

Pendjari NP, Benin

Tom Clode, 21st – 29th December 2017

Pendjari NP had long been on my wish list as one of the last strongholds for wildlife in West Africa. Elephant, lion, leopard and buffalo were all possible, as well as rarities including western hartebeest and korrigum. However, the jewel of Pendjari is the extremely rare population of cheetah that are seen here semi-regularly – most estimates put the total population in the WAP complex (encompassing Parc W (Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger), Arli (Burkina Faso) and Pendjari) at fewer than 20 individuals. Nevertheless I was hopeful of tracking down some interesting mammals, though I was aware lion sightings were hard to come by and cheetah sightings impossible to find.

Pendjari itself sits in the far north-west of Benin, on the border with Burkina Faso. Management levels have varied over the years (though it has always been managed better than Arli across the border), but a few months before my arrival the management had been taken over by African Parks, in partnership with the Beninese government. AP are a great organisation and I've seen their work at several parks over the years – I hope they can restore Pendjari to its rightful status as a leading safari destination on the continent.

The park is a long drive from Benin's main city, Cotonou. I chose to overnight in Parakou en route, and even then arrived into the park as darkness was falling. Flights to Cotonou are hard to come by – I travelled from Jersey with Brussels Airlines via London, Brussels and Abidjan which wasn't the most comfortable journey. Geographically, Niamey and Ouagadougou are closer to the park, but currently I'd advise against travelling from these cities due to security issues. The park itself is well-secured, although last year two tourists were kidnapped and their guide killed. I travelled with Jolinaiko Eco Tours, who are based in Ghana, and they provided an English-speaking driver (Boris), driver and car. Be aware that wildlife guiding is not really a "thing" in Benin, so don't expect any knowledge of/respect for wildlife.

December 21st:

Having spent the night in Parakou, Benin's second-largest city, we set off early to Pendjari. The roads to Natitingou are good, and here you can easily find food, water, fuel and cash – you must also pay for park permits here. From Natitingou onwards the road was in poor condition in 2017, though I believe AP have recently improved the surface significantly.

We arrived late in the day and entrance formalities were straightforward. Darkness was falling as we drove through the hunting area, which was predictably devoid of game. En route to our accommodation we did eventually come across several pairs of side-striped jackal on the road, as well as an unidentified mouse that darted across in front of us. I had opted for the slightly cheaper accommodation of the Pendjari Hotel rather than the Pendjari Lodge, which was much more upscale. I didn't really come to regret my choice – so long as you don't expect luxury, you'll be fine, as the rooms are small but comfortable, the food is more than edible and not too expensive, and there's always cold beer available. Since my visit, I believe AP have taken over both the lodge and the hotel and improved them – there's even a swimming pool at the hotel now! During my visit, the hotel was in a better area for game.

December 22nd:

This morning we headed out after sunrise and covered the short distance to the border with Burkina Faso. We took the road west from there to Mare Diwouni before rejoining the main road to the Circuit Mare Sacree. This area was to prove the finest area for game throughout my stay, and I was

thrilled to see early on that fresh lion tracks were easily found on this track. We quickly encountered a beautiful herd of buffalo – many individuals within it were orange or tan, very much reminiscent of forest buffalo elsewhere on the continent. I hypothesise, but have no proof, that there may be some shared ancestry with the forest buffalo in this population. Just a few minutes further down the road, we surprised a small herd of elephants in the tall grasses next to the road – they stormed away, agitated, but I was over the moon to have encountered them so quickly, as I had anticipated having to work much harder to see them.



Buffalo near Mare Sacree

We meandered back towards the hotel, stopping for good views of warthog, Buffon's kob, Abyssinian ground hornbill and Abyssinian roller. We decided to take a quick loop around Mare Fougou, which is right next to the hotel – this road has a lovely aspect over the Pendjari river as it forms the border between Benin and Burkina Faso. We were rewarded almost immediately with a good view of a large roan, and the mare itself produced very young waterbuck and Buffon's kob. More than satisfied with a great morning, we returned to camp for a tasty lunch of guinea fowl.

At about 4pm, we again headed north-west from the hotel, stopping quickly for Buffon's kob that congregate around the hotel itself. Near Mare Diwouni we again spooked a small herd of elephants and continued on past Mare Sacree. However, we found a much calmer elephant moments later, a huge (by West African standards) tuskless bull wandered next to the vehicle for 20 minutes as the sun began to set. This remains one of my favourite sightings of all time – for a bull in such a heavily poached area to allow us to be so close was actually very touching. We drove all the way west to Mare Yangouali, and for the first time I could see why cheetah had held on here. The plains are expansive here, dotted with warthog and kob, and water is plentiful in the various mares. This evening we had no luck on our cheetah search, although the mare held good hippo, red-throated bee-eater, grey heron and double-spurred francolin.



Tuskless bull elephant

However, after some car trouble we were late getting back (driving after dark is never allowed by self-drivers in the park). Our headlights revealed white-tailed mongoose and civet, but the highlight was undoubtedly a male lion lying squarely in the middle of the road. We watched him for a few minutes (my guides very nervously, it was now that I realised my driver had never seen a lion before) and he began to roar with impressive gusto. I could scarcely believe my luck – West African lion on day one!

December 23rd:

Flush with the success of the night before, we chose to do the Mare Fogou circuit first. The birding here is exceptional and though I am a novice birder we enjoyed a protracted sighting of a Beaudouin's Snake Eagle. We also had great views of kewel and Abyssinian ground hornbill. We drove south on the corrugated main track to Mare Bali – this mare was historically the centre of the best game viewing, but had recently emptied compared to the northern border of the park. At the mare itself we had woolly-necked stork, hippo, grey heron, spur-winged goose and lots of West African crocodiles. The drive back to camp in the heat of the day was relatively uneventful.

Our evening drive took us north again, and we quickly came across an almost-obliging herd of elephants, as well as roan and buffalo. The number of pin-tailed whydah and exclamatory paradise-whydah here was also very high. A very calm breeding herd of the elephants about an hour later was a real highlight, and I took a huge number of photos (on manual focus, which I was about to regret). About ten minutes later we rounded a corner to here a lot of kob barking and, sure enough, a beautiful lioness paced into view on the road. Our first daytime sighting, and a fantastic one, as she walked straight towards us and past us on the hunt. Of course, my photos were all out of focus in the fading light as I had forgotten to use autofocus – but what a sighting!

A white-tailed mongoose was another great photo opportunity on the way home, but again our journey was interrupted by the best kind of road-block. Three lionesses splayed out in the dust! After a few minutes they decided to slink away into the long grass, but a thrilling end to a great day.



White-tailed mongoose west of the Arli Border Post

December 24th:

Our first stop on Christmas Eve was again Mare Fogou, and we had our best kewel sightings yet on this circuit. There was once again excellent birding, with highlights including grey kestrel, dark-chanting goshawk, Eurasian marsh-harrier and Wahlberg's eagle. We also enjoyed Buffon's kob and buffalo as we swung north, where Mare Sacree produced saddle-billed stork but little else, as did the rest of the drive.

We started our evening drive a little early and headed back towards Mare Sacree. Not long after leaving the Arli Guard Post behind, our drive started pointing excitedly off to the right, and to my surprise a large male lion, in the middle of the day, was pacing out of the bush towards us. He joined the road just ahead of us, barely giving us a glance, and proceeded to march up the road surrounded by thick ash and dust from the fires in Arli. It was an incredibly atmospheric sighting – over half an hour later we were still following him before he disappeared into the bush.



Possibly the most obliging lion in Pendjari

Buzzing, we continued and got distant views of a big group of patas monkeys and a skittish western hartebeest. Returning to camp, we came across a "traffic jam" of three or so vehicles – these jams

were easy to spot as local guides' vehicles typically consisted of sofas strapped to the top of pick-up trucks so they were rarely below the (very tall) grass. We quickly caught sight of a lioness stalking Buffon's kob – she patiently waited but the kob drifted off in the wrong direction. She gave up and padded down the road at a leisurely pace (so leisurely we were again late back to camp) and she graced us with her presence for over 45 minutes – another incredible Pendjari lion sighting.



Lioness stalking Buffon's kob

December 25th:

Disaster! As we prepared to head out in the early morning, we discovered a slow flat. We had a spare but the guide was adamant he needed to head out of the park to get it repaired – I suspect he fancied Christmas with a friend nearby. Reluctantly, I agreed to wait in camp for them to return, but they didn't come back until well into the night. There was plenty to keep me occupied in camp though, with photo subjects including West African rainbow lizards, red-throated bee-eaters, Namaqua doves, red-cheeked cordon-bleu, white-rumped seedeater, African palm swift, white-backed vulture, red-billed firefinch, sahel bush sparrow, northern grey-headed sparrow, Abyssinian roller, Eurasian marsh harrier, Senegal thick-knee, striped ground squirrel, Buffon's kob, piapiac and wattled lapwing. I was less than enthused to hear from other guests that lions were seen in the evening just down the road, but c'est la vie.

December 26th:

With my guide and driver back at the hotel, we hit Mare Fogou early and within minutes had got lucky. A lioness and two cubs lay on the road, only mildly unimpressed by our intrusion. After a few minutes the cubs disappeared but the lioness took to stalking a waterbuck in the thick grass around the mare. The grass swallowed them both up, so we couldn't relocate them once they disappeared, but nonetheless a wonderful sighting with which to start the day. Fogou also produced our first and only common duiker and Bohor reedbuck of the trip. Driving south to Mare Bali, we had hoped to encounter korrigum, but were rewarded instead with plenty of roan, warthog, western hartebeest and lots of lion tracks from the night before.



Lion cub in the tall grass of Mare Fogou

Our afternoon drive headed north, stopping to view a huge troop of olive baboon ignoring border formalities at the boundary of the park. We made a beeline for Mare Yangouali in the hope of a fabled cheetah sighting – we succeeded in finding a spotted cat, but it was in fact two separate (and brief) serval sightings that surprised us near the mare. A skittish herd of roan and congregation of black-crowned cranes were also appreciated. We proceeded past Yangouali to loop back on a road further south that bisected a large expanse of open grassland I hoped the cheetah may use – this wasn't a great decision as large fires were progressing through this area and wildlife was scarce. We looped back to Mare Bali and surprised a number of small and aggressive elephant herds near the Pendjari Lodge. A pair of buffalo were our only other sighting of note on the way home.

December 27th:

Having now realised that being the first vehicle out was vital to finding lion, we struck out particularly early to Mare Sacree today and located two young brothers fast asleep in the road. We had them to ourselves for 15 minutes before the distant hum of another engine encouraged them off of the road. A bull elephant was viewed from a distance before we swung back to the south and headed for coffee at Pendjari Lodge, with a nice shikra sighting en route. The lodge itself is on a small hill overlooking a waterhole at which lions and elephants are regularly seen. The tents looked well-equipped and food excellent – I would have happily stayed here, although during my stay lions were primarily seen further north on the doorstep of the hotel and therefore the lodge was not as well located. I am given to understand that at different times of the year the game population moves further south and the cats follow.



An early lion sighting near Mare Sacree

Our evening drive took in Fogou first, the highlight being a sighting of a large water monitor – we also encountered a troop of tantalus monkeys on the Burkina side of the river. Continuing to Mare Sacree, we came across a lone western hartebeest and a large herd of elephants. Unfortunately, they were feeling somewhat harassed by a truck full of local schoolchildren and weren't playing nice.

December 28th:

Our trick of leaving first to Mare Sacree was once again successful with a clear 10 minute sighting of two lion brothers on the main road. They were incredibly relaxed, padding off into the grass only when it suited them. Leaving them behind, the remainder of the drive was punctuated by sightings of elephant and generic game.

Mare Yanougali was the focus for the afternoon and we were greeted by roan galore, as well as an impressive male defassa waterbuck. There were several more highlights, including fabulous views of a grey kestrel, a hippo clearly visible grazing and a side-striped jackal.



An impressive male Buffon's kob

December 29th:

We headed to Mare Bali this morning, coming across kori bustard, Beaudouin's snake eagle, roan, squacco heron, pied kingfisher, spur-winged goose, spur-winged lapwing, great egret, hippo, West African crocodile, African jacana, African fish eagle, rose-ringed parakeet, black-headed heron and black-crowned crane.

Our evening drive again headed north, where we came across several herds of elephant, including an adorable baby at Mare Diwouni. This was a beautiful sighting on which to end my trip, and a lion and cheetah-less journey back to camp was swiftly followed by a great deal of Beninoise beer.



A gorgeous baby elephant to end the trip

Overall, I hugely enjoyed my stay in Benin. I went in with expectations low – I entirely expected lions, elephant and buffalo to be difficult to come by, when in actual fact we saw all of them most days. Cheetah and korrigum eluded us and I will have to go back to find them (what a hardship!), and I learnt that wild dogs were last seen in Pendjari in the early 1990s, contrary to the idea sometimes reported that dogs are still present in WAP. I would highly recommend Pendjari to any intrepid mammal watcher, especially now that the park is in the safe hands of African Parks.

Mammal list:

African Buffalo – *easily seen, best area west of the Arli Border Post*

African Bush Elephant – *easily seen, best area around Mare Diwouni*

African Civet – *three individuals seen at night west of the Arli Border Post*

Bohor Reedbuck – *one individual seen near Mare Fogou*

Buffon's Kob – *countless animals seen every day*

Common Duiker – *one individual seen near Mare Fogou*

Common Hippopotamus – *pods resident in all the mares, best viewed at Mare Bali*

Common Warthog – *countless animals seen every day*

Defassa Waterbuck – *uncommon, about a dozen seen, mostly around Mare Fogou*

Kewel – *many seen every day, very common around Mare Fogou*

Lion – *eight sightings of 11 individuals, best area just east of Mare Sacree*

Olive Baboon – *seen regularly, with one large troop resident at the Arli Border Post*

Patas Monkey – *two troops seen, one near Mare Sacree the other south of Pendjari Hotel*

Roan – *countless animals seen every day*

Serval – *two individuals seen near Mare Yangouali*

Side-Striped Jackal – *approximately ten individuals seen at night, with six seen south of Mare Bali*

Striped Ground Squirrel – *one seen from Pendjari Hotel*

Tantalus Monkey – *one individual seen at the Pendjari Hotel, one troop seen at Mare Fogou*

Western Hartebeest – *c.5 individuals seen, best areas south of Mare Diwouni and north of Mare Bali*

White-Tailed Mongoose – *one seen at night west of the Arli Border Post*