

Sighting of the western gentle lemur *Hapalemur griseus occidentalis* in north-west Madagascar

The grey gentle lemur *Hapalemur griseus* is currently divided into three subspecies. Of these, very little is known about the western gentle lemur *H. g. occidentalis* and survey work to assess its distribution and numbers is urgently needed. The sighting of this species approximately 200 km to the south and 200 km to the north of the previously recorded populations further highlights this need. The Tsiombikibo Forest, where *Hapalemur* was sighted, may harbour further surprises and should be investigated more extensively in order to assess habitat condition and the species present.

The western gentle lemur *Hapalemur griseus occidentalis*, Family Lemuridae, is the smallest of the three recognized subspecies of *H. griseus*. The gentle lemur is reported to live in groups of 2–5 individuals and is crepuscular and/or cathemeral. The nominate subspecies, *H. g. griseus*, is found throughout the eastern rain forests and *H. g. alaotrensis* is restricted to the reed beds and surrounding marshes of Lake Alaotra (Figure 1; Petter *et al.*, 1977; Tattersall, 1982; Harcourt and Thornback, 1990).

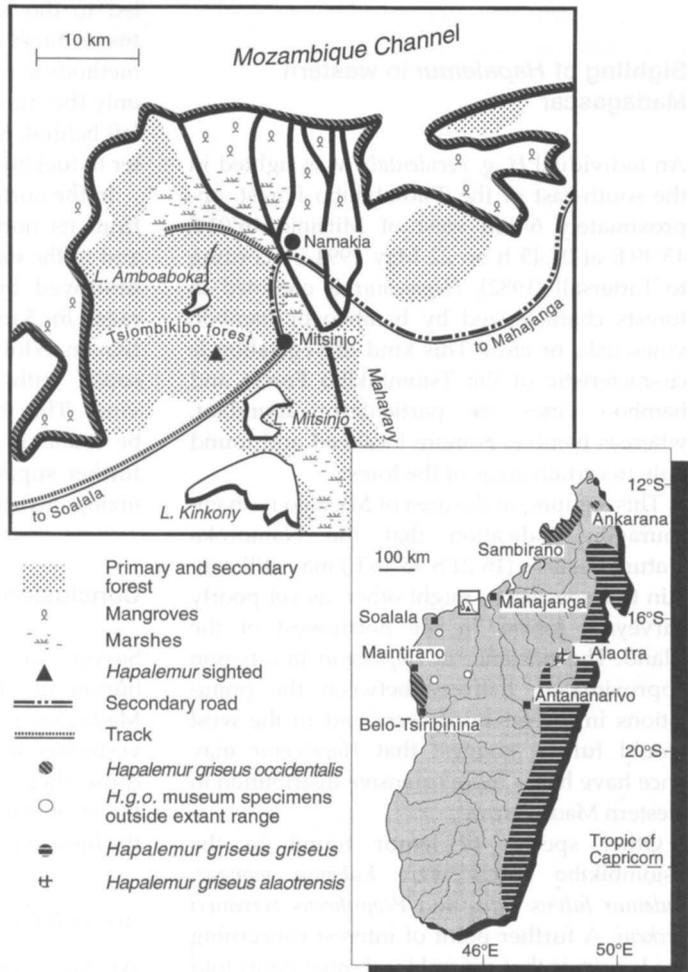


Figure 1. Distribution of *Hapalemur griseus* and sighting of *Hapalemur griseus occidentalis* (*Hgo*). Adapted from: Tattersall (1982); Carte de Madagasikara 1:500 000 (Anon., 1986); Nicoll and Langrand (1989); Mittermeier *et al.* (1992).

Isolated populations of the western gentle lemur are found in western Madagascar between Maintirano and Belo-Tsiribihina in the Sambirano region and in Ankarana Special Reserve, north-western Madagascar (Tattersall, 1982; Mittermeier *et al.*, 1992). Collecting records from outside the extant range exist from localities to the east of the Maintirano/Belo-Tsiribihina population and from the Namoroka area, 50 km south of Soalala, but the species is now presumed to be absent from these areas (Figure 1; Tattersall, 1982). Although *H. g. occidentalis* is classified as vulnerable, more information concerning its numbers and distribution in the wild is needed to ascertain its conservation status (Harcourt and Thornback, 1990; Mittermeier *et al.*, 1992).

Sighting of *Haplemur* in western Madagascar

An individual *H. g. occidentalis* was sighted in the south-east of the Tsiombikibo Forest, approximately 6 km west of Mitsinjo 16°01'S 45°49'E at 07.45 h on 22 May 1994. According to Tattersall (1982), *Haplemur* is confined to forests characterized by bamboo or bamboo vines (*viky* or *viko*). This kind of vegetation is characteristic of the Tsiombikibo Forest and bamboo vines are particularly abundant, whereas bamboo is more localized and found only in certain areas of the forest.

This sighting in the area of Mitsinjo is an encouraging indication that the Namoroka Nature Reserve (16°21'S 45°16'E) may still contain this species, as might other, as yet poorly surveyed, forests in the north-west of the island. The existence of *Haplemur* in a region approximately halfway between the populations in the far north-west and in the west would further suggest that *Haplemur* may once have had a more extensive distribution in western Madagascar.

Other species of lemur found in the Tsiombikibo Forest were *Eulemur mongoz*, *Eulemur fulvus rufus* and *Propithecus verreauxi deckeni*. A further point of interest concerning the lemurs is that several local inhabitants told

us that the aye-aye *Daubentonia madagascariensis* is to be found in this forest.

Vegetation

Tsiombikibo Forest is highly degraded in the regions visited by the authors. As a result, access to the interior is exceedingly difficult and lack of time ruled out a search for an easy entry into the forest. The south-eastern extremities consist of secondary forest with dense undergrowth and a canopy of up to 7–8 m high. Where no forest remains, vegetation consists of dense shrubs and vines, interspersed by clearings, both of which are a result of bush fires. Any remaining emergent trees are 15–20 m tall, but selective logging has led to the removal of the majority of these trees. Bush fires are 'encouraged' by the methods used in extracting these trees because only the trunks are taken out and all branches left behind, thus providing abundant dry matter to fuel bush fires during the dry season.

In the north-east of the original forest range, from its northern limit to Lake Amboaboka and to the east of the lake, the forest has been destroyed by bush fires, the last of which raged for 5 months in 1993. The fragments that remain exhibit the same vegetation as in the south, with abundant bamboo and bamboo vines. This indicates that *Haplemur* may also be found in this region, a possibility that is further supported by local inhabitants recognizing pictures of animals.

Conclusion

Surveys are needed to determine the distribution of *H. g. occidentalis* in north-western Madagascar. Tsiombikibo Forest should be investigated for an extended period of time, because there are probably still intact areas of forest in the interior and in the west, where the human population is less dense

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