

Vietnam, June-July 2011

I spent six weeks in Vietnam, first travelling around with my wife, than conducting a blitz mammal survey for WWF (more on it below). Vietnam is an easy country to travel around, with reasonably good infrastructure and diverse fauna.

The best way to see the country is to rent a motorbike or a scooter. Foreigners are not allowed to rent cars without drivers (they aren't allowed to rent motorbikes, either, but this rule is generally ignored).

A chain of very scenic karst areas stretches from Central Vietnam all the way to southeastern China. Many species of mammals (including most of Vietnam's endemics) are confined to forests growing on karst, while some others avoid such places, preferring non-karst forests.

We visited only a few of the country's protected areas. There are many more, and new ones are constantly being created. Unfortunately, hunting (especially poaching with wire snares) is a major problem everywhere. Even in the best-protected national parks, snare lines can sometimes be found around ranger stations; some of them are being set by rangers themselves. Tigers, bears, rhinos, elephants, bantengs and gaurs have been mostly hunted out; wild pigs, porcupines and sambar (the last remaining large deer species) are the main targets nowadays, but all animals down to larger rats and partridges are also trapped in large numbers. Pangolins and many primates are virtually extinct

Northern Vietnam, a. k. a. Tonkin

Hanoi is a very busy place, and although it has a few parks, the only wild mammals you are likely to see there are rats and bats. *Pipistrellus javanicus* seems to be particularly common. The most famous animal in Vietnam is a very old giant softshell turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*) that lives in Hoan Kiem Lake in the center of the city; it is one of just 4 surviving individuals of this species.

Tam Dao Nat'l Park is the closest highland park to Hanoi. It is popular among birders, but mammals have been thoroughly trapped out. A couple species of high-elevation squirrels was all we could find. The town has dozens of bushmeat restaurants, but meat for them has to be brought from all over the country. The most accessible forest is along the access road (the forested part ends about 4 km before Tam Dao town). If you have time, better go further north, into the "real" mountains: there are a few large national parks there.

Ha Long Bay is a beautiful area, but terribly touristy and with little wildlife. Black kites there have adapted to feeding on floating garbage in the open sea. There is a national park with good karst forest on Cat Ba Island. Macaques are common, but seeing the endemic langur (as so many races of primates nowadays, it is considered a separate species for no good scientific reason) requires either good luck (we saw one from a boat) or special effort. Interestingly, we saw a black rat in the forest that looked like *Tonkinomys daovantieni*, a recently described karst species known only from the adjacent mainland. There are numerous caves in the area, but the ones we visited had few or no bats; one interesting find was *Nyctalus noctula* in a small unnamed sea cave.

Van Long Nature Reserve is a small reservoir surrounded by karst; most people visit it en route to Cuc Phuong Nat'l Park. It is the only easily accessible place to see Delacour's langur, plus some nice waterbirds. You can get there by buses from Hanoi, but you'll have to walk or hitchhike the last 3 km. Avoid weekends! You'll have to take a short boat tour to see the langurs (cheap; best after 5 pm).

Cuc Phuong Nat'l Park is also accessible by public bus. It is good for birding, but the only large mammals you are likely to see are captive ones: there are breeding centers for primates, pangolins and Owston's civets (the latter two are generally closed to public, but you can arrange a quick visit after 5 pm). Turtle breeding center is also worth a visit, especially since most species are virtually extinct in the wild. Night drives are technically not allowed, but if you arrive late, you can drive the road through the park to get to the bungalows at the end. We did this and saw no mammals anyway (but this is a good way to see Malay night-herons). The only mammals seen on trails were squirrels. There is a bat cave with a good selection of horseshoe-nosed and leaf-nosed bats, including *Hipposideros scutinares*, an Annam karst endemic.

Southern Vietnam, a. k. a. Cochinchina

Ho Chi Min City (still informally called Saigon by just about everybody) is a sprawling megapolis with horrible traffic; driving out of it takes many hours. The French-built central part is a lot nicer than the rest, and has squirrels (*Callosciurus finlaysonii*).

Cat Tien National Park can be reached by bus (departures until noon) or hired car (expensive) from Saigon. It is generally considered the best park in Vietnam. We saw a lot of mammals in just three days and three nights. Bikes are available for rent, but are expensive (better bring your own). The best areas are Crocodile Lake (especially the access trail), watchtower trail (walk it or ride a bicycle at dawn, but don't take the expensive jeep tour), and the headquarters area. Gaur, muntjac and sambar can be seen in meadows and roadsides at dusk and dawn (Crocodile Lake area is particularly good). Common species in the forest include dwarf tree-shrew, bamboo bats, black-shanked douc and gibbon. Squirrels form mixed groups with up to five species of different size. More difficult to see are silver langur, giant and flying squirrels, mouse deer, civets and loris (the latter we didn't find). Macaques visit the headquarters area, and Himalayan bears sometimes show up outside the fence at the bear breeding center. The canteen has three species of rats. About 1 km before the turnoff to Crocodile Lake is a short trail to a couple of lava tubes where assorted horseshoe-nosed and leaf-nosed bats roost. The last Javan rhino in the park (and, apparently, outside Java) was killed by poachers in 2010.

On the road going from Saigon to Cat Tien turnoff (and onwards to Dalat), you pass a bunch of tall granite outcrops, some of them made into city parks. Most are on the left (western) side of the road, but the last one is on the right, less than an hour before the turnoff. It looks like two granite towers separated by a narrow gap. I was surprised to see a cloud of freetail bats emerging from the rocks in the evening. *Mammals of Indochina* don't list any freetails for Vietnam at all. I am not sure what the species was, and would appreciate if someone could check it out (and list me as a co-author of the resulting paper). The bats were hunted by a pair of bat hawks – a species not known from Indochina at all. Unfortunately, I was on the last bus of the day, and couldn't stop.

Deo Suoi Lanh (Cold Water Pass) is about an hour past Cat Tien turnoff on the road from Saigon to Dalat. It is popular among birders as the closest place to Saigon to see high-elevation birds, including more than half of Vietnam endemics. It also has high-elevation rodents: we saw a rat *Maxomys moi* there.

Central Vietnam, a. k. a. Annam

Da Nang is the best base for exploring this part of the country. Just outside the city is a peninsula called Son Tra (Monkey Mountain) which can be easily explored by motorbike (expect some steep grades). It has nice birds, lots of rhesus macaques, and a few red-shanked doucs (look in wetter forests in ravines, and at mountaintops). Grasslands in the summit area have lots of mice (*Mus cookii*).

Just south of Da Nang is a small group of karst outcrops known as Marble Mountains. It's the southernmost karst area in Vietnam. These hills have a few caves, but I found only common bat species there, probably because there are too many tourists.

Hue is the most pleasant town in Vietnam, with a large bat population inhabiting the old quarter. There are at least five species, from tiny *Pipistrellus tenuis* to huge *Hipposideros armiger*. Hue is the base for day trips to Cham Islands that have really good diving; dolphins are reportedly seen during these trips sometimes.

Hoi An is very touristy and much less charming. City rats include *Bandicota indica* (look in the gardens of the old Imperial palace).

Bach Ma Nat'l Park is just off the Da Nang – Hoi An road. It has beautiful forest and really good range of elevations, but the upper part was closed at the time of my visit due to road repairs. Pheasant Trail and the lower part of the main park road produced a giant muntjac (the name “large-antlered muntjac” is more accurate, as this species is not that much larger than the common muntjac) and gibbons. Highland species reportedly include saola, Annamite muntjac and some cats.

Ho Chi Min Highway mostly follows the Laos border in Central Vietnam. It was built primarily for “strategic purposes” and has very light traffic. Forest still exists along many parts of that road. Going south from Da Nang, you slowly climb to Lo Xo Pass, which has high-elevation birds and rodents; I even saw a common muntjac and some grey-shanked doucs there. Further south the road goes through deforested plateaus to Kon Tum, an interesting town where rats *Rattus losea* can be seen in grassy meadows around the dam south of the city center. The road from Kon Tum to the coast passes through Mang Den Pass (a resort town of the same name is being built there), accessible from Kon Tum by two buses a day. This is one of the best sites for high-elevation birding in Vietnam, as there are montane rainforests and pine forests within walking distance of the western end of town (where you can stay in inexpensive Rose Hotel which has a few bats *Myotis montivagans* under the roof). Look for squirrels, high-elevation rats such as the endemic *Rattus osgoodi*, moles (*Euroscaptor parvidens*), and Indochinese hares. Mice *Mus pahari* are common around the gas station. If you have your own transport, you can also check out a few remaining patches of submontane rainforest further east, along the road to the coast.

If you take Ho Chi Min Highway north from Da Nang, about half an hour after the city of Prao you pass through a new saola reserve, which was gazetted in 2011 and doesn't have an official name yet. Nicholas

Wilkinson of WWF-Vietnam invited me for a brief large mammal survey there. Our main goal was to confirm that saola was still present, as WWF was considering a massive anti-poaching program there. The reserve is not yet open to the public, and although you can cross it along the Highway, getting to the best habitat (primary forest on steep slopes above river headwaters deep inside the reserve) requires many days of exhausting hiking over some scenic, but extremely rough terrain. The surrounding area is under brutal hunting pressure, and there are still lots of snares inside the reserve, so seeing mammals and even birds is generally difficult. The least uncommon species include wild boar, serow, various flying squirrels, crab-eating mongoose, common and Annamite muntjacs, bear macaque, red-shanked douc and bamboo rats. We also saw a dwarf gymnure, a stripe-backed weasel, a giant squirrel, a giant rat (*Leopoldamys milleti*) and a few common bats. Sambar, gaur and elephant have recently become extinct, but locals still report seeing saolas, gibbons, mouse deer, clawless otters, dholes, civets and leopards. We had only 5 days in good habitat, and, despite rather intense effort, didn't see a saola, but found a set of fresh tracks at a mineral lick. If everything works out, poaching is brought under control, and trails are improved, 10-20 years from now this reserve should become a fantastic place to visit. For now, there are some saola skulls with beautiful horns on display in Air (a tiny Katu village in the center of the reserve, accessible by a steep half-day hike from the Highway). A permit to visit the reserve has to be obtained in Hanoi and verified at the local police station; you have to be accompanied by a reserve ranger.