

Ethiopia trip report, February-March and May 2009

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(written in February 2016)

For a mammalwatcher, Ethiopia is one of the most interesting countries in the world: it has very high mammalian diversity and lots of endemics. It is also poorly explored, with new species of small mammals described every year and new large mammals still discovered occasionally. This means that there is always a chance that you'll find something new, but it also means that identifying what you see can be very difficult or impossible. I think all larger mammals and bats mentioned below were identified correctly, but I'm still unsure about some shrews and particularly rodents. There are also numerous unsettled taxonomic issues with Ethiopian mammals; I tried to update the taxonomy as well as I could.

Travel in Ethiopia isn't easy or cheap, but it's totally worth the trouble, and the intensity of cultural experience is unparalleled, although many visitors find it to be a bit too much. The country is catastrophically overpopulated, particularly the fertile highlands. Parks and reserves range from existing only on paper to being relatively well protected, but all of them generate very little income and are deeply hated by the local population; armed conflicts over grazing restrictions are common.

I've been in Ethiopia three times. In 2005 I got stuck there for a few days due to an airport closure, but had no money at all, couldn't get out of Addis Ababa, and saw only one bat. In 2009 I went there to study crocodile behavior, spent a few days in Addis arranging special-use permits for national parks, hired a car, traveled to Omo Delta at the northern tip of Lake Turkana, survived ten days of studying crocodiles there, and went to Moyale to meet my volunteers Alexander Bernstein and Sarit Reizin who were coming from Kenya. We spent a week studying crocodiles in Nechisar National Park and a few delightful days exploring Bale Mountains and vicinity, followed the Rift Valley back to Addis, went to Lake Tana, Simien Mountains and the far north of the country, descended into Danakil Desert, returned to the highlands to visit Lalibela, went back into the desert, enjoyed studying crocodiles and everything else in Awash National Park (with a side trip to Harer), and returned to the capital to fly to Central Africa. Later the same year I returned to Addis yet again for a two days' plane change, rented a small car and briefly explored a few places nearby.

In the list below all S Ethiopia records are from February, all records from Addis Ababa and the areas N and E of it are from March (unless noted otherwise), and the few records made W of the capital are from May. Note that almost all of 140+ species were seen only at one location each; I had a feeling that if I stayed in the country for another two months I'd see another 140. Other people's trip reports show that we missed a lot of stuff even in places where we spent many days.

I don't provide logistical details since they've probably changed a lot since 2009, but if you need them or any other additional information, please email me to dinets@gmail.com.

Addis Ababa is a great birding destination due to the near-absence of cats, but the only rodent I ever saw there was a **grey spiny mouse** in an overgrown vacant lot next to the pathetic little zoo. In August 2005 I found one **Rüppell's horseshoe bat** hanging from the ceiling of Holy Trinity Cathedral; by 2009 the building had undergone restoration and looked way too clean, but I found a few **banana pipistrelles** under the roof of Itegue Taitu Hotel where I was staying.

There are two easily accessible forests W from Addis. Menagesha National Forest has great hiking trails; half a night of spotlighting there produced a bunch of sleeping **blue monkeys**, a **grey climbing mouse**, and a **crested porcupine**. Chilimo Forest is farther out; I was there for only two hours before dawn and briefly saw one animal that could be a **maned rat**, but was too far to tell (so I still have to see one). I also saw a **wildcat** on the road to Chilimo; you'd expect them to be easy to see in Ethiopia since there's plenty of seemingly good habitat and almost no feral cats, but this was one of only two wildcats I saw the whole time.

Omo Delta and the Ethiopian part of Lake Turkana shoreline are very hot and inhospitable. Interesting mammals were mostly hiding in an abandoned military outpost in the place where Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan come together: in these buildings I found a **Voi shrew**, a small colony of **Hamilton's** and **naked-rumped tomb bats**, one **Peters's flat-headed bat** squeezed between two concrete blocks, and a **Percival's spiny mouse**. The only other mammals I found in all the time I spent in and around Omo Delta were **striped ground squirrels** (rare), a **Mearns's pouched mouse**, a **Wilson's spiny mouse**, and lots of **Phillips's gerbils**.

The road to Omo Delta goes through Stephanie Wildlife Sanctuary, where the habitat looks much better: in just a few hours I found an **African giant shrew** under a juniper log, a few **heart-nosed bats** in a tree hollow, and a mixed group of **bush** and **rock hyraxes** (the latter looked different from those elsewhere in Ethiopia, but similar to the ones in Kenya; I guess they were *ruficeps* type rather than *habessinica/syriaca*).

Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary on the main road to Moyale (the official crossing to Kenya) had **Ethiopian dwarf mongoose**, **spotted hyena**, **Günther's dik-dik**, **oribi**, and **fringe-tailed gerbil**; there are said to be also **Grevy's zebra** and other big game, but I never saw any, just some old tracks of **greater kudu** and **aardwark**. In Yabelo town there were **Cairo spiny mice** living in the hotel building where they probably fed on abundant fleas. W of Yabelo are beautiful forests of giant juniper, probably with lots of interesting mammals (I only was there during the day).

Nechisar National Park is small, but it's packed with rare species. A few more endemics have recently been described from the mountains immediately to the W, which I didn't visit. In open grasslands of the park there were **savanna shrew**, **wildcat**, **plains zebra**, **common warthog**, **Grant's** and **Thomson's gazelles**, **striped ground squirrel**, **Buffoon striped grass mouse**, and **Peter's mouse**. Tall forests in the W part had **mantled colobus**, **imbabala**, **Kellen's dormouse**, and **Ethiopian forest brush-furred rat**. More open forests on the rocky slopes in the E part were the best: there were **Guramba shrew**, **Somali galago**, **olive baboon**, **Ethiopian dwarf mongoose**, **Günther's dik-dik**, **greater kudu**, **Ethiopian thicket rat**, **common rufous-nosed rat**, **Guinea and Natal multimammate mice**, **white-footed narrow-headed rat**, and **Brockman's rock mouse**. The old ranger station building on the road to the hot spring had **African sheath-tailed bats** living in unused rooms and **dark-winged lesser house bats** inside the walls. We found **spotted hyena** tracks in the grasslands.

Bale Mountains National Park is the most amazing place in Ethiopia. There are four unique habitats there; each covers a relatively small area, but still has endemic species. I would recommend spending at least a week in the park if you can. The gorgeous forests around the headquarters are the best place for ungulates: we easily found **common warthog**, **mountain nyala**, **imbabala** of the beautiful Menelik's subspecies, **common duiker**, and **Bohor reedbuck**. A garbage bin outside the guesthouse was visited by a **side-striped jackal** and a **golden wolf** at night. A **Scott's myotis** was roosting in a hollow tree behind the sauna building. Spotlighting was also great: **Ethiopian big-eared bat** chasing moths in our flashlight beams, **Abyssinian genet** within 100 m from the headquarters, **Ethiopian forest brush-furred rat** living under the kitchen, **white-footed narrow-headed rat** also living under the kitchen (I'm not making this up), and a little mouse up in a tree that I think was **Nikolaus's climbing mouse**, currently known from just two specimens. Moorlands of the summit plateau (Sanetti Plateau) had **Ethiopian highland hares**, and lots of **Ethiopian wolves** hunting a spectacular collection of rodents: **big-headed mole-rat** (common), **yellow-spotted** (uncommon), **short-tailed** (common on ridges), **black-clawed** (abundant) and **grey-tailed** (rare; try the N part) **brush-furred rats**, **Blick's grass rat** (abundant), **white-tailed** and **grey-tailed narrow-headed rats** (both common but mostly nocturnal), and **Ethiopian vlei rat** (common). Some of these rodents aren't easy to identify even at hand, so if you want to see them all for sure, plan on spending at least two days and nights on the plateau and putting in a lot of effort. We also trapped a **moorland shrew** there. Once you cross the plateau and reach the tree line on the other side, look for **Harena shrew**, which lives only in the upper forest belt 200 m wide, but isn't that difficult to find (we got two in six hours of spotlighting on foot along the road). We found a sleeping **klipspringer** here, and saw a **Harvey's red duiker**, although I'm not 100% sure about the identification. Below lies the famous Harena Forest, which is only something like 20x20 km in size, but has two rare endemics: **Bale shrew** and **Bale monkey**. We spent a day and a night there and briefly saw a shrew fitting the description under a rotten stump; Bale monkeys were also seen very briefly (we spotted a group from the car, but they moved away by the time we stopped and ran back). We also saw lots of **mantled colobuses**, a few **bush hyraxes**, a black mongoose that was likely a **common slender mongoose** (at least nothing else seems to fit), a rat that I thought was an **African marsh rat**, but now think was probably an undescribed species since it looked too dark and was in a wrong habitat, and **leopard** tracks.

Sof Omar Caves had huge bat colonies, but there were already workers there installing electric lighting, so the future of the bats looked bleak. We counted 11 species, probably a record number for an African cave and close to the world record (12 species in Cueva de La Barca, Cuba). These were **Egyptian fruit bat**, **Macinnes's mouse-tailed bat**, **Arabian**, **Hildebrandt's** and **Blasius's horseshoe bats**, **Ethiopian large-eared** and

Sundevall's roundleaf bats, **large-eared** and **Parissi's slit-faced bats**, **Egyptian tomb bat**, and **large-eared freetail**. The surrounding slopes were inhabited by **olive baboon**, **white-tailed mongoose**, **bush hyrax**, **Emin's gerbil**, **Neumann's grass rat**, and **chestnut climbing mouse**. We also found **wildcat** and **bushpig** tracks.

On the way back to Addis we checked out Lake Awassa (tame **grivet monkeys** and **mantled colobuses** in tree groves on hotel grounds), Senkele Wildlife Sanctuary (**Swayne's hartebeest** and **oribi** in beautiful grasslands), Abiata Shala National Park (**greenish yellow bat** night-roosting on one of office buildings, **Senegal galagos**, **Grant's gazelles**, a **delicate mouse** so tame we picked it up and hand-fed, and **Cape hares**), and Lake Ziway (an **African marsh rat** at night).

Debre Libanos is a monastery N from Addis Ababa, surrounded by nice rocky habitats. We saw a small troop of **geladas** nearby (supposedly a different subspecies from those in the Simiens), and a **Harrington's rat** in Blue Nile Canyon farther down the road.

Lake Tana is dotted with islands, many of them with ancient monasteries. Monks we talked with weren't aware of any mammals living on the islands. In the city of Bahar Dar on the lakeshore we explored the lush grounds of some upscale hotels and saw two **Gambian sun squirrels**; a trap I set on a shrubby slope behind our hotel got a **Mahomet mouse**. **Hippos** were easy to see in Blue Nile just below its exit from the lake.

Gondar, the old imperial capital, had extensive, partially overgrown ruins. We found a bunch of **hairy** and **Egyptian slit-faced bats** in them, and caught a **Mullah spiny mouse** there.

Simien Mountains are the most popular national park in Ethiopia, but people traditionally come there to hike rather than to see wildlife. To me long-distance hikes in Simien seem a bit pointless since the best scenery is at or above Chenek Camp while almost all hiking trails are below it, but if traditions were logical, they wouldn't be called traditions, would they? At the time of our visit most of the park was ploughed over, except for the highest elevations; I've heard that the situation has improved a bit recently. In addition to huge herds of **geladas**, a few **rock hyraxes**, a couple of Africa's cutest **klipspringers**, one very distant **Ethiopian wolf**, and some **Nubian ibex** of the very rare *Walia* subspecies (look near the highest point accessible by road), we found lots of interesting small mammals, all of them in or near the forest of giant lobelias at Chenek. There were **Bailey's** and **Thalia shrews** under piles of dead lobelia leaves, **East African mole-rats** and **Ethiopian striped mice** around the campsite at dawn; a few **white-footed narrow-headed mice**, one **Ethiopian vlei rat**, lots of **Abyssinian grass rats**, and one **yellow-spotted (?) brush-furred rat** in the same area at night, and a **Lovat's climbing mouse** in a big shrub growing just below the cliff edge, also at night. On the second night we camped in a roadside eucalyptus grove at low elevation and saw a **scrub hare** (or whatever those smallish hares of Ethiopian highlands should be called) and another troop of **geladas**.

Tekeze Canyon is a deep, scenic canyon that you cross on the way to Axum. Its bottom is at low elevation and should have some Sudanese species, but we didn't see any mammals there, probably because it was too hot. We followed the N rim of the canyon westward for a few hours to get to Shire Wildlife Reserve, where we eventually found a very shy **red-fronted gazelle**.

Axum is another ancient capital, famous for its colossal obelisks. **Striped ground squirrel** is common around the city. Driving at night from Shire to Axum, we saw a **pale fox** and a **cushioned gerbil** on the road, and a **greater mouse-tailed bat** in one of rusty Soviet tanks littering that part of the country. In the old part of Axum there are many ancient tombs; one of them had a mixed colony of **common** and **Patrizi's trident bats**.

Debre Damo is a very unfriendly monastery on a rocky hilltop near the Eritrean border, somewhat reminiscent of Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. Rocky slopes in this area had **rock hyrax** and **klipspringer**, while **African grass rat** is common on more level ground.

Lalibela is the main tourist destination in Ethiopia, an impressive monument to the stupidity of religious fanaticism. I really wish we didn't make a long detour to see it. If you want to see some really beautiful rock-hewn masterpieces, go to India. We saw one **rusty pipistrelle** in one of the churches, plus a **white-tailed mongoose** and a **Cape hare** while driving there.

Afar Region in northeastern Ethiopia is a land of bleak deserts, salt lakes, active volcanoes, constantly warring tribes, endless camel caravans and the world's hottest temperatures. The long and still unsafe trip there is worth the effort even if you don't see a single mammal. If you do see mammals, please document your records well for they are likely to be of scientific interest. The northern road to Afar starts from Mekele, descends the steep E slope of Ethiopian Highlands, where **rock hyrax** is common, and enters the desert. Soon after Berahile (a. k. a. Berhale) it passes by a small waterfall, a perfect place for a camp. Look for **Speke's pectinator** on surrounding rocky slopes in the morning, and for **Rüppell's fox** at night. Before reaching Hamdella (a. k. a. Akhmed Eli and everything in between) the road crosses pebble-covered flats where we spotted a pair of **dorcas gazelles** hiding in the shade of a lone tree. Hamdella, probably the most miserable-looking town on the face of the planet, is located near the shore of a huge dry lake with an island called Dallo. That island is a volcano that has erupted through a thick layer of salt, with the world's weirdest hot springs in the summit area. On the island and the northern shores of the dry lake, on the border with Eritrea, lives a small population of **dromedary camels**; they are probably the only feral dromedaries outside Australia, and there is a (tiny) possibility that they might actually be truly wild animals, for they look very different from all domestic dromedaries I've seen, with almost no hump and longer distance between footprints (obviously, I'd like a chance to investigate this further someday). If you turn from Hamdella to the south, you eventually reach Erta 'Ale Volcano (pronounced and sometimes spelled Ertalle), with an active lava lake in the crater. Look for **dorcas gazelles** and **unstriped ground squirrels** in sandy deserts in that area. I didn't see any mammals while spending a night at the crater rim, but there's been a sighting of **pale fox** at the base of the volcano, so there should be some rodents somewhere (unless the foxes survive on sleeping birds and invertebrates).

Southern Afar is less brutal. Mile Serdo Wildlife Reserve still has a tiny population of **African wild ass**, sometimes visible from the road (a birding scope would be helpful). We also saw a few **Soemmering's gazelles** there and in Yangudi Rassa National Park immediately to the S. Any data on rodents in this area would be interesting. Aledeghi Wildlife Reserve between there and Awash is also worth exploring; we saw **hamadryas baboons**, a **pale fox** (previously unknown from that part of the country), and **Somalia gerbils**.

Awash National Park is located at a junction of two rift valleys and is an important biogeographical crossroads, so it has a diverse and unique fauna and is worth at least a few days. Be sure to check out the hot springs area and the nearby wetlands, the canyon of Awash River, the arid plateau between the canyon and the highway, and the rocky uplands beyond the hot springs. Look for **Sahelian tiny shrew** (under loose plywood around Awash Falls Lodge), **Somali shrew** (under logs in the palm grove surrounding the hot springs), **Patrizi's trident bat** and **Egyptian tomb bat** (in Awash Falls Lodge), **olive** and **hamadryas baboons** (the former mostly along the canyon, the latter in more arid habitats; there are said to be also troops where most individuals are clearly of mixed origin, but we saw only one such baboon), **grivet monkey** (in the canyon), **rusty-spotted genet**, **lion** (extremely difficult to see; we saw only one while driving at night, and it disappeared instantly), **marsh mongoose** (around the lakes near the hot springs), **common slender mongoose**, **white-tailed mongoose**, **common dwarf mongoose** (in dry savanna N from the hot springs), **bat-eared fox** (in more open areas), **black-backed jackal**, **desert warthog**, **Soemmering's gazelle** (in open flats), **Salt's dik-dik**, **lesser kudu**, **beisa oryx** (also in the flats), **unstriped ground squirrel**, **woodland dormouse** (in the canyon), **least gerbil** (abundant around Awash Falls Lodge), **fringe-tailed gerbil** (common in all habitats), **African grass rat**, **Awash, Guinea and Natal multimammate mice** (the former is endemic and occurs mostly around the lakes; the second one lives in "normal" savanna, and the latter prefers disturbed habitats such as the lodge grounds), **Cairo spiny mouse** (around Awash Falls Lodge) and **Cape hare** (common everywhere; taxonomic status uncertain; some looked more like **scrub hares** to me). There were also small canids that I identified as golden jackals at the time; they are called **golden wolves** now, but look remarkably smaller and more jackal-like than the one I saw in Bale. We found **striped hyena**, **wildcat**, **leopard** and **aardwolf** tracks in the park.

Harer is famous for its population of urban **spotted hyenas**, some so tame that they can be hand-fed. They are a somewhat popular tourist attraction, so any hotel can arrange a meeting. A few miles before the city we almost caught a **desert musk shrew** on the side of the road.