



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO AND DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Date - July 2019

Duration - 32 Days

Destinations

Brazzaville - Odzala-Kokoua National Park - Kinshasa - Lola Ya Bonobo - Mbandaka - Basankusu - Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve

Trip Overview - Odzala-Kokoua National Park (Republic of the Congo)

For several years now I have been exploring the possibility of developing one extended tour to provide guests with the unique opportunity to spend time with all four of Africa's great apes, eastern and western gorillas, as well as chimpanzees and their smaller cousin the bonobo. Although time and cost are obviously a factor in an ambitious expedition of this kind, the logistics are not actually that difficult, at least in terms of the first three species, which are more or less routinely encountered in a combination of reserves across either Uganda or Rwanda for the eastern gorilla and the Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic or perhaps even Gabon for its western counterpart. Chimpanzees can be found at most of these destinations and beyond, but bonobos occur only in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and, as many people are no doubt aware, the DRC has not always been the easiest of countries to travel in. In addition to the remote and largely inaccessible areas in which bonobos have endured, the country has suffered decades of political instability and civil conflict, which has resulted in widespread bloodshed and literally millions of deaths, barely any of which are even reported in the west. Although the situation is by no means resolved and the violence sadly continues, it is localised to some degree and there are large areas within the DRC that are relatively unaffected, including the Lomako Reserve in the northeast, which is home to a healthy population of bonobos and can be reached comparatively safely. Consequently, and for probably the first time in my memory, the opportunity now exists to observe four different great apes on a single African tour, albeit a fairly long and



demanding one. We could at best find three on what was always going to be an exploratory first effort, but given how straightforward it is to view eastern gorillas elsewhere, it would only take a short flight and a few additional days to complete an extraordinary adventure. Of course these iconic apes are not the only highlight of an expedition of this kind, as the Congo Basin is the most diverse region on the continent and we had more than a month to fully immerse ourselves in a biological masterpiece that relatively few people ever experience. As such, it was likely to be a fitting end to at least the latest stage of a remarkable journey that my son and I have shared over almost two decades, as James had just completed his first year at university and although he had very kindly assisted me on several extended occasions during holiday breaks, we were both aware that this would not be possible going forward and that this would be our final trip together for the foreseeable future. For all the inevitable sadness that this would involve, I had at least planned a memorable end, as most destinations do not allow children to go gorilla trekking and James had therefore never seen this most impressive member of the family hominidae, which also includes three distinct orangutan species in Southeast Asia, as well as humankind. Similarly, neither of us had ever seen a bonobo and there was also a realistic possibility, albeit a remote one, that we might also encounter an African golden cat or a giant pangolin, two highly elusive animals that I have never been sufficiently fortunate to observe in the wild. Given the choice, I would have ideally reversed our itinerary, as the first section of the tour would take place among the comfortable lodges of Odzala National Park in the Congo Republic and we would finish with the far more arduous search for bonobos in the DRC, which would involve multiple days on the Congo and her tributaries, as well as in excess of two weeks in some fairly rudimentary living conditions. As much as I have always relished this element of genuine wilderness travel, my initial thinking was that it would have been nice to bring this phase of our travel to a close in a little style, particularly in terms of actually having the time to be able to relax and really savour our last few days together. However, with hindsight, I am relieved that our undoubtedly unique odyssey concluded with our own descent into the 'Heart of Darkness', as it was a momentous and entirely appropriate end that neither of us will ever forget. That is not to say that our time at Odzala was unmemorable, as the national park is



a natural wonder and we thoroughly enjoyed our stay, despite many of the usual issues that you tend to experience with high end lodges, more used to indulging wealthy clients than genuine wildlife enthusiasts. Odzala is actually administered by African Parks, a conservation organisation that works in partnership with governments and local communities in order to protect some of the most vulnerable and important ecosystems on the continent, as well as a vast array of species, many of which are endangered and/or occur nowhere else. Founded in 2000, African Parks currently manage sixteen national parks and reserves, from Chad to Mozambique and Benin to Zimbabwe, and in all they are responsible for three parks in or around the Congo Basin, basically the drainage basin of the mighty Congo River. None are at its very heart, but Odzala in the Congo Republic, Garamba in the DRC and Chinko in the Central African Republic are all hugely significant in terms of the diverse wildlife they support and African Parks are aiming to increase the reserves under their jurisdiction to twenty by the end of 2020. I intend to visit and promote as many of these as possible over the next few years, beginning with Zakouma in Chad and Akagera in Rwanda, which continues its remarkable recovery following the devastation of the civil war years in the early 1990s. The company that I used for this trip work in conjunction with African Parks and operate three lodges at Odzala, one in dense primary forest where visitors can spend time with any of three habituated gorilla families and another in a wetlands habitat that borders gallery forest and overlooks one of several productive bays, many of which can be explored on foot. The last camp is nestled between a tributary of the Lekoli River and a small stretch of savannah that leads to further rainforest. All three overlap to some degree in terms of habitat, but they are also reasonably distinct in both appearance and ambiance and in all we had fourteen nights to spend between the three. We visited them in the order described and at the first I booked three gorilla treks, just to ensure that we had a reasonable overview of how this activity can unfold at this particular destination, as the tropical rainforest of the Congo Basin is a unique environment and watching western lowland gorillas in this setting is unlike the experience that many wildlife travellers are used to with mountain gorillas in either Uganda or Rwanda. For a start, western gorillas spend more time moving and feeding in trees than their eastern cousins and are less likely to be observed on the ground in clearings, largely because there are far fewer open areas in such dense rainforest and the gorillas here are adapted to their specific surroundings. They are also significantly smaller in size, eastern adult males can be almost a third larger, and this particular forest adaptation, where

size is certainly no advantage within the dense understory, can be observed in many forest species, including the elephants and buffalo at Odzala. Sadly, for all my careful planning regarding our enormously anticipated gorilla encounters, our farewell tour did not enjoy the most auspicious of beginnings, as Ethiopian Airlines cancelled a connection which would have resulted in us missing at least the first four days of the trip. Their eleventh-hour replacement Royal Air Maroc did at least succeed in getting us off the ground, but they also managed to misplace our luggage for the second trip in a row, having failed the no doubt complicated task of transporting our bags between Dakhla and London just two months previously. It would ultimately take five somewhat dirty and sweaty days for us to be reunited with our clothes, but fortunately, we always travel with our essential equipment as hand luggage and our lost bags were



the last thing on our minds as we departed the capital Brazzaville for the two-hour Cessna flight to Odzala. There is always something incredibly evocative about flying to an African safari destination in a light aircraft and I was unbelievably excited to be returning to my beloved continent for a first authentic safari since Uganda in 2013, which is certainly the longest I have ever gone between visits to what I consider to be the greatest show on earth in terms of wildlife viewing. Whilst I have visited more spectacular locations than I can possibly ever recall, and I have always deemed it a rare privilege to be able to travel anywhere in the world to view wild animals, ultimately nothing compares to Africa as far as I am concerned and, from the moment I spotted a first meandering elephant from the air, I knew that this was going to be the special ending that I had hoped for with my son. Certainly the tour was less than perfect in many respects and the park itself is clearly not receiving the protection that it needs, but these are human issues that wretchedly continue to occur all over the world and as an actual wildlife destination Odzala is simply magnificent. To deal with the main problems in their order of importance, poaching is definitely occurring and probably not on a minor scale and the lodges, although beautiful and in breathtaking settings, are poorly managed. Whilst the latter is an annoying inconvenience, particularly if you have paid a small fortune to visit, the former could be an ecological disaster and needs to be addressed. One of the real issues is that at least some of the 130,000 or so locals who live in relatively close proximity to Odzala are unquestionably abusing their partnership with African Parks, as 5% of all revenue generated by the reserve is allocated towards community projects and villagers can continue to make use of the park's resources, which includes using land for agriculture and hunting animals for food. Hunting is permitted as far as ten kilometres into the national park, which basically means that almost anyone can hunt almost anywhere and it is virtually impossible to determine between locals hunting sustainably within an agreed area and those engaged in the rampant illegal bushmeat

trade. I have always personally believed that it is essential to include local communities in conservation initiatives of this kind and that it is nonsensical to expect people to protect animals when they are unable to feed their own children. Community welfare and education remains the key in my view, but on countless occasions I have seen these principles betrayed by the local people that they are intended to benefit. This is not an anti African sentiment by any means, as human nature is equally flawed across the globe and every society includes those who will always try to get more, some by hard work and others by any means necessary, regardless of the consequences to their family and friends or the vulnerable animals they have been charged to protect. Just from my own experience there are clearly significant issues at Odzala, as many species were observed in worryingly low densities, if at all, and of those that were encountered, most were evidently terrified and disappeared almost immediately, particularly the primates. Elephants are so wary of people that they only visit some of the bays after dark and on one occasion a large male was so disturbed by our presence, it charged out of the water from where it had been drinking peacefully and stampeded into the forest as soon as it became aware of us. If this sounds like unusual behaviour for these relatively calm animals, it all makes complete sense when you consider that I twice heard gunshots during our stay and that we drove past two African Parks guards stripping the flesh of a pair of elephant tusks they had taken



from poachers. This sadly was not an isolated incident and just a few months prior to our stay, local police officers and park officials seized 86 kilograms of ivory just south of the reserve, which equates to about 21 dead elephants. Lion and wild dog have already been extirpated at Odzala, which basically means that they have been wiped out by the same communities that have been entrusted with some of the highest remaining densities of western gorilla and chimpanzee in Central Africa. The fact that at least some of these communities are still heavily involved in elephant poaching should be of immense concern and the evidence suggests that they are killing a lot of other animals illegally as well. Certainly some species are being hunted in far greater numbers than African Parks have agreed to or are even aware of and it is likely that a degree of resentment and distrust exists towards the mainly white people telling local villagers how to live their lives. This antipathy, mutual or otherwise, is typical of these already fragile relationships and I observed some of these difficulties on a personal level during our stay, albeit on a relatively minor scale. Although the various problems experienced at our camps are obviously less serious, they do still have consequences, as all three lodges are operating at a very low occupancy level which translates into less funds for the community development projects and consequently less local emphasis on conservation. There are certain subjects in terms of the activities and price etc. that I will not address in this format, but people can contact me directly regarding them and there are several other issues that I do want to discuss, principally because the lodges are being managed inadequately in many respects and I am concerned that this will continue to have a detrimental effect on both visitor numbers and the essential conservation efforts taking place here. The main problem is a glaring lack of investment, as the basic infrastructure is woeful and, as one guide candidly informed me, the entire operation is being run on a shoestring with basically a skeleton staff. There are simply not enough vehicles or guides for the current number of visitors, let alone the additional guests that they need to attract, and my overall impression was of a group of mid-range lodges, albeit in fabulous locations, masquerading as top

end luxury, with prices to match. To begin, there is only one vehicle at each camp, which basically means that only a single group can participate in any activities involving a vehicle and that everyone else has to explore the reserve on foot, regardless of age or how many walks they may have already completed in succession. When booking, you are actively encouraged to visit for as long as possible, but then during your stay you are informed that you cannot take a particular activity because guests only staying for four or seven nights have to take priority given their abbreviated schedules. Walking is always fine as far as we are concerned, particularly at such a spectacular destination, but because we were staying for fourteen nights, we were often given no other option and on one occasion we even had an activity cancelled because the game vehicle was required for logistical purposes. I made it very clear that



this was not going to occur, as you simply cannot tell guests that they are unable to search for wildlife because their safari vehicle is being used to transport supplies. It beggars belief, especially at a reserve being sold as a luxury destination, and the situation at night is no better. As I will discuss further, the nocturnal activities at Odzala are appallingly limited, certainly when you consider the incredible diversity of the region and what can clearly be observed with just a modicum of effort. Only the first of the three lodges can accommodate anything approaching an authentic night drive, but even these are rushed and fairly rudimentary affairs, with everyone crammed into the single camp vehicle. If they were operating with more guests, several would have to stay behind each evening and no doubt visitors who had booked for an extended period would be told to give up their place to enable everyone to experience a night drive, when of course any reputable operation would instead be able to provide the requisite number of vehicles for all of their guests. The guiding situation is even worse, as the lodges are simply not employing enough guides and there is no cover at all if someone falls ill. This actually occurred during our stay when we were informed, not asked, but just told, that we would be joining another group because no other guides were available. As I attempted to explain at the time, it is difficult enough to search for

some of Africa's rarest creatures with just three of you wading through a swamp and that it would be almost impossible to find anything with the additional eight tourists that we were suddenly told we would have to spend at least the next two days with. There was no way that I would ever agree to this and you cannot ask guests paying thousands of dollars for a private tour to accept being herded together with other large groups simply because the lodges are not employing sufficient staff. I am always prepared to be flexible and to help out in a genuine emergency, particularly in remote regions where a great deal can go wrong quickly and it can understandably take time to correct the situation. However, it is not an emergency if it happens on a regular basis and it is not acceptable to pass these issues on to your guests, not when you know that they exist and have done nothing at all to address them. More than one guide mentioned that the entire operation was constantly at breaking point and that they could barely manage on a day to day basis, which partly explains the absence of productive nocturnal activities, as there are no spare staff to cover them. Guests are instead relying on the guides that they have been with since perhaps 5am that day, to take them out again at night, which, hardly surprisingly in most cases, very few of the guides have any appetite for. To be fair, our own guide did take us out on several additional occasions at our request, but again these drives were perfunctory at best, as they were too fast, too brief and too aimless to be overly productive and it was more a case of fulfilling our minimum expectations than really searching hard for rare species. That said, even these fairly hapless forays did provide a tantalising glimpse of what could have been achieved with a little endeavour and on more than one occasion we encountered animals that some of the fulltime guides had never previously seen. I did mention that it would make sense to train and employ some locals as cover for the permanent guides, as they would probably know more about the wildlife within the national park than most of the imported foreign guides that I spoke to and of course they would not cost as much to engage as basic cover. However, there appears to be very little will, or perhaps money, to make any significant changes and the lodges are



apparently happy enough to rely on the admittedly breathtaking locations of their camps and the equally impressive and virtually guaranteed gorilla sightings. Certainly some activities are being mis-sold and one apparently inconsequential incident perhaps illustrates the mentality that currently permeates the operation here, at least regarding its administration. We had to overnight in Brazzaville before flying on to Odzala and I naturally asked the lodge representative if she could recommend a decent hotel that we could be collected from the next morning in time for the onward flight. She did and offered to book it for us, but at the time I was not sure of our exact requirements and just told her not to worry for now and that I would probably eventually book it myself. Her response was that unless I paid the lodge directly to book the room on my behalf, they would not transfer us to the airport and we would have to make our own way there. The room was not particularly expensive and they were basically refusing to transfer us approximately twenty minutes to the airport for the sake of commission of perhaps another hundred dollars, after I had already paid them literally thousands of dollars for our stay. Even disregarding the fact that I was looking at the possibility of developing a long-term business relationship, this is an exceedingly poor way to treat paying guests and much the same can be said of the situation at the first lodge, where we had no luggage for five days and were not even offered sun hats to wear or toothpaste to use. Instead we had to ask our fellow guests for these and other similarly essential items and later in the trip I was amazed to hear that they are considering



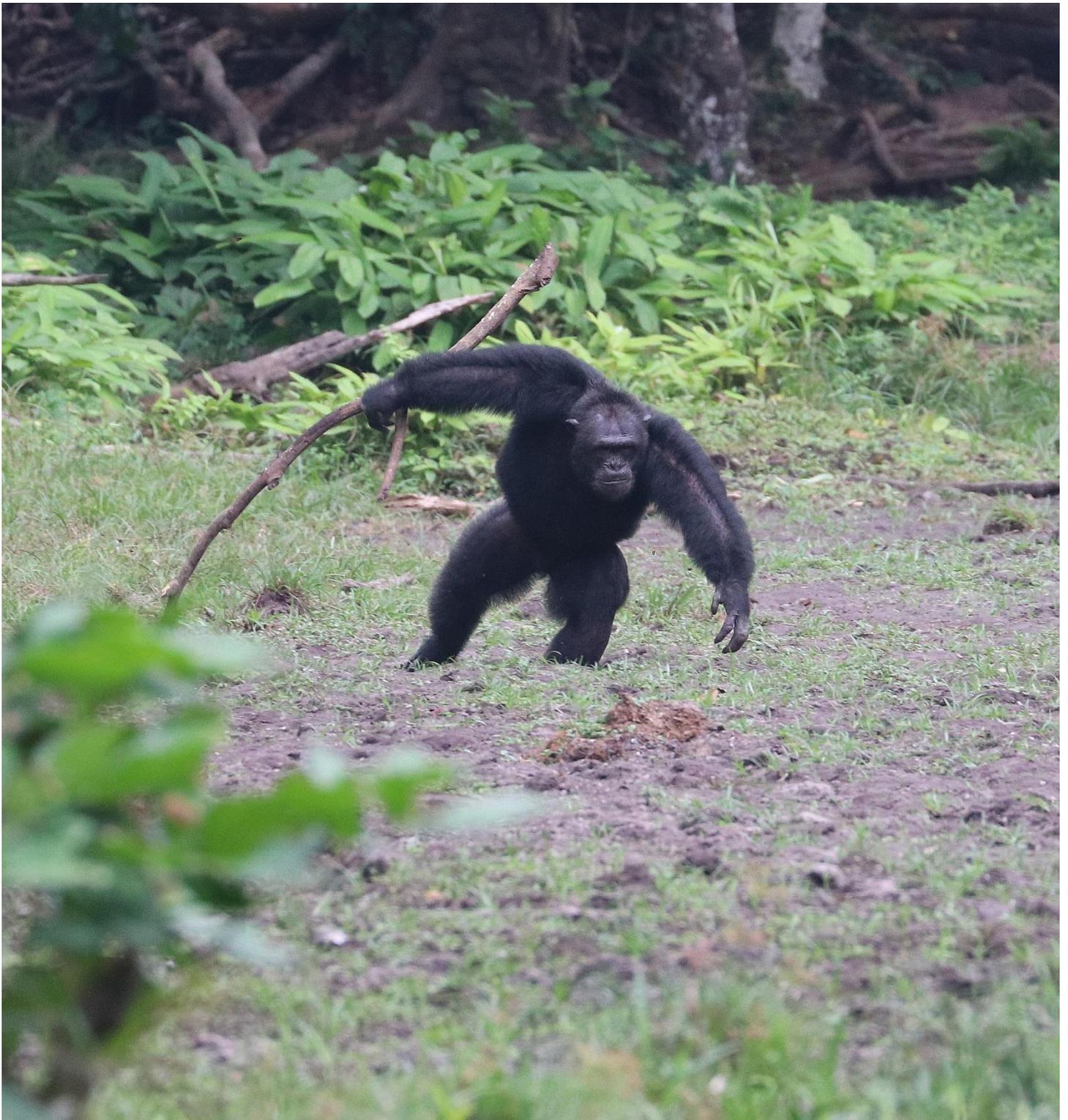
building a viewing platform at one of the camps, when in fact they should be concentrating on providing guests with at least enough guides and vehicles to be able to enjoy this incredible natural resource in all its enthralling glory, particularly after dark. If you are charging top end prices, you have to at least deliver these basic services or instead just reduce the cost and make the park far more affordable in order to massively increase visitor numbers. This would produce a regular source of income, which could be utilised to reinvest in the obviously inadequate infrastructure and the community projects that are clearly at the heart of the conservation effort here. The park needs better protection than it is currently receiving and despite the serious issues that I have highlighted, Odzala could easily become one of Central Africa's premier wildlife destinations. Much of the wildlife is currently too nervous to say that this is already the case, as many species were frustratingly difficult to see well, let alone photograph, and are easier to observe elsewhere. However, the diversity here is certainly on par with other reserves in the region and the gorilla encounters can be genuinely



exceptional. That said, and given that you will have already spent a great deal of money to get here, I would without question recommend that you take the sensible precaution of spending a little more, as western gorillas can be difficult to see well in the dense Congo rainforest and it is more or less imperative that you give yourself two or three opportunities to really make the most of your visit, especially if you have never seen these magnificent animals before. The rewards are usually unforgettable and can be deeply moving, as these powerful forest giants are one of the gentlest creatures on earth and it can be a humbling and slightly overwhelming experience to spend time sitting peacefully with them. Certainly very few wildlife encounters can even begin to compare and I was ultimately thrilled that I had followed my own advice and arranged three gorilla treks, as the first two included a few outstanding sightings, but the gorillas were on the move for most of our allotted time and the better views of the animals on the ground were relatively brief. The opposite was the case on our final early morning walk, when we found a family group in a clearing and were able to spend a full hour watching them feeding on roots and playing together. Magical does not even begin to describe the experience or the privilege of being able to observe the intricate behaviour and social interaction as other gorillas arrived. To hear a huge silverback crashing through the vegetation to join his family was as thrilling as you can possibly imagine and as I sat and watched my own son as utterly absorbed as I was, I knew that I had made the right decision, not actually in terms of this trip, but years before when I decided



that I would try to show him everything that this astounding planet of ours has to offer. I did consider adding a fourth gorilla activity following this remarkable sighting, as I never tire of watching these hugely impressive and charismatic apes and knew that James would have relished another opportunity, never having seen them previously. However, I was also aware that we were due to visit a bai where unhabituated gorillas are regularly observed and we both decided that this would be the ideal way to conclude our gorilla encounters, particularly as chimpanzees are also known to occur and we had the very real prospect of seeing authentically wild versions of both great apes at a single destination. We had already been hearing chimps for several days and whilst you are never guaranteed to see them at Odzala, they are occasionally encountered on the gorilla hikes or even during transfers in the safari vehicle. These sightings are very much a matter of chance, whereas at least one of the two apes are usually seen on each visit to the bai and a small obscured hide has been constructed to provide an excellent view without disturbing the foraging apes. The walk in was good as well, following a long early morning drive, with a first glimpse of the highly distinctive guereza colobus and what would be our only northern talapoin of the tour. Unfortunately, this solitary encounter was characteristically brief, with the small monkeys scattering in all directions as soon as they spotted us. This obvious hunting pressure was sadly evident throughout our stay and was observed on a daily basis, particularly in terms of primates and antelopes, few of which were seen for long periods or in healthy numbers. Thankfully this was not the case with either of the apes, as the hide did its job splendidly and we were consequently able to experience the type of momentous occasion you can only dream about when you are organising an entire tour around two or three key species. Although we had been informed that we were more likely to see gorillas than chimps, I had set my heart on both, principally because chimpanzees and bonobos do not live in the same areas in the DRC and if we were going to encounter three great apes on a single tour, Odzala would represent our only chance for the chimps. As it was, a few gorillas arrived first and over the next hour or so more began to emerge from the forest until we were eventually watching a family of 24, including several mothers with extremely young babies and an imposing but incredibly calm silverback. The entire scene was tranquillity itself, with mothers nursing their young and huge males lapping water gently from their enormous hands. Juveniles rolled and tumbled, but nothing else was hurried and there was a complete absence of hostility, just immensely gentle animals going about their lives completely oblivious to our existence. In all, we shared more than two utterly captivating hours with these endearing creatures and, almost unbelievably, within less than an hour of the last gorilla departing, the first of thirteen chimpanzees arrived. From the outset the atmosphere was different, charged and far more aggressive, with a formidable coalition of three males chasing and attacking a fourth and the alpha male picking up a branch and unmistakably brandishing it as a weapon. The serenity had disappeared with the gorillas, but the entirely natural behaviour on

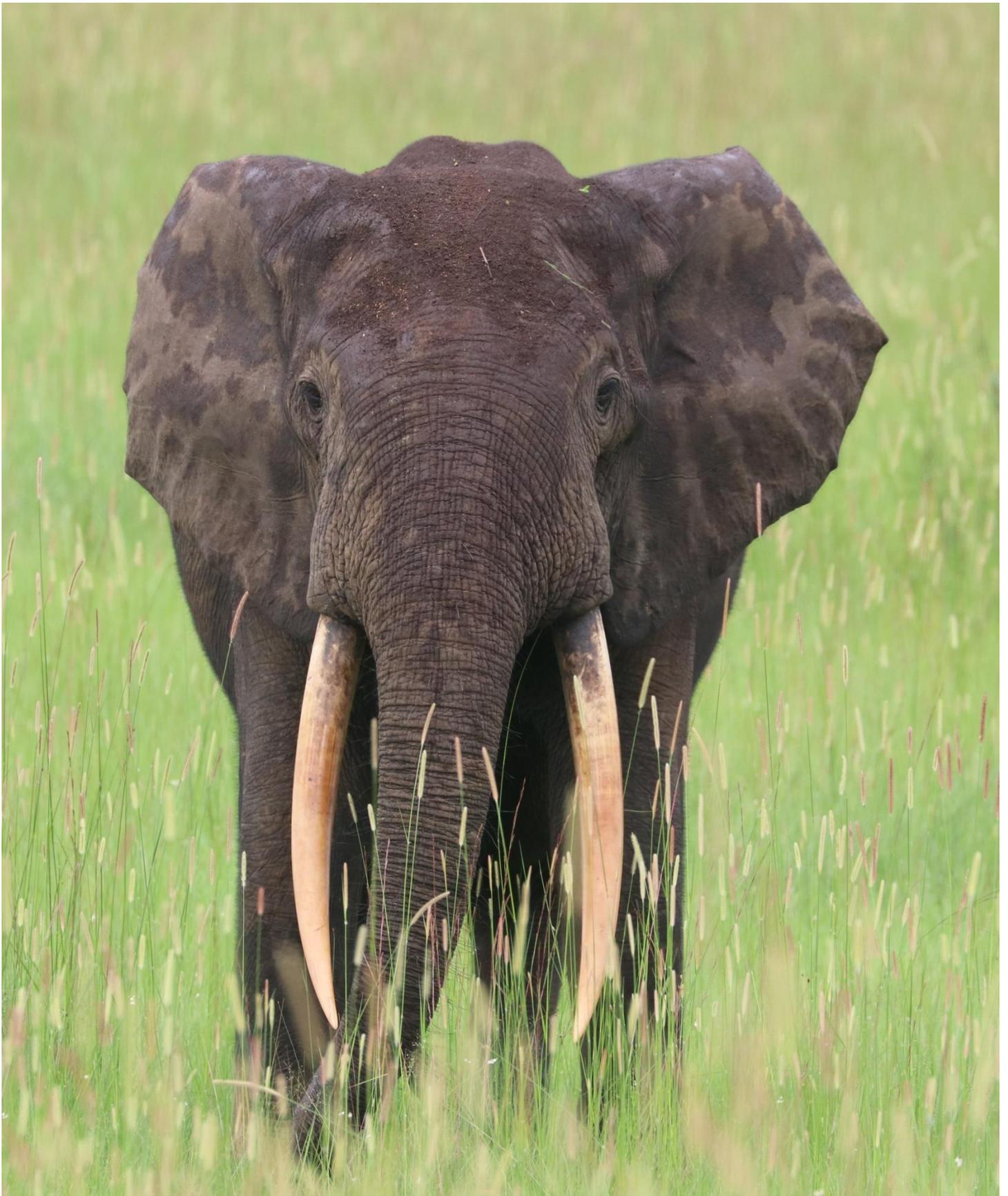


display was no less compelling, just different, as subservient apes cowered and males of a higher status asserted their dominance. I have watched chimpanzees hunting and ripping other monkeys apart and would never consider endowing them with human characteristics to thereby judge them. Their society and therefore their survival depends on a strict social order and it was fascinating to observe how quickly order was restored as soon as dominance had been reaffirmed. Suddenly the animals were feeding calmly together and females were sufficiently relaxed to release their young and let them explore unattended. One mother, who had been walking on all fours with her baby clinging to her back, stood upright and walked on two legs as she approached a patch of deeper water, clearly in order to avoid getting unduly wet. The male that had been chased away was allowed to return and feed on the periphery and for an hour or more peace reigned and we watched in awe. To call this extraordinary spectacle a highlight of the tour would be an absurd understatement, as this was a highlight of any tour and probably any lifetime. Not simply because we had spent several hours with two of the continent's four great apes in a single morning, but more because neither of the groups were habituated and we had been able to watch genuinely wild animals. The fact that they were blissfully unaware of our presence guaranteed that the absorbing and complex behaviour displayed had been natural and not modified or affected as an unavoidable element of the habituation process or our involvement. It is the way that I would ideally prefer to observe all wildlife and our unqualified success at Odzala was particularly encouraging given our imminent bonobo expedition and my intention to produce the ultimate great ape safari. Whilst a specialist tour of this kind is always going to be judged on whether you manage to see the main targets, and how well of course, it would also have the potential to feature a number of other tremendously rare species and part of the research process is to determine how likely this would be at each destination. It is certainly conceivable that I may not even choose the absolute premier location for every ape, as all of the sites will need to work well in combination and if two destinations offer reasonably similar possibilities for one of the four principal targets, my final decision will probably be based on what else is likely to be encountered at

each. At Odzala bongo, sitatunga, red river hog and three different pangolins are all feasible, in wildly varying degrees of probability, and the golden cat is one of around twenty carnivores that occur here, a few of which are even more elusive than this rarest of all African cats. Some of the ten or so duiker species are also seldom encountered and whilst most of the seventeen primates are likely to be observed given sufficient time, we spotted fourteen in all during our two-week stay, few tarry long enough for much more than a brief glimpse. The numerous squirrels aside, which are also very quick and can be frustratingly difficult to identify, the only major mammals observed with any regularity are elephant, buffalo and, to a far lesser extent, bushbuck. These can at least be viewed superbly well and in genuinely authentic conditions, as almost all of the activities at Odzala take place on foot and often involve wading through reasonably deep streams and waterlogged animal channels. To be fair, it would actually be difficult to provide a more authentic experience than this, particularly if you walk barefoot as we did, with elephant and buffalo faeces squidding between your toes and floating around your waist. As I discovered when I spoke to fellow guests, this kind of activity is not for everyone, but it was



not a problem as far as we were concerned and is obviously the only way to reach certain areas of the reserve. It is also the easiest way to get close enough to photograph the forest elephants and buffalo found here in the tropical rainforest of the Congo Basin and across parts of West Africa. These forest elephants are now classified as an entirely distinct species from the larger African elephants that generations of tourists are so familiar with, but, and such are the vagaries of taxonomy, the forest buffalo is only considered to be a subspecies of the Cape buffalo, despite the fact that it is even smaller in comparison and barely resembles its significantly bulkier relative. These two undeniably impressive species aside, very little else was spotted during the day, at least on the ground. Bushbuck would usually feed in the bai at the second camp during the late afternoon, usually in pairs, and the same area was home to a sitatunga and her calf. Strangely, we never saw them together or even on the same day and our only view of the mother was early one morning in thick mist. The calf was spotted the next day in better light and although I was able to get pictures at distance, I missed a chance of a really nice shot when we thought she had already moved on and inadvertently disturbed her on our return. I also missed our only red river hogs, a small group running through the forest and then across the open trail just behind us. It was a fabulous view of an equally fabulous animal, but they were clearly spooked and I decided to just enjoy the sighting instead of attempting to get a shot as they sprinted across the clearing one after another. I must admit that I would have probably tried for a picture if I had realised that I might



not see them again, but this was fairly early on and it was only towards the end of our stay that we began to fully comprehend just how difficult certain mammals are to find at Odzala and that we were actually fortunate to have encountered many species even once. This sadly applied to the picturesque hogs, which are a firm favourite of mine and I was sorry not to see them again or in more leisurely circumstances. Speaking of disappointment, nothing came even close to the abject disappointment of failing to find a bongo, as James has never seen one and we consequently spent a great deal of our time searching. Unfortunately, none of the lodge guides were from the region, the majority were South African and some were even European, and they evidently do not know the best areas to try for even relatively common animals. Instead they are used to guiding tourists who are generally content just to see the gorillas and maybe a few elephants and buffalo. As such, they are leading the same walks at the same times day after day, instead of using any initiative and exploring new areas for their guests. This basic lack of knowledge was compounded by the fact that our guide, as he would go on to all too clearly demonstrate, was visibly unnerved by elephants and did not want to do anything on foot in the dark. We had to wait for almost full daylight before he would leave the camp each morning and we always had to return by dusk. To be completely fair, none of the other guides walked in the dark either and that is often the case where there are healthy elephant populations. However, he still waited far too long each morning and this excessive caution almost certainly cost us any chance of

seeing bongos, as these timid antelopes feed in the bai during the night and return to the safety of the forest before light. We were keen to spend time exploring the forests and bais at night, but there is just no will to search on foot, even in areas where elephants rarely occur, and this almost complete lack of proactivity is difficult to accept in such a diverse region. The brief night drives at the first gorilla camp aside, there are no formal nocturnal activities at any of the lodges and certainly no walks, guided or otherwise. Most guests of course have no idea that they are being deprived of the opportunity to see so many rare animals, but this is still an inexcusable waste of an amazing natural resource, particularly as the wildlife in general at Odzala is so difficult to find. A few well organised and extended nocturnal activities could totally transform the visitor experience, especially if the guides made the effort to learn a little more about their surroundings at night and how and where to search for different species. Instead, in some cases they are

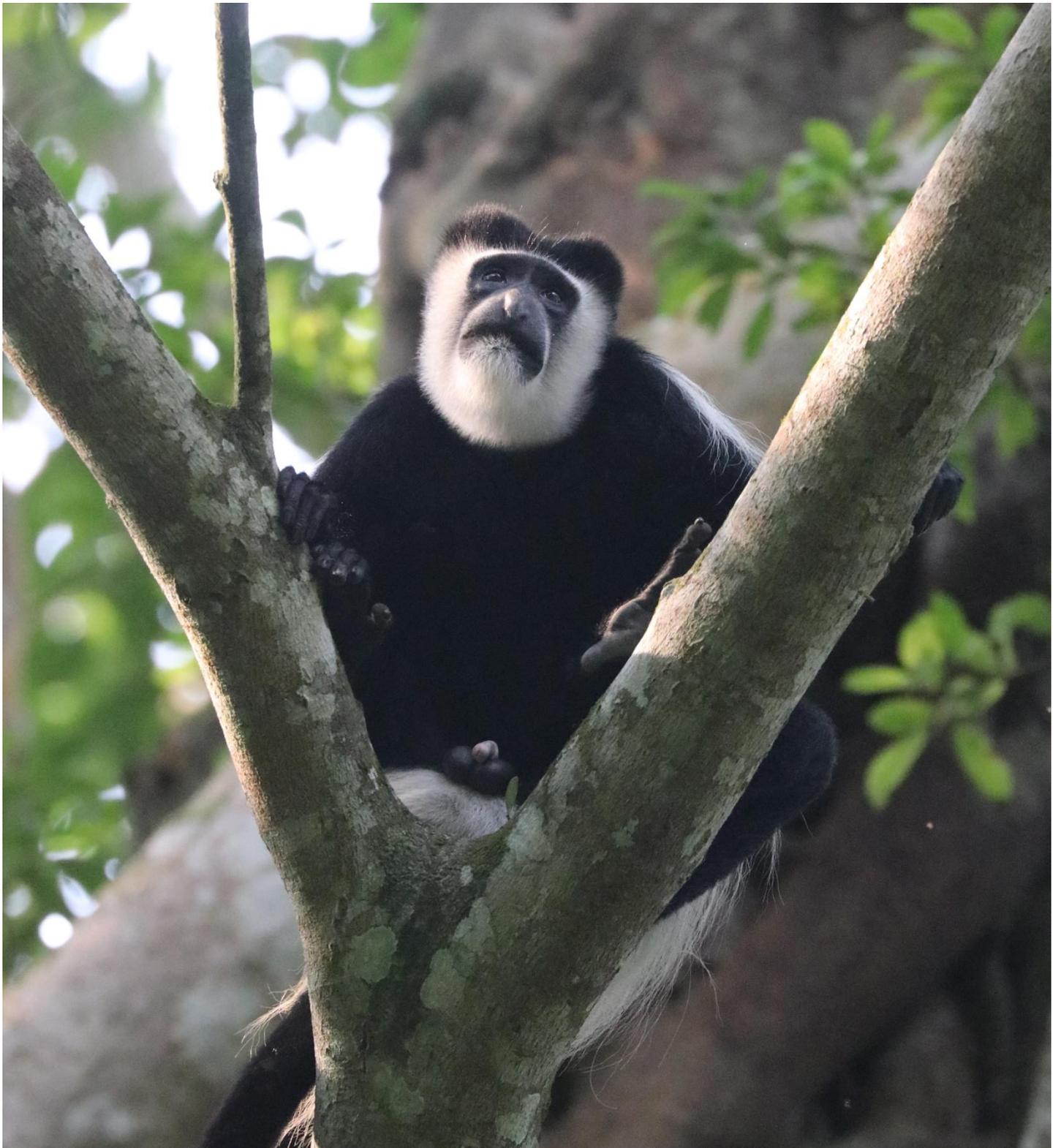


not even familiar with the creatures that can be found after dark and I was actually laughed at when I asked how often pangolins are encountered. Auspiciously, certainly for my son who had never seen one, James and I ignored the no walking rule wherever possible and on our first impromptu stroll, we practically bumped into a tree pangolin or a white-bellied pangolin as they are now formerly known. I actually heard it before I saw it and as I stopped us to try to identify the sound, James spotted the pangolin just leaving the ground and beginning to climb up into a tree. To say we were thrilled does not even begin to describe how elated we both were, as James had also spent time with his first gorillas earlier that morning and neither of us could really believe that he had seen two such iconic species for the very first time on the same day. The lodge guides were equally incredulous the next morning and kept telling us how impossible pangolins were to find and how incredibly lucky we had been. Whilst I appreciate that this was undeniably the case, as these poor creatures are being poached to extinction for their use in traditional Chinese medicine, which basically means they are being wiped out for absolutely no reason, the fact remains that we found the pangolin because we went out looking for it. The same can be said of three of only five carnivores that we encountered during our entire stay, as our solitary serval, African civet and large-spotted genet were all observed on improvised night drives on the camp access roads. Five carnivores is obviously still fairly dispiriting given the impressive variety that occur here, but it would have been far worse if we had not specifically requested these extra drives and several guests left one of the most biologically diverse regions in Africa having seen just one predator, the spotted hyenas that proliferate in the artificial absence of lions. We enjoyed extremely close views of these highly adaptable and resourceful hunters on another of our unaccompanied walks and the day before we arrived just two had managed to take down and kill an adult buffalo. As I have already touched upon, the lack of guides and cover is certainly an issue and there is clearly a lack of enthusiasm to

do any more than is absolutely necessary at night. Excluding two ladies who joined us on a couple of drives at the first camp, we were the only guests taken out at night during our entire stay and even these excursions were too brief and rushed to be overly productive. Without a vehicle there was even less interest and whilst we occupied ourselves for several hours searching for the water chevrotains that were apparently fairly common at one of the camps, our own guide spent less than ten minutes assisting us. I appreciate that all of the lodge staff are probably having to work too hard, but that should never inconvenience visitors and the reality is that the situation could be easily rectified by employing members of the local community to take guests out at night, which would also be relatively inexpensive, given that money is so obviously an issue here. When I mentioned this, I was told that guests prefer the continuity of the same guide for every activity, which I understand is true in general, but perhaps not when that same guide is saying goodnight at 6pm



and leaving them with nothing to do for the next twelve hours. Tourists will often tolerate this type of abbreviated schedule at safari destinations, particularly at luxury lodges with a nice bar, but many would equally like to explore at night given the opportunity, particularly if they are made aware of what they might encounter by enthusiastic and knowledgeable guides. The really sad aspect is that there is so much to see at Odzala and when our guide did make a little effort on our behalf, we were generally rewarded with some excellent sightings. In addition to a clear and prolonged view of the first of two African palm civets, an attractive arboreal carnivore that can be surprisingly difficult to observe across much of its range, we also routinely encountered a number of nocturnal primates. The easiest was no doubt the central or milne-edwards's potto, a small and absurdly sweet member of the loris family that was classified as a subspecies of what is now known as the West African potto until it was assessed as a fully divergent species in 2013. We found one staring inanely at us from a tree on our first walk to dinner and they were certainly the most straightforward animals to photograph at night until we got ambushed by a gang of hyenas on the boardwalk at our final camp. The other nocturnal primates were all galagos, two of which were fairly common, the southern needle-clawed and thomas's dwarf varieties and a third, demidoff's dwarf galago, which James caught a glance of fairly early on, but I only saw when a pair were spotted from our safari vehicle on our last night drive at the first forest lodge. We may have seen a fourth galago species as well, as the Gabon galago also occurs at Odzala and we experienced a number of sightings that were too brief to be able to accurately identify the animals involved to species level. Fortunately, this was not the case with a pair of lord derby's scaly-tailed squirrels, as I had been hoping to see at least one of the anomalures during the course of the tour and was delighted that we were able to watch the same pair on two occasions. It is feasible that we actually encountered another, with James shining on a much smaller nocturnal squirrel that did not appear to have a gliding membrane and could theoretically have been a flightless scaly-tailed squirrel, although these are extraordinarily scarce and it



would have been the rarest animal of this trip or almost any other. All of these sightings occurred during the night drives at the first lodge where the gorilla treks took place and we had far less success at the last two camps where no formal nocturnal activities are organised and we had to try and make things up as we went along, often on our own and on foot. Our solitary serval was a combination of the two, as James picked up eyeshine as we drove through an area of open savannah and we then tracked it on foot for more than half an hour as it hunted in the long grass. We used a few abandoned termite mounds to give ourselves a better perspective and the road through the savannah also yielded some fresh leopard tracks, just a metre or so from the equally recent afterbirth of probably a bushbuck, as if the leopard had been attracted by the scent of the antelope giving birth. Although I was not able to take a decent photograph of the serval, our additional effort had again produced superb views of an animal that had not been seen for more than a year and that we were informed we had more or less no chance of finding. Guides were shaking their heads at our good fortune, but we were more determined than lucky as far as I am concerned and would have enjoyed even more success had we been able to spend even reasonable periods in the field each evening. As it was, we still added an African civet and a large-spotted genet to the list of new species observed on these improvised night drives and one of our unaccompanied walks, on the boardwalk at the final lodge, would produce the best hyena sighting of the trip. In some respects it was more what you would call a mugging than a traditional sighting, as these huge but apparently sensitive predators are obviously using the camp boardwalk to traverse an extended area of swamp and at one stage we bumped into three walking directly towards us. They did turn and reluctantly make their way into the water, but they clearly did not want to and we could hear them splashing around until they emerged just behind us, at which point several more appeared ahead. We were now surrounded by the best part of an entire clan, some of which clearly wanted to go in the opposite direction without getting their paws wet and the others that had decided to wait for them and were following slowly behind

us as we continued along the wooden trail. Instead of heading into the swamp like the original three, the pack in front simply turned and began walking in the opposite direction and we now had the bizarre situation whereby three groups were all following each other in this rather bemused order...dry confused hyenas, idiot humans with spotlights, wet disgruntled hyenas. The lead group dispersed as soon as we reached the clearing at the end of the boardwalk, but of course we now had to turn back, which meant that the bedraggled hyenas that had been trailing behind us were now themselves being followed. To further complicate an increasingly surreal experience, the animals that had scattered, the only dry hyenas if you are still following this, had inevitably realised that their path was no longer being obstructed by these two ponderous creatures with bright lights and had begun to regroup. Within a few minutes they were sprawling behind us in single file once again and we had merely reversed the order of our seemingly suicidal jaunt, with the two of us remaining as the no doubt very tasty filling at the centre of a hyena sandwich. All the while we continued to spotlight on both sides of the trail, without perhaps ever considering why on earth any self-respecting mammals would still be hanging around when



we were actually walking as part of a huge mob of blood curdling monsters. Whilst we did occasionally check that the hyenas were still both ahead and behind, just in case they decided to end our incongruous fellowship by simply eating us, we obviously did not do so quite often enough and had somehow failed to notice that one of the lead hyenas had stretched itself out across the boardwalk and was having a nice little nap. We almost bumped into it in the dark, disturbing it sufficiently for the poor harassed creature to have to get up and move on once again. If I were the hyenas, I would have eaten us just for our stupidity, but there is no real record of these much maligned animals attacking people, certainly not in an authentically wild environment, and at no stage did we feel threatened. As if to prove the point, all but one of these ferocious killers eventually trudged off into the forest and the animal that remained, the sleepy hyena that we had interrupted, lay out on the boardwalk and returned to its slumber. We may not have encountered a great deal



that night, but neither of us would have even considered swapping such an intimate and exhilarating experience and when our guide asked the next morning if we had seen anything, we both answered simultaneously... 'just some hyenas'. Clearly the majority of sightings are never going to be as intense or enjoyable and I joked to James towards the end of our visit that if you stayed at Odzala for seven nights you would be raving about it, but if you stayed for fourteen you would just be raving. Whilst more a flippant line than anything else and of course grossly unfair to such a precious destination, there was an element of truth in my comment, as there are more than enough incredible natural experiences to produce a spectacular short stay, packed with memorable highlights. However, guests do not normally linger for more than a few days and the lodge activities do not subsequently cater either for longer stays or visitors who want to look for wildlife beyond the obvious gorillas and elephants. Low densities and extremely nervous animals do not help and finding mammals can be a real struggle in this environment, certainly in comparison to the safari destinations that most people will be used to. The number of different species observed was not terrible, but we largely experienced brief views of everything and very few of our sightings could be termed impressive. Our two duiker encounters probably lasted a combined total of about twenty seconds and, as I have already touched upon, only five carnivores, three of which were seen just once, was a disappointingly poor return given the many interesting small predators that occur at Odzala. We did not spot a single mongoose for example, out of at least seven possible types, and although we did enjoy a wonderful morning with thousands of grey parrots, most of our long diurnal walks were relatively unproductive. As is so often the case, there were several species that we were not able to identify, largely squirrels and bats, as well as a few rats, and we also heard the distinctive calls of the western tree hyrax, but could not see one, which is not at all uncommon. Given how skittish most of the wildlife was, not to mention the challenging conditions in the

dense murky forest and the early morning mist, photography was largely a struggle and the easiest way to both observe and photograph monkeys was from a boat. The river safaris that we were able to take when we reached the third camp were actually a hugely welcome addition by this stage of proceedings and on one afternoon trip we watched, or at least glimpsed in a couple of cases, six different primates. Only one was new for the trip, but we had similar success whenever we went out and I did think that the boat might be a more productive way of looking for bongo each morning. We did not get the opportunity to try, but it would be safer than searching the bais on foot, certainly from our guide's perspective, who was clearly uncomfortable around both elephants and buffalo. The gorillas aside, buffalo were probably the calmest creatures on display at Odzala, but he still gave them an extremely wide berth and on more than one occasion, completely changed the direction of our walks in order to avoid even a minimal chance of



encountering elephants. At the time I just assumed that he was excessively cautious, perhaps even on behalf of his guests, but on our penultimate day we almost walked into an elephant dozing in the forest and I realised just how serious the issue actually was. The young male elephant had been sleeping peacefully under a tree and when I turned to see why our guide was suddenly screaming expletives, he was already further away than the startled elephant. He may have passed all of the necessary field guide examinations, including those in ethics, astronomy and plant information, but he was never going to win any awards for valour and should probably not be working around wild elephants. In fleeing in that manner, not only did he break the cardinal rule of never putting your own safety ahead of your guests, he spooked a huge volatile animal with obviously unpredictable and dangerous consequences. As it was, the poor creature was clearly as terrified as our guide and stampeded in the opposite direction, but it could just have easily charged towards us or straight into another group with disastrous results. I know so many tourists who would have just stood there screaming if a guide had done this to them and when I tried to discuss the issue later on, principally to avoid any of my future guests being killed, he became ultra defensive and insisted that he was experienced in these situations and knew exactly what he was doing. I tried to explain that being able to identify various animal tracks or one hundred different bird calls, was not going to make a massive amount of difference if you are just going to run and leave your guests to fend for themselves, particularly if they are elderly or new to these often harsh and hazardous environments. To be fair, he almost set us off even, but James and I both know never to run from an animal and fortunately we realised what was occurring before we had taken more than a few steps. Although it could have ended very differently, we were laughing about it later that night and I mentioned that it reminded me of the story of the two backpackers walking across the African savannah, when one of them spots a lioness far away in the distance. They don't think a great deal of it and just continue across the plains when they see two more lions and notice that they are getting closer. Again neither of them say a great deal and they carry on walking, but now they are looking around a lot more regularly and quickly realise that there are several lions and that they are clearly being stalked. At this point one of the travellers slips his backpack off and takes out his trainers. He quickly removes his cumbersome hiking boots and as he pulls on his running shoes, his bemused friend declares, 'what on earth are you doing, even with trainers on you are never going to be fast enough to outrun a lion'. Without immediately answering, the guy in the trainers starts into a slow steady jog and as he moves away from his bewildered friend he calls out... 'I don't need to outrun the lions, I just need to outrun you'. It is a funny story that I have used on countless occasions with James over the years, when I would pretend that I was going to leave him to get eaten if anything went wrong. Even now, we both laugh at the punchline, but the fact remains that

it was an inexcusable error of judgement that could have had calamitous results. Client needs is another practical subject that specialist field guides are assessed on as part of their training and our guide was always attempting to come up with new ideas to satisfy the wealthy clients that he is used to entertaining at top end lodges. On one occasion he suggested placing a luxurious four poster bed beside the river for yet another 'ultimate guest experience', but at the time he neglected to mention his phobia regarding massive grey pachyderms and it would be difficult to imagine him walking at night with elephants, let alone sharing a four poster with one. Inevitably the incident clouded the remainder of our stay in some respects and it was not the best way to end what had already been a mixed affair. That said, we did experience some phenomenal natural highlights and I certainly learned a great deal about Odzala and how it needs to be visited, which is the main purpose of my research trips. I always have to manage guest expectations in terms of what they can see and do at every location and of course whether I can personally use a destination going forward or at least recommend it. That will ultimately depend on several factors here, but Odzala unquestionably works as part of the great ape tour that I am planning, not least because it is so easy to get to. Far more importantly than any of these concerns, I had been able to share another momentous occasion with my son and I will never forget his beaming grin as he caught sight of his first ever gorilla or the wonder in his eyes as he sat and watched an entire family feeding peacefully. Treasured memories and we would now travel to the DRC for the next stage of our incredible journey and the last for the foreseeable future.





No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Serval	<i>Leptailurus serval</i>	Solitary animal from the vehicle and on foot.
2	Spotted Hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>	Common but in low numbers at the final camp.
3	African Civet	<i>Civettictis civetta</i>	Individual crossing the road in front of our vehicle at the last camp.
4	African Palm Civet	<i>Nandinia binotata</i>	Two in trees at night at the first camp.
5	Large-spotted Genet	<i>Genetta maculate</i>	A brief but clear view of a solitary animal on the edge of the third camp from the vehicle.
6	Yellow-backed Duiker	<i>Cephalophus silvicultor</i>	A partially obscured view as we returned to the second camp.
7	Blue Duiker	<i>Philantomba monticola</i>	A single brief view in the forest.
8	Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>	The most commonly observed antelope, but still in low numbers.
9	Sitatunga	<i>Tragelaphus spekii</i>	Mother and calf observed respectively on successive days.

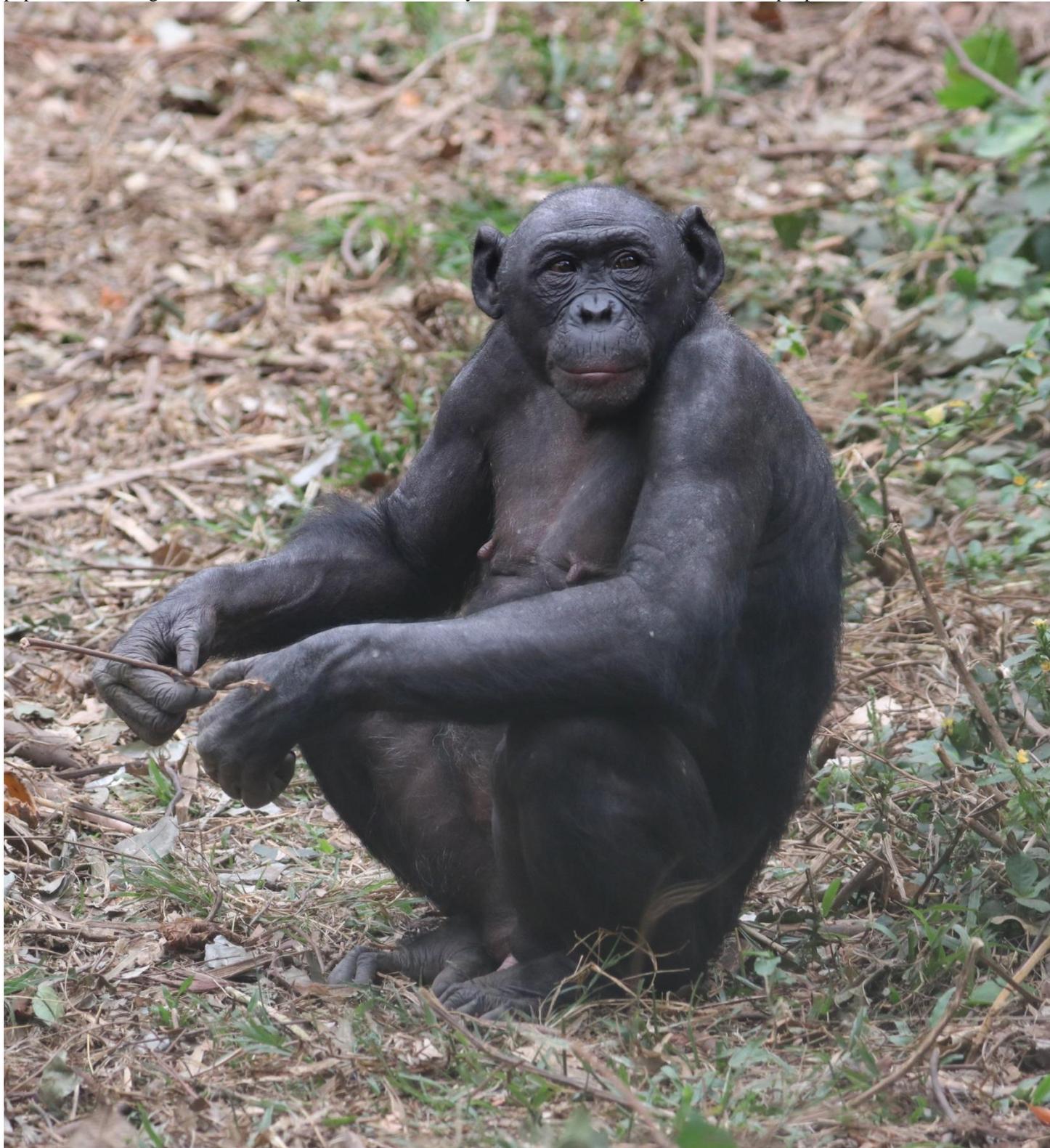
10	African Forest Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer nanus ssp</i>	Commonly encountered from the second and third camps.
11	African Forest Elephant	<i>Loxodonta cyclotis</i>	Heard at the first camp when looking for gorillas and regularly observed at camps two and three.
12	Western Gorilla	<i>Gorilla gorilla</i>	Three encounters with habituated groups and a family of 24 from a hide overlooking a bai.
13	Chimpanzee	<i>Pan troglodytes</i>	A group of thirteen at the same bai the gorillas were observed at, but after they had departed.
14	Guereza Colobus	<i>Colobus guereza</i>	First observed when we visited the gorilla bai and almost daily at camps two and three.
15	Moustached Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus cephus</i>	Two brief views from the vehicle.
16	De Brazza's Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus neglectus</i>	Three small groups, two of which were observed from the river.
17	Putty-nosed Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus nictitans</i>	The most commonly observed monkey.
18	Crowned Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus pogonias</i>	One sighting early on and then several at the final lodge.
19	Agile Mangabey	<i>Cercocebus agilis</i>	A single group observed feeding from the boat.
20	Grey-cheeked Mangabey	<i>Lophocebus albigena</i>	Several encounters in low numbers, including small groups feeding in the trees at the second camp.
21	Northern Talapoin Monkey	<i>Miopithecus ogouensis</i>	A small group briefly on the walk to the gorilla bai.
22	Southern Needle-clawed Galago	<i>Euoticus elegantulus</i>	Routinely encountered at night at the first camp, both from the vehicle and on foot.
23	Demidoff's Dwarf Galago	<i>Galagoides demidoff</i>	A single animal and a pair at the first camp.
24	Thomas's Dwarf Galago	<i>Galagoides thomasi</i>	Observed on several occasions at the first forest camp.
25	Central Potto	<i>Perodicticus edwardsi</i>	Commonly encountered at the first camp, one in close proximity to the lodge.
26	White-bellied Pangolin	<i>Phataginus tricuspis</i>	A single animal for around thirty minutes on an unaccompanied night walk.
27	Red River Hog	<i>Potamochoerus porcas</i>	A group of six running through vegetation and across a forest trail.
28	Lord Derby's Scaly-tailed Squirrel	<i>Anomalurus derbianus</i>	The same pair on two occasions on a night drive at the first camp.
29	Red-legged Sun Squirrel	<i>Heliosciurus rufobrachium</i>	The most commonly observed squirrel species.
30	Green Bush Squirrel	<i>Paraxerus poensis</i>	A pair on the boardwalk of the second camp.
31	Forest Giant Squirrel	<i>Protoxerus stangeri</i>	One high in a tree from the boat.
32	Forest Giant Pouched Rat	<i>Cricetomys emini</i>	Two individuals on night drives from the first camp.





Trip Overview - Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve (Democratic Republic of the Congo)

Despite the various issues encountered, Odzala had been an unqualified success in terms of the African great ape safari that I am planning, with unforgettable views of our first two target apes, the western lowland gorilla and chimpanzee. As we flew back to Brazzaville, we were hoping that we would be similarly successful with our third, the bonobo, but before then we would have to negotiate what was going to be a long and demanding journey. Even excluding the day that we would take to visit a bonobo sanctuary, it was going to take a full week to reach our destination, Lomako Reserve in the northwest region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the DRC in short. We left Odzala on the 15th of July and the earliest we could even see a bonobo would be the 23rd...and that was if everything went entirely to plan. That is always a very big 'if' in what has been a highly volatile republic for as long as I can remember and certainly since King Leopold II of Belgium personally purchased the Congo Free State, including its entire population, and began the ruthless exploitation of a territory that would ultimately kill millions of people. Whilst none of the colonial



powers can take any credit from the conquest of Africa towards the final quarter of the 19th century, Leopold's rule was particularly obscene and in just over twenty years his merciless regime was responsible for between two to fifteen million deaths. Men, women and children were murdered indiscriminately and rape and mutilation were routinely utilised to both punish and terrorise. Whilst I do not have sufficient time to explore these outrages in this piece, my 2017 Madagascar trip report includes a section regarding the bloody European colonisation of Africa and the innumerable atrocities committed by Belgium's so called 'Builder King', as he amassed a vast personal fortune on the almost inconceivable suffering of an entire people. For a far more detailed analysis of this wretched period, I never hesitate to recommend the brilliantly compelling 'The Scramble for Africa 1876–1912' by Thomas

Pakenham, which I believe should be compulsory reading for the children of every European country that took part in this shameful episode. Perhaps not surprisingly, the DRC has been in disarray ever since and has suffered decades of inherent corruption, war and human rights abuse, including the use of tens of thousands of child soldiers and the worst record of rape and sexual violence on the planet. Much of the land remains entirely lawless and the British Foreign Office advises against all travel to the extreme north of the country and most of the east, including Virunga National Park, an outstanding reserve that I intend to visit again in the near future. Our final destination Lomako was several hundred kilometres away from the nearest of any of these danger zones, but the Foreign Office also warns *'against all but essential travel'* to the capital Kinshasa, which was where we were due to begin our long expedition. The journey from Brazzaville to Kinshasa was an initial short step, at least in terms of distance, involving a brief boat trip across the Congo. However, this is a border crossing that has been known to reduce grown men to tears, such is the frustration of



attempting to negotiate a succession of varyingly corrupt border guards and officials on both sides of the famous river. Negotiate is actually an optimistic euphemism for the inconceivably delicate combination of pleading, posturing, intimidation and bribery that has to take place in order to secure a seat on one of the boats. I would never even consider attempting the process without the invaluable assistance of a local 'fixer', as it will ultimately cost you at least three times as much and take five times as long...or maybe it is the other way round? As it was, I personally saw money discreetly change hands with eleven different individuals, seven of them officials, and it still took us well over three hours to make perhaps a five-minute boat journey. We would become accustomed to such lengthy 'customs' delays along the river, but these minor inconveniences aside, we experienced few significant issues and our entire programme went about as smoothly as I could have ever hoped given the difficulties of travelling in a country beset by poverty and crime. These issues and other equally grave problems, predominantly widespread corruption and tribal conflict, have had a devastating effect on both the people and wildlife of the region and before our odyssey began in earnest, I had planned a visit to Lola ya Bonobo, a bonobo rescue and rehabilitation centre on the outskirts of Kinshasa. The smallest of all the great apes, bonobos and their larger cousin the chimpanzee, share the distinction, if indeed it is a distinction, of being the closest relative to man. Depending on which source you recognise and how exactly the calculation is made, the three species share around 99% of the same DNA, although it must be added that these comparisons are all relative, so to speak, as humans and mice also share approximately 90% and we have about 60% of the same DNA as a banana. That 1% disparity has certainly witnessed a staggering divergence between the species, with man advancing beyond all recognition and probability, from learning to walk upright and discovering fire to putting a man on the moon and taking the planet to the brink of annihilation in basically the blink of an evolutionary eye. Chimpanzees and bonobos are also different, although perhaps not quite as different as many people appear to believe. The general perception is that the male dominated chimpanzees are the more aggressive of the two apes and that bonobos, which exist in a matriarchal society with females holding the higher social status, prefer sex to violence and will habitually instigate or participate in sexual activity to resolve conflict or as part of a social bonding process. Whilst various studies do indicate that there is definitely truth in the 'make love not war' philosophy attributed to these animals, and indeed bonobos are the only terrestrial mammals other than ourselves to regularly engage in face to face sex, the reality is that in certain circumstances they can be equally aggressive. They also hunt far more than was previously understood and it has recently been established, in one area at least, that bonobos are killing prey at around the same level as chimpanzees. This is especially fascinating when you reflect how hostility can vary enormously between chimpanzees living in

different regions and I have personally witnessed a significant disparity in terms of the aggression displayed by these primates across apparently similar habitat. Several eminent and long-term studies have revealed the same contrasting behaviour and I have always considered that these well documented fluctuations must correlate directly to either the availability of food or the proximity of rivals in each area. As we are mainly discussing the collective behaviour of entire groups of chimpanzees and not the personality traits of just a few individuals, an abundance of food that can be gathered rather than hunted, must, to some extent at least, determine how aggressive an animal needs to be to survive and much the same can be said in terms of having to constantly defend a territory or a group of females within it. The fact that bonobos are hunting relatively heavily in at least one area would seem to support this theory, as they have not been observed doing so to anywhere near this extent elsewhere. The research in question was conducted by the



universities of Oregon and Northern Kentucky over a six-month period and was particularly relevant to us, as it took place at Lomako, the same reserve that we would be visiting to see these apes. Their report concluded that although the bonobos were only observed eating duiker, a small forest antelope, they are also known to consume monkeys, hyrax and birds. Adult females would generally share meat with other females and sub adult males, but not with adult males, which were chased away or even attacked if they attempted to feed from a carcass. Either by chance or more likely by a grand biological design, the two species do not coexist, as none of the great apes like to swim, although apparently they all can if necessary, and these two closely related primates are geographically separated by the Congo River, with bonobos to the south and chimpanzees to the north and east. The fact that both species are endangered is almost good news in some perverse way, as all of the other great apes except man are currently assessed as critically endangered and some only cling on in tiny fragmented populations. Of the two, chimpanzees have a far greater range and occur in more than twenty countries, while bonobos are endemic to the rainforest of the DRC and are consequently found nowhere else on earth. Both apes have experienced disastrous population decline in recent years and research has indicated that the bonobo population fell by a catastrophic 55% between 2003 and 2015, mainly as a result of habitat destruction and the rampant bushmeat trade. Around 80% of all meat consumed in the DRC is of the wild animal variety and when poachers wipe out an entire family of bonobos, they try to sell the infants still clinging to their butchered mothers as pets, which is where the dedicated employees and supporters of Lola ya Bonobo begin their magnificent work. It is illegal to harm or own a bonobo in the DRC and, in conjunction with the Congolese Ministry of Environment, orphans are confiscated whenever they are discovered. Usually they are in pitifully poor condition, suffering both physical injury and psychological trauma, hardly surprisingly given the harrowing ordeal endured at such an impressionable and vulnerable age. The savagery witnessed is just too much for some, who succumb to shock or their injuries, but the remainder are given a miraculous second chance and begin a long rehabilitation process that could ultimately see them returned to the wild. Some will never make it of course and will spend the rest of their days at the sanctuary in Kinshasa, but Lola ya Bonobo means 'paradise for bonobos' in the local Lingala dialect and even those not able to return to the wild, will still enjoy something approaching a natural life within the beautiful forest of the sanctuary. Orphans are given a surrogate mother when they arrive and these incredible local women care for the infants as their mothers would, spending hours with them each day and holding them as they sleep. We watched a group of orphans playing with their foster mothers and heartrending does not even begin to describe the scene or the amazing work that is taking place here. For those that are able to heal and eventually thrive, a new life awaits and on a ground breaking day in June 2009, the first ever rehabilitated bonobos were returned to the wild. Remarkably, the initial group of thirteen included two animals born in captivity at the sanctuary, as the bonobos at Lola ya are free to behave naturally and can mate and breed as they would in the wild. Successful breeding is also one of the most significant factors in assessing the progress of any reintroduction and several entirely wild

births have occurred since the original release a decade ago. A second has already taken place at the same reserve and Lola ya Bonobo are also heavily engaged in rainforest conservation and community development projects, to ensure that local people benefit from the continued protection of the apes and are made aware of the realities of poaching and the illegal bushmeat trade. It is not an approach that always works of course, not when you take human nature into account, but these bonobos at least are being safeguarded and the sanctuary itself is one of the best and most professionally managed that I have visited. As such, and considering that it is the only bonobo sanctuary in the world, I intend to support the outstanding work that occurs here, both in terms of financial contributions via Wild Globe and group visits, as I always try to include at least one significant conservation project on each of my trips and Lola ya Bonobo would be absolutely ideal for a great ape tour, especially as you have to include Kinshasa as the gateway to wild bonobos. This will enable guests to personally experience the tremendous effort being made on behalf of these persecuted apes and at the same time contribute to their future survival. I would go as far as saying that a visit to the centre should be an essential part of the process of seeing bonobos in the wild and on purely a practical level, they are far easier to photograph in the open areas of the sanctuary than in the dense and murky rainforest. As you can clearly see from my decidedly average shots, at times the bonobos were almost impossible to photograph in the dim early morning light and our efforts were further hampered by torrential rain and incessant condensation.

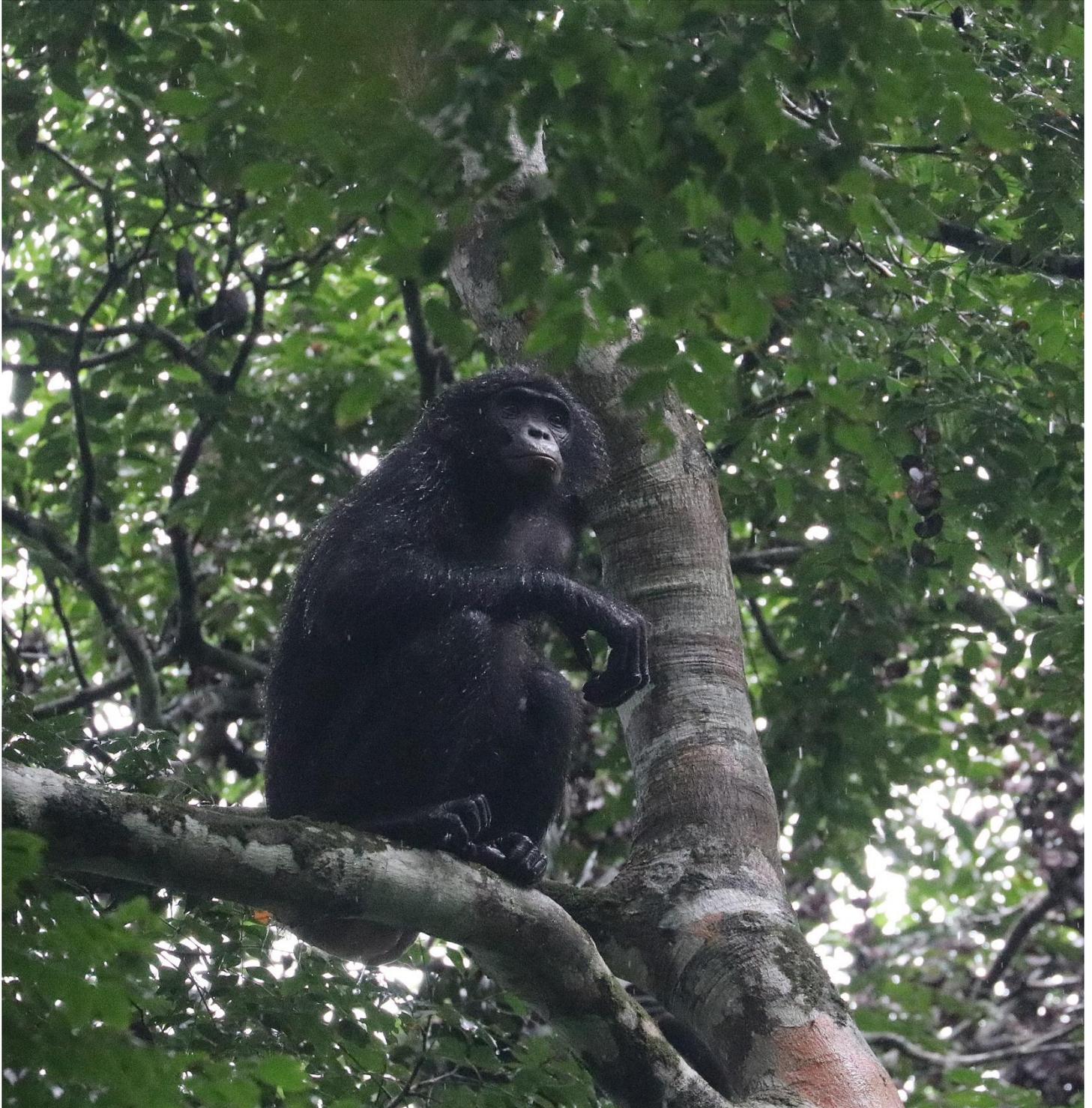
Even bright sunlight would barely permeate the thick forest canopy and it is probably entirely obvious that the pictures on pages 24 and 26 are of captive bonobos and that the remaining, clearly inferior, images are of authentically wild bonobos at Lomako. If I am brutally honest, the delightful refuge aside, Kinshasa is not the most attractive of capital cities and the only other destination that really interested me was Stade Tata Raphael, which is predominantly a football stadium, but in 1974 played host to one of the most memorable sporting occasions in history, the world heavyweight title fight between the undefeated champion George Foreman and the greatest, by his own admission, heavyweight boxer of all time, Muhammad Ali. Over the decades, the 'Rumble in the Jungle' has become part of sporting folklore, as Foreman, seven years younger than the former champion Ali, was considered unbeatable and had won 37 of 40 straight victories by knock out, including a savage demolition of the undisputed champion Joe Frazier, in which 'Smokin' Joe' was knocked down a staggering six times in just two rounds. Few neutral observers gave the veteran Muhammad Ali any chance and many believed that he was risking his life by even taking the fight. Lesser mortals surely would have been, but Ali was nothing if not a God amongst men and for seven rounds he taunted his younger opponent and simply absorbed the hate and the fury that Foreman unleashed. It would not last beyond round eight, as Foreman punched himself to oblivion and Ali regained the title with his own furious onslaught that floored the exhausted and frankly bewildered pretender. It was a title that had always belonged to him in any case and if you want to learn a little



more about one of the most important and respected global figures of the 20th century, my 2016 Queensland trip report includes a personal tribute to Muhammad Ali following his untimely death earlier that year. I would also very much recommend the superb 1996 academy award winning documentary 'When We Were Kings', which tells the enthralling story of this legendary fight and of an even more extraordinary human being. For those who are not aware and might be confused by the location of the contest, the DRC was known as Zaire between 1971 and 1997, when it was ruled by the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Mobutu seized power in the coup d'état of 1965 and by the time of his death in exile just over three decades later, he is believed to have misappropriated between \$4 billion and \$15 billion of his nation's wealth and natural resources. Indeed, the scale of his embezzlement was so vast and his lifestyle so excessive, that Mobutu had the distinction of being considered the most corrupt African leader of his generation, which is really some distinction when you consider the spectacular competition during that period. We were sadly unable to enter the stadium where 60,000 adoring fans witnessed the genius of Muhammad Ali at work, but I did stop to photograph some murals depicting the famous event and it was nice to show James where one of my boyhood heroes had made perhaps his finest stand. From Kinshasa we took the



short flight north to Mbandaka, from where we would finally take to the water and begin a five-day journey on the Congo and her tributaries, the Lulonga, the Maringa and finally the Lomako. You used to be able to fly to Basankusu, which would have reduced the outward journey by two to three days, but as it was, we travelled around 1,080 kilometres by boat and spent eight days in all on the water, as the current was with us on the return journey and the considerably lighter canoes only took three days to find their way back to Mbandaka. Both journeys were remarkably uneventful and I filled my time engaged by the scenery, as the days and the villages began to merge into each other. At night we would swim in the river to wash and I vividly recall drifting off in our tent one evening to the haunting melody of a mother singing her children to sleep. If that sounds almost too idyllically evocative to be true, the ambiance was regrettably not always quite as romantic, as we would spend our nights in villages for the added security and on another occasion an obviously demented elderly lady spent several hours running around screaming as if someone was trying to murder her.



After about the fourth hour I did consider it, but everyone else treated it as a normal occurrence and somehow completely ignored her hysterical ravings. Of course the poor woman needed some help, but this is the reality that so many people live with in certain parts of the world and it is far easier to understand why animals are killed for food when you visit a village and see first hand the bellies of the children bulging as a result of malnutrition. I have nothing but contempt for poachers and the illegal bushmeat trade, but it is impossible to tell a parent that they cannot feed their starving child and until this crippling poverty is addressed across the globe, animal welfare and conservation will remain an idealistic absurdity. The situation has been extreme in parts of the Congo since the tyrannical and brutal rule of King Leopold II of Belgium towards the end of the 19th century and during our long journey I reread the seminal novella 'Heart of Darkness' by Joseph Conrad, who captained a steamer on the Congo for a brief period during those bleak colonial years. In recent times Conrad's work has been criticised for its perceived negative portrayal of the native people and although in some ways his forthright language is very much a product of its time, in other, far more significant matters, Conrad was light years ahead of most of his contemporaries and was willing to expose a murderous regime that most of the world was prepared to

overlook or even support. To me, 'Heart of Darkness' remains a hugely significant political and social statement and a thoroughly damning indictment not only of the heinous crimes committed by Leopold, but of the worst excesses of colonialism in all forms. Certainly the situation in the DRC has been bleak for as long as I have known and it is probably no coincidence that in one of the very poorest countries on earth, we spent almost one hundred hours travelling by boat without seeing a single mammal, no monkeys, no otters and barely even a bird. The situation only began to improve as we reached Lomako and spotted both wolf's and colobus monkeys from the canoe, the first wild mammals encountered for almost eight days, which I am sure must be a record for one of my wildlife tours, albeit an unwelcome one. We were at least aware that we could now see bonobos at any time, as several groups occur at Lomako, including three that have been part of a formal habituation process. I have to admit that after many years of anticipation and several months of preparation, I could barely believe that I was finally on the verge of spending time with the only great ape to



have eluded me to date, at least that would have been the case until 2017, when scientists described a new orangutan species and suddenly there were two great apes that I had never seen. No matter, the prospect of seeing a bonobo was still an incredibly exciting one and I was just happy to be on dry land again, after five long days on the river. The fourteen kilometre hike to our camp was more a relaxing relief than a chore and we were joined by a large group of rangers, trackers and armed guards, as well as our own guide and camp support staff. Unfortunately, no one had been notified of our pending arrival, despite it being confirmed for several months, and consequently the trackers had not gone out that day to search for the nests that the bonobos make each evening to sleep in. We were therefore unlikely to find them the next day and now had only four realistic chances available to us, as we had already lost one opportunity by spending longer than planned on the river journey. Although there is always the outside possibility of just chancing across bonobos, habituated or otherwise, in the absence of a definite area to search, we treated our first major hike as an introduction to what is a real jungle experience and not the type of soft lodge adventure that most tourists are used to. The Congo Basin is the second largest rainforest on earth and although there are some trails at Lomako, much of the time you are following behind the guides and trackers as they cut their way through the dense forest, usually looking for the most direct access to the bonobos. This often occurs in the dark and at

pace, particularly in the early morning, when it is essential that you reach the sleeping apes before they wake and have a chance to move on and begin foraging. We did not see them on that first foray, but our long walk was rewarded with views of two other primates, as well as a fleeting glimpse of our only yellow-backed duiker of the stay, and later that day we were greatly encouraged to hear that our trackers had been able to find two of the habituated groups. To say that we were thrilled was an understatement, as they returned in the dark after searching for hours and, as we would personally experience just a couple of days later, they are not always successful. You have to remember that the bonobos at Lomako are authentically wild animals and habituated in this case does not mean tame, it just means that these generally timid apes do not panic and flee the moment they become aware of our presence. However, they will still usually move away and you have to move with them for as long as you can or until they settle to eat high in the canopy. What visitors should not expect is the type of encounter they may have previously experienced with habituated gorillas, particularly mountain gorillas in Uganda or Rwanda, as you are never going to be able to sit amongst bonobos as they feed calmly on the ground. We were advised early on that this simply does not occur and that the moment these powerful animals choose to descend to the forest floor, they just disappear and there will be no point attempting to follow. This very much proved to be the case and whilst we did manage to observe a handful of individuals on the ground, it was never for more than a few seconds. At this initial stage we were just relieved that they had been found and it was decided that we would try for the nearest of the two groups the next morning, which were a few kilometres away. It would be necessary to leave very early, while it was still dark and we noticed immediately a real sense of urgency from our team, who knew just how vital it was that we reach the bonobos before they were able to move on at first light. We did so with plenty of time to spare and then it was just a matter of sitting silently in the forest and waiting for the first apes to stir. It is difficult to fully convey the sense of excitement and expectation in situations like this, when everyone is in place and you are almost praying that nothing unexpected occurs to disturb or ruin the months, or in some cases years, of hard work and planning. The anticipation is even more palpable when you are poised to see an animal for the first time, a sensation that I now rarely get to experience, given the number of years that I have been doing this and the astounding variety of creatures I have already been so privileged to survey in the wild. Being able to search for and watch these magnificent animals with my son has added an additional

profound dimension that I could never have imagined before he was born and as we crouched there together in the dark, I knew that I was about to fulfil the lifelong dream of seeing every great ape, if we again exclude the slightly inconvenient caveat of that new orangutan species. As it was, our guides motioned for us to change position and as we crept silently forward, I was able to watch as a bonobo looked up from its bed of leaves and began climbing through the branches. If I am honest, it was by no means the best view I would have of these unique primates and I quickly lost sight of that first ape to the gloom of the forest. However, to me those few seconds were as exhilarating as they were momentous and I will never forget making eye contact with an animal that I had waited thirty years to observe in the wild. We would spend time with four bonobos that morning, an adult male, two adult females and an infant, and of the three habituated troops, this was the strongest. In all it included 24 bonobos and the other two numbered eighteen and twelve respectively, although we were not destined to find members of either. Instead, we concentrated our efforts on the closest



and thereby most accessible apes and would eventually observe around twenty members of that larger group, including twelve to fifteen apes moving through the trees in a single breathtaking vista. On one occasion our trackers were unable to locate nests for us to head to the next morning and on another the bonobos had moved on from the site they had been observed fashioning their nests at the previous evening. Whilst this could have easily resulted in two blank and immensely frustrating excursions, our enthusiastic guides had been in the forest for a few days now and they consequently had a rough idea of where the bonobos might be found. It was no more than an indication really, as these tremendously athletic apes can forage across great distances and we knew that our chances of finding them diminished by around 80% if we missed them in the morning. That said, our trackers refused to give up and spent hours searching with us in tow. They changed direction, split up and turned back on themselves, all the while reading and listening to the forest. Ultimately we were rewarded for their tireless effort and it was testament to their skill and dedication that we were able to observe bonobos on four consecutive days. We had five sightings in all, four with that main group and an entirely unexpected encounter with three unhabituated bonobos, which we somehow managed to surprise as we returned to camp late one morning. Although the view was transitory and the startled primates fled amid much uproar as soon as they spotted us, their panicked consternation was entirely appropriate given what would have normally been an unnatural interaction between two closely related, but fundamentally distinct species of great ape. It certainly provided us with a real insight regarding the natural behaviour of these isolated animals and the way in which the habituation process works, not only in Africa with chimpanzees and gorillas, but across the world in a variety of circumstances when animals and humans come into contact, either by accident or design. Countless species have



been almost tamed by familiarity, at least in terms of how they more or less ignore our presence, while others remain instinctively wary and are virtually impossible to observe. For our part, we were acutely aware just how incredibly fortunate we had been to encounter these authentically wild bonobos at Lomako, as we had now observed unhabituated versions of all three of the great apes that I had designed the tour around. Most of our sightings were fairly mixed and often involved following moving animals and attempting to secure the best view possible when an individual ape stopped to eat or rest. It was difficult to watch more than two or three together, as they disperse when they forage and also remain fairly high in our presence, at least until they ultimately choose to descend to the forest floor in order to move to another area quickly. As with their human cousins, the bonobos would visit the bathroom first thing in the morning and on several occasions we had to sidestep streams of urine and primate poo plunging from the murk. We did not always make it sadly, but we were so filthy by this stage and soaked in either sweat or rain, that we barely noticed. The rain did not help in terms of photography, which was already more or less impossible in the impenetrable gloom, but at least our final encounter proved to be the relaxed affair that I had been hoping for since we arrived, with a group of bonobos feeding and grooming in light that had improved decidedly to moderate. They were still fairly high and it continued to rain on and off, but for once they were not moving and I was able to relax with my back against a tree and just savour a wonderful couple of hours with animals that very few white people have ever seen. If not exactly idyllic, it was still a lovely way to finish and in general we were more than satisfied with our stay. Sightings can always be better, but perfection is not something that you can always associate with wildlife viewing and we had spent four days in a row with one of the rarest and most inaccessible animals on earth. Apart from the conditions at times, particularly in terms of photography, our only real disappointment involved the lack of nocturnal walks, as I was well aware of the elusive species that occur at Lomako and had made a point of arranging night walks throughout our stay. The fact that these did not take place had very little to do with our dedicated team, who were basically striving in the field on our behalf from 3am to after 7pm almost without a break. I obviously did not expect them to have to go out again after dinner and had instead arranged some additional guides to assist at night, which was lost either in translation or machination, whichever you prefer. Our guides did arrange to take us out on the final night, primarily, and entirely reasonably, because they did not have to get up at 3am the next day. However, everyone wanted to come with us by this stage, including the compulsory armed guards, and it was always going to be tricky to find highly secretive nocturnal mammals with so many people joining to say farewell. Several giant pangolin diggings and a few burrows

aside, we encountered I think six blue duikers in all and although this was not a particularly impressive return, by this late stage our guides had also become our friends and I was just happy that they all wanted to spend that final night trying to help us. Ideally I would have liked longer at Lomako and if the hike out somehow seemed harder, it had more to do with the fact that there was so little enthusiasm to leave, rather than the sweltering heat and stifling humidity. These were quickly cured as soon as I reached the river and immediately dived into the cool and utterly irresistible water. Apart from at a shallow stream near the camp, this had been a first opportunity to wash for a week and within a few seconds James and the entire team had joined me. With the current now on our side, the journey back was a great deal quicker, but with none of the anticipation or excitement that had sustained us as we travelled in.



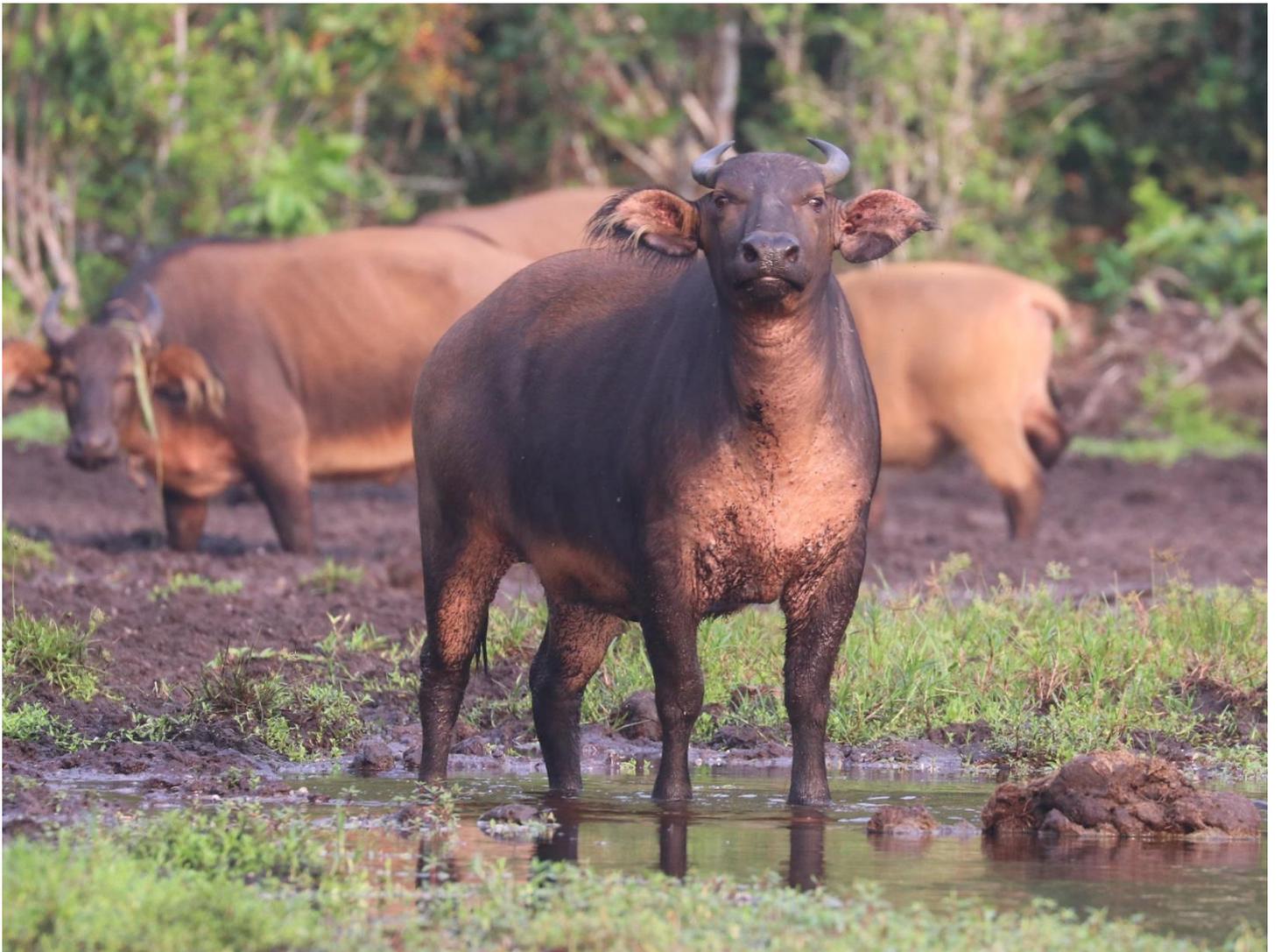
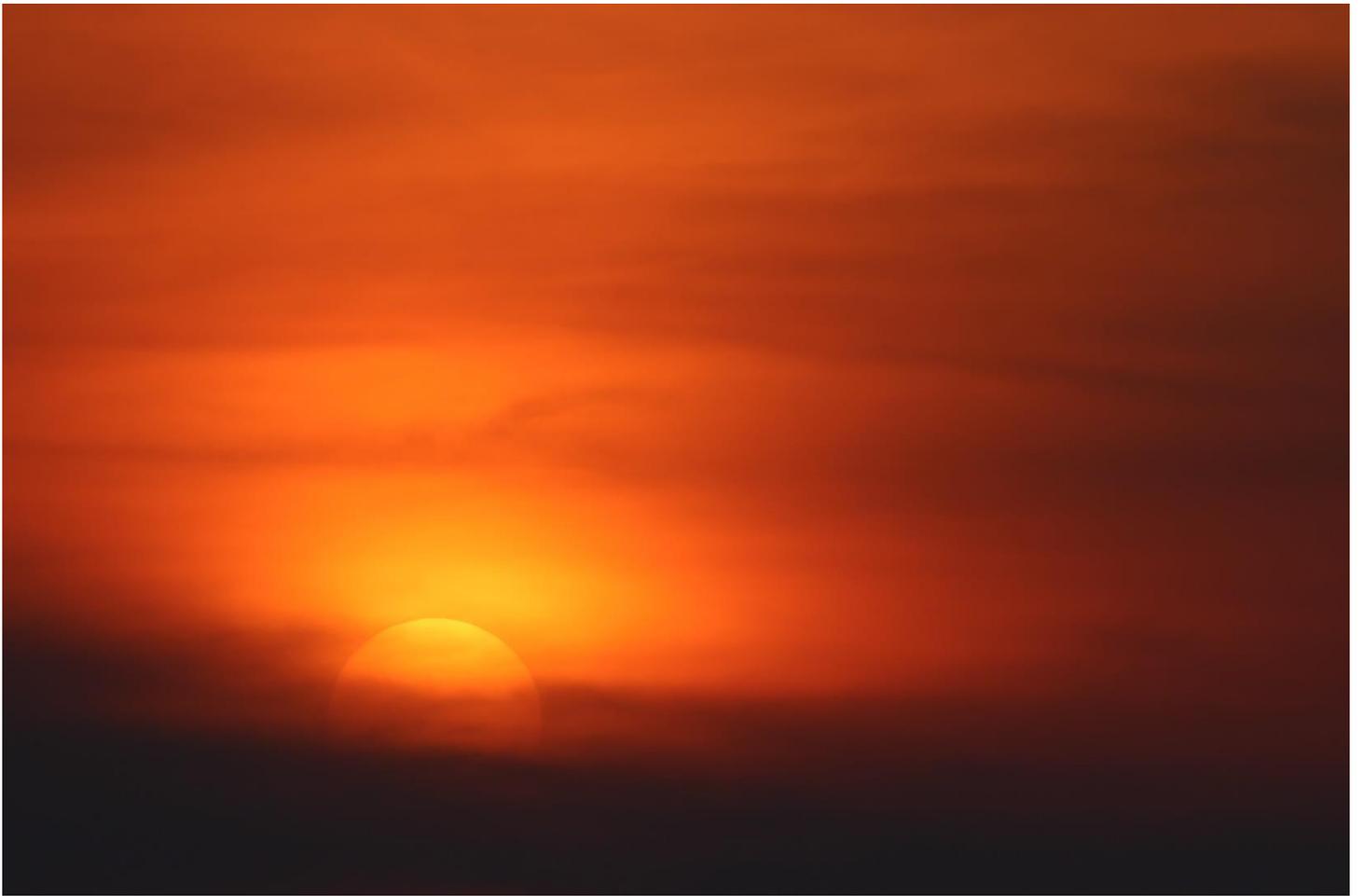
Consequently, much of our time was spent in reflection, both in terms of this tour and the many adventures we have shared together over the years. With James now taking an extended break to concentrate on his studies, I had intentionally scheduled this trip to ensure that he could participate, as he had never seen a gorilla previously and I wanted us to experience one last momentous occasion together, at least for now. In this respect our descent into the heart of darkness exceeded all expectations, with a succession of extraordinary sightings, including spectacular encounters with both habituated and authentically wild versions of three of Africa's four great apes, western gorilla, chimpanzee and bonobo. We may even be the first people to have achieved this, as truly wild bonobo sightings are exceptionally uncommon and I am not aware of anyone else who has been able to observe this combination of apes on a single tour. Certainly the expedition that I am in the process of planning to see all four African great apes will be unique, particularly if I decide to include each of the eastern gorilla subspecies, the more renowned mountain gorilla and what I have always known as the lowland gorilla, but is now called grauer's gorilla for whatever obscure reason. I will be revisiting Uganda and Rwanda in the near future regarding the mountain gorilla options and hopefully Virunga National Park in the DRC as well, as Virunga has always been one of the greatest reserves in Africa and is the only park where both gorilla subspecies occur. Heartbreakingly, for such a unique and important ecosystem, it has experienced years of conflict and more than 170 rangers have been killed there in the last two decades, either by poachers, rebels or the local militia, all of whom have seen the country descend into chaos in recent times. The area where the lowland gorillas occur is not currently accessible, but they can also be found at Kahuzi Biega National Park to the south, which can easily be combined with a visit to Virunga for the mountain gorillas. That I will be exploring these areas without James will of course be a source of deep regret and not only because he is the best I have known with a spotlight and is going to be impossible to replace. Although it was obviously not in a professional capacity initially, James and I have travelled and worked together for seventeen years and our understanding in all kinds of situations borders on the telepathic. We each know what the other is thinking and are able to respond instantly in the field, both to each other and in terms of the often unpredictable wildlife. Most of the nocturnal photographs that appear in these trip reports are as a result of his efforts, firstly in finding the animals and then in automatically knowing how and from where I need him to use the spotlight to illuminate them. Whilst his ability with a spotlight is uncanny and rivals any of the professional guides I have worked with, it is his company that I have valued most, as these intense research tours often take place in extreme conditions and can be incredibly demanding, particularly in terms of a lack of sleep. It is therefore essential that you get on with whoever you are travelling with and James is one of the few people I have known who never blames anyone when something goes wrong. There are never any recriminations and he just gets on with putting the situation right, even when I turn a car over to avoid an animal or get it stuck deep in sand, just because I want to try another area that is clearly unsuitable for our vehicle. Like all of us, he is not perfect and has faults, but they are minor and relate more to his age and inexperience in some areas, than to his actual personality. In the field he is as determined and as fearless as you have to be around wild animals, but never to the point of stupidity or arrogance and certainly never to the detriment of the animals involved. I have always considered myself to be an ethical person where wildlife is concerned and taught James the importance of animal welfare and conservation from an early age.



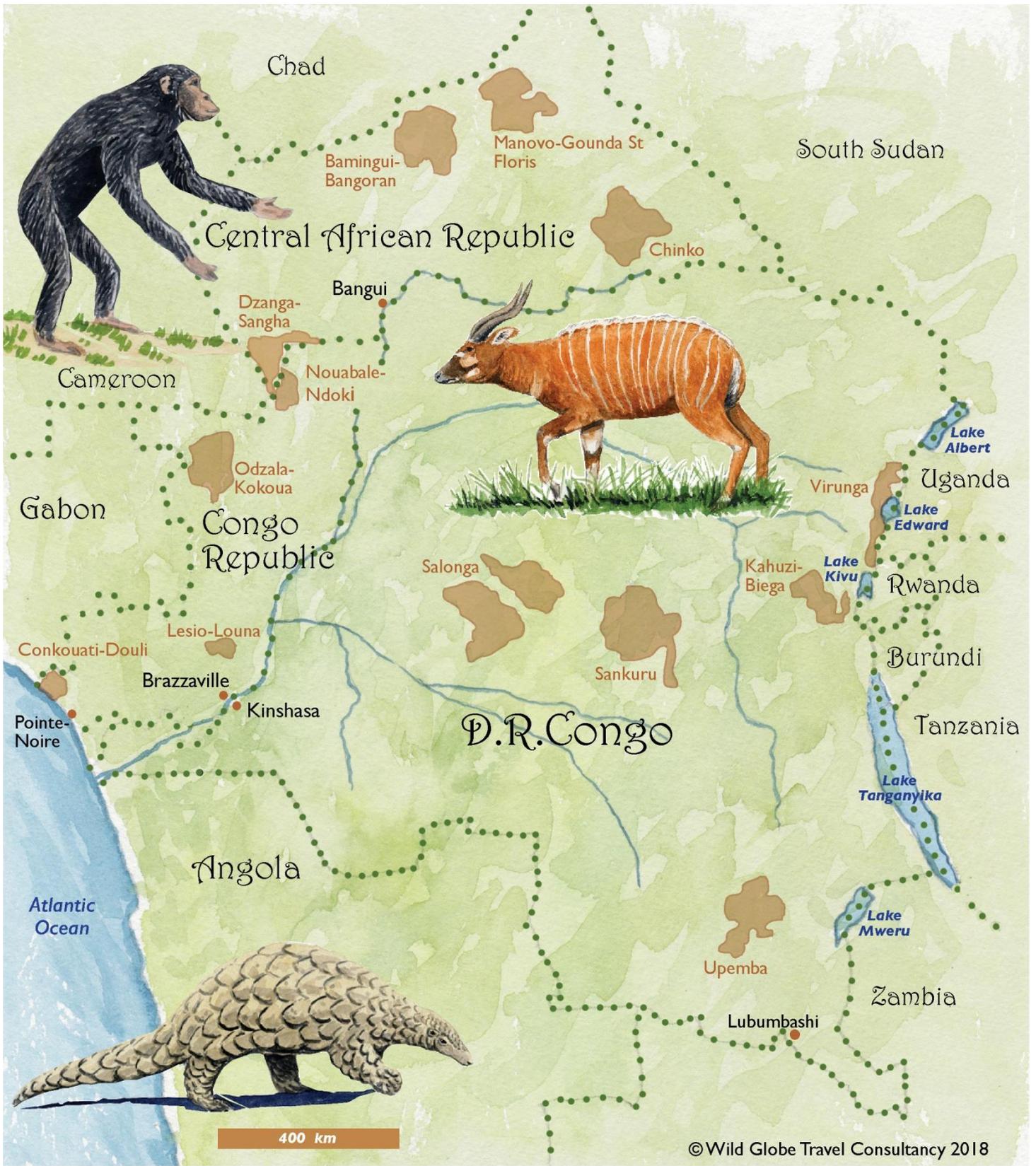
He has always known to treat animals kindly, but you cannot simply teach the genuine warmth that he feels for the creatures that we have spent so much of our lives around or the obvious joy and excitement that he has displayed during many of the encounters we have shared. James is already involved in conservation issues and climate change protest at university and made up his own mind some time ago that he could no longer justify eating meat. To say that I am immensely proud of him would be a considerable understatement and once or twice his gentle intervention has stopped even me crossing that ethical boundary in the field and risk disturbing something. More than all of these things, he looks at the world in a different way and over the years I have been able to share this unique perspective and to see and learn so much more through his young eyes. We have taught each other in fact and what we have witnessed and experienced together has forged an inseparable bond that, even if we are apart for months or years on end, will never be broken. I hope that one day we will travel together again, but if that does not occur, I know that I have been inordinately fortunate to have gazed upon the wonders that this astonishing planet has to offer with my son at my side. Thank you James, for everything, the privilege has been entirely mine.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Yellow-backed Duiker	<i>Cephalophus silvicultor</i>	Brief sighting of a single animal.
2	Blue Duiker	<i>Philantomba monticola</i>	Several sightings on our one nocturnal walk.
3	Bonobo	<i>Pan paniscus</i>	Five encounters in all, including one with three unhabituated animals.
4	Angolan Colobus	<i>Colobus angolensis</i>	Four sightings in total.
5	Red-tailed Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus ascanius</i>	Several small groups and probably the most commonly observed monkey.
6	Wolf's Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus wolffi</i>	Three sightings, including on the river from the canoe.
7	Black Mangabey	<i>Lophocebus aterrimus</i>	Individuals or low numbers on five different days.
8	Congo Rope Squirrel	<i>Funisciurus congicus</i>	Observed regularly, but in low numbers.









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