

The Republic of The Gambia: 2 - 9 March 2012

Mike Richardson (photography by Sarah Winch)



Cape Clawless Otter (*Aonyx capensis*) © Sarah Louise Winch - Wildlife Wanderer

Introduction

The Republic of The Gambia is a West African country located on the Atlantic coast and is almost entirely surrounded by Senegal. With an area of 11,295 km² Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa and has a population estimated at 1.7 million people.

At first glance Gambia may seem a poor choice of destination for the mammal connoisseur. It will never be able to compete with South Africa, Kenya or Uganda as a place to see large iconic species. In fact overhunting and habitat loss has led to the extinction of most of Gambia's mega mammal fauna including African Wild Dog, Red River Hog and African Buffalo.

On the plus side Gambia offers some excellent birding opportunities and has long been a favourite destination for UK birders wanting to escape the depressing British winter. Flight times from Europe are relatively short and a variety of cheap package deals are available from most major tour operators.

The Gambia still contains over 100 species of native mammals, including sought after species such as Leopard, Spotted Hyena and various antelope. It is also home to several species such as Western Red Colobus and West African Manatee, which are very scarce and far more difficult to see in other parts of West Africa.

Trip Details

I visited Gambia for a week in early March 2012 with my girlfriend Sarah on what was primarily a relaxation holiday. Plans for an earlier visit had to be cancelled due to family illness which meant everything had to be rebooked at the last minute. Due to limited availability we ended up staying at a far more expensive hotel than we initially intended and we had to use a more costly tour operator. Money aside, both turned out to be far better choices in the end.

We stayed at the Kairaba Hotel located on the Kololi strip. This is the main tourist area containing the majority of restaurants, banks, shops and tour operators. Our hotel and flights were purchased through The Gambia Experience - www.gambia.co.uk

I booked the services of two highly competent bird guides via the internet. Both came highly recommended and were quick to answer emails. They organised transport and drivers where appropriate and were able to get me into restricted areas at night which was most useful. I also hired a third guide for a hastily arranged pre-dawn visit to Abuko on my last morning. Details of the guides are as follows:

Modou Colley is one of the Gambia's leading bird guides and his knowledge of birds was outstanding. I used him to visit Abuko and the nearby rice fields in the daytime and also for a night visit to Abuko. Although happy to help me find mammals, his bird knowledge was far greater.

web: www.gambianbirds.com email: mcolley99@yahoo.com

Jukung Jadama (JJ) was also outstanding at finding birds. In addition he excelled at spotting mammals both day and night and was quick to identify them. JJ has worked as a volunteer ranger at Kiang West National Park which made him a great choice for exploring the Tendaba area.

web: www.gambiabirdguide.com email: jsjadama73@yahoo.com

Hassen Gindeh operates from the tourist guide hut outside the Senegambia Hotel and is still developing his reputation as a bird guide. He impressed me with his knowledge of mammals and reptiles and has served time as a volunteer at Abuko where he worked on tracking and live trapping mammals for research. He is also a passionate and excellent birder. I hired Hassen for a pre-dawn visit to Abuko on my last morning in the country.

web: www.gambiabirdman.blogspot.com email: agindeh@yahoo.com

Sites Visited

As our trip was primarily for relaxation purposes I decided to limited my time in the field to two main areas. My intention was to visit these sites both day and night giving me a good chance of seeing some of the birds, mammals and herps that frequent the area. Additionally, the grounds of our hotel also accounted for some quality wildlife sightings.

Abuko Nature Reserve

At 180 acres, Abuko is the smallest of only six protected areas in Gambia. Comprising of gallery forest and guinea savannah, the reserve contains several hides overlooking various pools where much of the wildlife congregates. There is also an animal orphanage at Abuko where several species of primate together with a small pack of Spotted Hyenas are housed. Presumably these are confiscated pets rather than orphaned wild animals.

Despite its small size, Abuko is home to some interesting mammals. Common and conspicuous diurnal species include Western Red Colubus, Green Vervet Monkey and Gambian Sun Squirrel. There are also good numbers of Western Bushbuck and Maxwell's Duiker, although only the former is easy to see. More elusive mammals include Pardine Genet, Marsh Mongoose, Red-legged Sun Squirrel and Serval. To my knowledge (and contrary to information widely available on the internet), Sitatunga are no longer found in Abuko. Past attempts to introduce them have failed due to a lack of suitable habitat.

Many mammals come to the pools to drink at dusk and dawn. The private photography hide (not as plush as its name suggests!) next to the hyena enclosure is particularly good for antelope as it's the only water source on that side of the reserve. A key can be obtained from the drinks kiosk or from the night watchman. The crocodile pools are apparently reliable for Marsh Mongoose although I didn't see them on any of my visits.

Although the reserve is open from 08:00 to 18:00, it is possible to access the reserve outside these hours for an additional fee so long as your guide has the right contacts.

Tendaba/Kiang West National Park

Tendaba is a small village located on the south bank of the river about 165km from Banjul. The drive is long (over three hours) due to the poor road in parts and if more time was available we would have preferred to do the journey by boat. We stayed for one night at Tendaba Camp and visited Kiang West for an evening spotlighting session. The next day we enjoyed a four hour boat trip along the creeks and mangrove swamps of The River Gambia.

Kiang West National Park is 110km² and comprises of dry deciduous woodland, savannah, mangrove creeks and tidal flats. Rare mammals such as Spotted Hyena and Leopard can still be found in the park, although it appears Roan Antelope are now extinct. More reliable are Banded Mongoose, Common Warthog and Guinea Baboon.

The park infrastructure is pretty poor and facilities non-existent. A 4x4 is pretty much essential as the roads are in a poor state. JJ arranged for a park ranger to accompany us on the evening which I understand is compulsory.

It is worth mentioning that my week in The Gambia coincided with a full moon which may account for the lack of carnivores encountered at night. The moon was so bright that it was possible to move through the forest without the aid of a flashlight well past midnight.

Mammals Seen



African Savannah Hare (<i>Lepus microtis</i>)	One individual seen in spotlight at Kiang West NP.
Gambian Sun Squirrel (<i>Heliosciurus gambianus</i>)	Common and widespread. Easily seen at Abuko and anywhere there are trees.
Striped Ground Squirrel (<i>Xerus erythropus</i>)	Common and widespread. Seen at Abuko and also large colony in rice fields at Mamdinaba.
Gambian Giant Pouched Rat (<i>Cricetomys gambianus</i>)	One seen in grounds of Kairaba Hotel after midnight. Earlier attempts to find this species around hotel failed as possibly not late enough. According to security guards this species is reasonably common once all the guests have gone to bed.
Egyptian Mongoose (<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>)	Three animals seen together at dawn in Abuko. They were spotted along path bordering the reserve extension.
Cape Clawless Otter (<i>Aonyx capensis</i>)	Three otters seen very well in mangroves on Tendaba boat trip.
Gambian Epauletted Fruit Bat (<i>Epomophorus gambianus</i>)	Seen drinking from Abuko crocodile pools at dusk and dawn. This species is also easy to see roosting in various hotel gardens, although all the roost sites I visited were empty. Gardeners usually know the location of bat roosts.
Senegal Bushbaby (<i>Galago senegalensis</i>)	Over 10 observed while spotlighting at Kiang West NP. Some seen very well.

Green Vervet (<i>Callithrix</i>) Monkey (<i>Chlorocebus sabaeus</i>)	Extremely common at all sites including Abuko and the Kairaba Hotel grounds.
Red Patas Monkey (<i>Erythrocebus patas</i>)	One seen with Vervet troop at Abuko. It is likely this animal is an escapee from the animal orphanage and perhaps should not be counted. Wild Patas are supposedly common inland although I didn't see any.
Guinea Baboon (<i>Papio papio</i>)	A large troop seen in dry river bed at Kiang West NP at dusk.
Western Red Colobus (<i>Piliocolobus badius</i>)	Common at all sites, including grounds of Kairaba Hotel.
Common Warthog (<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>)	A total of seven seen at night in Kiang West NP.
Maxwell's Duiker (<i>Cephalophus maxwellii</i>)	Two seen drinking from pool at private hide, Abuko, midday. Two also seen crossing path at Abuko early morning. This antelope is extremely shy.
Western Bushbuck (<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>)	Common. Seen at Abuko all times of the day and night. Grassy area at far end of crocodile pools is good place to see them, as is private hide. Also seen at dusk at Kiang West.
Bat <i>sp.</i>	Many different bat species seen but unidentified. Three sizes of microbat hunted over creek in hotel grounds every evening. One clearly a pipistrelle <i>sp.</i> Several species also seen hunting over crocodile pools at Abuko both dusk and dawn.

Mammals seen (but not by me)

African Crested Porcupine (<i>Hystrix cristata</i>)	On my early morning visit to Abuko we were alerted to some movement in some thick scrub. Hassen managed a glimpse through the undergrowth and confirmed it was a porcupine.
Marsh Mongoose (<i>Atilax paludinosus</i>)	An animal was spotted very briefly by JJ on the Tendaba boat trip. They are regularly seen on this trip.

With such a limited time in the field I was more than satisfied with the mammals I saw on my visit to Gambia. I intend to return to the country again in the not too distant future when I can concentrate on more trips to Abuko, perhaps setting up a baited site for porcupines, genets and civets. I would also like to visit Pirang Forest Park where Gambian Mongoose are supposed to be common, and possibly the coastline on the Gambia-Senegalese border (north bank of river) which is said to be the best place to see Atlantic Humpback Dolphins (particularly in December and January).