

Khanom Beach Wildlife

By Levi Shand

Now that we've made the trip several times to the various beaches Khanom services, the honeymoon period has ended and I've begun to look more closely into the natural features of beach. What I've found so far has been both lovely and a little scary.

White-Spotted Jellyfish (*phyllorhiza punctata*)



According to various sources around the Internet, this jellyfish is indigenous to Australian waters and now, as it is considered an invasive species in north SE Asia, it has become ubiquitous even in the Gulf of Thailand. Apparently its sting and venom are mild and can easily be neutralized with a little vinegar. I didn't stick around to find out; when I saw one of these little fellas (they can grow to be 20-30cm across and more than 60cm long) bobbing and pulsing along the surface, bitter experience told me to move on, because I was sure I simply hadn't spotted the flock yet.

Water Monitor (*varanus salvator*)



I thought it was a sort of cayman, but then I saw its legs and the way it moved. At the “End of the Road” restaurant, there is a sort of tidal lagoon next to the beach and as I was walking down for a dip in the gulf I noticed some big movement in the muddy water some ten meters down and away from me. I held perfectly still and watched one of these creatures retreat over the slick algae on the branches that had fallen into the lagoon and then, it disappeared into the murk.

Wikipedia says that monitors spend a good deal of their time in the water. They’re carnivores and territorial, so my humble advice is to avoid them if you encounter them in the wild. They’re common throughout SE Asia and as nearly as I can tell, there are three subspecies that live in Thailand, two of them being indigenous to areas close to Surat.

Some common Thai insults, as theirs until relatively recently has been an agrarian society, involve calling people the names of animals. “Buffalo” is a common insult and from what I understand, roughly equivalent to “jackass”. “Hia”, which I’ve heard my children use, is the Thai word for monitor lizard.

Again, Wikipedia states that when Thai houses were commonly two-storey, the bottom floor was reserved for the livestock while the family lived upstairs. Monitors would come in and antagonize and kill the domesticated animals, so the insult, which I’ve discovered is one of the more potent ones and should never be used, grew from that feeling a farmer may have felt at being woken up by a murder in progress just below his bed.

White-bellied Sea Eagle (*haliaeetus leucogaster*)



I spent an afternoon bobbing along with a Singha in my hand watching one of these guys execute its expert fishing technique of swoops and dives and long, low skims over the waves. I've learned that this species of sea eagle is the most common in Thailand and is diurnal, which means that it fishes during the day. You'll know this one by its wingspan.

Oriental Whip Snake (*Ahaetulla prasina*)



I was driving up the beach road on a Sunday morning when before me cut this shimmering green ribbon, right in my path. I hit the brakes and missed this dazzling snake, but didn't forget about it. The oriental whip snake is one of the commonest snakes in Thailand but one of the hardest to spot for its perfect camouflage. It's harmless if you're not a small animal, non-venomous, and a beautiful creature should you have the eyes to notice one in the wild.

Weaver Ants (*oecophylla*)



These reddish ants don't confine themselves to the beach but are there as well as in the cities and countryside, or rather anywhere there are trees. If you don't see a proper nest made of leaves and larval silk, you will see these big foragers out looking for a food source and think "yikes, fire ants!". That they aren't, but they do bite and have the capacity to spray a little formic acid in the bite wound, which is the kind of acid that is used in bathroom cleaning products. I've suffered some gnarly bites in the night and barring spiders (whose possibility probably oughtn't be barred) those big welts I've found come morning just may have come from one of these fellas you see above. So itchy!

These are among the more impressive of the animals I've seen so far in the province. They're all described as "common" but to a foreigner, maybe they don't seem so common. There are several other common animals to see such as hermit crabs and little rays, tree frogs, phosphorescent plankton that by night sparkle like glitter at your slightest movement, barnacle colonies and big butterflies, poisonous centipedes and trundling millipedes, and the list continues. Any and all sightings of these creatures could add color to the stories you tell your friends and family of your day at the beach!