

AITo Update, October 2015: Dawn Chorus, Sulawesi Style

If you are a morning person, this will remind you of why you are that; if you are not, you just might become one. The thing is, if you want to commune with tarsiers, you have to get up and out into the woods at 4 a.m.

If you have done your homework properly the day before, you have already had a wander through the woods to find your destination--a huge, vine-covered tree, for instance, or perhaps a bamboo thicket--so in the pitch-dark of 4 a.m., you can go more or less right to it--though you will be making your way through thick, trail-less jungle understory and chances are you will stumble and question your landmarks once or twice on the way from camp. But when you find your tree, you will choose a sitting spot perhaps ten yards away--maybe on the root of another tree, or a rock if there is one--and make yourself comfortable. You will be sitting for a while.

You turn off your headlamp, and simply sit there quietly. As in prayer or meditation, resist the urge to scratch your itchy foot or plan your next day's errands; attend to what is here, now. Nights in the Sulawesi jungle can be remarkably quiet, but as you settle in you start to notice sounds you hadn't before. Cicadas and other insects are the main background noise, but even that is far softer than daytime. You must stay very still if you just want to witness, rather than disturb, the creatures around you. Perhaps the crick of a frog now and then, perhaps the rustling sound of the leaf litter as a white-tailed forest rat moves through nearby in his search for bits and bobs of plant parts. If you are very lucky, you might even have an endemic macaque or two come around to check you out--they are big and noisy compared to everything else, and curious, though shy of humans. In the dark you will see nothing, but you will hear them approach, and stop, drop to the ground, circle around the other way, stop again, perhaps stand upright as they observe you... as you listen, just fill in the movements with your imagination.

Sometime after 5 a.m., the dawn's first light will begin to creep into the spaces between the numberless leaves above and around you. And soon after that, you will hear the first tarsiers. A tarsier sounds a bit like a bird, or a bat, or a bug, or an eight-year-old conducting an alien space-war. High and squeaky. Repeated, intent. The male (a bit sharper) and the female (slightly more modulated) are calling each other home at the end of their night of foraging in the forest. Bellies (hopefully) full of insects and perhaps a wee gecko (tarsiers are the only strictly carnivorous primate), their work-day is over, and it is time to head home to rest, together. "Where are you?" "Over here." "Come on home now, darling." "Yes, I am coming." The pair repeat this exchange numerous times each morning, reinforcing their bonds to one another and to their particular home-place in this tree. Somewhere deep in a cavity or tangle of this tree, they will spend the day ahead huddled together, perhaps with some babies, resting in preparation for the next night's foraging.



Tarsier tree. Photo: M. Summers



Tompotika tarsier. Photo: Sandesh Kadur

More than likely, you will not actually see them--it is still fairly dark, and they are well above you amongst the leaves, aware of you (they have extremely keen hearing and vision, even in the dark), and purposely staying hidden. But their song is free for the listening, and in this duet call you take in the tarsier language of love and connection. And as you listen to this pair at this tree, you begin to hear dozens of other tarsier pairs singing their own love-duets at other trees in every direction. They have sung

this morning song for millions of years, these tiny primates, and some million years previous to that, perhaps the primate ancestor that we humans share with these tarsiers had some similar song of love of one another and connection to a home place. *Their very own* home place: as with various other animals, the tarsiers of a given region have their own unique song-style and are their own unique species; they will not respond to the calls of tarsiers from other regions. The song of deep connection rings through millennia to you, right now, as you sit with your tiny tarsier cousins in the Sulawesi dawn.

The tarsier chorus rises, each duet finding its own crescendo before the pair duck into their tree-hollow and fall silent for the day. At the same time, the birds of the forest are starting to wake up as well, and the high chirpy squeaks of tarsiers begin to give way to the trills and warbles of the feathered ones. The sun rises, the colors of the forest sharpen, and within another half-hour the dawning of the day is complete, and the tarsiers are heard no more for today. Soon, you will head back to camp, and begin your day's work, which if you are here with AlTo will probably have something to do with protecting this forest so that big trees and tarsier choruses will live on despite the path of ever-growing numbers and consumption that humans have chosen. But the experience of this dawn chorus will remain with you throughout the day, and you will go to your rest in the evening just burning to get up at 4 a.m. again tomorrow.

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Would you like to hear Sulawesi's dawn tarsier chorus for yourself? A few open spots are still available for AlTo's tarsier survey trip scheduled for Jan 25-Feb 10, 2016. (And the \$100 discount has been extended to 30 November!) For trip information click [here](#), or contact Marcy Summers at the address above.