

The Gambia, 22-29 Dec 2015

We visited The Gambia for 7 days in late December, trying four different places; Tanji Bird Reserve, Jinack Island, Kiang West national park, Abuko Forest Reserve. We saw 12 mammal species, 8 of them adding to our life list.



Red colobus monkey, Bo Bolong Wetland Reserve

Tanji Bird Reserve is a scrap of coastal scrub and forest, only a few square kilometers. We tried an afternoon walk, an hour of spotlighting and a morning walk but only saw **green vervet** and **red colobus** monkeys, readily found.

Jinack Island is the main part of Niimi National Park, and has a long beach with scrub forest behind, then a mangrove estuary system behind that. There are four villages and quite a lot of farming too. We were told that bush babies can be found in the cashew trees near the main village or in the forest behind the observation tower along the beach, but too late for us to try spotlighting there.

Apparently it's possible (though rare) to see manatees or otters in the mangroves. We took a boat trip one afternoon towards dusk but saw nothing. Humpback dolphins are seen from the shore, but not by us in spite of a total 4+ hours of watching a mirror-smooth sea and then the 2 hour-long boat transfers from and to Banjul, so it's not guaranteed at all. Jinack zero - I wouldn't advise coming here without a guide who actually knows where mammals might be found.



Patas monkeys, near Tendaba village

Kiang West was our best location. On the main road upriver, **patas monkeys** can be found after the village of Kambong, though they are shy we saw two troops. Also **striped ground squirrels** at the roadside on the small road to Tendaba Camp. We took Mike Richardson's advice and went with Junkung Jadama (www.gambiabirdguide.com) as a guide - he was excellently organised (rare in The Gambia!) and knows the area well.

We went three times across the river by boat to explore the Bo Bolong wetlands, but where Mike saw three cape clawless otters in one trip, we saw zero in three trips! Perhaps they're more likely later into the dry season? Otherwise the mangroves are beautiful but only showed green vervet and a red colobus monkey. We also saw **bottlenose dolphins** in the river, contrary to some accounts that suggest humpback dolphins. The river is the colour of white coffee, and I think manatees would be very hard; you'd be relying on spotting one surfacing.

A trip into Kiang West found **warthogs**, **savannah hare** and **Guinea baboons** around a drying waterhole and after darkness we spotlighted in the woods and saw ten **Senegal bush babies** and a glimpse of a small antelope. We also found a **Gambian sun squirrel** in scrub near our camp, and an **epaullated fruit bat** in a tree in camp. On the way back to the coast a gang of **banded mongoose** ran across the main highway.

Finally we spent 3 hours in Abuko Reserve in the company of the manager Ebrahim Singhateh (you might be able to arrange out-of-hours visits through him: singhateh73@gmail.com +2207841637). The afternoon ought to be best because the tiny reserve is busy with bird watchers and school groups in the morning. However, although

green vervet and red colobus were easy and we saw another sun squirrel, our patience and Ebrahim's knowledge couldn't find any antelope over 3 hours.

It's hard to make The Gambia out as a convincing mammal watching destination, except perhaps for a few days. Then again, we may have been a bit unlucky; most people we spoke to emphasised that later in the dry season is much better (and this year also had a very long wet season). We effectively got all of our 12 species in 2 days to and from Kiang West, so we could have spent the rest of the week on the beach!



Guinea baboon, Kiang West NP