

Equatorial Guinea (Bioko Island)

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Justin Brown

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqHcMc_YH8BPPkEMFnjNI2Q

In June of last year, my girlfriend and I visited Gabon with Guillermo/Willy from Middle-Africa (guillermo.casasnovas@middle-africa.com) and had an amazing time. Willy is the same guy who organized (but didn't guide) Jon's trip. At the end of our time in Gabon, Willy and I started planning a trip to Equatorial Guinea to see drills, after having just seen their close relative, the mandrills. Making things happen in Equatorial Guinea is notoriously difficult, but Willy has great contacts on the ground there and was able to arrange a trip through the Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program. Being a US citizen, I did not need a visa, but for other nationalities, getting one can be very daunting. Willy, however, said that it won't be a problem with his assistance. After all, he got his quite easily. The visa basically grants you access to Malabo, but you need additional documents from the Minister for Culture, Tourism, and Craft Promotion (Craft Promotion?) to travel beyond the police checkpoints on the roads leaving the city (there's virtually no traffic outside the city). Willy's contacts will get these documents for you. Needless to say, the government is very paranoid, largely because of its wealth from oil and the potential for some form of coup.

As was mentioned in a previous report about Equatorial Guinea, there are several camps used by the Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program where tourists can stay as well (although it took some convincing). We stayed at Moraka Camp for four nights and Moaba Camp for two nights. From the village of Ureka, which is essentially the starting point to reach each camp, it takes four hours of walking briskly to arrive to Moraka. Most of the hike is along the beach. Willy discovered during our trip that it is possible to hire a boat from a village on another part of the island and arrive to Moraka via the ocean, as the camp sits right on the beach. This is how many hunters get to the area, unfortunately. Moreover, a manager of the Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program told us that the program has its own

boat at Ureka and that using it to shuttle tourists to Moraka might be a possibility. The hike to Moraka was quite nice, with the scenery of the ocean and the black sand juxtaposed to pristine forest, but going by boat would be much easier with all of the supplies and gear. The camp itself is very basic, consisting of a grassy area for tents and two dilapidated covered structures. The porters mentioned (and we confirmed this later) that there's talk of building a new and improved Moraka Camp just down the beach from the original.

Now to the important stuff: I saw six of the seven diurnal Bioko primates around Moraka, and had really good sightings of each at least once. The **red-eared monkey** is by far the most abundant, and I saw many on just about every hike. **Crowned guenons** are the next most common, but they rarely stick around and I had a lot of brief views of them bounding away in the canopy. I could have done a much better job of creeping up on them upon hearing their calls, but they weren't a high priority for me. I think the **red colobus** is the next easiest to see, as I can remember five good sightings. The **putty-nosed monkey** and **black colobus** were quite difficult, as I only had four sightings of the former, only two of which were good, and a single sighting of the latter, which was fortunately a terrific one with three or four relaxed individuals. With regard to **drills**, my primary target for the trip and of most interest to those reading this report, I saw them many times. However, the majority of these encounters were quick glimpses of two or three individuals moving away through the undergrowth. It is difficult to get a nice prolonged view of one, as they are very aware and wary of your presence. This skittish behavior is surely due in large measure to hunting, which is prevalent and getting worse. We were fortunate in that the fruit trees on the edge of the forest around the camp had plenty of ripe fruit and a big group of drills was sneaking in multiple times per day. Again, though, they were very nervous and would immediately take off if we adjusted in any way for a better view. A few of them would start climbing the trees as we were chatting, eating, or just generally distracted, but as soon as they could sense that we were paying attention to them, they abruptly left. A guy we met at Moaba who's filming drills for a BBC documentary told us that when he encounters drills in the forest, he just sits down with his back turned to them for the reason described above.

Our team of local guys informed us early on that as you hike away from the beach and higher in altitude, the hunting pressure isn't as great and the primates are accordingly less skittish. I found this to be generally true. My best drill sighting (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifwVMTaOlg8>) came as I was hiking on the trail that leads to the caldera. The trail initially parallels a river, and a big male was walking around on the stones that form the bank of the river. My guide and I watched him for 15 minutes, completely out in the open and just on the other side of the narrow river. He never saw us. It was perfect. I recommend, and Willy will echo this opinion, staying a couple of nights at Moraka Camp and a couple of nights at the caldera camp (I think it is called Las Hormigas). I only got maybe a third of the way to the caldera camp on the trail from which I saw the drill because it requires a full day of hiking. We spoke to many people involved in the BBPP, including two of the people in charge, and they all agreed that the primates are indeed more relaxed at the caldera. They also said that the black colobus is much more common as you get closer to the caldera. Plus, being at the caldera gives you the chance to see the rare Preuss's monkey as well, since it can only be found at high altitudes. I asked the guides, who also help with primate census studies, how difficult the Preuss's monkey is to find and they all said it's quite difficult. But at least there's a chance. We were told that the caldera camp can only really be used during January and February, the driest months, because of a river crossing and other rain-related issues.

I think staying at Moaba Camp is unnecessary for mammal-watchers, even though it's easier to reach (less than two hours of hiking from Ureka) and a much nicer, more comfortable camp. For example, red and black colobus are either absent or nearly absent from the Moaba area. Drill numbers are said to be pretty good, but the information in the previous report that drills are easy to see at Moaba is no longer true. The wildlife filmmaker told us that he's really struggling to get enough footage for the documentary because the drills are being more cautious than in prior years when he was also filming. He's been going to Bioko since around 2010, and thus recognizes probably better than anyone any behavioral changes with the drills. I only saw one drill at Moaba, and just briefly.

In addition to the diurnal primates, I also saw the following mammals on the trip: **blue duiker** (many), **Ogilby's duiker** (a few, including a pair that ran right at Willy), **western tree hyrax** (seven, with five during the day), **African brush-tailed porcupine** (two), **Bioko Allen's galago**, **Beecroft's anomalure** (two), and various other squirrels (including a pygmy one). The most disappointing miss was the African linsang. I didn't spend a lot of time spotlighting because I was always so exhausted from searching for drills all day, but Bioko seems to be really good for linsangs. People happen upon them at the camps and on the trails, so I don't think it would take too much effort to find one. Pangolins are around, too. Two volunteers saw one close to Moaba Camp while we were there, and based on conversations I had with the guides, they're more plentiful than you might expect. I expected them to be extremely rare at this point, but the guides indicated that finding one is doable on night walks. Sometimes, they said, pangolins congregate in groups while feeding at the same site. That would be so awesome to witness!

In summary, Willy and I had a blast, and I'm really pleased with all of my sightings. The mammaling on Bioko is fantastic, but the hunting is troublesome. The demand for bushmeat seems to be strong and growing, as the markets in Malabo clearly demonstrate. The Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program is valiantly combating the hunting as much as possible with the resources available to it (destroying hunting camps, monitoring the movements of hunters with camera traps, employing locals, training eco-guards, etc.). It has continual dialogue with government officials about the importance of the animals, and, we were told, is making strides on that front. More wildlife tourism will surely reinforce to these government officials that conservation matters. Just the presence of tourists is known to keep the hunters away; Moraka Camp would have been completely deserted without us being there. Bioko is a paradise in many ways, with its tropical weather, beautiful and desolate beaches made of black sand, large areas of pristine forest, and of course amazing wildlife; there's so much potential for tourism. It's also one of the strangest places I've visited. There are fancy areas on the island built by the government basically as a show of prosperity that just sit totally empty (hotels, restaurants, shopping, boardwalks, etc.). We went to a nice restaurant in one such area that is always fully staffed,

with three gourmet chefs, and it only receives a handful of customers each week! One of the chefs was brought in from Spain. The restaurant is essentially there to serve the President, his family and friends, other politicians, and a few expats. Regular Equatorial Guineans can't afford to eat there. Nor can they afford to go to any of the places in these weird areas.

I highly recommend going to Bioko. It is unquestionably the best place to observe wild drills. And it has a nice diversity of other mammals as well. In my opinion, trying to arrange a trip without Willy's help would be a big mistake. The challenges of tourism in Equatorial Guinea are very real, and Willy was crucial to the ease and success of my trip. Getting a visa, getting access beyond Malabo, getting transport, navigating the checkpoints, getting supplies, getting a good team of locals, getting everyone to understand and embrace what you're trying to accomplish: These are just some of the things to consider. In countries where tourism is more established, such things are usually easily managed, but in Equatorial Guinea, they can be a total nightmare.