

KENYA February/March2013

My first trip outside of Europe and the Mediterranean area was in Kenya and it was 22 years ago. For my first time I saw the large mammals of Africa. But of course not all of them. Since I have been always seeking informations where to see Hirolas, one of the rarest mammals of the world. Apparently they have always been restricted to the east of the Tana river. I knew that Arawale reserve was declared a reserve to try and save them. But this area has always been unsafe, because of shiftas (bandits) and poaching has always been a problem. I have never seen any company offering a trip there. Then Hirolas have been translocated in Tsavo east NP where they are around 100 now. But it was not a great success. It has apparently disappeared from Somalia. More recently a new reserve has been proclaimed south of Arawale: Ishaqbini . This reserve is managed by a Somali community. But again the poaching is or was the main problem. A few years ago a fenced area has been created to save the species. First the gate were let open permitting to some animals to get inside. Then it was closed and a few more animals were caught and released inside. All the predators have been caught and translocated.

Jon Hall tried to visit the area in 2011, unfortunately during the rainy season and was unable to cross the river Tana. Last year Jon (thanks to him) gave me a contact (I don't remember the name) who worked there in the past. This person responded me immediately, telling me the area was very safe, but unapproachable during the rainy season. The end of February seemed perfect. I used Jon Hall 's trip report (see Mammal watching).

Lazy to contact different agents offering car and driver I contacted ERICSON SAFARI, the company used by Jon and it was a big error. On different blogs I saw different persons complaining of the cars provided by this company. I saw that several persons got stuck without any help of this company. So I was really worrying. But it was tempting to use the same company and the same driver.

First Catherine from ERICSON SAFARI told me that Ishaqbini was safe, then unsafe because of clashes between tribes, then OK, then very dangerous, then just 5 days before my departure safe because of the presence of the army. So on February 20th when I arrived in Mombasa and told to my driver, John, the same driver used by Jon Hall, that I wanted to go to Ishaqbini he told me it was too dangerous because of rebels from Somalia. We spoke during several hours of that, but my driver was really afraid to go there. And it is true that the area is said to be very dangerous by different governments including France. So for the first day I decided to go to Shimba Hills Reserve, south of Mombasa. During an afternoon safari we saw: 12 (Roosevelt's)Sable antelopes (the main target here), 4 females (Eastern coastal)Bushbucks, a lot of Common warthogs, 40 Common Impalas, 30 (Cape) African Buffalos, several Dik dik(sp) and Yellow baboons, 1 Ellipsen Waterbuck and only dung of African savanna elephants. In the evening I was ready to speak again with my driver about the possibility to go to Ishaqbini. John first asked me to take 2 guides from Mombasa speaking Somali, or Johnson Kafulu from Arabuko Sokoke reserve, but I didn't accept and we finally decided to go to Garsen and to ask locally how was the security. We spent the night camping in Shimba Hills.

The following morning we left early to Garsen. Already John added oil in the car. It was just the beginning of the problems! Passing through Mombasa, we bought oil. We passed several road blocks without any question, but at the last one in Garsen we asked how was the situation and were told

“No problem”. It is true that like John I was worrying to go there. Until Garsen the road was good. But after it was in terrible conditions. After Garsen we saw very few people, one truck and nothing else on the so called road. It was very hot but we nevertheless saw several times Dik diks (I must recognize that we didn't stop to identify them). We saw also herds of sheep and goats, but also free donkeys looking like African wild ass (of course they were not pure genetically). Then we arrived at Tana Primate reserve. I was asked what I wanted to do. I explained we wanted to camp in the reserve, look at the monkeys and go the following day to Ishaqbini with 1 or 2 armed rangers. They accepted. The campsite was the best I saw in Kenya. We were next to the Tana River. In the late afternoon I saw many Tana crested Mangabey and Syke's Blue monkeys, 3 Tana red Colobus and despite of the presence of a lot of antelopes's footprints I didn't see any. There were 3 Hippopotamus in the river. The rangers told me I had very little chance to see Hirolas because they move a lot. Ishaqbini is just on the opposite side of the river, but because the local boat is “broken”, to reach the place you have to do a detour to cross the river. By night a Common genet was in the camp.

Early morning, the 22nd of February, (after John had added oil in the car) we picked up the 2 rangers and drove around 35km to the bridge which is north of Tana Primate reserve. Then it is 36 km south to reach Ishaqbini. No tarmac on the road which is just sand. As we approached Ishaqbini we began to see (Southern) Lesser kudus, Ellipsen Waterbuck, Yellow baboons, Reticulated giraffes, (Southern) Gerenuks, 1 Vervet, 2 Unstriped ground squirrels, Somali ostriches, a lot of Desert warthogs and Dik dik (the few identified were Kirk's), Baboons and a lone Lion. Arriving in the reserve itself we were received by the manager, Benson Nyangow Ojwang, who told me not to loose time as it was already warming. We changed of car, using a better car from the reserve and taking one more armed ranger. Benson told me the area was now safe, but that it was not a few months ago. But I had now 3 armed rangers. After only 10 minutes in the reserve we saw 6 Hirolas, thanks to the local ranger, plus a few (Common) Impalas and Plains Zebras, and the same bovids mentioned above. But despite Elephants' dung we didn't see any. I was told they are also (Cape)Buffalos and (Coastal) Topis. Then Benson drove us to a lake where they want to do a campsite. It was full of birds and I saw also 2 Bushpigs, 1 (Eastern coastal) Bushbuck and 1 Tana red Colobus. Then we entered the fenced area and saw the same species, including 3 shy Hirolas.. Very satisfied we left the place, dropped the 2 rangers at Tana Primate reserve and drove to Malindi and Tsavo East that we reach just before 18h30. We camped in the park.

The 23rd we crossed Tsavo East, expecting to arrive late afternoon in Aberdares NP. In Tsavo we saw a lot of African savanna Elephants, several Ellipsen Waterbucks, a few Common Impalas, Yellow Baboons, 1 Striped Hyanea, 1 (Southern) Gerenuk, 1 Hippopotamus, a few Plains Zebras, 20 (Kongoni)Coke's hartebeests, 1 or 2 (Tippelskirschi) giraffes and +=10 Peter's gazelles. Just as we reached the tarmac road to Nairobi, we got stuck because the car had already drunk or lost all the oil. After John had asked to Catherine another car and been told they had no car, I got stuck along the road while John left to buy more oil. Need less that we it was out of question to reach Aberdares, so we slept in Nairobi.

The 24th (I don't add after adding more oil in the car) we reached Aberdares NP late morning, seeing a Striped ground squirrel before the gate. By 2 in the afternoon we phoned to Catherine to complain because I had lost 1 late afternoon and 1 morning safaris in Aberdares. Catherine agreed to provide me the car for 1 day more. Then we left looking for animals. John showed me 8 Forest hogs(not my

first ones, because I saw one twice in Uganda). We saw a lot of Common Warthogs, 10 or less Defassa Waterbucks, a lot of (Cape)Buffalos, 3 (Cape)Bushbuku, a lot of Olive Baboons. One 1 hour after the phone call the car had a new problem (something broken below). We left very slowly to the campsite. John called Catherine, who told again there was no car and that she was sending a mechanic that never arrived. The following morning we were waiting in the campsite without informations. By 8 John called Catherine who told him that the mechanic had left by 3am (not the truth). I asked to John to drive slowly to the gate. We saw a large, very dark male Leopard. Arriving at the gate we saw the 2 mechanics arriving at 9h40 only. They worked hard. By the end we had to drive to the next town to finish to repair the car. It was finished by 3pm, so we had lost again 23hours. It was too late to reach Samburu, so we went back in Aberdares(seeing a second Striped ground squirrel outside the reserve) to explore the highlands, where we slept (in the morning the tents were frozen). Except the problem of oil the car seemed to be OK, but the following morning all the bad smoke got inside the car which was unable to climb each time it was a little steep. John had to repair it and me lost again time. We saw again a lot of (Cape)Buffalos, only 1 African savanna Elephant, 30 Defassa Waterbucks, 3 close Guereza colobus (more heard), a lot of Syke's blue monkeys, 1 Harvey's Duiker, 15 (Cape)Bushbucks, 2 Spotted hyaneas, several Scrub hares by night, 1 Mount Kenya(Black fronted duiker) in the highland forest, 1 (Mountain) Suni (seen twice), 1 Bohor reedbuck. We heard also by night the barking of a dog at 3000m(Wild dog?) and Eastern Tree hyraxes in both campings (at 2000 and 3000m). Finally like John I glimpsed an animal which look like a Cusimanse which is known only from Mt Elgon in Kenya. I have no idea what it was. By midday we left to Samburu. While crossing the high plateau I saw Common Impalas in the fields and in a ranch, plus 15 Common Elands, a few Plains Zebras and Thomson 's gazelles in a ranch on the way to Nanyuki.

I spent a full day (27th of February) in Samburu where I saw more than 80 African savanna Elephants, 20 Reticulated giraffes, 1 Cheetah, 1 Leopard, a lot of Unstriped ground squirrels, 1 Scrub hare, 70 (Galla)Beisa oryx, 1 lone Grevy's zebra, 40+ Bright gazelles, 70+ Common Impalas, 2 Dwarf mongooses, 40+(Southern)Gerenuks, several Vervets, first 1 Wild dog running after a gazelle, then a group of 14 Wild dogs resting, a lot of Dik diks (a lot of Kirk's and at least 2 pairs of Guenther's), only 4 Common warthogs (and 4 too far unidentified ones) and no Desert warthogs.

We left the 28th to Nairobi where John dropped me and where I spent a night, catching a bus the following morning to Arabuko Sokoke Reserve where I camped 2 nights. After leaving Nairobi I saw a few Plains Zebras and Grant's Gazelles in Nairobi NP.

In Arabuko Sokoke reserve I met John Wachira who guided me. We saw at least 20 Golden rumped elephants shrews, 1 Four toed elephant shrew, a lot of Yellow Baboons and Sykes's blue monkeys, 15+ (Coastal) Sunis, 1 (Eastern coastal) Bushbuck, several Red bellied coast squirrels, 2 or 3 Zanj sun squirrels and dung of Elephants, and by night 1 Senegal galago, a glimpse of Greater galago (heard several times in the campsite) and 1 African white bellied Hedgehog, but no Ader's duiker which seems to be very rare. John saw one only once. The best place to see this species seems to be Boni Reserve at the border with Somalia (according to John and a researcher on bats that I met in Arabuko).

In fact I saw a lot and most of species I wanted to see. My driver, John, was friendly, always in time and a very good spotter (thanks to him for the Leopards, the Cheetah and the first Forest hogs). John

Wachira in Arabuko was the same, but the car was a nightmare. I lost of time and feel to have been scammed. Because of the time lost everyday, most of the time we had not time to stop to have lunch. An exhausting experience. So if I can recommend my driver (wachirajohn50@gmail.com) who work indepently I advise everybody not to hire a car with Ericsons Safaris. I have just been one more person scammed by this company.

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