

BENIN 6 -10 December 2018

Last year I saw on my Guenon Conservation Community site that I follow on Facebook, that they were posting about locations in Benin to see primates. Benin had not been on my radar to visit, until I read about spots to see the beautiful Red Bellied (also called White Throated) Guenon, a species I thought I would never add to my primate list. I convinced a friend of mine to tag a few days to our Paris winter break vacation to go primate watching. I was not disappointed.

I did research trying to find a company that would organize a primate watching trip to Benin on the internet. I found a company called Lirokotours (lirokotours.com) that offers a 3 day/2 night Culture and Monkey Watching tour. The company is run and owned by Dosseh “Jacques” Houessou (alluminance@gmail.com). He is based in Cotonou, Benin and seems to have all the connections to run tours all over the country. He is also very friendly and willing to set up anything I asked for, is quick to respond to emails, and was willing to make last minute changes to an itinerary. I can highly recommend him.

It seems currently there are five main wildlife watching areas in Benin that you can visit easily.

1. Drabo Forest Sanctuary - this is a restored 14 hectare forest that is an easy day trip from Cotonou. For the past twenty years invasive plants were removed, and 253 species of native plants were re-introduced into the area. This is also the place to see Red Bellied Guenon up close. Note the founder animals were re-introduced from the bush meat trade, however they have been breeding successively for years.
2. Jardin des Plantes et de la Nature in Porto-Novo - also an easy day trip from Cotonou. This botanical garden has a wild population of very habituated Mona monkeys.
3. Gnanhouizounme sacred forest - this is a community project with two villages helping protect local wildlife. It is a stronghold for Mona monkeys, Red Bellied Guenons, Western Sitatunga and River Hogs in Benin.
4. Kikele Sacred Forest - another community project. This is a good spot for White Thighed colobus and Mona monkeys.

5. Pendjari National Park - located in the Northwestern part of Benin. Recently falling under the management of African Parks, it holds a large portion of the West African lion and elephant populations. From what I have read and been told, the government of Benin has stepped up to help protect the area.

I did see multiple signs by lakes for African Manatee. While I did not meet anyone who had seen any, my friend who works with the species stated there is a large population in the country.

I was also told from August - November you can go whale watching from Cotonou. It looks like mainly to see Humpback whales

I visited the first three areas. I had seen White thighed colobus well in Ghana so did not include Kikele. In retrospect I wish I had more time that I could have visited Penjari. It would be a place to go back to in the future.

Jaques organized the wildlife watching portion of the trip with Mariano Hounbedji who is a biologist with the Organisation pour le Developpement Durable et la Biodiversite. Hands down he is one of my favorite humans on the planet. A primate lover (as all good mammal watchers should be), he is "The" go to person for Red Bellied Guenons. He works with wildlife education in the country, gives lectures around the world, and helps monitor wildlife populations in the country. I wish I could take him everywhere to watch primates with me.

I did take Malarone while on my trip, but in December the mosquitos were not bad.

Day 1 - I flew from Paris to Cotonou on an Air France Flight that was 10 hours late leaving.... We arrived into Cotonou around 1:30 am. Jaques had set up a driver to meet us at the airport and take us to Maison Rouge Hotel which is located about 2 minutes from the airport. I had picked the hotel after doing additional online research and can highly recommend it. The only mammals I saw were micro bats flying over the pool. The hotel is higher on the price side for Benin, but I thought was worth it. It is beautiful as it is decorated with art from all over the country, has a wonderful staff, and some of the best food I ate in Benin. Note however I have had multiple tour guides tell me Americans care more about where they stay than other nationalities. I have to admit I fall under this stereotype.

Day 2 - We had about 5 hours to sleep until we were picked up by Mariano and our driver. Our first stop was the Drabo Forest. As soon as we got there Red Bellied guenons were waiting for us on a stone wall that surrounds a house in the village in the forest. There were two groups. The first were very habituated and allowed close up views for photography. They mainly stayed around a large house in the village. The second group was much shyer and were located in a small forest patch in the village. I had brief views of some females from this troop. We went on a small hike around some forest patches and were able to stay with the guenons for as long as we wanted. They were building rooms in the village so researchers and guests could spend the night. While these are from an introduced population, I enjoyed watching the guenons up closer as I had only seen the species in pictures.





After the Drabo forest and lunch, we drove to the botanical gardens to see the Mona monkeys. The gardens historically was a sacred site in Benin, then was taken over by the French during colonization and turned into botanical gardens. The Mona monkeys are a relic population left in the gardens as the forests around it were turned into housing areas. The gardens do have



guides (who only speak French) who took us around and showed us some the plants used for medicine and used for fetishes in Voodoo rituals. Benin being in the heart of western Africa where voodoo started. We were taken to one tree that was used as an execution site.

Blood from the victims later used in rituals. Once we got to the gardens Mariano did inform the guides that the monkeys were the most important things to find. After a ten minute search we found a family group relaxing



in a tree in the middle of there gardens. We stayed with them for an extended period of time as they were also very habituated. After being at the botanical gardens we spent the night in a hotel complex called Songhai located in Porto-Novo. Started by a priest from Nigeria, the compound has a farm to table outlook and everything is grown on the property. They also make soaps and cleaning products that they sell in a small gift shop on the property. I did not see any wild mammals here.





Day 3 - we drove for about 3 hours to start the journey to the Gnanhouizounme Sacred Forest. This is a project Mariano has been working on in depth. There are two village portions there that are working to help protect wildlife. It is one of the strongholds for Western Sinitunga, has a large population of red river hogs (I saw tracks of both multiple times) and has wild Mona and Red Bellied guenons. The wildlife there is still pretty shy as I think hunting was a previous problem there, but luckily this has stopped. To get there we had to take a motorbike ride, then cross a river in a canoe, then walk a few meters to the start of the villages. They have nearly completed a building that has private rooms and en suite toilets, but as it was not completely functional when I was there, so we ended up camping in front of the building. We were able to use the western toilets however in the building. One of the local families was supplied with food to cook for us. We spent the first afternoon hiking in a

forest area outside one of the villages that included a flooded forest segment, followed by the second forest segment that was dryer by the second village. We could hear primates but did not see them. I did see several Thomas's rope squirrels in a small garden in the second village. Mariano informed me that Thomas's galago were easy to see in the villages at night and that was an understatement. As soon as it got dark, I watched two emerge in the trees above my tent. They later, in typical galago fashion for me, decided wrestling and vocalizing above my tent at 1 am was a good idea. We went on a night walk and easily saw 15 more



galagos, as well as seeing some slit faced bats in a bathroom (with some very large lizards) by the local school. Mariano did say that he has sent pictures of the bats to Afribat, but until measurements can be taken, the exact species identification is still open. At night we also heard the “beautiful” sleep soothing vocalizations of Western tree hyraxes. Mariano told me they are currently being studied and may be up for a species split soon.





Day 4 - We woke up before sunrise to hike into one of the forests to try to see monkeys as they were waking up. I saw multiple large fruit eating bats in trees, but every time I tried to take a picture they would fly away. I maybe saw 2-3 different species. We did manage to find a troop of mixed Mona and Red Bellied Guenons. The views were brief however as the monkeys bolted as soon as they saw us. After hiking we went back, had lunch, and went back to Cotonou to spend the afternoon to relax in the Maison Rouge Hotel pool.

Day 5 - We spent the culture part of our trip visiting the lake village of Ganvie which I will not describe in detail as I did not see any mammals.

Overall Benin is a wonderful place to visit. The majority of people there went out of their way to be friendly, especially in the village where we spent the night. I think for primate lovers it makes a good trip by itself or to combine with other places in West Africa.

Species

1. Red Bellied (White throated) Guenon - *Cercopithecus erythrogaster*
2. Mona Monkey - *Cercopithecus mona*
3. Thomas's Rope Squirrel - *Funisciurus anerythrus*
4. Thomas's Galago - *Galagoides thomasi*
5. Slit Faced bat - unknown species