

## **Trip Report: Niokolo-Koba, Senegal**

Tom Clode, April 22<sup>nd</sup> – May 6<sup>th</sup> 2018

I've always been fascinated by African Wild Dogs, and several years ago set myself the goal of seeing them in all 16 range states. Over the past few years, I've had the good fortune to tick six countries off my list, with great sightings in Botswana, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe. I've also had some near misses in Zambia (South Luangwa is really a bogey destination for me!), Chad and Namibia – Angola, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Malawi, Senegal, South Sudan, Sudan all present real challenges! Of all of these, Senegal is top of my priority list – the wild dogs here are isolated and deeply threatened by habitat degradation and poaching. In fact, the nearest population of dogs are probably in Siniaka-Minia, Chad (about 5,000km away!).

With this in mind, in 2016 I reached out to the guides of Niokolo-Koba NP, in the south-east of Senegal at their website GIE Niokolo (<http://www.niokolo-safari.com/>). Ousmane Bate kindly responded with information that the wild dogs were still occasionally seen in the park, though seeing them would be a real challenge. Sadly, before I was able to make it to the park, Ousmane passed away. His colleague Abdoulaye Kante kindly stepped in, and arranged my visit for me. I paid via Western Union a sum of about £1 million CFA for a two-week trip (about £1,400 or \$1,800), which included all food, fuel and accommodation, as well as entrance fees.

### **April 22<sup>nd</sup>:**

Arriving into the new Dakar International Airport was very straightforward, having connected through Casablanca from London Gatwick with Royal Air Maroc. I'd highly recommend this airline, having also travelled with them to Chad – dated planes, but usually lots of empty seats and good food. At 6am, Abdoulaye arrived with an English-speaking driver – be aware that guides in Niokolo-Koba speak French but very limited English. It was about an eight-hour drive to the park, the roads were excellent and, aside from minor car trouble, the route through Tambacounda was very easy. Some basic accommodation outside the park is available to visitors, and this is where we spent the night. Running water and electricity were available here, as well as some good birding – the area is full of gonoleks, woodpeckers and babblers.

### **April 23<sup>rd</sup>:**

Finally, a chance to visit the park! We set out early through the entrance gate at Dar Salam, taking about 1.5 hours to cross a dry area of scrubland before making it to the main game-viewing area around Simenti. This drive allowed us our first view of birds not commonly found in other areas of Africa more typically known for safaris, including Abyssinian rollers, blue-bellied rollers and many more. Arriving at the area around the Simenti Hotel, there are a number of "mares" – essentially waterholes spreading away from the Gambia River. Here, we encountered our first warthogs and Buffon's kob, as well as copious numbers of marabou storks, great white pelicans and red-throated bee-eaters. White-faced whistling ducks and spur-winged goose were also common. Kewel are omnipresent in this area – these beautiful antelope were once considered a subspecies of bushbuck but are not recognised as a separate species. Defassa waterbuck are similarly regularly seen.

By lunch we had made it to our accommodation at the Campement du Lion – this is one of three accommodation options in the park and is rough and ready, but comfortable. Accommodation consists of a woven hut, containing a large mattress, pillows and a mosquito net. There is now electricity in the camp so charging facilities are available, but no running water. Showers are

available in camp using a large drum of water and a cup for pouring it on oneself. I believe showers are available at the Simenti Hotel, but the Campement du Lion is well-located on the banks of the iconic Gambia River and offers a good opportunity of encountering the extremely rare West African Lion. Cold drinks are available here for a price, and meals normally consist of fish caught from the river and mango. Beware the numerous green monkeys here – a large male will steal mangoes from your hand given the chance and is surprisingly aggressive (I caught him in the face with a large battery which barely gave him cause to look up).

Our evening game drive took in the main game-drive loop around Simenti, as well as a trip across a rope bridge near camp. Near the rope bridge, the tracks of a lone male lion were clear on the road. Our drive though was rewarded only with good views of roan antelope, kob and waterbuck. We returned well before sunset (an unfortunate consequence of limited tourist numbers is that game drives do not extend into anything approaching darkness, which is an issue when daytime temperatures reached 48 degrees Celsius!). The viewpoint below camp is a good place to view West African crocodiles, hippo and kewel. I was rewarded for staying until sunset with my first ever view of an African Finfoot, and a beautiful gymnogene.

#### **April 24<sup>th</sup>:**

Today started with an unfortunate miscommunication – Abdoulaye had kindly arranged for us to spend the night bivouacking near a guard post at Lingue-Kountou where wild dogs had been seen historically, but I was unaware and left all my belongings behind! Not a major issue, and we enjoyed plenty of birdlife on our morning drive near Simenti – blue-bellied roller, red-throated bee-eater, woolly-necked stork, saddle-billed stork, purple heron, grey heron, gymnogene and African hoopoe to name but a few. Warthog, oribi and Abyssinian Ground Hornbill were other highlights.



Female kewel near Simenti

Our evening drive around Lingue-Kountou was designed to intercept wild dogs as they cross from a rocky area they had previously dened in to the Niokolo River. Our drive succeeded in intercepting Buffon's kob and very little else – nevertheless we had a very enjoyable evening with the guards of Lingue-Kountou, who kindly shared their food and chatted about football. I slept on a camp bed outside the guard post under a makeshift mosquito net, and was able to use the rudimentary

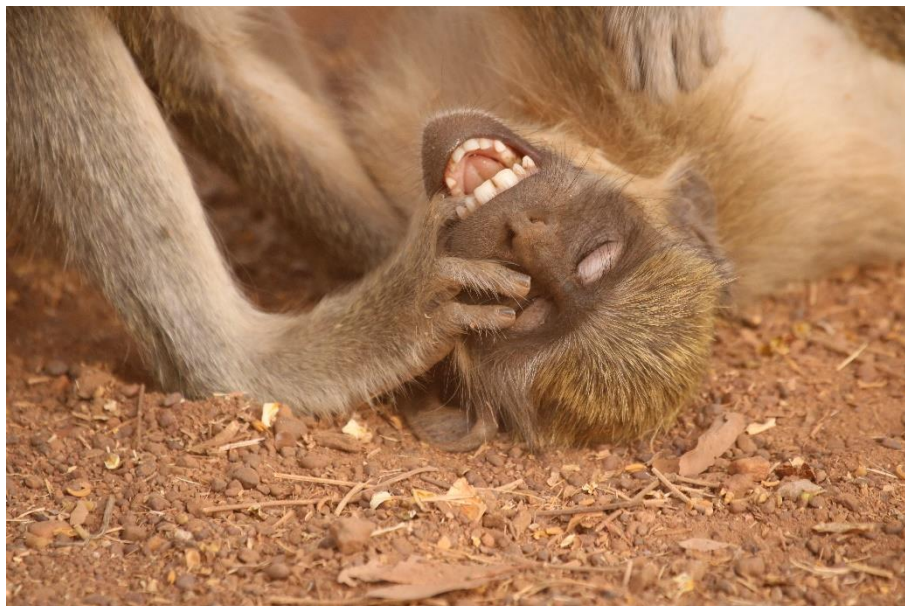
shower and toilet facilities at the guard post. The temperatures were stifling, but I was encouraged by the tales of the guards who had encountered wild dogs occasionally and had an idea of where den sites might be. They very kindly agreed to let us join their patrols in the area (an opportunity not afforded to anybody else before as far as I know) to allow us to get away from the limited road network.

#### **April 25<sup>th</sup>:**

This morning we walked along the banks of the Niokolo river with the guards on the search for dogs. We were rewarded with good views of warthog and kewel but nothing further. The pace of the walk was, as you might expect, startlingly fast, especially given the amount of gear we were carrying. In the evening, we drove back to Campement du Lion to collect my belongings via an area known as the Elephant Pharmacy. Historically, elephants came here to enjoy the mineral-rich soil, but nowadays it is the haunt of large herds of roan. The roan here are particularly magnificent, much like those I'd seen in Pendjari NP in Benin. Today, there are at most three elephants left in Niokolo-Koba – Philipp Henschel of Panthera fame saw three individuals at Mt Assirik in the park several years ago.

#### **April 26<sup>th</sup>:**

This morning saw us encounter one of the many vast troops of Guinea baboons found across the park – the Frankfurt Zoological Society seems to have an interest in the baboons here, as well as the ground-dwelling chimpanzees found near Mt Assirik. Waterbuck and kewel, both often shy, were easily seen this morning. We stopped again at the Simenti Hotel to view the Gambia River and the large population of West African crocodiles below. The green monkeys here kept us highly entertained, as did the Striped Ground Squirrels. The hide at Mare Simenti again offered good birdlife, as well as the omnipresent warthogs, kob and waterbuck and a beautiful African Paradise-Flycatcher.



Green monkeys fighting near the Hotel Simenti

Our drive continued to the Grand Mirador, a viewpoint from which a pack of dozen dogs had been seen about six months previously. We had excellent views of spur-winged lapwing and African

wattled lapwing en route, but the viewpoint was deserted but for a huge West African crocodile. There were also some very clear leopard tracks here.

Our evening drive took in kudu and waterbuck as we drove back to Lingue-Kountou and settled in again.

#### **April 27<sup>th</sup>:**

We again walked with the guards again this morning, with the highlight being a prolonged sighting of a bateleur eagle. We checked out a couple of wild dog den sites and for a second thought we had struck gold, when we heard whimpering from within. To our surprise, a spotted hyena came barrelling out of the den – we also tracked a group of poachers on bicycles and found an abandoned camp where they had evidently killed a porcupine a few days before. A lengthy evening walk disturbed a lot of warthogs but little else, until we honed in on the alarm calls of a group of green monkeys late on. Creeping through the bush, we eventually gave up and returned to the game trail, where we were met with extremely fresh lioness tracks – we had likely missed her by just a few minutes.



Roan antelope – so much more impressive than their southern cousins!

#### **April 28<sup>th</sup>:**

First things first, I was woken by loud sniffing just outside camp – a quick peek behind a wall in the wee hours revealed a white-tailed mongoose before I drifted off to sleep again. An early morning walk across floodplains to the Niokolo river produced a real highlight for me – in the caked mud was, clear as day, the tracks of an African wild dog! I always take sightings from others with a pinch of salt, so to know that dogs had been here during the rainy season just months before was fantastic news. The rest of our walk was uneventful.

We then drove on to Mt Assirik, which took around three hours. This is an area of desolate beauty, home to ground-dwelling chimpanzees and a tiny population of elephant – giant eland are also sometimes seen here. En route we had distant views of serval and side-striped jackal and, most excitingly, relatively fresh elephant tracks across the road. As the curator of the park had refused us permission to bivouac at Mt Assirik, we sadly had to return back to the main game-viewing area of park instead of spending the night here.



**April 29<sup>th</sup>:**

Back at Campement du Lion we set out on the main game-viewing track and saw the usual antelope species, as well as a few new birds including the African Jacana. During both the morning and evening drives oribi were well represented. During the evening I set up by some discarded food in the hope that the local honey badgers would make an appearance – I was left disappointed but determined to try again.

**April 30<sup>th</sup>:**

Our morning drive again took us to Mare Simenti, where birdlife and mammal life was similar to that previously seen there. We learnt from a French tourist that three male lions had been seen nearby whilst we were at Lingue-Kountou. Our evening tour of the mares was similarly quiet, although it was delightful to see a tiny Buffon's kob wandering behind his mother at one stop.



Possibly the smallest Buffon's Kob in the park!

**May 1<sup>st</sup>:**

Today we again drove to the Grand Mirador, and en route saw our first Gambian mongoose and four-banded sandgrouse of the trip. At the viewpoint, a colossal troop of Guinea baboons, numbering well over 100, squabbled on the foreshore below. It kept me entertained as we scanned for dogs unsuccessfully for several hours. Several red-flanked duikers came down to drink whilst we swatted away flies in the heat of the day.

Our evening drive through the Elephant Pharmacy rewarded us with the same large herd of roan as we had encountered previously. A sunset by the river provided excellent views of waterbuck, kudu and many new species of bird. That evening, a pair of honey badgers loudly fed on some discarded rice near camp and made for excellent photos.



Honey badgers enjoying some leftovers at Campement du Lion

### **May 2<sup>nd</sup>:**

We decided to return to the Grand Mirador as we suspected the dogs were in this general vicinity. We surprised three buffalo as we arrived, photographing their rears as they stampeded into the bush – there were also great views of Abyssinian ground hornbill.

During the evening, we again drove to the Elephant Pharmacy and were treated to a view of a sweet baby patas monkey. Our sunset on the riverfront was lit up by a prolonged striated heron sighting. Senegal coucal, yellow-crowned gonolek, red-flanked duiker, pied kingfisher and African hawk-eagle all made appearances. My evening sat waiting for honey badgers was successful and was made all the better by a relaxed and co-operative common genet.



A baby Patas Monkey at the Pharmacie des Elephants

### **May 3<sup>rd</sup>:**

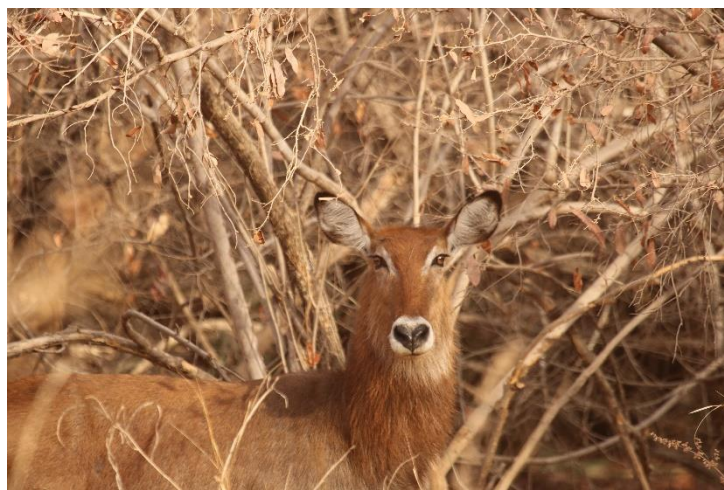
This morning we drove to Mare Simenti once more, picking up only kewel, Buffon's kob and waterbuck. Just as I was settling in to another quiet drive, I had cause to shout "Stop!" as a leopard burst across the road about 25 metres in front of the vehicle – we trawled the area for several

minutes hoping the panicked cat might reappear but to no avail. However, I was very pleased having seen such an elusive cat, particularly in an area where they are so seldom seen.

Our evening drive was less successful, taking a short trip to the rope bridge with no sightings to report. There were, however, clear and fresh tracks of three male lions on the road towards camp, disappearing across the river just downstream of our camp. That night, their roars would be heard very easily. My evening was very successful, with several sightings of honey badger, civet and a distant leopard from camp.

#### **May 4<sup>th</sup>:**

A morning drive to Simenti rewarded us with an alarmingly close encounter with a buffalo in the grounds of the hotel. Waterbuck filled the rest of the drive, and a further highlight was a beautiful martial eagle at close quarters.



Female Defassa Waterbuck

Our evening drive took us down to the local hippo pools, where a youngster was well seen. The rest of the drive was focussed on tracking down the lions that were in the area, but to no avail. We did, however, enjoy sightings of lanner falcon, hamerkop and giant kingfisher.

#### **May 5<sup>th</sup>:**

Our morning drive left the main game-viewing area in a successful attempt to get a view of western hartebeest. We also encountered a massive troop of Guinea baboons, many waterbuck and a palm-nut vulture.

Our final evening drive was a last attempt to secure a lion sighting, and we tracked the males who had left very fresh tracks near camp. We were at most half an hour behind them when they veered off at a crossroads and our chase came to a premature end.

#### **Overall:**

I've been fortunate to see a lot of Africa (with oodles more left to see) but Niokolo-Koba captured my imagination in a way nowhere else has. It is the last place in West Africa so many rare species cling on to survival – in my lifetime, it seems as though the last wild dogs of West Africa will

disappear, and I hope to return very soon to see them before that happens. Of course, the lions, elephants, chimpanzees, giant eland and much more will also have me coming back in the years ahead.

**Mammal List:**

*African Buffalo* – three seen at the Grand Mirador, one seen at the Simenti Hotel

*African Civet* – one seen from Campement du Lion

*Buffon's Kob* – countless seen every day

*Common Duiker* – one seen between the entrance gate and Campement du Lion

*Common Genet* – one seen from Campement du Lion

*Common Hippopotamus* – a pod is resident directly upstream of Campement du Lion

*Common Warthog* – countless seen every day

*Defassa Waterbuck* – countless seen every day

*Gambian Mongoose* – one seen on the banks of the Gambia river

*Green Monkey* – countless seen every day, guaranteed to be seen at Campement du Lion

*Guinea Baboon* – very common near Simenti and the Grand Mirador

*Honey Badger* – seen on two nights from Campement du Lion

*Kewel* – countless seen every day

*Leopard* – one seen well near Simenti, one seen distantly from Campement du Lion

*Oribi* – at least one pair encountered each day

*Patas Monkey* – seen regularly at Pharmacie des Elephants

*Red-Flanked Duiker* – seen regularly from Campement du Lion and the Grand Mirador

*Roan* – countless seen every day, particularly common at the Pharmacie des Elephants

*Serval* – one seen distantly between Lingue-Kountou and Mt Assirik

*Side-Striped Jackal* – several seen near Mt Assirik

*Spotted Hyena* – one flushed out of den near Lingue-Kountou

*Striped Ground-Squirrel* – several seen at Hotel Simenti

*Western Hartebeest* – about half a dozen seen near Simenti

*White-Tailed Mongoose* – one seen at Lingue-Kountou