

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 18 Sept -25 Sept 2013

I was ready for a Western Lowland Gorilla. I kept reading people's reports about the CAR and earlier this year I was going to start putting together my trip. My trip planning and a certain rebel situation however happened at the same time and this squashed my plans, or so I thought. I had also read that Wilderness Safaris had opened two camps in and around Odazala -Kokoua National Park in the Republic of the Congo and were offering gorilla treks. After doing some research I was in, with my friend Jyl from Michigan who I had met in Kenya.

I had a pretty uneventful flight from the US to Paris except for the random man next to me that kept thinking my shoulder was a perfect pillow to fall asleep on. I have always had nightmarish connections at Charles de Gaulle airport that seem to take hours, however this time luckily my flight and its connection to Brazzaville were in the same terminal. The first night we stayed at the Mikhael's Hotel in Brazzaville, which just seemed like some of the other business guest type hotels I had stayed in, in Africa.

Day 1 – We met up with our group in the morning at the hotel which consisted of a father and daughter from Luxembourg, a married couple from Wales, and a single woman originally from Zimbabwe who was currently living in Perth. Australia. After meeting everyone, I over heard the Welsh man explaining to his wife that my friend and I were Americans (sounding as if we were some endangered species she should be shocked to see). He later came up to us and asked us if we were familiar at all with the location of the UK and if we had every heard of Wales. I usually can come up with some pretty quick responses to things like this but I was dumbfounded so just had to walk off. I know many of my country people are geographically challenged, but.....We then took a charter 2.5 hour light aircraft flight from Brazzaville to the M'boko airstrip in the national park. From what I could see from the air there still seemed to be large tracts of untouched rainforest, which was a nice surprise. We were split into two groups, my friend and I ending up with the single woman. While she was a birder at heart, she was

pretty laid back and never complained about stopping to look at anything. We ended up with the main guide Karl who is from the Ivory Coast. The trip is split between two lodges – the first at the Ngaga Camp which is on the outskirts of the national park where the gorilla treks start and the second the Lango Camp which is based on a bai and involves river and savannah type safaris. The drive to the Ngaga camp took about three hours. The only wildlife we saw was a single marsh mongoose in the middle of the road.



After getting to the camp we went on a short walk along a trail by the main building. No mammals were seen. I asked Karl about trail names, but he told me that the trails were more on a grid system and did not have real names to give. The Ngaga camp does allow night walks, unlike the Lango Camp where there is a high population of forest buffalo and

forest elephants. I decided to make the most of it and go on walks each night that I could. The main “road” leading from the camp is where we concentrated our efforts each night. Night number one only showed a single Elegant needle clawed galago and a single Demidoff's dwarf galago, both of which seemed very skittish.

The actual rooms at Ngaga are small luxury type tents in thatched rooms. At night it is pretty much pitch dark in the rooms. As a malaria preventative I was taking malarone and warned my friend that I fell under the “unusual dreams/nightmares/night talking” side effects and apologized for anything that could happen. At around 12 am the first night there, I woke up to something



large crawling around the tent in front of my bed. So I jumped up, grabbed my torch and woke my friend up telling her about it. Excited she asked me what it was, and I responded some sort of possum like creature as I was shining the light all over the room trying to find it. She then asked , “wow how did you see it in the dark”..... damn malarone.

Day 2 – our first gorilla trek. Two groups of gorillas are habituated for tourists , Neptuno's group and Jupiter's group, both named after the silverback. Neptuno's group are the main ones that people go to see as they tend to stay pretty close to the lodge. They have one senior tracker and two junior trackers, each of which go out in the morning to find the groups based on where they nested the previous night. As with the mountain gorillas you are given one hour to spend with group once you find them. Prior to leaving for the trek I saw some mice by the main lodge which Karl identified as a species of tree climbing mouse. The hike to actually find Neptuno's group took about 2.5 hours on pretty level terrain with a couple hills. The group was sitting in a large area of marantaceae a type of plant common in the area and something they really like to eat. It also proved to be a very challenging substrate to move through and after about 40 minutes of making a new path and trying to be as stealth a possible, I was looking upon my first western lowland gorilla, a young female who stayed around for about 1 minute. We then went into a small clearing and were bluff charged by Neptuno himself, one of the most exciting parts of the trip. After the charge he sort of hid himself behind some leaves and stared at us for about 5 minutes.





There was a small partially open very dark clearing that the rest of the troop was hanging out in and certain members were taking turns peeking out at us for a few seconds. This was a very different experience than my mountain gorilla trek in Rwanda where the gorillas seemed very relaxed and uninterested in the people. These gorillas seemed very wary, but also very curious about us. The afternoon consisted of going to one of the villages (Ombo village) in the area. Just like the CAR they still do some subsistence hunting in the area, mainly duikers via net hunting. On one of the roofs of one of the houses my friend noticed a filleted out creature that I kept trying to convince myself was a chicken and not the moustached monkey that it really was.

After my long day of trekking and speaking my limited French to the people, dogs, cats and goats in the Ombo village I went to bar area of the lodge, got a beer then laid down on one of the couches on the outside part of the lodge. Just as I had strategically placed myself, my beer, and



my camera, a beecroft's flying squirrel glided meters above my head and landed on the tree next to me. Despite my thinking everything was placed correctly, by the time I grabbed my camera, pushed aside my beverage and dragged myself up off the couch the squirrel had run up the tree and out of any way possible for a picture. My night walk only consisted of a single demidoffs galago and a distant view of an african palm civet.

Day 3 – in the morning we went on a forest walk for about 2 hours along the trail leading away from the main lodge to the left. The only mammals we saw were a troop of putty nosed monkeys that quickly ran off as soon as they saw us. In the afternoon we were set to go on our second gorilla trek also to see Neptuno's group. They were supposedly pretty close to the lodge and the morning group had found them within 40 minutes. As we were starting our trek we heard a very close by call from a lone gorilla. Unfortunately for us it was not a member of Neptuno's group making the sound, but a probable lone male that wanted to take over the group. Because of this Neptuno took his group at a pretty fast pace away from the lone male and away from us. After 4 hours of hiking mainly in thick marantaceae and making new made paths



we could not catch up with them. It was close to dusk and at this point we had to call it quits. The tracker actually looked more irritated that we could not catch up to them when we did and wanted to try again the following morning before we headed to the other camp. Luckily for us the management at the camp, Karl and the trackers were able to work it out so we could go on one more walk free of charge the next morning. My final night walk turned out to be the most eventful. We saw another elegant needle clawed galago, a juvenile african palm civet at close range and a pair of demidoff's galagos that let us watch them for about 5-10 minutes before moving off.



When we were coming down one of the paths something large jumped from the road into some thick marantaceae. Karl called out yellow backed duiker! Unfortunately for me I did not get a close enough look at it to really count it, so frustrating as this is the number one duiker I would like to see in the wild. I was told by the staff at the camp that they are seen frequently at night by the lodge. I was talking to Karl at this point about the lack of bats we had seen. At this point he told me sometimes they see bats catching moths by the dining room and that by the National park headquarters there is a tree that he frequently sees hammer headed fruit bats in and we could give it a try on the way to Lango camp the next day.

Day 4 – Because of the concern with stress to Neptuno's group the previous day, the trackers decided that we would try to find Jupiter's group instead. This involved us having to drive out to the main road and start hiking along the road until there were signs of them. After about 10 minutes on the main road we heard the characteristic hoot-panting calls of chimpanzees. We followed the call into the forest and I got my first look (although slightly distant) view of my first wild non habituated chimp.

From there within 25 minutes we heard/located Jupiter's group who were sitting in a large area of very thick marantaceae. I was pretty excited that we found them so easily, however my excitement was quickly lessened when it took us an additional 2 hours to get to the point of seeing them where they wouldn't

quickly move off. They definitely gave us a run for our money, but when we finally got to a small group of the females and a few young males they seemed very interested in us. As we were trying to position our heads to look through vegetation at them, they kept trying to position themselves to do the same. It was comical at times. Jupiter also seemed relaxed with us and walked by for a few seconds at one point.



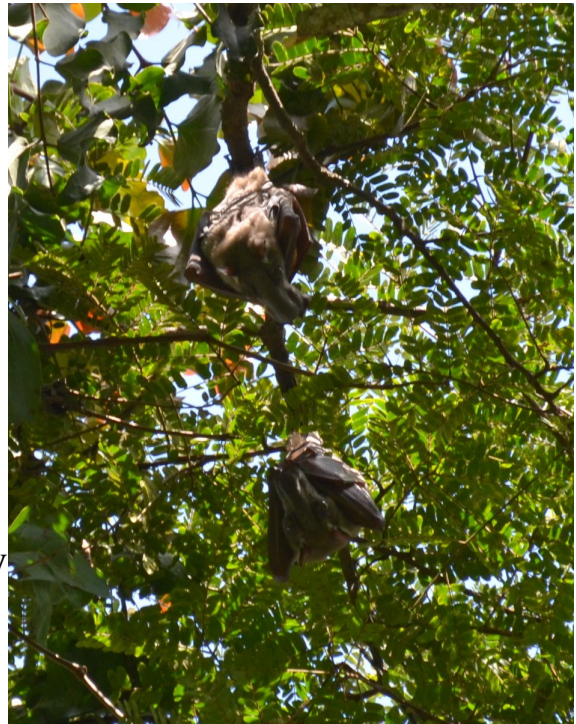


At the way back to the main lodge, there was a small troop of putty nosed monkeys staring down at us. Of course as soon as I lifted my camera to get a picture, they ran off.

After lunch we drove towards the Lango Camp. As promised Karl stopped at the national park headquarters to look for bats.

When you enter the headquarters from the Ngaga side, there is a maintenace building on your right. There are a group of tall trees behind it (Karl did not know the common name of the tree) and there were a few hammer headed fruit bats resting in one of the taller trees. Amazing looking bats and one of my new favorites.

This is not a place they usually stop so you would have to ask and I was told the bats are not always there. You have to drive by the headquarters to get to Ngaga as well so it seems like if you really wanted to see them you could try on the way in and out. I also saw a lone red legged sun squirrel in a tree, but too quick for pictures. The road leading to Lango camp goes through some very overgrown savannah type habitat. Alone or in pairs older male forest buffalo like to hang out on this road and on the way in we saw dozens all at pretty close range.



The actual camp itself is situated in a forest type environment. A resident troop of Western Guereza Colobus like to hang out by the trees by the office and in front of cabin number three were we were put (we saw them multiple times at Lango).

The lodge common area overlooks the Lango bai itself. They have a small deck out in the bai for sundowners. A lone male forest elephant walking in the camp however distracted all of us from our first night sundowner. He proceeded to walk under the deck and into the middle of the workers camp where he hung out until it got dark.

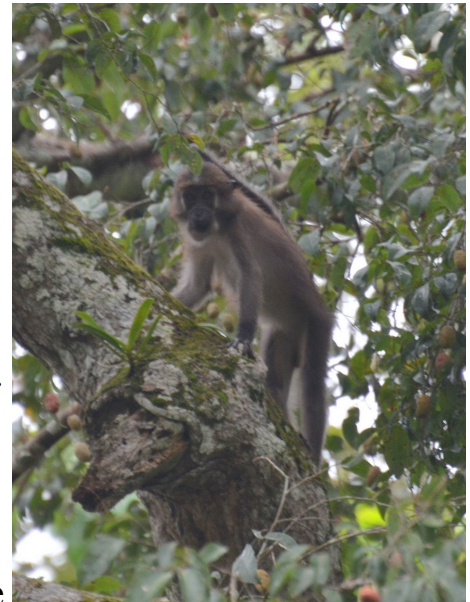
Day 5 – In the morning we did a walk out into the bai itself. We saw a couple bushbuck at a distance and some female forest buffalo.



Our walk was cut short however by a large group of breeding forest buffalo that were blocking our route. I was told red river hog are frequently seen on walks as well as the occasional bongo, just not by me. Mid day we saw the colobus again as well as a few red legged sun squirrels that would not stick around for pictures. In the

afternoon we went on a river boat ride along the Lekoli River. It takes about an hour to get there from the camp. There is a area by the river where they are building a low cost camp for tourists as well as being an area where a local spotted hyena researcher lives. They have found that the hyenas in the area have a large craving for pangolin on their menu. We went “downriver” first and had adequate views of more western guerezas as well as as a few putty nosed monkeys. After seeing a large group of locals in a boat, and with concerns with them scaring off any wildlife we would see, we then went up river for a look. Karl told me this was a great area for Debrazza monkeys. While we did not see any at that point, we did see a really large troop of agile mangabeys.

There must have been about 80-100 in all the trees surrounding us as well as on the ground. I have never worked with or seen a mangabey before and it was interesting to see how “spider monkey” like they were in the way they responded to us by stomping their feet at us and moving branches at us. It was one of my favorite moments of the trip. After getting out of the boat and on the way back to the car, the other woman in our group stopped and said, “Wow there are a lot of really large rats in that tree moving pretty fast”. When we all turned to look, we discovered it was not a large group of tree dwelling rats, but a large troop of northern talapoin! This was the most excited that I had seen Karl at a sighting as he said they were difficult to see. It was dusk, the lighting was horrible, but I did get decent views of a couple of them that would stop for seconds and stare at us. I only have one really lousy photo to share.



I knew they were small, but was surprised at just how small they were. The ride back to the lodge again produced dozens of male forest buffalo. That night while we were sleeping I heard the sound of branches crashing outside the room around 3 am. I went out to check it out and saw a lone forest elephant standing right under the deck of our room. I was 100% certain I was awake at this point (and after about 5 minutes of convincing myself) – so

woke my friend up to have a look.

Day 6 – in the morning we went back to the Lekoli river for a morning cruise. On the way there a lone spotted hyena was standing in the middle of the road. We saw more forest buffalo including a few with calves along the river itself. We also watched a small herd of forest elephant for about 25-30 minutes along the side of the river.



Monkeys on the downriver part included colobus, putty nosed monkeys, and agile and grey-cheeked mangabeys.



We went upriver one more time to try for debrazza and were rewarded with a view of a young male.

Trying to leave the river we were blocked by another herd of elephants and



had to exit by one of the park boat landing areas instead. In camp I saw another squirrel that actually stopped for some pictures that I have included. While the camp itself had dozens of red legged sun squirrels, this one looked different. The sun squirrels would never stop long enough for a picture, but looked different than this one. Maybe a juvenile? Any help with identification would be helpful.

I tried to take a nap in the afternoon but the western colobus had other ideas and decided at that time would be the right time to jump around along the trees around my room. As least they allowed for some pictures.



We took a afternoon to night drive and saw a lone grey-cheeked mangabey in a tree, a few male sitatunga, and more forest buffalo. We ended the trip with a marsh mongoose that ran in front of our car by the camp.



Day 7 – the drive back to the airstrip and flight back to Brazzaville were uneventful.

Some thought about my trip-

- 1) I have never used a large company that owns so many lodges like Wilderness travel. I was kind of hesitant at first because I was concerned that they want to cater to the “tourist light” person that only wants to see what they are shown and are more interested in how much alcohol is included with there package then how many animals they see. While some people in my group did fall into this category, I felt like the staff and guides went out of their way to show us stuff. When I said Karl “lets go look for squirrels” during down time he was great about it. He took me to see the bats which was amazing. I was the only one that wanted to do the nightly walks at Ngaga and this was not a problem. Plus the fact that they worked it out for us to go on the other gorilla trek was impressive. I would recommend this trip to anyone.
- 2) Holy mother of god insects and arachnids. I know people talk about the ants in the CAR. I saw ants, but they never bothered me. On our first gorilla trek they handed out bug nets to wear on our heads. I thought this was silly until we started hiking and about 24,000 small flies tried to fly into my orbital cavity through my tear ducts. It made for some great pictures. At one point while walking through the marantaceae on the first gorilla trek I felt something prick my right hand and I looked down and saw two small blood marks. They looked too close to be from a snake so I kept walking. After about 30 minutes my hand started to itch and by the time I got back to the lodge there was some very mild swelling by the marks. I and the staff thought I was probably bit by some kind of spider. When I woke up the next morning my hand was very swollen, itched and was painful. It also looked like it was going to start leaking some bodily fluids. If I didn't need the hand for day to day activities I considered chewing it off at one point. The Welsh tourists had some strange liquid they had brought from the UK in a water bottle. They convinced me to put it on my hand to help the swelling. While I had no idea what it was, and it smelled like a sewer in 100 degree weather in a bottle, at that point I thought weird UK carcinogen vs hand chewing and picked the carcinogen. Not sure if the swelling was getting ready to go down or not by itself but the swelling went down the next morning. My friend did ban me however from ever using it near her

again. I took a pretty impressive picture of my hand and thought long and hard about sharing it here, however didn't want people here to think when they see my name, "oh the girl with the gross hand just posted a new report". I also enjoyed getting stung in the neck by a flying insect when I was looking up at the chimp. It felt like a 16 gauge needle was being thrust into my neck. The thought of scaring off the chimp was the only thing that stopped me from screaming like a 4 year old being told there is no santa claus. I also could go on and on about the biting flies, but I think you get the picture.

- 3) Marantaceae while obviously delicious for the gorillas = pain in the ass for humans. The hiking through it was intense. No one else talks about it from CAR trip reports, so not sure if that is what they encountered.
- 4) I have been to a lot of rainforests, a lot, maybe not Jon Hall a lot, but a lot. I have seen hunting pressure effect how well you can see animals, but not to this degree, and I felt that this was the reason a lot of the mammal sightings I saw along the first camp were so quick. It made photography very challenging at times and I have a lot of photos of animals backsides, tails and one extremity. That being said the national park itself is beautiful and I often wish I was still there but in a bug free area. Forest buffalo on the other hand liked to pose and have photos taken, especially while eating.
- 5) Give me a blank map of the world and I can point out Wales.

Trip list

1. Marsh mongoose – *Atilax paludinosus*
2. Elegant (southern) needle-clawed galago – *Euoticus elegantulus*
3. Demidoff's dwarf galago – *Galagoides demidovii*
4. Western Lowland Gorilla – *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*
5. Beecrofts Scaly tailed flying squirrel -*Anomalurops beecrofti*
6. Climbing mouse species
7. African palm civet – *Nandinia binotata*
8. Putty nosed monkey -*Cercopithecus nictitans nictitans*
9. Common Chimpanzee (central) – *Pan troglodytes troglodytes*
10. Hammer-headed fruit bat – *Hypsignathus monstrosus*
11. Red legged sun squirrel – *Heliosciurus rufobrachium*
12. Forest buffalo-*Syncerus caffer nanus*

13. Forest elephant – *Loxodonta cyclotis*
14. Western Guereza colobus – *Colobus guereza occidentalis*
15. Bushbuck -*Tragelaphus scriptus*
16. Agile Mangabey – *Cercocebus agilis*
17. Northern talapoin – *Miopithecus ogouensis*
18. Spotted hyena - *Crocuta crocuta*
19. Grey-cheeked mangabey – *Lophocebus albigena*
20. De Brazza monkey- *Cercopithecus neglectus*
21. Sitatunga -*Tragelaphus speckei*
22. Possible another squirrel species or a juvenile red legged sun squirrel

Close calls

1. Yellow backed duiker- so frustrating!!! The really thick marantaceae at night was the only thing stopping us from trying to track it
2. Moustached monkey – I did sort of see one. Albeit ripped apart on a roof.

Drug induced sightings

1. Congo possum – scientific name not readily available.....