



A small family of forest elephants enters Langoué Bai. Though not classified as a separate species to savannah elephants, they do actually have a different number of toes on both their front and back legs.

RAINFOREST EXPEDITION WEST AFRICA

The Great Gabon

With 80 per cent of its land area covered in gorilla and elephant-filled rainforest, Gabon is often described as Africa's last great Eden. **James Fair** travelled to this little-known equatorial country to see whether it could truly be called a wildlife paradise.

JOJO HEAD didn't look like someone who spends her life tramping around swampy rainforest looking for gorillas and chimpanzees. My experience has always been that 'jungle', for want of a better word, leaves me dirty, sweaty and scabby from insect bites that I've been unable to resist scratching, but Jojo had the fresh-as-a-daisy appearance of a student who had stepped straight out of a university lecture hall.

Not for the first time that day in Loango National Park, we'd come to a coffee-black swamp that could

only be crossed by wading through it. And Jojo – who manages a great ape habituation project under the direction of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology – clearly had something on her mind. "I don't want to alarm anybody," she said apologetically, "but while I was crossing here last time, something bit me." She paused to let us digest this morsel of information before adding, as if to justify even mentioning it in the first place, "It must have been quite big, because it bit me on *both* sides of my leg."

There were crocodiles in the forest, but my first thought was that Mokélé-mbembé, the mythical beast pursued by Redmond O'Hanlon in *Congo Journey*, had migrated west and was cruising Loango's black-water swamps in search of a thigh to sink its teeth into. But I didn't want to appear a sissy, so I waded in, almost up to my waist, in a manner that I hoped appeared reckless. I was disappointed when I failed to emerge on the other side with at least the odd leech or two clinging to my calf. Still, it was encouraging

to know there were large beasts – albeit unseen – in the water. In the same way, the chimps and gorillas avoided our scrutiny that day, though half-eaten wild mangos provided evidence of their existence. Both of these incidents reinforced my preconception of Central African rainforests as places of exotic, inscrutable wildlife where adventure and danger beckon.

OFF THE MAP

Most people's reaction when I told them I was off to Gabon was to squint as if thinking very hard and then say, quite slowly, "Gabon – where exactly is that again?" (As if they ever knew.) "Gabon," I would answer slyly, "is where hippos surf in the Atlantic," which, if not quite answering the question, at least pricked their curiosity.

And it's true. In the year 2000, an obsessive, half-crazy American called J Michael Fay walked 3,200km across Central Africa. On reaching the coast at what is now Loango National Park, he found

Western lowland gorillas on their 'picnic' in Langoué Bai. They travel in smaller groups than mountain gorillas and tend to range over much wider distances.



elephants and buffalos on the beaches and hippos riding the ocean swell. And while I wouldn't suggest that the Gabonese people and their wildlife co-exist in a prelapsarian state of eternal bliss (there is logging throughout the country and seismic testing in Loango), it isn't a conservation basket-case either. There is hope here, and that is as precious as the oil and minerals that lie under the Earth's thin, sun-baked crust.

And some places are remote beyond imagination. To get to my first destination, I flew from Lambaréné (where the airport is small enough to make dogs on the runway mandatory) to Ivindo National Park. The plane flew low under the cloud cover, following the broad Ogooué River upstream, and I – the only passenger – could see little but endless, unbroken forest stretching to the horizon.

Ivindo was a landing strip surrounded by trees, and from here I was driven for nearly three hours along a logging track through secondary forest. At the

Langoué Bai was, if you like, in the middle of the middle of the middle of nowhere.

end of the road, I was met by two staff members from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and we walked for three hours through primary forest to the camp. The next morning, we hiked a further hour to Langoué Bai, a natural forest clearing. It was, if you like, in the middle of the middle of the middle of nowhere.

BY THE BAI

Langoué Bai was another of Michael Fay's discoveries on his 'megatransect'. He stumbled into it while trying to find an alternative route across Gabon and came across forest elephants and lowland gorillas feeding peacefully, as if the ivory and bushmeat trades belonged to a different planet.

And this is how it feels to this day. Within a couple of hours of

arriving on that first morning, a group of 11 gorillas emerged from the forest and plonked themselves down as if on a picnic – which, in a sense they were, since they had come to the bai to pull up the long, broad *Hydrocharis* grasses and nibble on their roots. And while you don't get eye-to-eye contact with these gorillas – they're a good 75 to 100 metres away – as you do with their mountain cousins, neither do you have to move on after just one hour.

Watching the group through a high-powered spotting scope (provided by the WCS), I could see that some of the gorillas were using the grasses they were feeding on as fly swats. The silverback occasionally got up to patrol his group, sauntering between the females and their young as if inspecting troops or dancing girls. Further to the left of the bai, a solitary male bent down to drink, providing a spectacular view of his generously furred derrière. "Giving us the

moon," was how another visitor described it.

When I got back from my trip, I compared my pictures with those taken by other photographers. They looked oddly similar, and I'm sure I even recognised one of the trees in the background. It was as if the gorillas were regulars at the local boozier, with their own stools at the bar and tankards to drink from.

Gorillas are not the only wildlife to use the bai. Wiry sitatungas, garishly orange buffalos and squat, heron-like birds known as hammerkops were ever-present, as were the forest elephants that come to rummage for minerals in the mud



A cattle egret perches on a sitatunga.

GABON Plan your trip to one of Africa's greatest unknown wildlife destinations – everything you need to know is here.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

TOUR OPERATOR

» James travelled with **Wildlife Worldwide**. For more details ☎ 0845 130 6982; www.wildlifeworldwide.com

GETTING THERE

» **Air France** flies Paris-Libreville. ☎ 0870 142 4343; www.airfrance.co.uk
 » **Royal Air Maroc** flies to Libreville via Casablanca. ☎ 020 730 758 00; www.royalairmaroc.com

PLACES TO GO

» **Langoué Bai**, in Ivindo National Park, is the main reason for visiting Gabon. Langoué Camp is run by the Wildlife Conservation Society. www.wcs.org/international/Africa/gabon/ivindo
 » Visit **Loango National Park** for elephants, buffalos and hippos on the beach. Operation Loango owns Loango Lodge and a number of bushcamps. ☎ 0031 26 370 5567; www.operation-loango.com
 » **The Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology** runs a gorilla and chimpanzee habituation project in Loango National Park. More details at www.eva.mpg.de/primat

» **Evaro Lodge** (an hour's boat ride from Lambaréné) is a hotel with orphan gorillas and chimps on site. euravoyages@inet.ga; www.eurafriquevoyages.c.la

TOURIST INFORMATION

» **The Gabon Tourism Office** www.gabontour.ga
 » www.gabonnationalparks.com

OTHER WEBSITES

» www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/africa/gabon/

READING

» **Gabon, Sao Tomé and Príncipe: The Bradt Travel Guide** by Sophie Warne (£13.95, ISBN 1841620734, code WL0607/15).
 » **Birds of Western Africa** by N Borrow and R Demeij (Helm Field Guides, £29.99, ISBN 0713666927, code WL0607/16). Order these books on p85, quoting the relevant code.

CARBON EMISSIONS

» My flights from Heathrow to Libreville produced 3,320kg of carbon dioxide. I offset this through **atmosfair** for 67 euros. www.atmosfair.de

THE NAVIGATOR



Lopé National Park
 Gabon's oldest protected area (it's been a wildlife reserve since 1946). Important for wildlife, but also inhabited by humans for 400,000 years.

Loango National Park
 Diverse coastal habitat, ranging from rainforest and savannah to brackish lagoons. Famous for its surfing hippos and beachcombing elephants.

Ivindo National Park
 The most reliable place in Gabon to see western lowland gorillas. Said to contain the most impressive waterfalls in equatorial Africa.

LOCATION Gabon straddles the equator on Africa's west coast. Its 13 national parks, created in 2002, account for 11 per cent of the country.
LANGUAGE French is the national language. The Gabonese guides speak little English, so the more French you speak, the better.



TOP SPECIES TO SEE



WESTERN LOWLAND GORILLA

WHY As if seeing one of our closest relatives in the wild isn't enough, the western lowland gorilla is also a distinct species to the mountain gorilla. Notable for its rust-red head.
WHERE There's only one place in Gabon where sightings are, if not guaranteed, then at least reliable, and that's Langoué Bai in Ivindo National Park. I saw at least one individual every day I was there. Also found in Loango National Park.
WHEN Unlike the elephants, gorillas tend to visit the bai in greater numbers during dry periods, so July, August and September are good months, but they can be seen at any time of year – I was there in February.



FOREST ELEPHANT

WHY Genetic evidence suggests it is a different species to the savannah elephant, though the two are still classified as one by the IUCN for conservation purposes. But even a casual tourist will spot differences – forest elephants are smaller, with straighter, orange-brown tusks and round 'Mickey Mouse' ears, and live in less numerous social groups.
WHERE Langoué Bai in Ivindo National Park is excellent, but the eles are widespread and can be seen in most of Gabon's wildlife reserves.
WHEN All year, but there are fewer visits to Langoué Bai in the dry months, July and August in particular.



RED-CAPPED MANGABEY

WHY A beautiful, lithe monkey with a limited range in West Africa and classified as vulnerable by the IUCN. Gabon, along with Cameroon and Nigeria, is a major stronghold. It has a grey body and face, with a white collar, cheeks and front and a chestnut cap on top.
WHERE This monkey tends to be found near the coast, and the best place in Gabon is Loango National Park (it has the most developed tourism). A river trip is most likely to yield sightings – your boat driver will take you as close to the mangroves as possible, and this is your best bet.
WHEN Any time of year.



WEST AFRICAN MANATEE

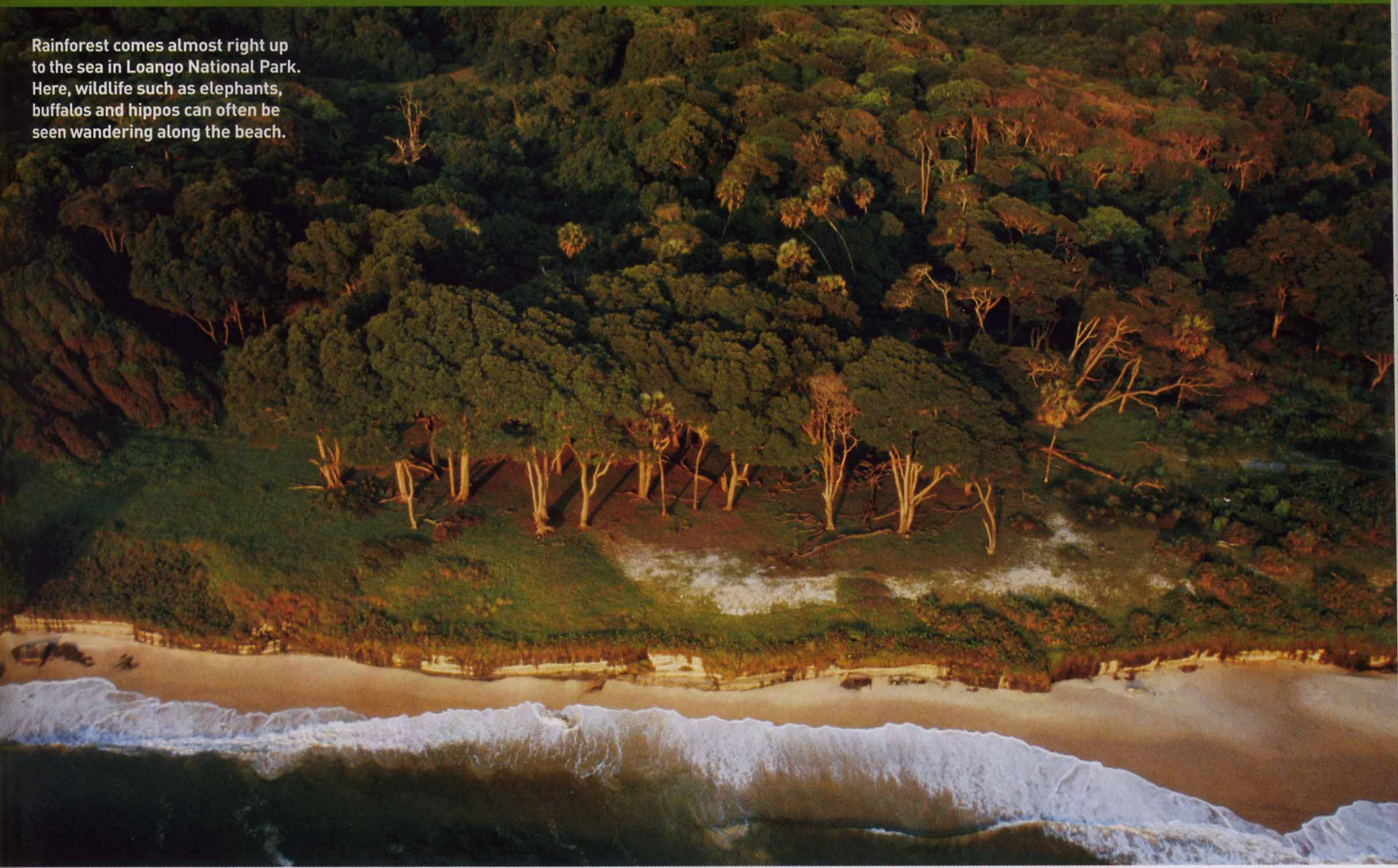
WHY For me, this was the most surprising wildlife sighting of the trip, in the lagoon just a few hundred metres from Loango Lodge. The West African manatee is a separate species from the other two – the West Indian and Amazonian manatees.
WHERE The estuaries and brackish lagoons on Gabon's coast are the best places to see manatees. The individuals living here feed almost exclusively on mangroves, so they're less likely to be found in areas where mangroves have been cleared. The species occurs from southern Mauritania to Angola.
WHEN Any time of year.



MANDRILL

WHY These little-known rainforest primates are remarkable for forming the largest social gatherings of any primates (apart from humans) – 1,340 were counted in Lopé National Park, though typical sightings number 400 to 800.
WHERE Lopé is one of the few places where mandrills are being actively studied – researchers from the Wildlife Conservation Society now offer pilot mandrill-safaris, though sightings cannot be guaranteed.
WHEN The largest gatherings tend to occur from June to September. Contact mandrillsafaris@yahoo.fr for more details – excursions are best arranged well in advance.

Rainforest comes almost right up to the sea in Loango National Park. Here, wildlife such as elephants, buffalos and hippos can often be seen wandering along the beach.



of the shallow stream running through the centre of the bai.

On my second day, we arrived at the bai to find a family of six elephants close to the smaller platform at the southern end. We crept down to the viewpoint (fearful of alerting the elephants) and watched for two magical hours as tiny, pig-pink babies with mascara-coated eyelashes wrestled like mini sumos, while their mothers, aunts and older brothers knelt down in the water to excavate those mineral riches. When one of them let rip the raspberry of all farts, even Modeste Doukaga, a WCS field researcher who comes to monitor the bai and its wildlife practically every day of the year, was compelled to chuckle.

TENDER IS THE NIGHT

Most nights were spent back at the WCS camp, where, long into the small hours, tree hyraxes – the closest living relatives of the elephants we had been watching back at the bai – called out in a rising tone that climaxed in an urgent, almost orgasmic scream.

I actually slept at the bai on my third night, bedding down on a rollmat on the wooden platform floor. The half moon that rose above the forest canopy after 10pm provided some light, but the experience was all about sound – elephants trumpeting somewhere

We came across a group of manatees, and two of them were, in the words of my guide, 'couplement'.

in the obscurity of the bai, with the dark trees beyond rolling on under the night.

After four days, I was driven out to Ivindo, a tiny logging town about three hours away. From there, I took a train back to Libreville, a journey that was helped by the generously padded seats and acres of leg room, but suffered slightly from a delay of six or seven hours. Mind you, that's better than First Great Western

sometimes manages.

I spent the morning in Libreville, then flew down to Omboué, where I visited a small gorilla sanctuary at Evengué. Here I could get a lot closer to gorillas than I had at Langoué, but no captive animal ever fills me with quite the same emotional surge as a wild one. However, I enjoyed the morning I spent paddling in the lagoon, watching ospreys circling above and listening to the chuntering of African grey parrots as they made their cumbersome progress across the vast, grey-blue sky.

From there I moved to Loango Lodge, on the edge of the national park and overlooking one of the many brackish lagoons that are a feature of this area. Within a couple of hours of arriving, we'd come across a group of manatees, and not only that, but two of them were, in the words of my guide Bayonne, 'couplement'. How he was able to say with any certainty that they were mating I'm not sure – all I could see were two dark shapes about two metres long in close proximity to each other, with the

occasional stiff flipper thrown up out of the water or alien snout snatching a breath. Still, manatees, and the West African species to boot – I was chuffed.

Earlier, Bayonne had nosed the boat close to the mangroves to give us furtive views of red-capped mangabeys – slender-limbed white, grey and chestnut-crowned monkeys. Our luck was in that day – on a brief excursion ashore, a figure moving not 50 metres away turned out to be a lone chimpanzee that glanced our way, giving us a brief but piercing stare before lolloping casually into the bush.

Gabon is opening its doors to tourists, and while there may still be teething problems (that train is quite often late, I'm told), these are more than offset by the experience. I never did get to see those surfing hippos, so there's my excuse to return – as if I needed one.

NOW WATCH THE PROGRAMME

BBC TWO

Natural World: Gabon – Forests of the Future will be broadcast on **Wednesday 6 June, BBC2, 9pm.**