

THAILAND: 2-9 JANUARY 2010

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Introduction

This was my second visit to Thailand after a successful trip to Pang Sida & Kaeng Krachan in 2006. Needing a driver as I wanted to do a lot of spotlighting, as before I used Wild Bird Ecotours <http://www.wildbirdeco.net> for the ground arrangements. However I have to admit I was less than impressed by their organisation this time around and would not use them again.

Firstly they had only booked 4 instead of 5 nights' accommodation at Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary which meant we had to leave a day early even though the accommodation was empty, had not prepaid the accommodation in Bangkok on my final night so the driver had to pay before the hotel would let me check in, and most importantly had not obtained permission for me to spotlight in Phu Khieo despite emailing me to confirm that they had done so beforehand. More about this later.

I had also been assured that the driver spoke fluent English but in reality his English was poor and made it difficult to communicate at times, although thankfully his wife joined us, and her English was somewhat better. The driver, Mr Tun, was however excellent & worked very hard throughout the trip despite being reluctant to spotlight in Phu Khieo without permission (see later).

Itinerary

- 2nd Early morning arrival in Bangkok followed by 7-hour drive north east to Phu Kheio Wildlife Sanctuary. Late afternoon & early evening looking for mammals in Phu Khieo.
- 3rd-5th Full days in Phu Khieo
- 6th Morning in Phu Kheio. Afternoon drive to Khao Yai National Park staying just outside the park at Greenleaf Guesthouse.
- 7th-8th Full days in Khao Yai National Park
- 9th Khao Yai until mid-afternoon & then returned to Bangkok for evening prior to early morning flight back to snowbound London.

The sites

Phu Kheio Wildlife Sanctuary

Introduction

Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary is an excellent reserve in north-eastern Thailand. It is home to an excellent range of mammals including no fewer than 8 species of cat, both Asiatic Black & Sun Bears, Dhole & a good population of Asian Elephants. It's also home to several species of primate including the scarce Phayre's Langur & previously held Sumatran Rhinoceros!

Directions

The main headquarters area of Phu Khieo is accessible from the northern end of the park. If driving, follow signs for Chulaphon Reservoir, about 50 km west of the town of Chumpae. Phu Khieo WS is well sign-posted once you approach the reservoir. As you approach the reserve, the road climbs to the top of a ridge (with Nam Nao NP on your right) and there is a left turn at an

overlook with food stalls to enter the reserve; the first checkpoint is also here. From here, the access road runs 24 km to the Headquarters.

Accommodation

You can either camp or stay in basic cabins near the reserve headquarters. We used the cabins (take a mosquito net with you) & cooked for ourselves but you can eat in the restaurant used by researchers & other visitors. The accommodation was full for the first two nights over the New Year holiday weekend but quiet after that.

Spotlighting

The prospect of finding cats, including Clouded Leopard, which has been well studied here, was the main reason for visiting the reserve so I asked WildBirdEco to ensure that I had the necessary permissions to spotlight in the reserve. They assured me that this had been arranged, but on arrival, it was clear that it had not. Worse still the director of the sanctuary is quite possibly the most inflexible person I have ever had the misfortune to encounter. Having trained in North America & coming from the school that 'her' mammals were for conservationists & scientists, and no one else, she refused to let us spotlight for fear that it would disturb 'her' wildlife. This is despite the fact that there is a constant procession of park vehicles going backwards & forward during the day causing far more disturbance than one vehicle spotlighting at night.

When I offered to pay for a guide to accompany us she wasn't interested and said if she let us spotlight she would have to let everyone else spotlight. I pointed out that there was no one else staying there at the time so no one else would know or ask & asked her how often she had been asked for permission to spotlight in the previous 3 years. The answer was never but she remained unmoving. The only spotlighting she would allow us to do was on a 45-minute organised drive through open grassland at the extortionate cost of £10 per person for 45 minutes.

We decided to ignore the rules the first night & returned a couple of hours after dusk only for the driver to be threatened with the removal of his licence. Consequently he was not prepared to spotlight in the evening again although we did do two pre-dawn spotlighting sessions from the vehicle when nobody else was up. I also spotlighted on foot on the remaining 3 evenings although I only went a kilometre or so from the camp due to safety concerns.

Ironically the morning spotlighting sessions were poor, possibly due to the full moon, with only one Lesser Mousedeer & some distant eye-shine likely to have been a flying squirrel. The evening sessions on foot produced a Masked Palm Civet about 100m from the cabins & lots of deer in the grasslands (see below).

The mammals

Despite the problems encountered we still managed to see a good number of species. The following are the main sites, all distances are given from the first gate by the main road. The following notes should be read in conjunction with the map in found in the following reference <http://www.birding2asia.com/W2W/Thailand/North/PhuKhieoWS.html>

- Access road km 0 – km 7. The first seven kilometres run through excellent forest although we only drove through this area on our way in & out of the sanctuary. There was plenty of evidence of mammals including elephants in this area & in hindsight I wish we had spent more time here.
- Kilometre 7 – At km 7 you pass a second checkpoint near some park buildings & a Spirit House, & the road enters an open area with a couple of pools, used extensively by Sambar, Our only Long-tailed Macaques were seen in this area in the parking area just beyond the bridge & we also saw Variable Squirrel here.

- Kilometres 7-21 – The road continues through excellent forest with several stream crossings to the park headquarters. We drove this whole stretch several times & I walked the stretch between kms 15 & 21 on one occasion & the stretch between kms 20.7 & 23.5 on several occasions.
 1. There are several researcher trails on the upper stretch of the road between km 10-15 which could be worth exploring. I walked one which followed a stream through excellent forest & would probably have justified more time.
 2. Three troops of Phayre's Langur were seen between kms 10 & 15.
 3. White-handed Gibbon was commonly heard along the road & one was seen at about km 17. Two Masked Palm Civets were seen nearby.
 4. An excellent Asiatic Black Bear was seen along the road at km 15 at 0700 one morning.
 5. A troop of Northern Pig-tailed Macaques were seen at kilometre 16.
 6. Lesser Mousedeer were seen twice & there are several licks along the road that could attract mammals although we only saw Red Muntjac.
 7. Variable Squirrels can be seen anywhere along the road.
- Kilometre 20.7 – at km 20.7 a nature trail leads off to the right of the road. It leads 3 km back to the parking lot near the park headquarters. I walked this one morning & although it was fairly dry leech socks were worthwhile. The trail initially runs through forest to a pool (after c.200 m) where there was lots of evidence of elephant, other ungulates & bears! The trail then runs through rainforest, drier forest with Variable & Cambodian Striped Squirrel & tall open grassland with lots of evidence of elephants & ungulates. After leaving the grassland across a boardwalk through a wetter area the track clearly forks, the left fork takes you back to the access road. Stay on the right fork to head back to the park headquarters.
- Kilometre 21 – at km 21 there is a barriered track leading off on the left hand side of the road. I walked this for a couple of kilometres until the leeches just became too bad (I didn't have leech socks with me at the time) & although I didn't see any mammals the track had lots of evidence of mammals including bears, small cats & what was probably Dhole. While walking this track I heard a Tiger roar rather too close for comfort. Coupled with the bear tracks it was a useful reminder of the need to be very careful on foot in this area.
- Kilometre 22 – a driveable track leads off to the left. It can only be driven from the opposite direction, starting at km 23 but can be walked in either direction. Despite driving & walking the track several times early & late in the day we saw absolutely nothing along here although there a couple of waterholes which could be well worth staking out & there were lots of mammal tracks in a wallow along the road.
- Kilometre 22-23 – This stretch passes several small pools & wallows again full of mammal tracks although we again saw very little.
- Kilometre 33-23.5 – the pool on the right hand side of the road consistently held Sambar & Red Muntjac & occasionally reintroduced Hog Deer.
- Kilometre 23.5 – The park headquarters area consistently held Sambar, Hog Deer & Red Muntjac. Variable & Cambodian Striped Squirrel were also seen & a Masked Palm Civet was spotlighted near the cabins one night. Dhole are apparently seen on a regular basis near the football pitch.
- Kilometres 24-5-25.5 – when you reach the headquarters you turn right just before the football pitch rather than continuing straight on. Continue through the camp towards Queens Resort until you reach an area of open grasslands on the left. This area holds small numbers of deer during the day & large numbers at night, I counted 50+ Hog Deer & Red Muntjac one night.
- There are other sites around the headquarters, most notably the 5 km trail to Mon Lake, & the track through open woodland to the east of the Queen's Resort but we did not visit these areas.

Overall although the forest is excellent our visit was slightly disappointing, notwithstanding the bear, palm civet & langurs. I suspect the full moon in the morning sky didn't help & also that the amount of disturbance from vehicles over the previous holiday weekend may have driven mammals away from the roads despite there being a lot of evidence of large mammals on the tracks & around the wallows.

References

- <http://www.birding2asia.com/W2W/Thailand/North/PhuKhieoWS.html> – a birding report but useful with a helpful map.
- http://www.thaibirding.com/trip_reports/phukhieo_nov_2005.htm – another birding report but with useful background information.
- Grassman Jr., L.I.; Kreetiyutanont, K.; Tewes, M.E. Survey and status of the carnivore community in northeastern Thailand 2002 *Tiger Paper* (29): 1-3
- Grassman Jr., L.I.; Tewes, M.E.; Silvy, N.J.; Kreetiyutanont, K. Ecology of three sympatric felids in a mixed evergreen forest in north-central Thailand 2005 *Journal of Mammalogy* (86): 29-38

Khao Yai National Park

Introduction

Khao Yai National Park is one of the best known parks in Thailand & has a diverse mammal fauna including six species of cat & both Asiatic Black & Sun Bears. It is one of the most visited parks in Thailand but although the campsites can be packed to capacity particularly at weekends & holiday periods away from the camp sites, waterfalls and park headquarters it is relatively quiet & I walked a 3-km trail between one of the camp sites & waterfalls & only saw four other people in 3 hours. And this was in the middle of the day. It is even quieter at dawn.

I had pre-booked a guide, Nine who runs the Greenleaf Guesthouse to look for Pileated Gibbon but had already found them the day before. He did however provide us with a possible stakeout for serow.

Directions

If driving from Bangkok, take the northbound highway and at Saraburi turn towards Nakorn Ratchasima - please drive with caution as this stretch of road is considered the most dangerous in Thailand with frequent accidents, be aware of very slow moving trucks crawling three abreast uphill. Shortly before Pak Chong there are signposts for Khao Yai National Park in English. If driving, the journey will take about 3 hours from central Bangkok, if taking public transport then 5 hours is more realistic.

Accommodation

We spent one night outside the park at Greenleaf Guesthouse <http://www.greenleafour.com> & two nights inside the park. There are lots of alternatives on the access road from Pak Chong. The other two nights were spent in excellent bungalows in the park. These were pre-booked but other than at extremely busy times, e.g. the New Year holiday are likely to be available on arrival, particularly as there tend to be a lot of last minute cancellations. There are also a number of campsites in the park. We cooked for ourselves. If relying on the park restaurants be aware that they close early other than at weekends, e.g. 4 pm!

Spotlighting

Spotlighting is banned without prior permission which you are unlikely to get. Consequently the only 'legal' way to go spotlighting is on one of the 45-minute organised night drives for £10. I didn't go on one of these but reports from others who have are not good & having come across the drives while we were there I can understand why. On one night we were sat watching a Common Palm Civet in the car headlights on the golf course when an organised drive passed us

& didn't even stop to look at the civet. On the following night five spotlighting vehicles passed us in a convoy on the old golf course, causing lots of disturbance & stopping for nothing!

Although spotlighting is officially banned in reality we encountered several private vehicles that were spotlighting & talking to ex-pats it's clear that a lot of people do spotlight discretely, i.e. don't use spotlights when you are close to park accommodation or when you see other vehicles approaching. We did spotlight the open areas of the old golf course on both nights & the road north from the headquarters on one night. If you do drive at night however do drive slowly, a Clouded Leopard was killed by a speeding vehicle one night while we were there!

The mammals

The following notes should be used in conjunction with the maps & trail details in Upton's excellent http://www.thaibirding.com/locations/north_east/ky.htm.

- Sambar, Red Muntjac & Northern Pig-tailed Macaques are common & easy to see throughout the park.
- Access road 2090 from the northern gate to the park headquarters – this road goes through excellent forest although the slopes are steep in places making spotting mammals difficult. We did find one Bengal Slow Loris on a night drive & there is a stakeout along this road for Chinese Serow. Driving north from the park headquarters after several kilometres you pass a well-sign-posted viewpoint followed shortly by a park fire station. Continuing north after a few kilometres there is an obvious large layby on the left hand side of the road with a small waterfall. This is apparently a good site for the serow although we dipped on a short visit one night. There was quite a lot of traffic so I suspect it would be better to stake the site out early in the morning before the park gates open at 0600. There are also several saltlicks along this road so it is well worth driving it slowly.
- Wildlife Watchtower – the watchtower is about 800m from the well sign-posted parking lot a few kilometres north of the visitor centre & overlooks a pool & saltlick. An early morning visit produced Wild Boar & three Smooth Otters at the pool (the latter apparently being seen regularly) & an Asian Elephant briefly on the saltlick visible from the parking lot. Dhole is seen here irregularly.
- Wang Jumpee Parking Lot – Three White-handed Gibbons were seen here one afternoon.
- Park cabins – We saw White-handed Gibbon in the forest behind the cabins. Malayan Porcupine was easily baited around the cabins at night. We also saw porcupines along the road north of the headquarters at night.
- Old Golf Course – This open area with several ponds appeared to be a popular area for spotlighting & we saw Common Palm Civets both nights. Some Australians had seen Yellow-throated Marten on a fruiting tree here on several mornings but we couldn't find them. There is also an excellent saltlick to the east of the golf course. Park in the Lam Takong Campsite & cross the swing bridge near the entrance. The trail comes out onto the old golf course. Follow this across the road & up the hill keeping to the left hand side of the clearing. The trail forks left but continue straight on for half a kilometre or so & you will come to an obvious large saltlick with lots of evidence of mammals. This would probably be worth staking out. The trail apparently continues all the way back to the road towards Pha Kluai Mai Campsite.
- Pha Kluai Mai Campsite – we saw two Black Giant Squirrels in the campsite & heard White-handed Gibbon, others saw Malayan Porcupine & Common Palm Civet. I walked the trail (Upton's trail A) from the campsite to the Pha Kluai Mai Falls car park & heard gibbons but little else. However it was the middle of the day & I suspect it would be good at dawn & dusk. Oriental Small-clawed Otter used to be seen regularly here but has become more difficult since the reintroduction of hybrid Siamese Crocodiles.
- Pha Kluai Mai Falls – a large fig tree near the car park held lots of hornbills & Pileated Gibbons had been using it the week prior to my visit.
- Khao Khieo Access Road – this is an excellent albeit it busy road. The road initially passes through forest before entering open grassland where Asian Elephants & Gaur are regularly seen. Shortly after re-entering the forest the road passes a Spirit House on the left hand side

of the road. Park here & walk the next kilometre or so as this is the most reliable area in the park for Pileated Gibbon. I saw Pileated Gibbon the first evening & again the following morning but you do need to be careful as there are also hybrids present in the troop. You do need to allow plenty of time to look for these. Despite being reasonably large & very vocal they can be difficult to see well. On the third day we had the troop calling for an hour close to the road but could not find them. This stretch of road is also good for Variable & Grey-bellied Squirrels. The road eventually ends at a guard station. In the past both Asiatic Black Bear & Yellow-throated Martens have been known to come to food put out by the guards here. See <http://www.mammalwatching.com/Oriental/orientthailandkhaoyaisep2006.html> for further details

References

- http://www.thaibirding.com/locations/north_east/ky.htm
- <http://www.mammalwatching.com/Oriental/orientthailandkhaoyaisep2006.html>
- Austin, S.C.; Tewes, M.E.; Grassman Jr., L.I.; Silvy, N.J. Ecology and conservation of the leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis* and clouded leopard *Neofelis nebulosa* in Khao Yai National Park, Thailand 2007 *Acta Zoologica Sinica* (53): 1-14
- Austin, S.C.; Tewes, M.E. Ecology of the clouded leopard in Khao Yai National Park, Thailand1 _ 1999 *Cat News/IUCN SSC*

Checklist

Northern Treeshrew <i>Tupaia belangeri</i>	Phu Kheio, two on 3 rd .
Bengal Slow Loris <i>Nycticebus bengalensis</i>	Khao Yai, one 8 th January
Phayre's Langur <i>Trachypithecus phayrei</i>	Phu Khieo, three on 2 nd , 2+ on 4 th & three on 6 th .
Long-tailed Macaque <i>Macaca fascicularis</i>	Phu Kheio, 12+ on 6th
Northern Pig-tailed Macaque <i>Macaca leonina</i>	Phu Khieo, 10+ on 5 th . Khao Yai, seen daily, very common
White-handed Gibbon <i>Hylobates lar</i>	Phu Khieo, heard on 4 th , 5 th & 6 th , one male seen on 4 th . Khao Yai, heard daily, four seen on the 8 th , one female & a group of three males.
Pileated Gibbon <i>Hylobatus pileatus</i>	Khao Yai, one plus a hybrid on 7 th , two plus hybrid 8 th , heard on 9 th
Asian Black Bear <i>Ursus thibetanus</i>	Phu Khieo, one seen for about a minute walking on the access road c.7 kms from the park headquarters.
Smooth Otter <i>Lutrogale perspicillata</i>	Khao Yai, 7 th , three in the pool viewable from the Wildlife Watchtower.
Masked Palm Civet <i>Paguma larvata</i>	Phu Khieo, 4 th , two resting on a branch along the access road, c.5 kms from the park headquarters mid-afternoon, another seen while spotlighting near the cabins the same day.
Common Palm Civet <i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	Khao Yai, one on the 7 th & 2-3 on 8 th , all in the vicinity of the old golf course.
Tiger <i>Panthera tigris</i>	Phu Khieo, one heard mid-morning
Asian Elephant <i>Elephas maximus</i>	Khao Yai, 7 th , male on saltlick viewable from Nong Pak Chi watchtower parking lot.
Wild Boar <i>Sus scrofa</i>	Khao Yai, 7 th , one viewable from the Nong Pak Chi watchtower.
Lesser Mousedeer <i>Tragulus kanchil</i>	Phu Khieo, singles on 3 rd & 6 th

Red Muntjac <i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	Phu Khieo, up to 10 daily particularly along access road close to park headquarters, & in grassland between park headquarters & Queen's Resort. Only one seen away from this area at a saltlick 10 km from the park headquarters.
Hog Deer <i>Axis porcinus</i>	Khao Yai: up to 10 seen daily Phu Khieo, very common in grasslands between park headquarters & Queen's Resort.
Sambar <i>Rusa unicolor</i>	Phu Khieo, common Khao Yai, common
Black Giant Squirrel <i>Ratufa bicolor</i>	Khao Yai, 8 th two Pha Kluai Mai campsite, one Pha Diew Die road.
Grey-bellied Squirrel <i>Callosciurus caniceps</i>	Khao Yai, 9 th 3+ Pha Diew Die road.
Variable Squirrel <i>Callosciurus finlaysonii</i>	Phu Khieo, daily counts of 2, 2, 2, 1 & 1. Khao Yai, daily counts of 1, 2 & 3+.
Cambodian Striped Squirrel <i>Tamiops rodolphii</i>	Phu Khieo, one on 3 rd & two on 4 th
Malayan Porcupine <i>Hystrix brachyura</i>	Khao Yai, 8 th , two around cabins & two singles on road north of park headquarters.