

Trip report: Ghana, 2019

by Rauno Väisänen

Since seeing the nature documentary on *Picathartes*, i.e. the yellow-headed rockfowl, by young David Attenborough, I have been dreaming about a visit to West Africa. My colleague Mr Erkki Virolainen did a most successful birding trip to Ghana in 2014 with an inspiring report (in Finnish). Ghana is also a well-known butterfly-watching destination with amazing species diversity. In addition to many *Papilio* and *Charaxes* species, there are wonderful West African *Bebearia*, *Euriphene* and *Euphaedra* butterflies. Finally, after reading Ian Thomson's fantastic trip report with two pangolin species on the mammalwatching website, I decided to buy KLM flight tickets for me and my wife Anneli from Tallinn to Accra.

We spent two weeks in Ghana on 16-29 March 2019. The programme was as follows:

16th March: late arrival at Accra and accommodation at Tema;

17th March: morning at Shai Hills (abbreviated as **SH**) and afternoon in Kakum National Park (**KA**), accommodation at Jukwa;

18th-21st March: **KA** and surroundings, including the canopy walkway on 19 March, accommodation at Jukwa;

21st-23rd March: Bonkro Forest (**BN**), including the *Picathartes* nesting site and night walks, as well as bird and butterfly watching at Kwabena Sam Forest (**KS**) on 22nd and 23rd March, accommodation at Assin Foso;

24th March: 855 km drive from Assin Foso to Mole, with a long detour to Daboya just for the Egyptian plover, late arrival at Mole Motel;

24-26th March: Mole National Park (**MO**) with night drives on 25th and 26th March;

27th March: drive from **MO** via the Monkey Sanctuary at Boebeng Fiema (**BF**) to Bobiri Butterfly Sanctuary (**BB**), accommodation at Bobiri Guesthouse;

28-29th March: morning at **BB** and departure from Accra.

Ashanti African Tours did really wonderful job in helping us to organise the trip. We were blessed with the world-class wildlife guide Andrews Kankam Amankusaa (Andrew), who knew very well mammals, birds and butterflies thus fully covering our interests. He was also exceptionally good in spotting mammals in difficult conditions. Our driver Ibrahim was most trustful and experienced. They were both nice company during the whole trip. Also the local guides, Kwame at Bonkro and Sadik in Mole, were very good in spotting mammals.

The main emphasis of our tour was on mammals, especially pangolins, but we also watched birds and butterflies as much as possible. Cultural part was restricted to short visits to the famous Larabanga mosque and the Besease shrine at Kumasi. The weather was warmer than usual at that time of the year, and there were also heavy rains so that we skipped some night walks. The daily weather conditions had a great impact in the numbers of mammals seen. Mammal-watching was easy in the north but quite challenging in the humid and dense forests in the south.

We saw 50 mammal species, though four of them, i.e. the **greater cane rat** (*Thryonomys swinderianus*), **royal antelope** (*Neotragus pygmaeus*), **Maxwell's duiker** (*Philantomba maxwellii*) and **bay duiker** (*Cephalophus dorsalis*), were only seen as bushmeat specimens for sale at the road side market at Anyinam. The other species are listed and discussed below. We tried also to see the **long-tailed pangolin** (*Uromanis tetradactyla*) in the southern Ghana and the **aardwark** (*Orycteropus afer*) in **MO**. In spite of decent efforts, we did not find them probably just due to the short time available. However, we were very satisfied, since we finally found one pangolin, and we had a real 'genet happy hour' in **MO**.

Unfortunately, the numbers of several mammal species have been in decline in Ghana. They include e.g. chimpanzees, Diana monkeys, porcupines and several species of duikers. Hunting and poaching seemed to be a problem even in some protected areas. We heard or saw such activities repeatedly at **BB**, **KS** and **BN**, which certainly has affected negatively the mammal populations. We also saw big hunter groups in northern Ghana.

On the other hand, the large national parks of Kakum and Mole seemed to be quite well protected by the legislation and law enforcement staff. Ashanti African Tours with some partners had done really amazing job to educate and involve local people at Bonkro village in nature conservation and sustainable tourism activities so that at least locally the prospects were positive. Similar projects would be most welcome also at other valuable mammal sites. The diverse bushmeat selection readily available indicates that there are still interesting mammals also outside the protected areas. For instance, forests around Anyinam might be worth a closer study.

In addition to mammals, we observed about 280 bird species and a good selection of West African butterflies. Compared to my friend Erkki's 352 bird species on a similar trip a few years before it is not that much, but just as a side-product of mammal-watching trip we were quite satisfied. The birds included rare species like the spotted creeper, yellow-headed rockfowl, violet-backed hylia, fine-spotted woodpecker, Forbes's plover, standard-winged nightjar, rufous-sided broadbill, long-tailed hawk, Egyptian plover and Denham's bustard. However, we were as delighted of the beautiful ones like the rosy, red-breasted, black, and northern carmine bee-eaters, yellow-billed and violet turacos, blue-throated, Abyssinian, and blue-bellied rollers, as well as pygmy, woodland, malachite, and blue-breasted kingfishers.

Ghana is a wonderful destination and has a lot of potential for mammal-watching and other nature-orientated tourism. It is also safe and friendly with relatively developed services and infrastructure. And, who would not love a country with a monkey graveyard, elephant dung for sale as medicine, people named after the week day they were born, and coffins designed on the basis of the professions of deceased. I want such a coffin for myself, I just have to decide a suitable animal shape.

The report is again just a short list and there are no photographs, but I hope it is helpful for those planning a trip to Ghana. I agree that photographs make these reports much nicer to read. They are often necessary for identification. However, for me the animal photographs seem to be a kind of surrogates for hunting trophies, something I do not want to get, though I haven't anything against sustainable hunting.

List of mammal species

Western tree hyrax (*Dendrohyrax dorsalis*). We heard several hyrax individuals at **KA**, **BB** and **BN**. Fortunately, we saw the species on the first night walk in **KA** on 17th March. It is very elusive, difficult to spot, and stops calling as soon it notes the lights or movement. Still, the tree hyrax is surely a most memorable part of the nocturnal soundscape of southern Ghana along with the Akun eagle owl and Nkulengu rail. In fact, its loud voice reminded me of my lascivious neighbours in Helsinki in the past.

African bush elephant (*Loxodonta africana*). We saw daily about ten elephants around the motel and pools and a delightful group of 25-30 females and young ones in a forest in **MO**.

Bosman's potto (*Perodicticus potto*). There were a pair of pottos in the high trees near the headquarters of national park in **KA**.

Demidoff's galago (*Galagoides demidoffi*). We saw altogether about ten of these small and very quick species living mostly in thickets in **KA**, **BN** and **BB**. Frankly speaking, they were only the individuals number five and six that I succeeded to see properly.

Thomas's galago (*Galagoides thomasi*). We saw one well in **KA** and another at **BB**.

Senegal bushbaby (*Galago senegalensis*). Our first night drive on 25th March after the heavy rains in **MO** resulted easily in at least 12 bushbabies, whereas next night when it was much drier we saw only two or three. The bushbabies were easy to see on small trees and bushes. A few of them were also jumping on the ground like some lemurs.

Patas monkey (*Erythrocebus patas*). Three small groups altogether with a dozen individuals were seen in **MO**.

Lowe's monkey (*Cercopithecus mona lowei*). One group was found at the canopy walkway in **KA** on 19th March and many more at **BF** on 27th March. Several individual at **BF** were quite tame.

Lesser spot-nosed monkey (*Cercopithecus cephus petaurista*). At least ten were seen at the canopy walkway at **KA**.

Callithrix monkey (*Cercopithecus aethiops sabaesus*). We saw at least 15 individuals at **SH** and a few in **MO**.

Olive baboon (*Papio anubis*). At least 20 baboons were seen at **SH** and a few in **MO**.

Geoffrey's pied colobus (*Colobus vellerosus*). The species is abundant at **BF**. It is nice and interesting site to visit, though quite different to any other place due to its spiritual and cultural dimension.

Olive colobus (*Procolobus verus*). One group was seen at the canopy walkway in **KA**.

Beecroft's anomalure (*Anomalurus beecrofti*). One individual was seen very well at **BN** on 22nd March.

Lord Derby's anomalure (*Anomalurus derbianus*). Two individuals were seen nicely in **BN**.

Pel's anomalure (*Anomalurus pelii*). Two Pel's anomalures started their evening flights from the tall trees near the canopy walkway in **KA** on 19th March.

Striped ground squirrel (*Xerus erythropus*). Four individuals were seen at **MO** on 26th March and one at Larabanga next day.

Fire-footed rope squirrel (*Funisciurus pyrropus*). Two individuals were found in **KA** on 20th March and one was calling at **BN** on 22nd March.

Gambian sun squirrel (*Heliosciurus gambianus*). One individual was seen at **BB** guesthouse when we were leaving.

Red-legged sun squirrel (*Heliosciurus rufobrachium*). One was seen at **KA** on 19th March.

Green bush squirrel (*Paraxerus poensis*). One green bush squirrel was observed at **KA** on 21st

March.

African giant squirrel (*Protoxerus stangeri*). There was a nest with a female and at least two young ones in a tree trunk near the canopy walkway in **KA**.

Slender-tailed squirrel (*Protoxerus aubinnii*). One individual was seen at the canopy walkway in **KA**.

West African smoky dormouse (*Graphiurus nagtglasi*). One dormouse was climbing in a small tree at **BN** on 23rd March.

Gambian pouched rat (*Cricetomys gambianus*). One pouched rat was seen in **KA** on 19th March and three at **BN** on 23rd March during the night walks.

Uranomys mouse (*Uranomys ruddi*). Two individuals were active in the daytime on the ground near the trail to the canopy walkway in **KA** on 19th March. We saw them nicely, and they seemed to fit well with the description on Uranomys mouse in the Kingdon pocket guide.

African climbing mouse (*Dendromus* sp.). Two mice were seen climbing in the thickets at **BN** during our night walk on 22nd March. Our identification is quite vague based only on our visual observation, but Andrew had earlier photographed the species at the same place for identification. He called them 'shining mommy climbing mice'.

We also saw a few relatively large unidentified mice in the savannah in **MO**.

African savanna hare (*Lepus microtis*). Five hares were seen during the night drive in **MO** on 26th March, but none in the previous night.

White-bellied hedgehog (*Atelerix albiventris*). This really cute little hedgehog was walking on the roadside in **MO** on 26th March.

Hammer-headed fruit bat (*Hypsignathus monstrosus*). One individual was seen at **KA** on 17th March and another two days later.

Egyptian tomb bat (*Taphozous perforatus*). A group of at least ten was roosting at a cave at **SH**.

Tree pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*). One individual was found from the thickets at **BN** on 23rd March after long and strenuous searches, thanks to Andrew's sharp eyes and good hearing. It was found at 8 p.m. at height of about four metres. The pangolin was very well covered, but a small movement revealed it. Finding a pangolin is by no means guaranteed even in Ghana. In fact, it is quite tricky and a bit desperate so that we were very satisfied that we found even one. Our pangolin came with litres of sweat, nastily biting ants (delicacy for pangolins) and a couple of poisonous snakes (boomslang and forest cobra). We continued our searches of pangolins, but with no more success. Sadly, one living individual was for sale at the road side market place at Kubeasi and another at Kwahu on 29th March. There must be easier ways to earn one's living than hunting pangolins!

Common genet (*Genetta genetta*). We saw two common genets at **MO** on 26th March. The first individual was running not so close to us just as they use to do. However, the second one was posing us in a nearby bush without any idea to escape.

Bloched genet (*Genetta maculata*). During a night drive in **MO** on 25th March a romantic pair of

bloched genets were playing on the roadside and were just interested from each others so that we had a very good look at them. One unidentified genet of that night probably belonged to this species as well. Still a better look at this species was provided by an individual in a small tree next evening.

Hausa genet (*Genetta thierryi*). Genets were indeed stars of our trip. During one hour on 26th March we saw from close distance three genet species almost like in a dog show. The happy hour was started by the legendary Hausa genet. We found one walking slowly on the roadside. This small and graceful species was high on my wish list, but I didn't really expect to find it. It is very rare in Ghana, though Andrew had seen it once before during his long career.

African palm civet (*Nandinia binotata*). This was another nice surprise. Though it is not that rare, it is elusive and difficult to find. We spotted one from the thickets of **KA** on 20th March. It was well-covered among vegetation, but fortunately it was peaceful and stayed still for identification. Identification was not a problem at the Anyinam bushmeat market, where one civet specimen was for sale. Does somebody really eat them?

Common kusimanse (*Crossarchus obscurus*). Three kusimanses were walking on a forest road at **KS** on 23rd March.

Marsh mongoose (*Atilax paludinosus*). Night drives in **MO** resulted in four individuals on 25th March and two more next night. Some of them were much smaller than others, but locals convinced us that they were just young ones.

Gambian mongoose (*Mungos gambianus*). I saw one individual in the daytime among the rocks on the foothills of **SH** on 17th March.

Common warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*). A few warthogs were seen around the motel in **MO** every day and about 25 on drive on 26th March.

Hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus*). About 25 were seen in **MO** on 26th March.

African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*). One was running on the roadside in the forest in **MO** on 26th March.

Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*). We saw 35 bushbucks in **MO** on 25th March and only 11 next day along the same routes.

Red-flanked duiker (*Cephalophus rufilatus*). Five individuals were seen in **MO** on 25th March.

Roan antelope (*Hippotragus equinus*). Only one individual was seen at distance crossing the road in **MO** on 26th March. It is said to be quite common there.

Waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*). A dozen of waterbucks were seen in **MO** on 26th March.

Kob (*Kobus kob*). We saw 7 kobs at **SH** and many more in **MO**. The daily numbers in **MO** varied from 135 on 25th March to 35 on the next day, probably depending mostly on the weather conditions.