



Sun Bear

Thailand 16.–27.11.2022

Khao Yai, Phu Khiao, Kaeng Krachan and around

Jan Ebr

In 11 days we got 37 species (25 lifers), making this our (my and Ivana's) best mammal trip yet outside Africa. Compared to other reports, we saw very few carnivorans - only three species, no cats, martens nor dholes - in part probably due to our reluctance to skip the rules around night watching in parks as much as some others did. Interestingly the most represented group was primates (9), only then followed by the usual rodents (8) and ungulates (7). Observations:

https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2022-11-16&d2=2022-11-27&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska

We have already been to Thailand in 2014, as our first visit to the tropics, way before we even heard about mammalwatching - back then we visited only Khao Yai and continued on to Cambodia, totalling 10 mammal species for the whole trip, with 6 species in Khao Yai. This year, we both had health issues preventing us from planning anything in advance - when the situation became clear, we started looking for a tropical destination that would be 1. mostly free of malaria (which I really can't afford to get right now), 2. not too physically demanding (preferably just explored with a rental car), 3. free of complex visa and/or covidism hassles and 4. at least somewhat affordable while buying tickets less than two weeks in advance. We originally made a booking to Sri Lanka, but renting a car proved impossible due to some local holiday, so we canceled before paying and chose Thailand instead. I have then read some reports on the airplane and planned the rest of the trip as we went.

Thailand indeed fulfilled all the requirements. Car rental from Europcar at the airport was cheap and smooth - I am frankly still not sure if the car wasn't a little broken, as the automatic transmission shifted really weirdly in hills and it struggled with anything even mildly steep, but the condition did not deteriorate and it might as well just been a bit shitty model? Renting a sedan prevented us from getting to the higher parts of Kaeng Krachan; everything else was nicely paved. Driving is nowhere as bad as people make it out to be - that is after you get past the driving-on-the-wrong-side thing and the switched controls making you occasionally wipe some British imperialism from the windshield instead of using an indicator. It is paramount to use a navigation app for driving as some of the ways to get on/off highways and through complex intersections are just impossible to guess, but beware that some small roads marked on Google Maps simply do not exist or are behind gates. Mapy.cz is far more accurate in rural areas and is good for checking the existence of roads. Being close to the equator, Thailand looks deceptively small on your typical Mercator map - it's actually bigger than Poland (roughly the size of Spain actually) and we drove 2300 kms while visiting a pretty small part of it.



Lesser Ricefield Rat

Thailand has recently abolished all covid rules, so entry was smooth - when in Thailand it surely doesn't seem like they did though as most people are still wearing masks, even hiking alone in the jungle or driving a scooter, but nobody ever bothered us for not doing so. Parks and reserves are straightforward to enter and cheap (I really don't get the recent outcry online about raising entry fees to the outrageous sum of ... 10 euro for the most expensive parks?!), camping in them costs nothing. For accommodation outside parks we always booked on booking.com a few hours in advance and it worked smoothly - almost nobody ever spoke English, but there was nothing to discuss anyway and despite typically looking for the cheapest places, the accommodation was always nice. Overall the trip cost 800 Eur per person to get to Bangkok and just 450 Eur per person for local expenses (including the car and everything).

The main downside of Thailand then remains the maze of rules for visitors in parks and reserves. There is some information for the parks online, but none of the pages that we found in English are actually official (in particular www.thainationalparks.com has a lot of useful info for most parks, but it's also privately managed).. Then there are signposts on the actual sites, often contradictory to what you have read online. Can we walk any trails without a guide? At what times can we drive on the roads? These are questions with often unclear answers and in Kaeng Krachan, even the rangers refused to give any straight answers when asked. Overall, there is a sustained effort to force people to get accompanied by rangers even for trivial trails - we did not really aim to do much hiking as a lot of the wildlife seems to be best spotted from the roads anyway, but it surely is annoying. A secondary downside is the universally terrible food - this time we learned how to say „coriander“ in Thai (pak-chiee) so we were able to make the food at least edible for us, but there is still a lot of weird stuff and outside of tourist establishments it's pretty hard to know what you will get. At least the constant diarrhea (which I had from day 2 to the end) responded well to activated charcoal and did not progress to systemic sickness.

Khao Yai

Arriving too late to enter the park, we took a random accommodation near the southern entrance and walked around for a bit.

Lesser ricefield rat (*Rattus losea*) - between plantations on a side road (14.2622 N, 101.2832 E). IDed by Vladimir Dinets based on pale tail and narrow hind foot.

We then entered the park at first light and stayed for 1.5 days. Even though it was Thursday, the campsite was packed and noisy. We mostly drove around, hiked the handful of allowed trails without a guide and spent some time on the observation tower. At night, we sneaked out from the camp over the suspension bridge into the golf course and walked the road there, but it was full of night safaris, who obviously could see us and ratted us out, so a ranger came on an electric scooter and escorted us back to the campsite, which ended our attempts to break the rules, as next time we couldn't claim ignorance again. A more adventurous person could probably just cross the road and continue into the wild unseen,



Asian Elephant



Indochinese Serow, Pileated Gibbon, Lar Gibbon

but what would happen if caught there, I have no idea.

Sambar, Barking Deer, Northern Pig-tailed Macaque - ubiquitous

Asian Elephant - 7 am on the road to Khao Kieow, actually blocking the road, announced by a traffic jam

Indochinese Serow - mother and calf just below Khao Kieow crossing the road later in the morning. A stroke of luck, because I only went up the second time because I was too scared to turn around on the narrow road.

Pileated Gibbon - Khao Kieow road - parking at the spirit house immediately after the grasslands end and walking up (as mentioned in other reports)

Lar Gibbons - Khao Keiow road before the grasslands, found through a group of photographers standing on the road, also one individual on the short trail behind the visitor center.

Finlayson's and Himalayan striped squirrels - boardwalk to Pha Diao Dai (below Khao Keiow)

Black Giant Squirrel - on the first tree north of the road bridge at the visitor center - the same tree we saw it in 2014!, Pha Klui Mai campsite, Pileated Gibbon area

Grey-bellied squirrel - Pileated Gibbon area

Wild Boar - crossing the Khao Kieow road in the middle of the grasslands

Small Indian Civet - at the junction with the golf course road in front of the campground, seen at night while being escorted by the ranger, so not photographed



Rhinolophus shameli and Myotis cf. horsefieldii?

Wat Tham Sila Thong

I found mentions of two bat caves north of Khao Yai and this one seemed more reliable and accessible. The entrance is in the courtyard of the wat (14.5500 N, 101.5415 E), where a warden gives you the key happily. Two obviously very different species of bats are roosting there, the more common is reportedly **Rhinolophus shameli** (according to Ton Smith on FB). The smaller darker ones are **Myotis**, but species ID is possibly more complicated - Ton Smith reports that a bat expert suggested **horsefieldii**

for specimens from this cave, but Pipat Soisook notes that while those look more like *horsefieldii*, the commonly known species from the cave is *siligorensis*. **Finlayson's squirrels** found around the wat. Some half a kilometer east of the wat there is an area to watch the evening departure of endless bats from other caves, these should be **Chaerephon plicatus**.

In the night, we drove extensively around the mostly agricultural area. Crossing a small patch of forest (14.6018 N, 101.4655 E), we found some rodents running on branches, but they could not be photographed - at a glance they looked a bit like Woolly Dormouse (not that I am suggesting that it lives here!), with thick, but not squirrel-like tails, but I don't think this could lead to an ID. There were further smaller rodents in vegetation between fields along the road to the west of the forest, but were mostly seen only in IR.



Chaerephon plicatus



Gaur

maps, the reserve has another entrance from the north, with a road leading to the middle of it - there we found a closed barrier and nobody around to discuss its opening, so we gave up.

Khao Phaeng Ma

A tiny reserve at the northern edge of Khao Yai is famous for **Gaurs**. Signposted from the road and shown on maps is a viewpoint at the western edge of the reserve (14.3667 N, 101.7736 E) - there we paid a small fee, walked uphill for 20 seconds and saw the Gaurs in a distance. There is a campsite, but walking anywhere towards the reserve is not allowed so there isn't much point in staying. On

Sakaerat Biosphere Reserve

I found a cluster of observations on iNaturalist here, decided to explore and found a really chill destination - a research station in the forest where they happily greeted us and told us to walk as we please and leave when we want. We spent the afternoon walking uphill for a few kms and then the evening walking down, around the camp and spotlighting/IR watching around the access road - to find nothing more than **Finlayson's Squirrels**. I was still happy to have discovered this peaceful oasis, only to later find out that Jon has obviously already been there. The lack of animals is thoroughly puzzling to me though as the area is quite wild.

Phu Khiao

Also often spelled Phu Khieo. In a stark contrast to Khao Yai, we were the only ones camping here for the (one) night. As there are signs everywhere against going into the forest, we stayed around the access road and the grasslands; at night we walked a bit around the campsite and buildings. The forests here look, in places, almost like central Europe - there are pines! - until you walk 10 meters into one and find 7 leeches ...but the climate was indeed much more enjoyable than in the lowland areas.

Sambar, Indochinese Hog Deer - at campsite and everywhere around

Red Giant Flying Squirrel - while sitting in front of the (closed) campsite kiosk after dusk, I noticed something



Indochinese Hog Deer, Red Giant Flying Squirrel, Golden Jackal

fly across in the lights. We could then observe it taking several flights between trees in the shape of a flying square. One of my long-time dreams.



Indochinese Gray Langur, Assam Macaque

Golden Jackal - at night on the road in front of the campsite

Indochinese Gray Langur - early morning on the access road (16.4132 N, 101.5831 E) not far from the camp

Assam Macaques - late morning on the access road, few hundred meters west of the ranger memorial (16.4405 N, 101.6034 E) originally mis-IDed as Rhesus - have I mentioned that we still do not have any relevant book and were IDing everything using the internet? :)

Northern Pig-tailed Macaques - around the Queens resort in the grasslands behind the camp

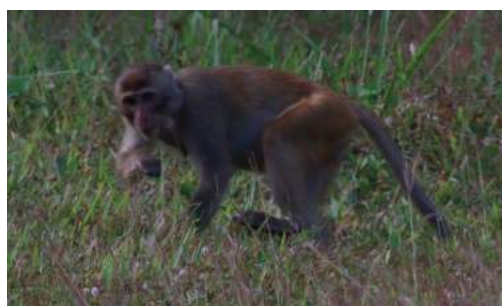
Lar Gibbons - around the access road just opposite the ranger memorial

Black Giant Squirrel - with the Assam Macaques

Rhesus Macaques - around the dam, outside of the reserve (16.5316 N, 101.6480 E)

Asian Elephant - start of the dam access road, close to noon and again at night (16.4973 N, 101.7268 E)

We left the reserve and camped in a nearby Google-found campsite called „My DREAM“, the only accommodation really close to the reserve entrance, so that we could do night driving on the dam access road and the second



Rhesus Macaque, Lar Gibbon

branch leading to the power station. Those roads go through some nice forests, but we found only the elephant again (which scared me a bit as I noticed it only at a very close range), an unidentified civet in the distance and a rat only seen in IR running around the food stalls near the Phu Khiao entrance.

Next day we got up late and drove on highway 12 though Nao Nam around mid-day, looking for two caves near the Sunset Viewpoint, neither of which we found. This road looks also interesting for night watching - there are some checkpoints on both sides, but surely it must be open at night given its importance? The main question then remains whether there isn't too much traffic.

Wat Chantharam

Lelu's Flying Fox colony in a wat garden, pretty impressive. After reading reports, I was still not sure where the place was as there are all sorts of spellings and descriptions of the position and the name is very common, so I googled the species and found an article about this site, a few km NW of Ang Thong (14.6703 N, 100.3761 E).



Lelu's Flying Fox

Kaeng Krachan

We have spent two nights and the third evening in this famous wildlife park. Without a 4wd we were confined to driving the lower parts, meaning the access road and its continuation to the first river crossing. When we asked a ranger if we could access the nature trails, he said that it's dark there and the road is better for pictures ... so we don't really know if it's allowed to walk even the small trails alone. We stayed around the road and Ban Krang camp anyway, and only hiked the dirt road across the three river crossings.

There were only a handful of people in the Ban Krang campsite - after the first very rainy night, some left and it got quieter. After a nice dawn drive, the rest of the first night was so rainy that we canceled our plans to walk around at night and go driving at dawn and then spent the rest of the morning contemplating our bad choice of a specific camping spot and cleaning mud out of everything. The second night was clear, so we got an evening drive, a midnight walk around the camp and a dawn drive and then another evening drive before leaving the park. Signs at Ban Krang say „do not leave camp 6 pm to 6 am“, but the main gate of the park is open 5 am to 7 pm, so staying out of the park one can get more night driving time somehow (for the cost of paying the entrance fee repeatedly). Our morning/evening drives were rather short and didn't produce almost anything - notably there was nothing around any of the waterholes. Du-



Bat - Murina sp.



East Asian Porcupine, Small Indian Civet



Dusky Leaf Monkeys

ring our stay here we saw zero ungulates! (To add insult to injury, a Mouse-deer was seen strolling around the campsite before we arrived).

Sun Bear - feeding behind the kitchen in the middle of the day, then again after midnight (much scarier). They put out jackfruit for it, which is probably not the best thing for its conservation, but it's enjoyable for visitors.

Small Indian Civet - this time with a photo after midnight behind campsite toilets.

East Asian Porcupine - walking straight across the campsite after midnight; also seen behind the kitchen but only in IR

Dusky Leaf Monkey - numerous troops along the access road, one also towards the first crossing.

Stump-tailed Macaques - around km 6 in afternoons

Lar Gibbons - on the road to first crossing

Black Giant Squirrels - in the camp and on the access road near the camp

Grey-bellied Squirrels - everywhere along the access road

Himalayan Striped Squirrels - photographed only around the lake near the gate, but glimpsed in more places along the access road



Northern Treeshrew

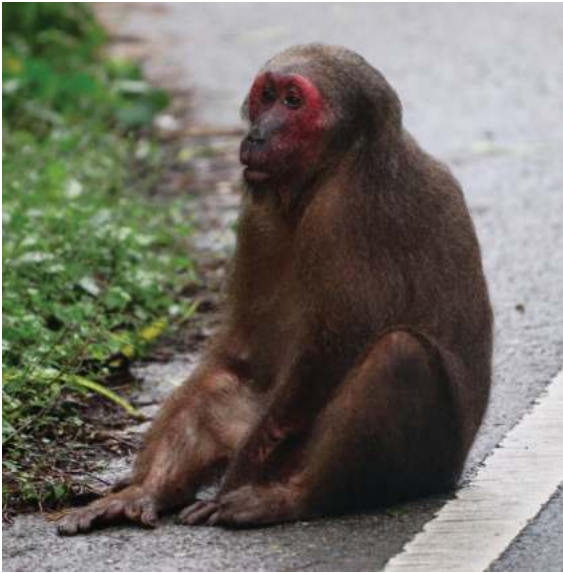


Southeast Asian Shrew?

Pallas's Squirrel - single around km 7

Northern Treeshrew - found around 6 pm in IR from access road at km 12

Southeast Asian Shrew - a larger shrew with long bi-colored tail, a few meters from our tent after dark found in IR. Only three species of shrew have range here and this looks by far best for the ID.



Stump-tailed Macaque, Pallas's Squirrel



Bengal Slow Loris

Murina sp. bat - IR is useful even during day, especially a cloudy one - a leaf next to the road after the second crossing was weirdly warm, turned out to be a roost of a bat

After leaving the park, we stayed the night in Baan Maka, walked the property and did a bit of night driving on the roads around.

Bengal Slow Loris - easily found along the nature trail

Greater Ricefield Rat (*Rattus argentivener*) - in bushes near the main road junction some km from the lodge (12.8502 N, 99.5807 E) - ID by Vladimir as young individual, based on belly being more silvery than white and an orange spot in front of the ear; also adequate habitat.

Burmese Hare - on the park access road (12.8106 N, 99.5646 E)

Grey-bellied Squirrels - from room window

Finally we took a whale watching trip with Wild Encounter Thailand, seeing many **Bryde's (Eden's) Whales**, but nothing else (they did not look for anything but the whales). On the way to the pier we met a

Pallas's Squirrel at 13.5127 N, 100.3890 E.



Greater Ricefield Rat, Burmese Hare

Many thanks to people on the SE Asia mammal FB group (notably Ton Smith Pipat Soisook) and Vladimir Dinets for IDs!





Bryde's (Eden's) Whales