

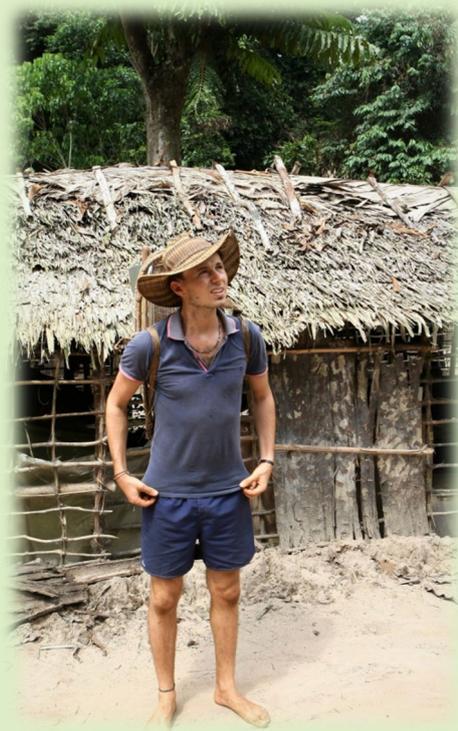
E-mail from Antonin Leclercq

5.40am. Every day I wake-up at the same time, with the light of the sunrise and the sounds of the forest, the best music I know. Unlike most people here, I am not working directly with the bonobos, because my job is to run and administrate the camp, so that they can study the bonobos. Therefore, I do not have the same tasks, the same routine, the same rhythm. I stay in camp much more than other people here, but still there are many occasions to go to the forest and see the bonobos.

This morning I have to deal with some administration tasks on the laptop and prepare for tomorrow, as we will receive some food from Lompole, the nearest village. All the many little tasks are time-consuming but must be done, and the morning goes by in a blink.

I have been really efficient this morning, because I have plans for the afternoon. I do want to spend it in the forest. I will also make this time profitable for bonobo work since I know some trails need a bit of clearing. As time goes by, plants are growing and some trees are falling. Sometimes it gets really hard to follow the trail (or really easy to lose it), that is why from time to time it is good to do some clearing of the trails and ways around the tree-falls that we cannot cut.

We have two habituated communities, we usually follow nest-to-nest, one on the West-, one on the East side. Unfortunately, assistants lost the West-side bonobos yesterday, so this morning two assistants went out to focus on East side Bonobos, while the remaining people will try to relocate the West side Bonobos in the afternoon. After lunch and a few more instructions to the team in camp, I can leave. I go to search for West side bonobos. Although officially forbidden, I go alone but with all the due precautions. For me, being alone is a wonderful way to enjoy the atmosphere of this huge tropical forest, its beauty of wildlife, ranging from the tiniest ant to the biggest elephant that, unfortunately, I never had the chance to see so far. It feels peaceful here, even though the forest is actually really loud with all the animals shooting, moving, singing, calling. We often think a forest is quiet and silent but this is very wrong, at least with tropical forests. After a little walk to reach the more remote thus less maintained trails I spend a few hours walking slowly while cleaning Komla and Mangos trails with my secateurs. Cutting the sprouts and branches on the way with my secateurs, making a way around tree-falls and recording the updates on the GPS, but also replacing trail markers indicating hundred meter distances and bifurcations, is a regular need in an environment where material such as tape perishes quickly. On my way back I hear some branches moving. I stop and wait. After a while I can hear something again, so I carefully go in the direction of the noise and eventually meet with some bonobos! What a great surprise. In the past, I once did the mistake of going into the forest with no gear at all, and when I met with the bonobos by chance, I could not follow them, as that would not have been safe! It does not happen anymore: I have my GPS, a satellite phone, batteries, a surgical mask, a string, my head-torch and water of course. So I can follow them in the forest until they nest at dawn. By



precaution, I send a text to camp via satellite phone so that people know that I found and follow the bonobos, and where we are. They are only 5 of them, really quiet and resting in the trees while a young is playing around. I am sitting on a log next to them, while the sweat bees are all over my face and my neck, getting the salt of my skin. It is tickling. After one hour I hear someone whooping from the trail. I whoop back. It's our distance call to indicate our position when close to each other. Lambert, one of the local assistants, has come to help me and take over so I can go back to camp. I am fine so we stay together, following them while Lambert teaches me the "who is who" whispering French. He can recognize both West and East individuals and name them, as he follows them since early on. I am rarely with them, so I cannot tell them apart. With the late afternoon, they decide to move to some Maku trees and have their fruit for dinner. After dinner and before dusk they move again, a bit faster now, and we eventually meet with other bonobos, where they nest for the night.

Lambert records the names of all bonobos around us. We record the GPS position, and unwind a thread from a nest to the nearest trail -so that the assistants of the next morning shift can locate them easily when approaching in the dark. We head back to camp; it is night already.

I enjoy my sun-heated-bucket-shower every day I spend here, i.e. about 11 months so far, but the shower is even better when you have had a long day like this one. People in camp are happy to have the bonobos for the next day, and I am happy that I could help and find them since it does not usually happen for the camp manager. After dinner, I still have some tasks to do, e.g. preparing for the next day providing the cooks with the needs for the next morning, checking whether or not batteries are properly charged, and eventually, after most people have gone to sleep, locking the padlocks on a few doors. That was one good day in LuiKotale and I go to bed with the lullaby of the forest to soothe me to sleep.