

Somalia trip report, August 2005

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(written in February 2016)

It's a bit ridiculous to write a trip report eleven years after very briefly visiting a country, but it looks like nobody has gone there for mammalwatching more recently, so I reckon it's better to have some old information than none at all. Identifying Somalian mammals is difficult because no research has been done there in the last twenty years and many available sources use outdated taxonomy, but I did my best.

Somalia is an interesting country for a mammalwatcher, with a few species endemic or shared only with the remote Ogaden Desert of Ethiopia. There are a few species known from a very small number of specimens (**Somali golden mole** is known from just two skull fragments found in an owl pellet), and certainly some yet to be discovered. There's a lot more endemics and near-endemics (including **beira**) in Somaliland to the north, but I recognize Somaliland as an independent country, and so should everybody. Unfortunately, I've never been there or in Puntaland.

August 2005 was a good moment to visit southern Somalia: Transitional Federal Government was more or less in control and there was almost no fighting. I spent three and a half days there, traveling with an armed convoy. During the day I had to stay with the leading vehicle, but on two nights I managed to sneak out of the camps and spotlight a bit. The habitat was thoroughly thrashed around settlements, but looked a bit better in between; there were even a few patches of badly degraded gallery forest. I saw 12-13 species (including 8 endemics or near-endemics); there would probably be a lot more if I could get farther away from the road.

We entered the country near Liboi, Kenya, and spent our first night in a military camp at the edge of a strip of riparian woodland at Juba River near Jilib. I saw two wild mammals along the way: a **rock hyrax** and an **unstriped ground squirrel**. Walking along the river at night I saw a **Voi shrew**, a **four-toed hedgehog**, a **Somali galago**, and some **bushpig** tracks (I guess the pigs aren't hunted by local Muslims). By that time I'd been traveling in Africa for almost four months and had only two Sherman traps left, but still caught a **Louise's spiny mouse** just outside the camp.

In the morning a **red bush squirrel** moved along a row of trees between the camp and a banana plantation. On that (second) day we moved closer to the coast, and savanna gave way to sandy desert with scrub patches between dunes. The only wild mammal seen all day was a very slender mongoose, pale-grey with no black tail tip. I'm pretty sure it was **Somali slender mongoose** (the location was slightly outside this species' range as shown by IUCN, but HMW says it occurs all the way to Kenya). There were **warthog** tracks in one place.

At nightfall we stopped at a beach near Baraawe where I trapped a **grey-headed thicket rat** in overgrown dunes. I walked around a bit and saw **jackal** tracks (not sure about the species). My companions considered the area to be unsafe, so we packed up soon after midnight and moved on. Just before dawn I saw a gerbil crossing the road in a shrubby patch near Merca; I think it was a **Julian's gerbil** but I wouldn't bet my life on it.

We stopped for breakfast near a termite mound that looked like it's been broken in by an **aardvark**; I squeezed inside and found a skinny-looking shrew that was likely a **Greenwood's shrew**. We drove around Mogadishu in a broad circle and continued for another 30-40 km along the shore, towards the area marked on some maps as Alifuuto National Park. Just before we arrived I spotted a gazelle in the distance that could only be a **Speke's gazelle**. Convoy drivers and officers all agreed it was an exceptionally rare sighting. This was probably the last record that far S because the population and range of this species keep shrinking; I've heard that nowadays you have to get at least 300 km away from Mogadishu to see it.

We spent the last night in a large fenced compound on the coast. It was considered completely secure, but both my traps got stolen before I could pick them up in the morning. I walked along the fence at night and saw a spiny mouse which I couldn't identify and a hedgehog outside. The hedgehog looked pretty much the same as the one near Jilib, just a little bit larger, but this time I was within the range of the form *sclateri* which is often listed as a full species **Somali hedgehog** (the difference is supposed to be in toe number and foot color, but I couldn't see either). There were also tracks of a possible **wildcat** (domestic cats seem to be very rare there).

At dawn I saw a **silver dik-dik** in thorny shrub outside the fence, but again couldn't get closer because the compound commander wouldn't let me out of the gate. He put me on a truck to the airport. I had to stay inside the trunk as the truck slowly made its way around Mogadishu, so I didn't see much. Then I flew to Ethiopia.

I hope someday Somalia will be peaceful again and it will be possible to explore it the way it deserves.