot a Mountain Scops Owl about 3 m away from me at eye height on the way to the restaurant for dinner! By the time I realised I should be getting my camera out it took off.

In general I found Bach Ma to be quite a scenic area and it would have been good to spend some more time there but the elements were against us. Nevertheless we squeezed in as much activity as we could walking up and down the road (there's a cool monks residence just up from the lodge which I think a previous contributor had to stay in when the lodge was shut), walked to the top of a waterfall (where we were continually frustrated trying to get good looks at an unidentified forktail along the creek), did some spotlighting, visited the tunnels and managed a break in the clouds to get some good views from the cleared area at the top of the mountain (where you can strike a large gong if you so desire).

Mammals: we were very happy to come across Stump-tailed Macaques on the drive up. A rather solidly built species. Unfortunately they were very skittish and didn't hang around to be admired. Gibbons could be heard calling down in the valley on the way up. Giant Squirrel again popped up. During spotlighting Anh found a large flying-squirrel but by the time we got to where he was it had disappeared. But then another smaller flying squirrel appeared out of nowhere and we were rewarded with binocular views of what we worked out as being a Parti-coloured Flying Squirrel, which was a great find. I found a horseshoe bat roosting in one of the abandoned buildings at the hotel (pictured right) and there were several roosting in the tunnels further up the mountain. Unfortunately there seem to be quite a lot of species options from the area. We identified Least Horseshoe Bat (because it was so small) but we saw at least one larger species and there may well have been 2 or even 3. Anyone with suggestions would be welcome. Terry also got a fleeting look at what he thought may have been a *Hipposideros* in the tunnels as well but we never re-sighted it after it flew in deeper (the tunnels are a snug fit when you're a tall westerner carrying a camera in your backpack).



Phong Na Ke Bang National Park

After spending the morning at Bach Ma we drove to the mountain town of Khe Sanh for the night. This town has been 'immortalised' in a famous Australian beer drinking song about a returned Vietnam veteran. I'm not sure

what I was expecting but the town didn't seem to have anything to recommend sticking around for (although to be fair this was a fleeting glimpse). We stayed in quite a large communist era style hotel in which we appeared to be the only guests. The hot water in our first room didn't work and the language barrier made finding a room with working hot water a long drawn out process. The next morning we drove through picturesque (a word you can often use in this part of the country) winding mountain roads en route to the famous Phong Na Ke Bang National Park. We may have got lost at one stage. It felt like it. We stopped along the way to bird at several places but they were generally not playing ball. Highlights included Black-throated Laughing-thrush and great views of Pied Falconet. We also saw our only Eastern Jungle Crow which seemed quite odd (a species I would have assumed would be fairly common). We also happened across a Small Asian Mongoose on the road which allowed good views but not quite long enough (again) to get a photo.

The limestone karst landscapes of Phong Na Ke Bang are quite often stunning to say the least. The local town is unsurprisingly a tourist/backpacker mecca (although in a nicely small scale and low key way) and set along a river directly opposite a series of karsts which make for great photo opportunities. The area is riddled with caves some of which you can do organised trips through. At one stage, in an effort to locate some bats, Anh got a local guy to take us to a local non-tourist cave ('possibly' illegally it seemed). Once we saw what sort of scrambling this was going to entail my two companions said they'd wait near the entrance. I gritted my teeth and carried on for about 30 m or so having to crawl on my belly at one stage with my camera. Once I saw the tight crevices ahead of me I decided this was a folly I was not equipped for and we called time on the excursion. The sight of discarded netting used by the locals to catch bats was a bit underwhelming too.

We spent a couple of days driving around looking for birds. This was again a frustratingly difficult experience much of the time and the highlight was good views of Mountain Hawk-eagle. A couple of the endemic laughing-thrushes from the area either wouldn't come out from hiding in the foliage or were too far away to confidently tick. A nights spotlighting netted some frogs and two more new snakes. Anh was truly an enthusiastic and persistent fan of catching snakes it has to be said.



An Assamese Macaque (from a long way away)



A group of Hatinh Langurs showing off their sidies

We had distant views of Stump-tailed Macaques our first day in the park. It appeared they were quite close to the road where we stopped but they disappeared quite quickly in the dense vegetation and then reappeared downhill crossing a gully. Again they were very skittish despite us being a long way away from them. Hatinh Langurs are kept in a fenced enclosure set around a large karst. The population there was established via rehabilitated animals and we got quite good (if distant) views, although looking through a fence doesn't feel all

that legitimate a sighting. Nevertheless we took care of this guilt later in the trip. Giant and Pallas's Squirrel were sighted. On our final morning we visited another spot and the sun decided to turn up after what had been a series of intermittently gloomy days. While wandering around looking for birds a troop of Red-shanked Douc Langurs turned up allowing us prolonged views for quite a while. Not a monkey I would get sick of looking at. At this stage I was looking across the top of the karst mountainside with the sun on it when I noticed an odd shape. I got the bins on it and realized it was a macaque soaking up the sun and not one we had seen before. Anh was very excited as it turned out to be an Assamese Macaque – a rather rare sighting in the park it seems.

Dong Le

Our last destination was ostensibly just to see one of the only (if not the only) accessible colony/group of wild Hatinh Langurs. We were still in limestone country although it was much more developed with the odd karst set amongst rice paddies and towns. On the way we stopped off to visit a large limestone cave used by the Vietcong as a weapons manufacturing base. We spied quite a few bats but they were way too high to be identifiable. There was old Vietcong graffiti on the wall, bits of debris and of course the remains of netting used to catch bats. We made our way to our hotel in Dong Le. It seemed evident that this was a part of the country that was a bit more 'nationalistic' than where we had previously been and was not visited by tourists.....probably at all. Anh asked if we wanted to try spotlighting one more time although he said he hadn't tried this area before.

In a night that could only be described as one of those 'great travel stories' (after the event) the following occurred: our driver was stopped by the police for ages and copped a big fine for not having the 'correct papers'; we drove somewhere into the boondocks of central Vietnam, stopped around some village and tried riskily climbing a fairly treacherous karst which we quickly decided was a bad idea; the locals turned up and got very agitated about our presence, holed us up in our car for about two hours and called the local police; who then casually grilled us in front of the locals in an adjacent house for another two hours in an effort to defuse the situation; and who then drove us to the police station and let us go and said let them know in advance next time and it would all be fine. We got home quite late. We also didn't manage to spotlight anything.

Next day we were rather keen to get going and went to the Hatinh Langur spot which was a karst mountain in amongst rice paddies. Apparently they are only now found on a couple of karsts in the local area which is (of course) rather unfortunate. They are an attractive beast with a crest and white 'sideburns' and we watched several hanging about the rocks and trees in the morning sun for an hour. It was a nice end to the trip.

We had a fun and at times 'interesting' stay in Vietnam. Thanks to Anh and Forest Briding for organising our trip and helping us out with our perhaps more unusual animal hunting requests.

Happy animal hunting (soon.....I hope.....)

Brett

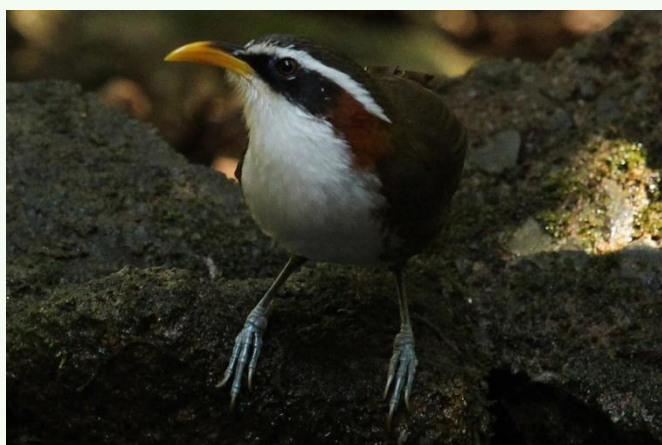
Mammal list is attached. Feel free to contact me if you'd like to see a bird/herp list as well.



Rhacophorus vampyrus - Bidoup Nui Ba National Park



Oriental Magpie Jay – Di Linh Plateau



White-browed Scimitar Babbler – Di Linh Plateau



Tokay Gecko – Dong Nai Reserve



Vogel's Pit Viper – Di Linh Plateau



Bridled Cat Snake - Phong Na Ke Bang National Park

Common name	Scientific name	Dong Rai	Cat Tien	Di Linh	Da Lat	Da Nang	Bac Ma	Phong Na	Hatinh
Leopard Cat	<i>Prionailurus bengalensis</i>		1						
Small Asian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes javanicus</i>							Travelling to	
Red Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>		1						
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		1						
Northern Slender-tailed Treeshrew	<i>Dendrogale murina</i>		1						
Northern Treeshrew	<i>Tupaia belangeri</i>				1				
Giant squirrel	<i>Ratufa bicolor</i>	1	1		1		1	1	
Variable Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus finlaysonii</i>	1							
Pallas's Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus erythraeus</i>	1	1					1	
Cambodian Striped Squirrel	<i>Tamiops rodolphii</i>		1						
Red-cheeked Squirrel	<i>Dremomys rufigenis</i>			1			1		
Eastern Striped Squirrel	<i>Tamiops maritimus</i>				1				
Parti-coloured Flying Squirrel	<i>Hylopetes alboniger</i>						1		
Pygmy Slow Loris	<i>Nycticebus pygmaeus</i>		1						
Annam Silver Langur	<i>Trachypithecus margarita</i>		1						
Hatinh Langur	<i>Trachypithecus hatinhensis</i>							1?	1
Red-shanked Douc Langur	<i>Pygathrix nemaeus</i>					1		1	
Black-shanked Douc Langur	<i>Pygathrix nigripes</i>		1						
Buff-cheeked Gibbon	<i>Nomascus gabriellae</i>		1		h		h		
Pig-tailed Macaque	<i>Macaca nemestrina</i>		1						
Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>					1			
Stump-tailed Macaque	<i>Macaca arctoides</i>						1	1	

Common name	Scientific name	Dong Rai	Cat Tien	Di Linh	Da Lat	Da Nang	Bac Ma	Phong Na	Hatinh
Assamese Macaque	<i>Macaca assamensis</i>							1	
Short-tongued bat	<i>Cynopterus sp.</i>		1						
Least Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus pusillus</i>						1		
Horseshoe Bat 2	<i>Rhinolophus pearsonii</i>						?		