



A short trip to Loango National Park, Gabon

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Foreword

Many thanks to Donna Honey from <https://www.seewildtravels.com/>, who organized this trip for four of us, arranged all logistics including the e-visa to Gabon. Thanks to Bob Shipbaugh, who joined us after I post a “who want to join” on mammalwatching.com. Bob is a very nice guy to travel with. Therefore, we should also thank Jon Hall as we can make friends on his website.

If you do not want to go to Embassy of Gabon by yourself, you must get an e-visa or entry authorisation letter through a travel agency based in Gabon. At least for China and USA citizens, that's the case. We did not get any problems at the immigration office, but it was very slow.

After stay at Fly Hotel (walkable distance from Libreville Airport) for one night, we took the AfriJet flight to Port-Gentil. It was scary that on the way one of the propellers on the plane stopped. Luckily,

we flew back to Libreville safely, changed to another plane after one hour, and arrived Port-Gentil this time. Then we took a 3.5-hour drive to the Loango National Park Authority. Two-thirds of the road was well paved, but another one-third was bumpy dirt road.

Loango Lodges

Louri Camp (1°58'47"S 9°21'16"E) is only open in rain seasons. It is located by a small lagoon, and close to vast savanna with small patches of coastal forest. N'dola Lodge is the main lodge of Loango NP, located in the northwest corner of the park, the mouth of Iguela Lagoon. N'dola is open in all season, connect to a branch of the savanna, and not far from the beach.



Lagoon view of Louri Camp and Savanna nearby



Dining room and tent of N'dola Lodge

In the rain season there were many seasonal water ponds on the savanna and the grass was green. Though the landscape is pretty, animal density is low. In my understanding the earth is not soil but sand of coast, so the dominant vegetation is something like sand grass, not suitable for herbivores

to eat. While this area is still one of the best places in the world for searching sitatungas and red river hogs. It was said that this area is only good in rain seasons because in dry season the savanna is completely dry. Nonetheless, in dry seasons, despite being yellow, it is still the savanna where mammal watchers get the sitatunga and red river hog.

Activities

We stayed at Louri Camp and N'dola Lodge, each for two nights. We were in the rain season, so in the first afternoon shower poured down. However, in the other days, it was almost sunny or cloudy.

Boat and jeep safaris were available from Louri Camp and N'dola Lodge, then there was a short drive from Louri Camp to the jetty. Activities last 3-4 hours in the morning and 2-3 hours in the afternoon. At Louri we could walk around the camp at night, but at N'dola even walking around is not allowed at night as there was a bull elephant often visiting. Most activities were private for us except one morning safari we share the car with one single traveler. Off road drive was prohibited, while we could leave the car and walk as long as it was not too close to the elephant or buffalo.

No night activities mean the chance to see more mammal species are limited. A traveler at N'dola told us there was a Gavilo Lodge on the opposite bank of the lagoon, outside the park border, but it was closed since covid-19. If you stayed there, you would be able to take a night walk at a site called “Leopard Forest”, where you would see 20 galagoes and 10 civets in one night. If it was true, I really hope Gavilo Lodge would reopen.

Mammals

1. African Forest Elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) 非洲森林象

In 2021, a research show that there were approximately 95,000 elephants in Gabon, more than the previous estimates! Therefore, Gabon is the country with the second large elephant (all three species) population (second to Botswana), and the highest elephant density nationwide, and 60%-70% of the world African forest elephants live in Gabon. We even saw one grazing on the roadside from Loango

NP to Port-Gentil.

Loango NP is the best place to see African forest elephants, at least during the rain seasons. We did see many, clear view of 40-50 individuals, especially on coastal. They were mainly feeding on the sedge *Cyperus pedunculatus* that grows on the beach. Elephants were also common on the savanna. Most individuals were habitual to the safari car, so we could watch them up close. Only some mothers with very young calves were quite sensitive and aggressive. Different from the savanna elephants, the forest elephants do not live in large families. In most cases, there was a single mother with one or two calves. The largest herd we saw was 11 individuals gathering on the beach. We also had two amazing encounters of elephant swimming across the lagoon. There were research projects of the elephant here as we saw two individuals with GPS collars.



Male elephant



Female elephant and calf



Elephants on coastal



Elephant swimming in lagoon

2. Forest Buffalo (*Syncerus caffer nanus*) 森林水牛

Though generally regarded as a subspecies of the African buffalo, they have great differences in appearance. It is said that forest buffaloes are very rarely observed in the unbroken canopy of the

forests. They instead spend most of their time in clearings, grazing on grasses and sedges. Actually, we only saw a few in the large savanna near Louri Camp, but we saw many on the small patch of savanna near N'dola Lodge, and also one on coastal. They were also habitual to the safari car. We saw several herds of around 10 individuals, while some maybe the same herd, as buffalos would not move a lot if there was sufficient food. The color of fur is not determined by sex, maybe age?



Male buffalos



Buffalo herd

3. Sitatunga (*Tragelaphus spekii*) 林羚

This species is called “forest antelope” in Chinese, but I think the key factor of their habitat is marsh rather than forest. We saw one young male and one female with cub. Both were on the middle of the open savanna, closer to Louri Camp, but they ran all the way into the forest immediately. It was funny to see them running. They had long, splayed hooves, which were the adaption to the marsh, so while running they had to stretch limbs, curve back and jump, just like a rabbit. Another interesting point in my view about species in this genus, such as bushbucks, is that mature male is more rarely seen than females.



Sitatunga young male



Sitatunga female

4. Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) 河马

The climate and environment of central Africa are so different from eastern and southern Africa, so most of the species are whereupon different. However, the same hippo adapts to both areas somehow. We saw several hippos in the lagoon not far from N'dola Lodge. They were curious about our boat, following us all the way, or maybe just want to expel us out of their territory.



Hippopotamus



Mangroves by the lagoon

5. Western Lowland Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) 西部低地大猩猩

There was only one habituated gorilla family in Loango NP, called Atananga Group, and it is part of the research project. Researchers were tracking them every day. Only four tourists are allowed to visit this gorilla family each day. Before the tracking, there was a small presentation from the researcher in the office. In this time of the year, the tracking was very easy, as this family was migrating close to the lagoon. We took the boat to the nearby bank, and walked for no more than 15 minutes to see the gorillas. Then we had 1 hour to observe them. In the dry season, they would migrate further inland, so tracking would be more challenging.

This family consisted 17 members. The leader, Kamaya, was a very slim silverback. He could be easily defeated by other silverbacks. Since 2009, he had been the only habituated silverback in this area. All potential challengers could not approach the family because the present of researchers. No need to worry about the genetic diversity, because 3 new females joined this family, all with their own offsprings, including a blackback, and all accepted by Kamaya. Kamaya sometimes intimidated the blackback, but allowed him to stay with the group. In this case, the blackback is also under habituation, though not completed. Maybe he would become a leader one day, and it would be good

to have more habituated individuals.



Kamaya the leader



Ambia and her six-month-old son



Gorillas on the ground



Gorilla in the tree

6. Red-capped Mangabey (*Cercocebus torquatus*) 红帽白眉猴

What I didn't expect was we didn't see any monkey in the first three days. On the fourth day, a troop of red-capped mangabeys moving cross N'dola Lodge at noon, but they were not habituated, quickly moved away when we tried to approach. On the finally day in the morning, we encountered another troop in a small patch of forest in the savanna in Louri Camp area. When we back to N'dola Lodge, the mangabeys came again at noon at the same site. When we finally left the national park by boat, another troop was just near the Park Authority. They were foraging and playing both on the ground and in the tree, making a lot of noise.

On a large scale, all distribution area of the red-capped mangabey is not far from the sea, but they do not only live on coastal, but also swamps and riverside forests. This ecological niche is somewhat similar to the crab-eating macaque in Asia.

7. Red-legged Sun Squirrel (*Heliosciurus rufobrachium*) 红腿太阳松鼠

Common around N'dola Lodge in bush and in trees.



Red-capped mangabey



Red-legged sun squirrel

8. Large-spotted Genet (*Genetta maculata*) 大斑獾

We saw the genet at Louri Camp both nights. It was walking around the lagoon, so we found it by thermal imager or torchlight from the dining room. I think it was the large-spotted genet, though personally I had not read any record of this species in Loango NP before. They should not be rare here. When we stayed at N'dola Lodge, another group came back late after dark, and they said they saw many genets.

9. Cyclops Roundleaf Bat (*Doryrhina cyclops*) 大眼蹄蝠

There were many bats flying at both Louri Camp and N'dola Lodge at night. I only managed to get photo of this one at Louri Camp when it was roosting on a tree.



Large-spotted genet



Cyclops roundleaf bat

What we miss

I really wanted the red river hogs. According to our guide, they are not difficult to see, in all seasons. We took many long drives, but no success. Would the dry season be better? One traveler we met said that after May, the hogs were everywhere. Anyway, Loango NP is already the first choice for the red river hog in the world. I should come back again.

The coastal lagoons and mangroves seemed to be idea habitat for the African manatee. Our guide said he did saw manatees sometimes. Boat based activities were popular in Loango NP, but very few reports of manatees from visitors, so perhaps the population here is low.



The symbol of Louré Camp



Rabi River

For monkeys we only saw the red-capped mangabeys. At least moustached guenons and putty-nosed monkey were also often seen. Maybe they would be easier to seen in dry seasons. Another possible target was the Gabon talapoin. Though I had not seen reports about this species in Loango area, both Donna and our guide said there was a site called Rabi River, very they were sometimes seen. We tried Rabi River, but no success.

This was my first time visiting central Africa. I don't know how other places in this region like, and even Loango NP may be different in the dry season. Overall, the feeling was completely different from that in eastern Africa. In spite of the low witness rate of mammals here, I still love this place, because the species were so unique. In my view, Loango is a must visit to fill my wishing list.

Birds

I am not really a birder, so I just try to list the birds I have seen.

	English name	Scientific name	Chinese name
1	Hartlaub's Duck	<i>Pteronetta hartlaubii</i>	黑头鳧
2	Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>	红眼斑鳩
3	Forbes's Plover	<i>Thinornis forbesi</i>	弗氏鴉
4	White-crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus albiceps</i>	白头麦鸡
5	Kittlitz's Plover	<i>Anarhynchus pecuarius</i>	基氏沙鴉
6	White-fronted Plover	<i>Anarhynchus marginatus</i>	白额沙鴉
7	African Jacana	<i>Actophilornis africanus</i>	非洲雉鴉
8	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	矶鴉
9	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	林鴉
10	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	青脚鴉
11	Temminck's Courser	<i>Cursorius temminckii</i>	黑腹走鴉
12	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	普通燕鸥
13	African Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia microscelis</i>	非洲白颈鸛
14	African Darter	<i>Anhinga rufa</i>	红蛇鸛
15	Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>	凤头鸛
16	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>	锤头鸛
17	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	白鹭
18	Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	绿鹭
19	Western Cattle-Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>	西方牛背鹭
20	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	大白鹭
21	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	草鹭
22	Palm-nut Vulture	<i>Gypohierax angolensis</i>	棕榈鹭
23	African Fish-Eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga vocifer</i>	吼海雕
24	Congo Pied Hornbill	<i>Lophoceros fasciatus</i>	斑尾弯嘴犀鸟
25	Black-casqued Hornbill	<i>Ceratogymna atrata</i>	黑盔噪犀鸟
26	Piping Hornbill	<i>Bycanistes fistulator</i>	笛声噪犀鸟
27	Shining-blue Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo quadibrachys</i>	闪蓝翠鸟
28	Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	斑鱼狗
29	Broad-billed Roller	<i>Eurystomus glaucurus</i>	阔嘴三宝鸟
30	Gray Parrot	<i>Psittacus erithacus</i>	非洲灰鹦鹉
31	Gabon Boubou	<i>Laniarius bicolor</i>	双色黑鸚
32	White-throated Blue Swallow	<i>Hirundo nigrita</i>	白喉蓝燕
33	Leaf-love	<i>Phyllastrephus scandens</i>	旋木鸚
34	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	黑眼鸚
35	Yellow-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus africanus</i>	黄嘴牛椋鸟
36	Mouse-brown Sunbird	<i>Anthreptes gabonicus</i>	灰褐食蜜鸟
37	Green-headed Sunbird	<i>Cyanomitra verticalis</i>	绿头花蜜鸟
38	Bates's Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris batesi</i>	巴氏花蜜鸟
39	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	梅花雀
40	Long-legged Pipit	<i>Anthus pallidiventris</i>	长脚鸚



Temminck's courser



Common tern



African woolly-necked stork



Hadada ibis



Palm-nut vulture



Congo pied hornbill



Black-casqued hornbill



Gray parrot



Gabon boubou



Leaf-love



Mouse-brown sunbird



Bates's sunbird

Reptiles

1. Central African Slender-snouted Crocodile (*Mecistops leptorhynchus*) 中非狭吻鳄

This species was mainly found in Akaka River. While this area was only good to visit in dry seasons, it was not far from where we tracked the gorilla, so we took a detour and found the crocodile.

2. Nile Crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*) 尼罗鳄

They lived in the small lagoon near Louri Camp. We could see the movement and eye shining at night. Strangely they were completely invisible in daytime. No idea why they did not sunbathe here.

3. West African Black Turtle (*Pelusios niger*) 黑侧颈龟

Two together were seen in the accumulated water in the tracing rut on the sand ground of savanna. They might come from the nearby swamp during the rain.

4. Nile Monitor (*Varanus niloticus*) 尼罗河巨蜥

Seen on savanna and in mangroves, even around N'dola Lodge.

5. Black-lined Plated Lizard (*Gerrhosaurus nigrolineatus*) 黑线板蜥

Seen under the forest of Louri Camp.

6. Peter's Rock Agama (*Agama picticauda*) 纹尾鬣蜥

Many at N'dola Lodge. No sure whether they were all the same species.



Central African slender-snouted crocodile



West African black turtle



Nile monitor



Black-lined plated lizard



Peter's rock agama (male)



Peter's rock agama (female)