

Sierra Leone: 27th January – 10th February 2020

We'd been following with interest the various reports of trips to Sierra Leone that came about after Ben Schweinhart's 2016 report of hearing a pygmy hippo splash at Mahoi Bridge in Gola. It was clear that to stand any chance of spotting one you'd have to be in the right place, get lucky, and most importantly have a thermal camera. Thermal recently acquired, we planned a trip to Sierra Leone.

As you'll see, we didn't get lucky with either of the two megas (pygmy hippo or pangolin) and in general saw fewer ungulates than previous reports too. Nonetheless, our trip to Sierra Leone was fantastic and I'd be eager to go back.

Planning the trip wasn't the easiest of tasks, with many emails needing to be exchanged with contacts at Gola Rainforest National Park and the RSPB team they work with. They were, however, always extremely friendly and tried their hardest to help us. They also managed to sort us out with all internal transfers and accommodation and once in Sierra Leone everything ran rather smoothly. But plans for a particular day would change multiple times and it was sometimes difficult to pursue the particular activities that you actually wanted to do. The food was far more pleasant than expected from Jon's report – though I'd personally suggest you ask them to make yours WITHOUT the smoked fish. Unlike most previous mammal trips to Sierra Leone, we chose to spend a couple of nights in Lalehun for *Picathartes* (a bird) and were very pleased we did – a very cool animal, and a good place for some nice mammals. We also heard of another spot off Tiwai where a Japanese film crew had managed to get some shots of pygmy hippo and so tried our luck there too (with no success).

Guides-wise, we were shown around Gola itself by the two local guides that the RSPB use: Songe in Lalehun, and Ansu in Sileti – both were extremely hardworking, easy-going, and knew their monkeys ridiculously well. We very much enjoyed our time with them. For the trip to Mahoi Bridge/Transect 8, we were also joined by a ranger who spent his time either catching fish or smoking the fish he'd caught, and Bolu, who was officially the camp hand, but with Ansu carried almost all the equipment, and then scouted the areas in search of pygmy hippo dung. He clearly knew the forest like the back of his hand.

We'd arranged via info@tiwaiisland.org to spend four nights on Tiwai as we heard there was a chance at pygmy hippo there. In general, Tiwai felt like a place that had been once-loved, with great but run-down facilities. We'd heard mixed reports about Alusine as a guide, which matched our own experience. On trips looking for things that interested him his eyes would light up; he clearly had good local knowledge (easily finding us a couple of neat species – **rufous fishing owl**, **finfoot** – because he knew exactly where they'd be), and was our only guide who knew many of the birds. However, he also seemed to get easily bored when dad and I looked at forest birds, and more annoyingly, charged us far more than he had quoted for several of our trips. The manager of Tiwai seemed much easier to deal with, and I'd say try and book trips direct through him. You only need a guide for the boat-based trips as navigation through the transect grid of paths on the island is easy enough if you have a GPS (we had GPS coordinates for the sites where we saw some particular species, as well as a GPS network of maps – we can try to relocate those files and provide them if at all useful to anyone; just drop me an email).

Travel to Lalehun (Gola Central) 27th – 29th Jan

Dad and I got flights from Gatwick to Lungi with a 4h stop-off in Casablanca with Air Maroc, who were perfectly fine. The timings were handy in that we left London mid-afternoon for arrival in Lungi in the early hours of the following morning. We were met at the airport by Mohamed from the Lungi Airport Lodge (highly recommended – very friendly and easy-going, with pleasant rooms and good food) who

drove us and our bags the short distance to the lodge. The next morning we were met by Lumeh, the tour guide operator from Gola, and Joseph, our driver. The Landcruiser they came in was extremely comfortable and the driving safe. We were keen to drive straight to Lalehun (it's ~7h to Lalehun, and similar to Sileti), but were told this wasn't possible when in the UK. Lumeh said that he'd try to get us there in one day, but despite arriving in Kenema by lunch time, we were then told we couldn't go any further that day. Left to fend for ourselves for dinner, we wandered into town, which seemed perfectly safe, albeit we should probably have packed a torch or two for the walk back along a busy road with fast vehicles and excitingly landscaped pavements.

Lalehun (Gola Central) 29th-31st Jan

We set off the next morning to Lalehun. The drive was along much bumpier, but nonetheless easily passable, roads. The only mammal of note before we got there were several **striped ground squirrels** which ran out across the road, and an impressively large (if distinctly dead) **marsh cane rat** for sale by the side of it.

On arrival we met up with our local guide, Songe, and then headed out for a walk in the forest. This culminated in reaching a viewpoint perched on the top of an extremely large, dome-shaped slab of granite. From here, we had great view of **Diana monkeys** and **western red colobus**. After a late lunch, we headed to the nearer of the *Picathartes* sites to wait for the birds to return at dusk. As we got to the site, we were met by a very noisy group of **red colobus** which was fantastic, but unfortunately appeared to be the reason that the birds then didn't show up. We did spot a couple of nice mammals on the way out though: **spot-nosed monkeys** and a **green bush squirrel**. The walk back was in the dark. We heard many **western tree hyrax**, and easily found two **pottos** (their eyes so bright that they almost look like orange headlights shining back at you) as well as **Thomas' galago** (distinguished by their very high pitched call, and their preference for being quite high up - ~15m or so). There were also several **straw-coloured fruit bats** closer to the lodge. Dad and I took a short post dinner walk down the road that ends at the camp, which was well worth it: more **pottos**, three **Demidoff's galago** (lower pitched and much lower in the canopy), plus most excitingly **Nagtglas's African dormice** relatively low down on the main stem of an emergent tree.

The next morning we took a walk just before 7am again down the road, and mainly focussed on a large fruiting tree that was attracting a lot of activity. As well as a large number of hornbills, we had an **African giant squirrel** and a **red-legged sun squirrel**. We then returned and set off on what would be a day-long hike to a different *Picathartes* site. On the way out, we had fleeting views of **Campbell's monkey** (the ability of our guides to identify monkeys from brief and sometimes obscured views was a real plus) and two large groups of **Diana monkey**, plus a pair of **giant squirrels**.

Waiting for dusk, we took a brief walk round and heard **sooty mangabey** and **Campbell's monkeys** and Songe also showed us a gigantic hole – excavated by a **giant pangolin**. We returned to the *Picathartes* site and sat still from 1700 until they arrived an hour or so later with the light seriously fading. They were fantastic animals – chicken-sized, the shape of plump roadrunners, brightly coloured with yellow, almost plastic, head gear, and white breasts, long-jumping everywhere. Well worth the extra couple of nights in **Lalehun** and the walks and waits. We were also joined by a loud and large group of **black-and-white colobus** and for quite a while didn't know where to look!

The walk home, which took about three hours, was quite quiet, although what we did see was ace. An adult **Demidoff's galago** with three young ones in tow hopping about in the bushes, plus a few **Thomas'** too. Closer to camp, and high up, we had a fast-moving, large animal with a long tail and bright yellow

eyes near the top of the canopy. It turned out to be a **palm civet**. We were alerted to it by the very loud, distinctly eery, almost mournful, call it produced. Nearby, we had another mammal at the top of the canopy - white eyes from a larger-than-potto sized animal that was moving slowly. It clearly had no tail, was a brownish-grey colour, and had a Roman nose. We were pretty sure that despite the eye shine it was a **tree hyrax** and Songe thought so too. The creature was a rather unexpected highlight of our walk back.

The next morning we had another stroll along the entrance road. The time there were **Campbell's monkeys** in the fruiting tree, and nearer camp a **green tree squirrel**. Birds wise, a fly over from a pair of **bathawks** at 0710 was pretty great. After breakfast we set off for **Sileti**, a 2h30 drive along good roads. En route, we spotted **striped ground squirrels**, **fire-footed rope squirrels** and a **slender mongoose**. Very close to **Sileti** we also had a few **lesser spot-nosed monkeys**.

Sileti (including Mahoi bridge, and Transect 8; Gola South) 31st Jan-5th Feb

Having met our new local guide (Ansu) we spent the first afternoon/evening in Sileti walking to a lookout called the **picnic site**, from which a Japanese film crew had sighted pygmy hippo. It would turn out this crew had spent a long time and explored much of Gola and Tiwai, and so this may well not have been a particularly good indicator of a decent spot. Not long after leaving the lodge, we came across a group of **sooty mangabey** foraging on the ground with **spot-nosed** and **Campbell's monkeys** above them in the trees, as well as a **western palm squirrel**. Our time at the lookout was relatively short (we had stupidly forgotten batteries for some of our torches) but realistically any mammal activity below felt like a long shot anyway. Our long walk home was relatively quiet mammal-wise, and although **Buettikofer's singing fruit bat** were calling loudly nearby our two attempts to locate them were unsuccessful. We also saw three **Thomas' galagos** and a juvenile (<30cm) **black cobra** crossed the trail under our feet.

Our morning walk near camp was rather successful, with **Diana**, **spot-nosed** and **Campbell's monkeys** as well as **sooty mangabey** calling and two **giant squirrels**. We returned to camp, had a quick bite to eat, and then packed ready to head off to **Mahoi bridge**. The walk itself was straightforward enough – the first kilometre or so along a narrow-ish path in the forest, and then the rest along the old logging road – and we were there in just over two hours. The spot itself is really rather beautiful, though there was a lot of human activity in the area (plenty of fishermen visible from the bridge) and so again it seemed an unlikely spot for a hippo to want to hang out. We spent an hour or so that evening walking away from the bridge, in the opposite direction to the main camp, which produced some more good view of **Thomas' galago**. Back at the tents the **hammer-headed bats** were easy enough to find from their ridiculously loud calls, though they were (even red) light shy and so good views were a little difficult to get. The following morning, we had a quick walk back in the direction of camp. Ansu once again found us **spot-nosed** monkeys, and we heard **Campbell's** too. We also managed to see (and confidently ID) a **western palm squirrel** and a **slender-tailed squirrel**. The latter was charcoal-coloured, with a HB length of ~25cm and a noticeably longer (~30cm) tail. Sadly, we also heard four gunshots not far from us: poachers, probably targeting monkeys. After a really rather tasty fish stew breakfast, we packed up and headed to **Transect 8** – the location Jon had seen his hippo.

The walk to T8 was 2km back along the logging road, and then a ~600m walk along a slightly rough path. T8 camp is again in a ridiculously beautiful spot, again perched just above the river, meaning a convenient location for a forest-style bath. The climate was so warm and sweaty that being able to wash frequently was much appreciated! Bolu – who was apparently with us as the person to look after camp and cook – was extremely knowledgeable about the forest, and clearly took great pride in his job. Once camp was set

up, he went off in search of signs of hippo while Sagba (the forest ranger) went and fished. Bolu returned later that afternoon having found hippo scat and prints on the bank opposite. Excitedly, we crossed the river and checked out the latrine and prints and found an appropriate place to base ourselves for the night. Bolu reckoned the evidence was a week old or so, though to us it looked fresher (more like 3-4 days).

At dusk, we crossed back to the hippo print side and placed our mattresses ~10m back from the bank. We took turns being awake for the duration of the night, checking the river and surroundings every 10mins or so with the thermal. We again had **Thomas' galago** and **potto** but the highlight of the night was what we eventually decided was a **Pel's anomalure**. The animal glided in and to a tree at ~23:30 where we had good views for about 10 mins. It was black on its upperparts, with the exception of a rather indistinct patch of grey narrowing from its nape down its spine. It had a uniformly black tail (unlike Lord Derby's). It was white on both surfaces of the plagiopatagium and belly. It appeared larger than both other species, and with a broader, less elongated face than the Lord Derby's and especially the Beecroft's.¹ Looking at the Handbook of Mammals of the World plate and at figs. 1 and 2 in Schunke and Hutterer (2005, downloadable from researchgate [here](#)), the animal looked like a *ssp auzembergeri* but with the white membrane of *ssp peralbus*. Frustratingly, because we'd had to wade across quite deep water to cross the river, we hadn't brought our camera, so this account is based on detailed notes made the next morning.

After checking the latrines in daylight and finding no fresh hippo evidence, and having been told by Sagba of another hippo site accessible from Tiwai, we decided rather than spend another night in the forest to head back to the main camp, in the hope that we might be able to find a pangolin. The walk home was again straightforward, and made nicer as we heard **Diana** and **Campbell's monkey** and **sooty mangabey**, as well as a small ungulate moving through the forest understorey which from based on sound alone Ansu thought likely to be a **Maxwell's duiker**. We also saw an obliging group of **black-and-white colobus** near the main camp which were much more used to people than the others we'd seen.

We spent the next two nights pottering around the farmbrush that was on the boundary of the park, and the local community forests, as Ansu felt this likely the best area to look for **pangolin**. Access was back along the track to the guesthouse and then left along the main road. Unfortunately, we would hear another gunshot (though possibly outside the park) and have no luck with the **pangolins**, but we did get rather lucky with a whole load of other creatures. **Demidoff's** and **Thomas' galagos** were common, as were **potto**. I had another fleeting sighting of a **slender mongoose** too, and we flushed one antelope in the farmbrush though again none of us were able to see it. We also saw an **African civet** walking along the main road, and a **palm civet** in the trees along the track between the road and lodge. The highlight was a **Beecroft's anomalure** ~20m up a tree in the **Jeneva village community forest**. This was strikingly different to our Mahoi anomalure, with greyish-orange upperparts, orange belly, an elongated muzzle and a relatively thin tail. The low-point of these nights was returning home at around 02:00 to find the guesthouse had become home to a marauding swarm of black ants. An hour – and several litres of diesel applied to the walls and floors by **Lumeh** – later, and the ants were gone and we were finally able to get some shut-eye, waking the next morning with only mild fume-induced headaches.

Morning walks were spent wandering the **Mahoi road** in the hope we might bump into an ungulate. We didn't. It seemed to us that Sileti had, rather sadly, was probably experiencing upturn in poaching. That matched what the our guides were telling us, as well as the gunshots we heard and the conspicuous lack

¹ In comparison to the photos of Jon's mystery anomalure (<https://www.mammalwatching.com/2017/04/13/mystery-anomalure/>) our animal was black rather than grey on top, with the white of the underside extending to the upper surface of the membrane. The head and tail both appeared uniformly black.

of ungulates. On our first morning, we saw **striped ground squirrel** and **Campbell's Monkey** (hearing **Diana monkey** and **Sooty mangabey** too). And on our last morning in Sileti we managed to get a good (if fleeting) view of an **Olive colobus** along with more **Diana monkeys**, an **African giant squirrel** and a **red-legged sun squirrel**.

Tiwai Island 5th – 9th Feb

The drive from Sileti to Kambama - the departure point for Tiwai - was uneventful, with the only mammal being more striped ground squirrels. After getting a boat across the Moa River, Alusine showed us our room in the research station and we caught up on sleep for a few hours.

During the next three days there we went on a couple of guided morning walks and canoe and boat trips with Alusine, as well as self-guided strolls both in the morning, afternoon, and after dark. I'd recommend taking an initial morning walk with Alusine to familiarise yourself with the very simple path network (it's just grids) but if you do that, and take a GPS then you'll be OK to guide yourself about, and won't lose anything without having Alusine. He's obviously essential for boat trips, which were a good way of seeing other species. You can also set small mammal traps – we put out five – and caught a **western brush-furred rat**.

Across the daytime walks we saw most of the frequently encountered species at Gola: **spot-nosed, Diana, and Campbell's monkeys; black-and-white and red colobus; African giant, fire-footed rope, and striped ground squirrel**; and additionally heard **sooty mangabey**. At the far end of the island we heard the **chimps** each morning, though we never saw them. On one morning walk, I managed to catch the back end of a group of three or four **red river hog** and on our way home also a **common cusimanse** foraging in a palm grove. Both sightings of these were quite fleeting. In the clearing around the research station we saw an **Egyptian cobra**.

The boat and canoe trips were excellent for seeing birds (loads of kingfisher species, the **finfoot** and **rufous fishing owl** plus **Egyptian plover**), and we also saw quite a few of the monkeys and squirrels from them. Alusine tried several times to find us pygmy hippo, showing us a series of latrine sites along the south-western shore of the island. We also specifically used a last boat trip to look for **green monkey** – and Alusine found one rather easily

During night walks, we saw a **Lord Derby's Anomalure** (with a mid-grey back, and a clearly black-tipped tail – in contrast to the Mahoi bridge animal) between the research station and the campsite. Other mammals included a probable **tree hyrax**, and a **Miller's striped mouse** just around dark. **Thomas' galago, palm civets, and straw-coloured fruit bats** were all quite common.

Alusine mentioned a spot back on the mainland that was a possible place to look for **pygmy hippo** - near a village called **Segbema**, accessed by walking to the south-east shore of the island and then crossing in a canoe before a short walk to the river. We gave it a go on our last night, but unfortunately without success. We did however see **western palm squirrel** on the walk there and several (unidentified) large bats seemingly fishing over the river pool.

Summing up, we thoroughly enjoyed our time in Sierra Leone, and I'd go back like a shot to Gola to try again for **pygmy hippo** and **pangolin**. It's (as we expected) quite hard work to look for creatures, and organise activities, but well worth it once you're there.

Mammals (34 species)

Western tree hyrax	<i>heard at all sites, seen at Lalehun and (probably) Tiwai</i>
(Western chimpanzee	<i>Tiwai, heard only)</i>
Olive colobus	<i>Sileti, once only</i>
Western red colobus	<i>Lalehun, Tiwai</i>
Western black-and-white /King colobus	<i>Lalehun, Sileti, Tiwai</i>
Sooty mangabey	<i>Sileti, and heard at Lalehun and Tiwai</i>
Green monkey	<i>Tiwai, once only on a boat trip</i>
Diana monkey	<i>Lalehun, Mahoi Bridge, Sileti, Tiwai</i>
Campbell's monkey	<i>Lalehun, Sileti, Mahoi Bridge, Tiwai</i>
Lesser spot-nosed monkey	<i>Lalehun, Sileti, Mahoi Bridge</i>
Potto	<i>Lalehun, Sileti</i>
Demidoff's galago	<i>Lalehun, Mahoi Bridge, Sileti</i>
Thomas' galago	<i>Lalehun, Mahoi Bridge, Sileti, T8 transect, Tiwai</i>
Red-legged sun squirrel	<i>Lalehun</i>
African giant squirrel	<i>Lalehun, Sileti, Tiwai</i>
Slender-tailed squirrel	<i>Mahoi Bridge, only once</i>
Western palm squirrel	<i>Sileti</i>
Fire-footed rope squirrel	<i>crossing Lalehun–Sileti road, Tiwai</i>
Green bush squirrel	<i>Lalehun only</i>
Striped ground squirrel	<i>common on roads; also Lalehun, Sileti, Tiwai</i>
Nagtglas' African dormouse	<i>Lalehun, alongside main track ~300m before camp</i>
Lord Derby's anomalure	<i>Tiwai, once only</i>
Pel's anomalure	<i>T8 transect, once only</i>
Beecroft's anomalure	<i>Jeneva Community Forest, near Sileti, once only</i>
Western (rusty-bellied) brush-furred rat	<i>Tiwai (trapped in Research Station clearing)</i>
Miller's (= Liberian) striped mouse	<i>Tiwai</i>
Straw-coloured fruit bat	<i>Lalehun, Tiwai</i>
Hammer-headed fruit bat	<i>lek at Mahoi Bridge, single at Sileti</i>
(Buettikofer's singing fruit bat	<i>heard only, near Sileti picnic area, in twos and threes)</i>
African palm civet	<i>Lalehun, Sileti, Tiwai</i>
African civet	<i>on main road at Sileti, once only</i>
Slender mongoose	<i>Lalehun-Sileti road + farmbush near Sileti, Ben only</i>
Common cusimanse	<i>Tiwai, once, Ben only</i>
Red river hog	<i>Tiwai, once, Ben only (Andrew heard)</i>

+ unidentified long-tailed mouse (Tiwai), pygmy hippo prints and latrine (Transect 8, Tiwai and Segbema), forest buffalo prints and dung (lookout near Lalehun), old giant pangolin burrow (Lalehun), and marsh cane rat and bushbuck offered as bushmeat (main road from Lungi)

Birds (113 species)

Little grebe
Long-tailed cormorant
White-crested tiger heron (Segbema)
Green-backed heron
Cattle egret
Black heron
Little egret
Intermediate egret
Great egret
Hadada ibis
Woolly-necked stork
Abdim's stork (overhead at Lalehun)
White-faced whistling duck
Osprey
Palm-nut vulture
Hooded vulture
Bat hawk (Lalehun)
Yellow-billed kite
African harrier-hawk
Long-crested eagle
Lizard buzzard
Shikra
Red-thighed sparrowhawk
Crowned eagle (Tiwai)
African hobby
Crested guineafowl
Latham's forest francolin
African finfoot (Tiwai)
African jacana
Egyptian plover (Tiwai)
Rock pratincole (Tiwai, Segbema)
White-headed lapwing
Green sandpiper
Common sandpiper
Rock dove
Laughing dove (heard only)
Red-eyed dove
Blue-spotted wood-dove
Tambourine dove
Timneh parrot (Tiwai, Segbema)
Yellow-billed touraco
Great blue touraco
Red-chested cuckoo (heard only)
African emerald cuckoo (heard only)
Yellowbill
Senegal coucal
Rufous fishing owl (Tiwai)
African wood owl (heard only)
Plain nightjar
Long-tailed nightjar
African palm swift
Little swift
Common swift
African pygmy kingfisher
Malachite kingfisher
Shining-blue kingfisher
Woodland kingfisher
Blue-breasted kingfisher
Giant kingfisher
Little bee-eater
White-throated bee-eater
Broad-billed roller
Red-billed dwarf hornbill (roosting near Lalehun)
White-crested hornbill (Sileti)
African pied hornbill
Piping hornbill
Brown-cheeked hornbill
Black-casqued hornbill
Yellow-casqued hornbill
Speckled tinkerbird
Yellow-rumped tinkerbird (heard only)
Buff-spotted woodpecker
Little green woodpecker
Grey woodpecker
Fire-bellied woodpecker
African pitta (roosting near Sileti)
Rock martin
Rufous-chested swallow
Barn swallow
White-throated blue swallow
African pied wagtail
White wagtail
Swamp palm bulbul
Western bearded greenbul
Common bulbul
Western nicator (heard only)
Tawny flanked prinia
Grey-backed camaroptera
Yellow-browed camaroptera

Grey longbill
White-browed forest flycatcher
Cassin's flycatcher
Red-bellied paradise-flycatcher (Ben only)
West African wattle-eye
White-necked picathartes (Lalehun)
Olive sunbird
Brown sunbird
Tiny sunbird
Common fiscal
Red-billed helmetsrike
Western black-headed oriole
Shining drongo
Pied crow
Forest chestnut-winged starling
Northern grey-headed sparrow
Blue-billed malimbe
Red-headed malimbe
Red-vented malimbe
Black-necked weaver
Village weaver
Common waxbill
Western bluebill (Ben only)
Bronze mannikin

PLATE 14

inches 4
cm 10

