

Kipunji and other primates in southern Tanzania (Nov-Dec 2022)

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Most of the tourists go to the northern part of Tanzania where the famous game parks and the Kilimanjaro are located. But the most interesting primate species are found in the southern part of the country. As we cancelled our proposed trip to Uganda because of Ebola, we decided to organize a trip to southern Tanzania! Our main target were the 4 localized primates species: Zanzibar Red Colobus, Udzungwa Red Colobus, Sanje River Mangabey and off course the star of the show: the Kipunji.

Before you continue reading: In contrast to the authors of most trip reports on this website, we are no fanatic mammal watchers. We organize the trip ourselves, take it easy, spend at least 3 or 4 nights at every location and are focused on (diurnal) primates. So as usual it was not a wildlife watching holiday, but more a holiday with wildlife watching. That is the reason we don't add a detailed itinerary to this report.



General impression of the country

This was our first visit to Tanzania, but we have been in the neighboring countries Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya. The people in southern Tanzania are very friendly and helpful and we never felt unsafe during our 5 week trip. There is no shortage on gasoline stations, ATM's and small shops, so there is no need for an organized trip.

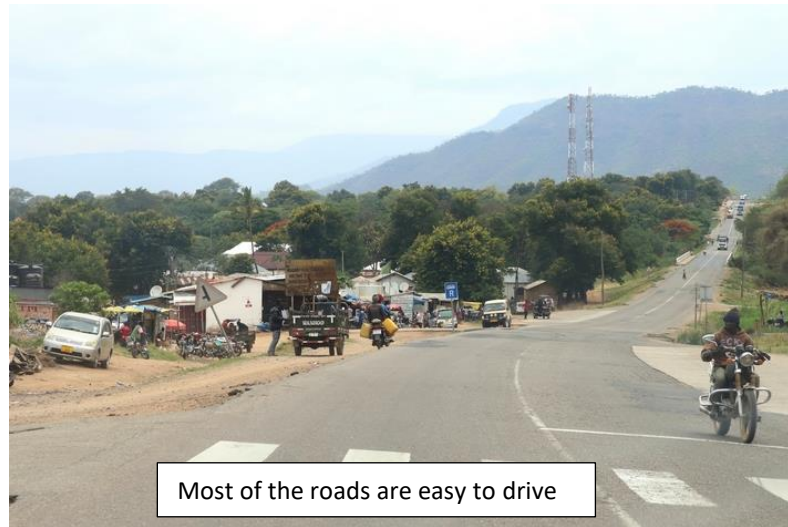
Car rental

We rented a car for 2 periods:

- For the trip on the main land we rented a long wheel base Toyota RAV4 (about 12 years old) from Savannah Seasons Car Rental (www.savannahtanzaniasafaris.com) for 50 USD/day. We picked up and delivered the car in Dar es Salaam. The car looked OK, but was not quite OK. We ended up at a garage 2 times and didn't go to Ruaha NP. That famous safari park is quite remote and you need a sturdy 4WD to get to the park and do the game drives inside the park. The owner of Savannah had a few cars for rent, but you don't sign a rental agreement. Basically you are using his private car(s). Not something I would do again.

- On Zanzibar we rented a car for a week from www.zanzibarcheapcarrental.com for just 25 USD/day. The Suzuki Escudo is 4x4 and did the job very well. Outside the capital city of Zanzibar (Stown Town) driving is very easy and relaxed. Just pay attention to the speed bumps, which are huge and wreck your car when you miss them. But there is no need to hurry on a small, relaxed island.... Be aware you need a Zanzibar driving license (the police ask for it) which can be organized by the car rental company.

Driving on the main roads in southern Tanzania is quite easy as the road from Dar es Salaam to Mbeya is in good condition. Yes, there are lots of trucks (they go slow), busses (they go fast) and 4x4's (they go really fast) on the road. But I rather drive a car myself than putting my life in someone others hand. We have seen 4x4 driving at irresponsibly high speed and overtaking trucks at places where you need the help from above to survive.... So we had a save trip and, because we were not speeding, we had no problems with the police at all. We used Google Maps to navigate as you can download the maps in advance and use the maps offline.



Most of the roads are easy to drive

Weather

November is a hot month in southern Tanzania and probably not the best month to visit this part of the country. Because of Ebola in Uganda, we changed our travel plan and decided to go to Tanzania instead of Uganda. So we didn't have a choice to go a bit earlier as November is too hot in the lower parts (Dar es Salaam, Mikumi, Udzungwe) with maximum temperatures of 35 degrees (and high humidity). Iringa and Mbyea are on a plateau and the temperatures were mild. In general, we had nice and sunny weather, with the exception of the Mbeya area, where we had pouring rain for 1,5 days (start of the rainy season).

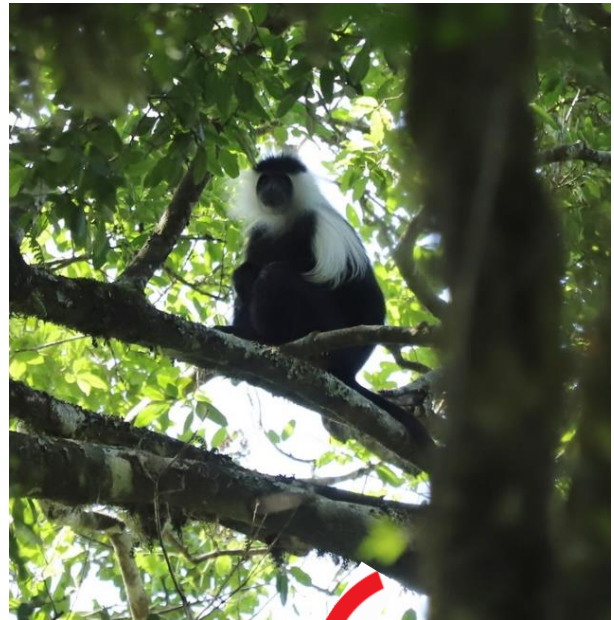
Primates seen

- **Vervet Monkey** (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*). Seen a few times during the trip, such as close to the Edelwyss Inn (excellent hotel in Morogoro) and in/around Mikumi NP.
- **Yellow Baboon** (*Papio cynocephalus*). The most common primate during the trip. Normally baboons are not our most favorite primates, but the yellow baboons are slender, have a nice color and are quite friendly. They hung out at our accommodations near Mikumi NP and Udzungwa NP, but never caused problems. Also seen along the road in the dry, hot parts of the country.
- **Zanzibar Red Colobus** (*Piliocolobus kirkii*). Nowadays this species only lives in the central and southern part of the Island. There are many large lodges under construction along the coast of Zanzibar and so this species is decreasing in numbers. The most easy (and touristic) place to see them is Jozani Forest, which is part of the Jozani-Chwaka Bay National Park. If you are lucky you can spot the colobus monkeys from the main road, but be aware you are not allowed to stop and take pictures from the stretch of road in the park. The (mandatory) guides in the park give 'childish' tours, but know where the monkeys are. It's a typical tourist attraction for the beach people. We also saw the Zanzibar Red Colobus in the gardens of the Ungula Lodge. We didn't stay at the lodge (too expensive) but we asked the (Dutch) manager if it was possible to walk around the hotel grounds to search for wildlife. He agreed with that, which was very kind of him. This is one of the few places



in the southwest corner of Zanzibar where they didn't cut the forest. So the hotel grounds are a heaven for 2 species of primates (also Blue Monkey) and some other mammals. We had lunch at the lodge, which was very good at a reasonable price.

- **Udzungwa Red Colobus** (*Ptilocolobus gordonorum*). Another specialty of southern Tanzania. Easy to see on the grounds of Hondo Hondo camp where they sometimes come to the ground to play and feed on the lawns. Also easy to see at the Udzungwa Park Headquarters where they sometimes walk on the roof of the buildings! The species is classified as Vulnerable with an estimated population of 35000.



- **Angolan Colobus** (*Colobus Angolensis*). We have seen this species in 2 areas:
 - On the grounds of Hondo Hondo Camp and in the adjacent Udzungwa National Park.
 - On Mount Rungwe in the far southwest of Tanzania.They are not shy, but quiet and easily overlooked.

- **Blue Monkey** (*Cercopithecus mitis*). In terms of taxonomy, the blue monkey (*cercopithecus mitis*) is one of the most complex monkey species in the world. More than 10 subspecies are distinguished. We have seen two subspecies:

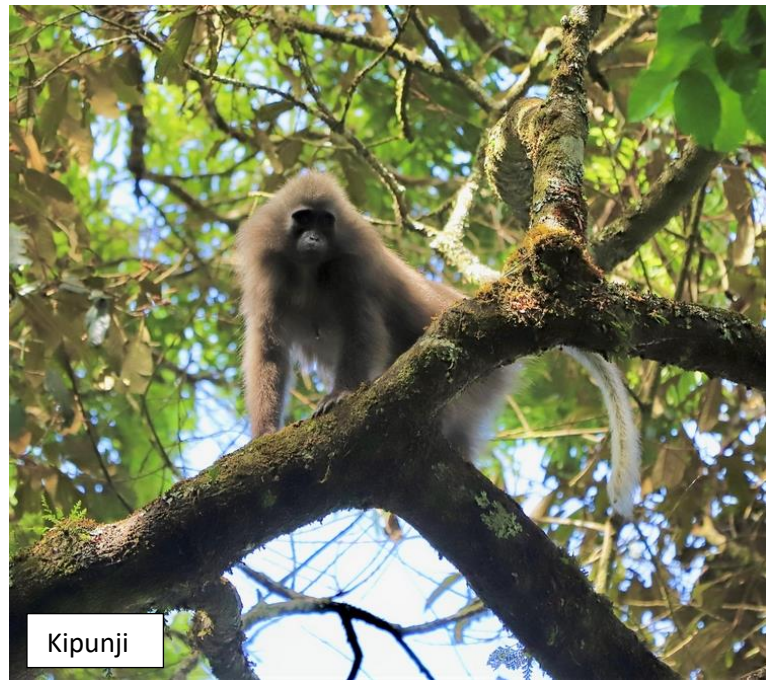
- the subspecies *albogularis* lives on Zanzibar, among other places. We have seen this subspecies in the Jozano Forest and on the grounds of the Unguja lodge (see Zanzibar Red Colobus).
- the subspecies *moloneyi*, which occurs in southwestern Tanzania, among other places. We have seen this species on the ground of Hondo Hondo Camp in Udzungwa NP and on Mount Rungwe.

- **Kipunji** (*Rungwecebus kipunji*). This species, which has its own genus, is only discovered in 2005. Yes, you read that right. And so you would expect to have to undertake an entire expedition to find this beautiful primate species. But that's not too bad. Most of the population is found on Mount Rungwe. There is hardly any information available on the internet whether and if so where the forests on Mount Rungwe are accessible. ***Later in the report you can find the details.*** There is at least one travel company which has the kipunji in his itinerary, but they didn't want to share crucial information to us. So we searched on google maps and stumbled upon a local tour company



who organized accommodation (Riverbank Fish Farm) and a guide (Donald) for us. Donald arranged a tracker and with both of them we found the Kipunji on Mount Rungwe within 1 hour after entering the forest. Unfortunately the animals were quite shy and I was only able to make 2 good shots. For most of the morning we followed them and had brief views of a pretty big group (>10 animals), but they kept their distance. Be aware that there is just 1 trail going up Mount Rungwe and finding the Kipunji requires scrambling on steep forested slopes without any trails. Until the start of Covid research was done by WCS for more than 10 years, but they stopped their research. Several groups of Kipunji were habituated by them, but I got the impression things changed quickly. Maybe there is even some hunting pressure again. When you look at the guest book at the forest building, so few people visit this place. And if they do visit, they go for the challenge to reach the top of Mount Rungwe and don't pay attention to the Kipunji. So one of the rarest and most mysterious primates species on the planet hardly get the attention they need... pfffff.....

- **Sanje River Mangabey (*Cerocebus sanjei*)**. This locally occurring species is endangered with a total population of just 3000-5000 animals. The most accessible population lives in the eastern part of Udzungwa National Park where a few groups are habituated. In the wet season they come down to the valley and sometimes can be seen close to the park headquarters. But in the dry season they move higher up the mountains and it takes more effort to find them. It took me nearly 4 hours of walking/scrambling on very steep slopes in 35 degrees to find them. I asked the manager of the Hondo Hondo Camp (which is just a few km's from the park headquarters) to let the park rangers know I would like to see the Sanje River Mangabey. The park has sent 2 trackers early in the morning to find the habituated group. If you don't have trackers it's very very difficult to find this species as the terrain is challenging.



Other mammals seen

We saw a few other mammal species during our trip:

- **Mikumi NP:** African Elephant, Blue Wildebeast, Bohor Reedbuck, Buffalo, Bushbuck, Common Eland, Common Hippopotamus, Common Warthog, Giraffe, Greater Kudu, Impala, Lion, Plains Zebra.



- **Mount Rungwe.** Except primates we only saw 1 mammal species in the forests of Mount Rungwe: black and red bush squirrel (*Paraxerus lucifer*).
- **Zanzibar:** Suni, Black-and-rufous Sengi (or elephant shrew). Both are easy to see in the gardens of the Unguja Lodge in the southwestern part of the island. The Sengi is supposed to be easy in Jozani Forest, but we had a short visit of only 30 minutes to see the Zanzibar Red Colobus. After we had seen the Colobus monkey it started raining and we headed back to the car.



A few notes on places visited

- **Hondo Hondo Camp near Udzungwa NP.** It's a very good place to see primates as we saw 4 species on the grounds of the lodge, quite unique in Africa. You can camp for a small fee near the reception area and they have big safari tents with a ensuite bathroom and small banda's with a shared bathroom. Because the lodge is quite expensive we booked a banda, but to our big surprise we were upgraded to a nice tent! The food in the restaurant is good and the staff is very friendly. The camp manager is a really nice and friendly guy and he was a kind of bonus on our 3 night visit. Hondo Hondo has power 24/7 and the wifi was good. As the lodge is located about 500 meters from the main road, it's a quiet and peaceful place.
- **Mkumi NP.** This national park is easy accessible as the entrance is on the main road from Dar es Salaam to Malawi/Zambia. We visited the park twice in nov/dec with just 2,5 weeks in between. The difference between our visits were striking: during our first visit the number of animals around the hippo pool was magnificent: lions, elephants, giraffes, zebras, impalas, buffalos, wildebeast, warthogs etc. It was really spectacular!! About 2,5 weeks later the place was nearly empty because the wet season has started and the grass started getting greenish. So the first visit was perfect and the second visit was a bit disappointing. To buy tickets at the entrance is an easy and pretty fast process. They don't force you to take a guide or a guided tour. You can just drive the roads with your own (rental) car. In the park is a campground with toilets and some benches which you can use for a lunch stop. The park is quite big, but most of the roads are just in a pretty small area north of the main road. It was not busy in the park, just 15 or 20 cars driving around.

- Riverbank Fish Farm and Mount Rungwe.** The Fish Farm is an excellent place to stay if you are going for the Kipunji. They have 2 clean, simple rooms, each with an attached bathroom. Hot water is provided on request in buckets. We stayed for 5 nights and enjoyed every minute of it. The staff is very friendly and helpful and the place is beautiful and peaceful. We had breakfast and dinner with them and the food was simple, healthy and good! We used this place as a base to go to Mount Rungwe to see the Kipunji monkey. Our stay was organized by Eric from Tukuyu Tour Operators (<https://tukuyutouroperators.blogspot.com> or +255 656317211). He also offers homestays, but during our visit Eric was in Dar es Salaam, so we stayed in the Riverbank Fish Farm.

It's amazing how easy it is to get access to the forest where the Kipunji lives. From the Riverbank Fish Farm we drove about 20 minutes by car till about 1 km east of the village Kyimo on the B345. From there we went on the back of 2 motorbikes together with our guide Donald and drove about half an hour uphill till the edge of the forest where a (unmanned) building from the forest department is located. With a good 4WD (Landcruiser, HiLux) and good driving skills it's possible to drive to the building. The caretaker of the building lives nearby and will come to the building as soon as a motorbike or car passes his house. You pay the entrance fee to him and from step 1 In the forest you have a chance to see the Kipunji as they sometime come to the edge of the forest. It's possible to camp on a primitive campground about 500 meter inside the forest. Except for a few picknick benches there are no facilities. The new (concrete) toilet building is nearly finished, but we wonder if it will ever be finished. Avoid the rainy season because rainy season really means rainy season on Mount Rungwe..... When you decide to go camping (and have a chance of seeing nocturnal animals) be aware that even in the 'dry' season there is a good chance of rain in the afternoon.

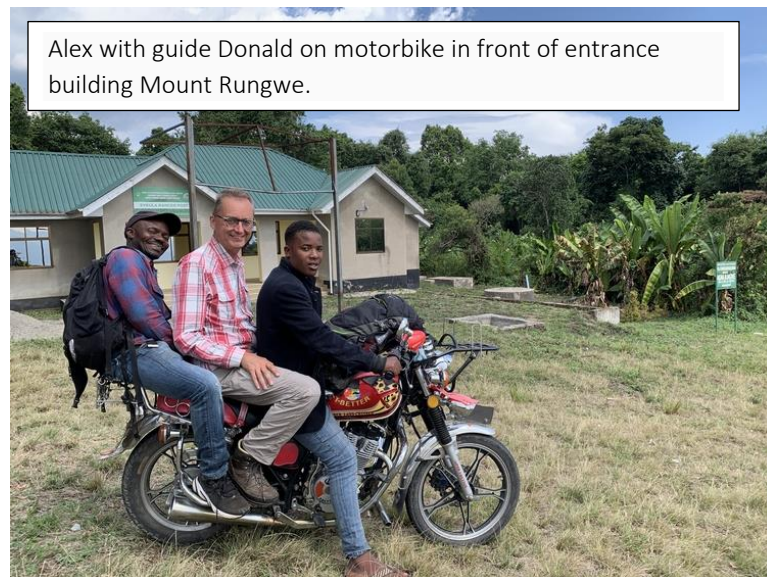


Accommodation River Banks Fish Farm

Final thoughts

We had a great time and spotted all the diurnal primates possible in this part of Tanzania. Unfortunately we didn't see any of the (dwarf) galagos, but we didn't put much energy in finding these nocturnal animals. Hopefully this report will inspire people to go to this part of Tanzania to spot the Kipunji and other rare monkeys. The combination with beautiful safari parks and Gombe makes it a top destination for nature lovers. You don't have to have a big budget and not much time to spot the Kipunji. Mbeya airport is only 1 hour away and Eric from Tukuyu Tour Operators can arrange everything for you locally. **So....go there!**

If you would like to have some information about our trip, please get in contact with us: schouten.alex@outlook.com



Alex with guide Donald on motorbike in front of entrance building Mount Rungwe.