

DAO TIEN UPDATE

LEE LEE AND MERRY - THE NEXT STEP

By Dr Marina Kenyon

In mid March, Lee Lee and Merry our two golden-cheeked gibbons (*Nomascus gabriellae*) selected to be the first pair fit for release back to the wild, with good body condition and a strong pair bond (together since March 2009), were moved to the next stage - a 20 hectare forested area, on the southern tip of Dao Tien.

Both Merry and Lee Lee were fitted with radio collars before moving to test the gibbon's tolerance to a collar, as collars have never been fitted for this species before, but also to see how they both fair in the semi-wild jungle, before final release into continuous forest in Cat Tien National Park (CTNP). As this was the first time gibbons have been fitted with radio collars, great care was taken in material choice, shape, weight and building a weak link into the collar, so they would naturally drop off without recapture. When collaring and moving the gibbons to the semi-wild forest, it was noticed that Merry had a noticeable bump, a baby bump, estimated at 4 months, thus further confirming our belief that the pair had a strong bond and were good candidates for release.

The pair were first placed in a release cage inside of the semi-wild forest, to give them time to settle into their new area and hear the new neighbouring groups of gibbons, so they would not panic on release. After two days they were ready and, on opening the slide, Merry dashed out and up into the trees in seconds as expected! Based upon her wild behaviour when we rescued her, we think Merry was hunted and taken from the wild as an adult, and thus has had a normal wild education. Lee Lee, on the other hand, was taken from the wild as an infant and kept in isolation for 18 years in a small cage next to a petrol station.

A big concern for us was, would Merry wait for Lee Lee who, for most of his life, had viewed the world through a cage, never in the open, and would find this freedom more of a challenge. The door was open, Lee Lee placed his hand through into the great outdoors, and then not understanding what was going on, turned and returned to the cage, not even acknowledging the open slide. After a few hours Lee Lee bravely made his move into the open, sat on top of the introduction cage, and finally up into the trees along side. For weeks he stayed close to the cage, sometimes going in, but most often staying in the trees in the local vicinity. Luckily Merry has chosen to take up residence in trees near by and wait for her mate to adapt to the new free lifestyle. We have no idea how long it will take Lee Lee to come to terms with his freedom but he is improving every day and now spends most of his time in the trees 40-50 metres away from the cage along with Merry. It is early days yet, but it may be that Lee Lee never adjusts and if this is the case we will have to re-consider if he is a suitable candidate for full release into the national park. This is one of the reasons why we monitor the gibbons rehabilitation so closely, always collecting data in order to try and develop guidelines for release of other gibbons in the future. What makes a suitable candidate for release? How, where and when should suitable candidates be reintroduced to their wild habitat? Until we have scientific data to support the specific selection of release candidates, every healthy individual will have a chance.



The 20 hectare semi-wild fence line on the southern tip of at Dao Tien



Dr Uli Stricher and Dr Kurtis Pei fitted Lee Lee's radio collar (left) and Mr Dulme, Marina, and Lee track Lee Lee and Merry's progress

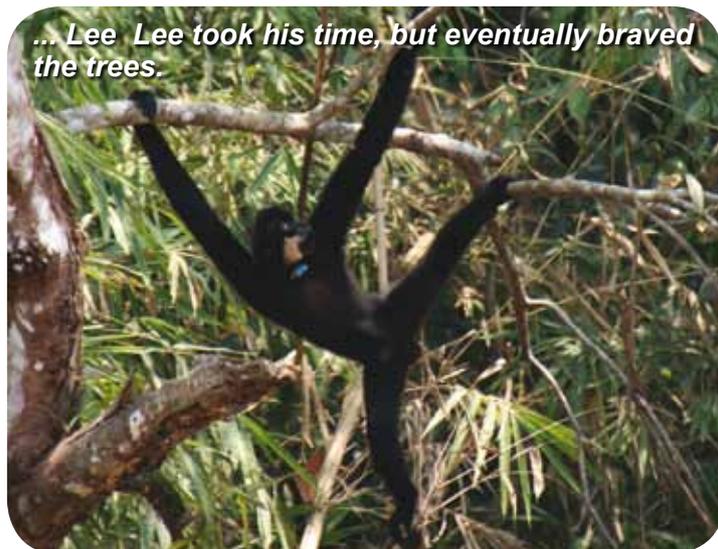
Currently, food and water are provided on top of the release cage daily, but with the monsoon rains coming soon there will more wild fruit and leaf in the forest to tempt him back to a wild life. Once Merry and Lee Lee start travelling through the 20 hectares of forest, finding food, and staying off the ground, they will be considered for the final phase of the rehabilitation process - full release into continuous forest in CTNP. For now we simply wait for Lee Lee to embrace his life again as a wild gibbon.



Merry was straight out into the trees...



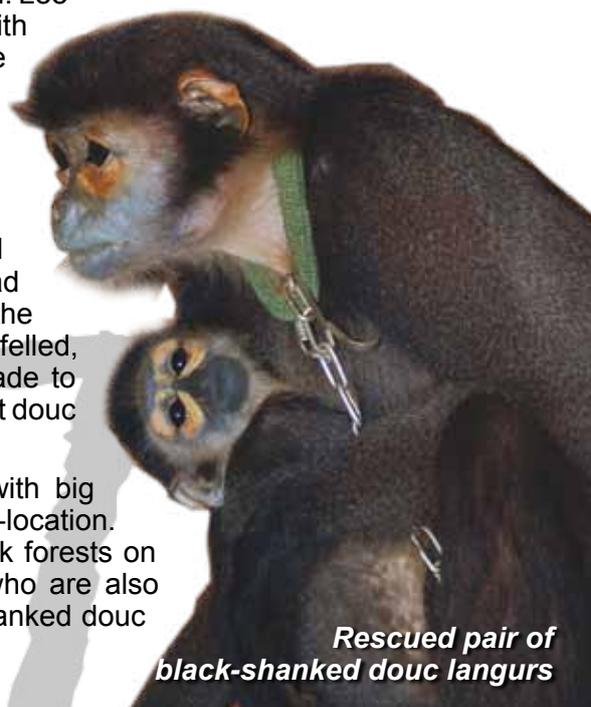
... Lee Lee took his time, but eventually braved the trees.



EMERGENCY RESCUE OF MOTHER AND INFANT DOUC MONKEYS

At the beginning of May the Director of CTNP, Mr Thanh, called to say we needed to rescue two douc langurs (*Pygathrix nigripes*) in Binh Phuc, a neighbouring province to the north-west of Cat Tien. Lee Butler went with the team from CTNP to assess the situation, prepared with travel boxes to rescue if necessary. After four hours of travel the rescue team arrive to find a very frightened female douc monkey and her large infant, which was still clinging tightly to mum. Although frightened their body condition was good, unusual for these specialist leaf eaters if they have lived in captivity for any length of time. It turned out they were taken from the forest only three days prior, after their non-protected forest was felled. Normally full health checks and behavioural assessments are done prior to release, but as the mother and infant had only just been taken from the forest and were still in good condition, the decision was made to release the pair immediately. With their forest felled, they could not be returned to their home range so the decision was made to release the pair on Dao Tien where they could join Chinh and Thanh, the first douc monkeys returned to the forest in October 2009.

The two new arrivals were returned to the forest the next morning, with big smiles from all Officials and everyone involved in their rescue and re-location. The new pair have been seen from time to time moving through the thick forests on Dao Tien. They are sharing their new habitat with Chinh and Thanh, who are also doing very well, thus forming a social group of endangered wild black-shanked douc monkeys living on Dao Tien.



Rescued pair of black-shanked douc langurs



REMEMBERING JIM

On March 17, 2010, the third anniversary of Jim Cronin's passing, our family and friends in Vietnam celebrated his life with a party held in his honour on Dao Tien. Alison Cronin and Kurtis Pei were also there to remember Jim.

Lee Butler (left) raised a toast to Mr Jim with Dao Tien's staff and their families.

