

Trip Report - Côte d'Ivoire, March 2022

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Tai National Park has been on my list of places to visit for more than 20 years, but I guess not previously high enough on the list for me to actually make it there. After a planned trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo fell through in early January I was scrambling to find a consolation trip. At about the same time, I'd been communicating with Thomas Clode of Pictus Safaris about various places and he mentioned an upcoming trip of his to Tai National Park. Further research revealed the possibility of finding a number of species I'd not seen before and thanks to Tom's advice and suggestions a trip plan was quickly pulled together.

I went on the Côte d'Ivoire government website and immediately regretted purchasing an air ticket. I discovered that a negative COVID19 PCR test was required within 48 hours of departure from the country, but these were only obtainable at specified official government clinics and they could not guarantee that results would be available within 48 hours. I also discovered that a "déclaration aéroportuaire" for Côte d'Ivoire was required prior to boarding my flight from Canada. This necessitated payment of about three euros for processing. The website did not accept my Visa card, so at 3:00 am I

phoned the Snedai group in Côte d'Ivoire to ask how I could provide payment. They told me that they often had difficulty with Visa cards issued in North America and asked if I had a friend in Côte d'Ivoire who could provide a mobile money account to pay for this processing fee. Not actually having any friends in Côte d'Ivoire I was a bit flummoxed until I hit upon the idea of contacting Hotel Blawa, my hotel for the first night in Côte d'Ivoire. Little did I know that my guardian angel is actually a middle-aged French guy running a hotel in Abidjan. Mr. Jose took down my details and an hour or two later emailed me the completed air declaration form free of charge. My spirits rose considerably.

After the usual mad rush to catch the ferry from Victoria I made it to Vancouver airport with plenty of time. The airline check-in person clearly had no idea where Abidjan or, in fact, Côte d'Ivoire was located, which heightened the sense of adventure. Flights were on time and I arrived in Abidjan about 1:20 in the morning. Having heard some horror stories about West African bureaucracy I was expecting the worst but was pleasantly surprised. My preparatory E-visa documents were accepted, I was fingerprinted and a visa was printed off expeditiously. In the lineup for passport control I was fingerprinted again and had a photo taken, to be followed by a rapid antigen COVID19 swab, a check that the tags on my baggage corresponded to the luggage tags stuck to my boarding pass, a quick pass through an x-ray scanner and I was in Côte d'Ivoire. Mr. Jose was waiting and within 15 minutes we were at Hotel Blawa. In fact, I was so relaxed I overslept the next morning and only narrowly avoided missing my flight to San-Pedro. In San-Pedro I received a text that there was suspicion of a COVID19 outbreak at Ecotel Touraco and they were cancelling reservations for the following week. I contacted Tom Clode who was actually at Ecotel Touraco. He was having a beer on the deck and reported that nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Having difficulty reconciling these mutually incompatible pieces of news I went for a long walk on the beach and decided that I would head for Tai village at the north end of the park the following day, spend a few days there and hope that Ecotel Touraco would admit to being open the following week.

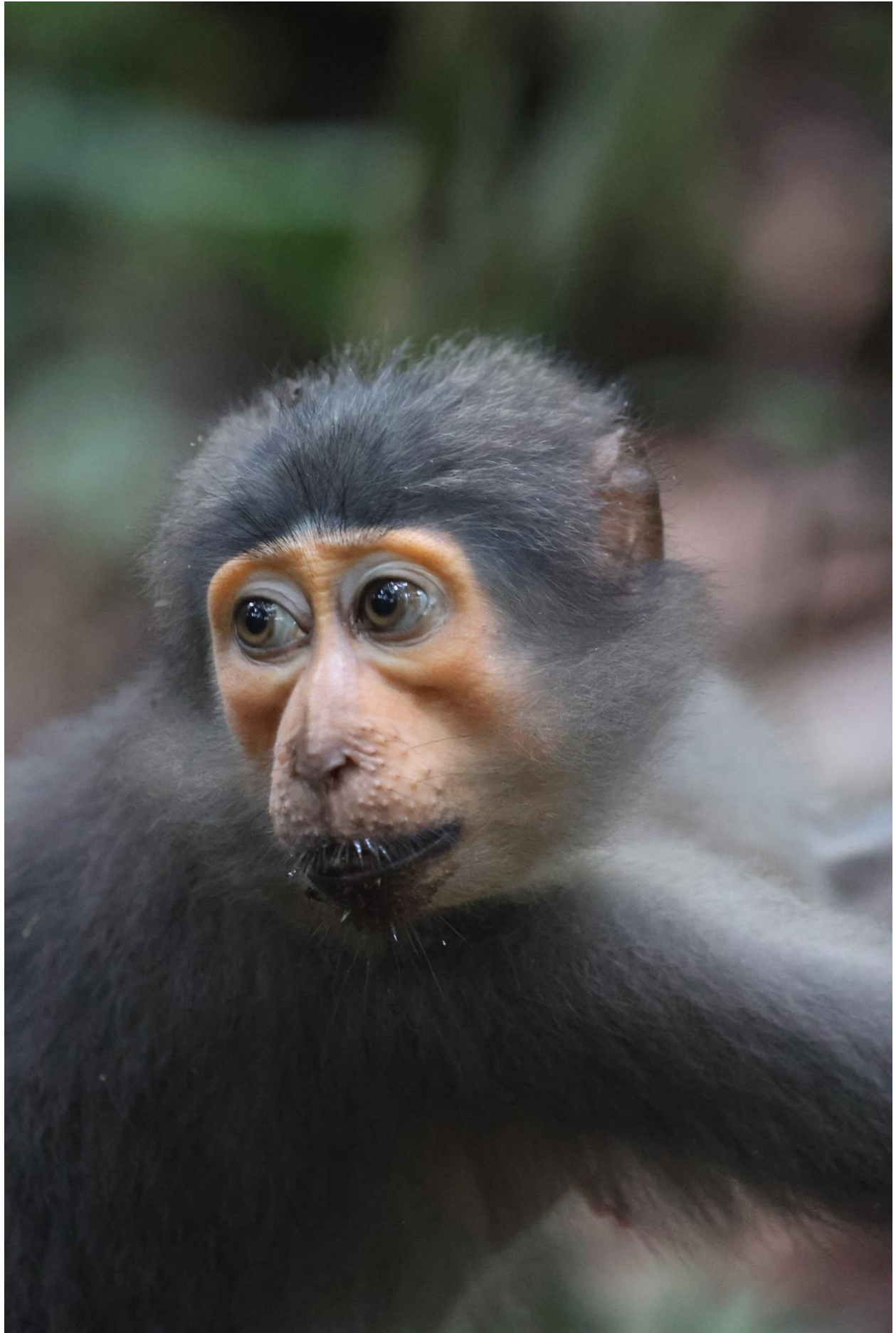
I found a vehicle and driver the next day for the 8.5 hour drive to Tai village. Apart from one broken belt on the car the drive was reasonably uneventful. There were numerous police and army checkpoints along the road, ostensibly because of the presence of rebels loyal to former president Laurent Gbagbo on the Liberian side of the border. I arrived at Tai village about 6:00 pm and was greeted by Marianne from Tai National Park. She suggested meeting at 8:30 in the morning to get a lift 20 minutes down the road to the spot where the hike into Camp Mangabey starts. I inquired if we could leave earlier but was politely rebuffed. The obligatory COVID19 screening test, drive around town to pick up assorted provisions, etc. meant that it took us until about 11:30 to reach the start of the hike. Given the midday heat and humidity we not unexpectedly saw little on the hike in. Arriving at Camp Mangabey I was greeted by the first mammal of the trip, a Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey in a tree immediately over the tent. The tents at Camp Mangabey were significantly more comfortable than I was expecting - large canvas safari tents on cement bases with washrooms behind. In keeping with my general dining experience in former French colonies versus former British ones, lunch was fantastic – avocado salad with baguette and chicken with rice and greens. A short afternoon walk revealed good but distant views of King/Western Black-and-white Colobus monkeys. I was hoping to do a night walk but was told by my guide, Vincent, that these were not allowed except with previous permission from the coordinator of Ecotourism Tai. This was extremely disappointing, as I had hoped to be able to sort something out upon arrival.

After an early breakfast, we headed out to find the habituated troop of Sooty Mangabeys. Our first primate sighting was actually of Diana monkeys, followed by more Western Black-and-white Colobus.

Eventually we reached a troupe of about 60 Sooty Mangabeys which allowed for close views. A young Maxwell's Duiker wandered into the group of monkeys to be patted on the rump by one of the mangabeys. Heading back to camp we had our first sighting of Western Red Colobus Monkeys and also a Fire-footed Rope Squirrel. A walk later that morning revealed more of the same species and on our afternoon hike we saw yet more Red Colobus and a large Nile Monitor lizard and also observed signs of Leopard, Red River Hog and elephant.







Next morning I was up that 5:10 am and had a quick look around camp before dawn but saw no mammals. On our morning hike to a large inselberg we noted previously seen primate species as well as two new squirrel species, Punctate/Small Sun Squirrel and Red-legged Sun Squirrel, and a brief sighting of a Slender mongoose. These were dramatically overshadowed by a conversation with a French employee of Ecotourism Tai, Max, who told me about hearing a strange noise a couple of weeks previously, wandering over to a small pond and coming face-to-face with a Pygmy Hippo at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. He showed me the photo he took on his phone which is probably the best photo I've seen to date of a Pygmy Hippo in the wild.





The next morning I got up about 1:00 am to have a look around camp and found an Emin's Pouched Rat. I then set off with Vincent and Max to check on some camera traps. The batteries were dead in the first camera trap and the second one had gone missing. If, as was likely, the camera trap been removed by poachers it was significantly concerning as the camera was well off the trail and would seem to indicate pretty thorough covering of the ground by poachers. On the way back I found a hollow stump with mother and baby Hipposideros/Leaf-nosed Bats inside. We heard some Campbell's and Lesser Spot-nosed Monkeys, and, as we wandered over, a Black Duiker bolted near a large fallen tree. Traces of animals seen on the hike included Forest Elephant (dung and tracks), Bongo (dung), Leopard (scrapes), Red River Hog (diggings), and Common Chimpanzee (tools and pounding stones). A walk after lunch revealed Stampfli's Putty-nosed Monkey as well as previously seen primate species. A couple of animals were moving high in the trees around camp that night, likely genets, but I was unable to identify them to the species level. Max agreed to go on a night hike with me which provided good views of a Tree Civet as well as Demidoff's Galagos.





The next day only previously-seen species were encountered while the following day produced the first Slender-tailed Squirrel and African Giant Squirrels of the trip. Feeling somewhat cabin-feverish from the lack of night hikes I awoke just after midnight and left camp for an hour-and-a-half non-approved hike. Apart from some unidentifiable bats flying around I saw absolutely nothing, which I suppose serves me right.

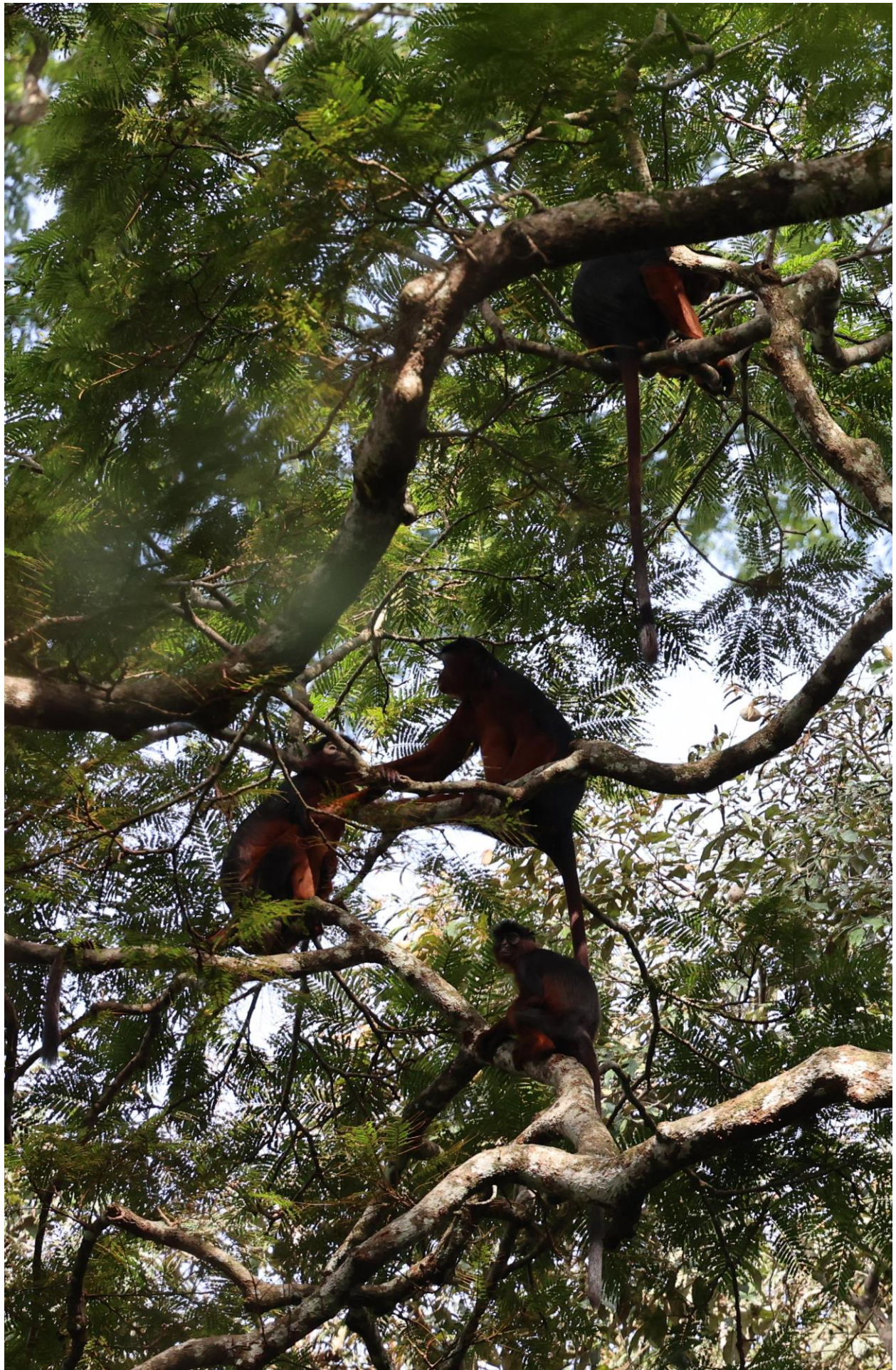
We hiked back to the waiting vehicle early the next morning and were back in Tai village about 9:20 am. The bill for my stay at the camp had mysteriously crept up a couple of hundred dollars, a situation which was eventually resolved with a phone call to the Ecotourism Tai coordinator in Abidjan. I hadn't yet received word on whether Ecotel Touraco was open or not and was unable to contact anyone there but I was ready enough to leave that I decided to take my chances. The only vehicular option turned out to be a motorcycle so I stuck my bags on the back of one and took off with the driver, Christian. As before there were numerous police and army checkpoints along the road, at some of which folks demanded money - most likely for my mangling of the French language.

Ecotel Touraco turned out to be lovely. I was so parched I had lost the power of speech but was quickly revived with hibiscus drink and some cold water. No one was expecting me but I was told it would be

fine to stay and a guide was rustled up. We started with a boat trip on the Hana River watching the kingfishers and hornbills. We then did a hike along a trail which delineated a plantation from the edge of the National Park. We saw abundant tracks of elephant, buffalo and Pygmy Hippo and heard Campbell's monkeys but weren't able to see them. Supper, consisting of chicken and green beans, was delicious. I would have had a delightfully uninterrupted night's sleep had I not forgotten to turn off my alarm set for 12:30 am.

The next morning we started the eight kilometre hike to Camp Chimpanzee. We heard Diana monkeys and then saw a Green Bush Squirrel. A noise by the side of the trail caused us to hike into the bush and wait 15 minutes or so. We were rewarded by the sight of a pair of Zebra Duikers running past at close range. The name doesn't do these animals justice. Perhaps Tiger Duiker would be better. They are incredibly beautiful and I was too mesmerized to even think of lifting the camera. We arrived at Camp Chimpanzee about 11:00 am. Walking around camp revealed recent Pygmy Hippo sign. After a delicious lunch and a brief nap we left about 3:00 pm and soon saw both of the previous colobus species as well as a Brooke's Duiker. It started to rain heavily about 6:00 pm and we arrived back at camp absolutely soaked an hour later. I dozed off and on until about 10:00 pm, by which time the rain had essentially stopped and we headed out again. We spotted Maxwell's Duiker just outside the campsite but my camera lens was so foggy I couldn't keep up with cleaning and the pictures look like a Maxwell Duiker shot in a luxuriant underwater garden. A little further we found an obliging Tree Civet on a liana and then a Pardine Genet with prominent white facial markings and a tail more black than white. The next genet was seen too briefly to identify. Around midnight we arrived at the spot where Tom Clode had recently just missed a Pygmy Hippo where we waited for a while but without success. On the way back we saw a Pel's Anomalure and another genet.







The next morning turned out to be an exceptionally good one for primates. Western Red Colobus, Western Black-and-white Colobus, Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey, Sooty Mangabey, Diana monkey, and Campbell's monkey were all seen and another Slender-tailed Squirrel rounded out the morning's mammal list. We did a brief stakeout at the spot where one of the guides had recently seen a Pygmy Hippo but with no results. Back for another delicious lunch and then spent the early part of the afternoon trying to dry out my incredibly wet clothing. As the humidity level in Tai never seems to drop much below 100% this was an exercise in futility. The afternoon's walk continued well into the evening, returning about 10:30 pm. Several Maxwell's Duikers were seen as well as numerous galagos and a genet that appeared different to previous ones. Thanks to the help of Tom Clode this was identified as Johnston's Genet. Perhaps the best of my collection of bad photos of this genet appears below.



The next morning we went to find the habituated group of chimpanzees still at their night nest site, leaving about 4:30 am. We saw a number of galagos and then a Bay Duiker close to the trail. An Emin's Pouched Rat crossed the trail and a couple of Maxwell's Duikers were seen well. We arrived at the chimpanzees just as they were starting to rise. The males came down to the ground first and started using rocks to crack open nuts and then the others descended. We spent a couple of hours just watching the chimpanzees going about their business, particularly the young ones annoying each other while the adults looked on tolerantly. Close to camp on the way back Blais, the guide, saw a Yellow-backed Duiker crashing away through the bushes.



We hiked back to Ecotel Touraco for lunch and I then departed via moto-taxi for Tai. At the various police and army stops my driver's stories became increasingly elaborate. I was a volunteer at the park whose assistance was so urgently needed in Tai that he had borrowed a motorcycle to convey me, as his had broken down. This extreme degree of urgency was the reason he had no papers, neither of us had helmets, various safety features of the bike didn't function, etc. This technique worked surprisingly well, as I noted he paid fewer fees than the driver on the trip south had paid, although a couple of police officers thought it was dangerous for a tourist not to be wearing a helmet. Why it wasn't equally dangerous for others not to wear helmets remained unclear to me, but I focused on playing the assigned role of urgently-needed and vital volunteer.



We eventually arrived in Tai village and I bought a ticket for the bus trip to Abidjan the next day. The bus was remarkable for its degree of advanced decrepitude but made it safely back to Abidjan with just one breakdown and one flat tire.

My last couple of days in Abidjan were largely uneventful. I spent much of the first day at Banco National Park on the outskirts of Abidjan but saw little in the way of mammals apart from a squirrel. Going to the Plateau district for dinner, however, revealed hundreds of Straw-coloured Fruit Bats roosting in the trees and flying around at dusk.

Both Canada and Côte d'Ivoire lifted their COVID19 PCR testing requirements while I was there, so I needed only a rapid antigen test prior to my flight home. Côte d'Ivoire's rapid antigen testing speed must be the envy of the world. I had barely left the examination room and returned to my seat in the waiting room when I was presented with my negative test result documentation. I spent the remainder of the day at the old colonial port of Grand Bassam. Returning to Hotel Blawa that evening I found Mr. Jose working his magic for someone else. A young Gambian man who had been working in the UK was returning to the Gambia but only had 3 months' validity left on his passport rather than 6 so the authorities were demanding \$500.00 USD to rectify the issue. A flurry of phone calls seemed to result in success and we all had a beer to celebrate before heading to the airport.

In all, it was a hugely worthwhile trip. I would like to thank Tom Clode for his thorough and very helpful advice and Mr. Jose for a whole range of assistance. The humidity-induced skin chafing and insect bites are fading but the warm memories of Côte d'Ivoire remain fresh.

List of Mammals seen:

1. Common Chimpanzee – *Pan troglodytes*
2. Western Red/Bay Colobus – *Piliocolobus badius*
3. Western Black-and-white/King Colobus – *Colobus polykomos*
4. Sooty Mangabey – *Cercocebus atys*
5. Diana Monkey – *Cercopithecus diana*
6. Campbell's Monkey – *Cercopithecus (mona) campbelli*
7. Stampfli's Putty-nosed Monkey – *Cercopithecus (nictitans) stampflii*
8. Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey – *Cercopithecus (cephus) petaurista*
9. Demidoff's Galago – *Galagoides demidoff*
10. Red-legged Sun Squirrel – *Heliosciurus rufobrachium*
11. Punctate/Small Sun Squirrel – *Heliosciurus punctatus*
12. African Giant Squirrel – *Protoxerus stangeri*
13. Slender-tailed Squirrel – *Allosciurus aubinnii*
14. Fire-footed Rope Squirrel – *Funisciurus pyrropus*
15. Green Bush Squirrel – *Paraxerus poensis*
16. Pel's Anomalure – *Anomalurus pelii*
17. Emin's Pouched Rat – *Cricetomys emini*
18. Straw-coloured Fruit Bat – *Eidolon helvum*
19. Benito Roundleaf Bat – *Hipposideros beatus*
20. Tree Civet – *Nandinia binotata*
21. Johnston's Genet – *Genetta johnstoni*
22. Pardine Genet – *Genetta pardina*

- 23. Slender Mongoose – *Herpestes sanguineus*
- 24. Maxwell's Duiker – *Philantomba maxwelli*
- 25. Zebra Duiker – *Cephalophus zebra*
- 26. Brooke's Duiker – *Cephalophus brookei*. Considered by some a subspecies of Ogilby's Duiker
- 27. Black Duiker – *Cephalophus niger*
- 28. Yellow-backed Duiker – *Cephalophus silvicultor*
- 29. Bay Duiker – *Cephalophus dorsalis*

Signs only of the following Mammals:

- 30. African Forest Elephant
- 31. Leopard
- 32. Red River Hog
- 33. Giant Forest Hog
- 34. Pygmy Hippopotamus
- 35. African Buffalo
- 36. Bongo