



*Da & Lat were both rescued from a roadside rest stop*



*Lee Lee was rescued from a petrol station after 17 years*



*Merry was captured as an adult and lived in a tiny cage for several years*

By Alison Cronin

On August 7th we realised our dream and goal of releasing golden-cheeked gibbons back to the wild in Southern Vietnam. Over the past year two family groups of gibbons have been living in semi-wild areas at the Dao Tien Endangered Primate Species Centre in the final stages of their rehabilitation. Lee Lee, Merry, and their baby boy Noel and Da, Lat and their boy Ngoan have strong family bonds, have good skills in the trees, and have grown accustomed to eating wild forest fruit over the past year. It is currently rainy season in Vietnam and as such the forest is full of fruit so it was the perfect time to organise the gibbon's release.

Choosing the release site was no easy task. The team from Dao Tien had planned to release the gibbons into Cat Tien National Park and the island is located at the entrance to this National Park but surveys showed that wild gibbons had moved into previously vacant areas of forest that had been short-listed as potential release sites. As with everything that happens in the rescue and rehabilitation of these endangered primates, we aimed to research and document as much information as possible to ensure our rehabilitated gibbons stood the best chance of survival when they were returned to the wild. One of the first considerations was to identify an area of good quality forest, with lots of fruiting trees, that was not already part of other wild gibbon's territory. We did not want to disturb or disrupt any wild gibbons nor did we want our rehabilitated individuals to have to compete for their territory or food with others.

Marina Kenyon, Director of Dao Tien, and her Gibbon Monitoring Team found two release sites in the neighbouring national park of Vinh Cuu. The sites were perfect with loads of fruiting trees and no gibbons to compete with – just macaques and black-shanked douc monkeys for neighbours. It was a good choice for the gibbons added to which the Director of Vinh Cuu, Mr Mui is the same Director that we initially started the Dao Tien rescue centre project with in 2006! We were all very happy to have found such good release sites and to be working with such good friends. Mr Mui and his team in Vinh Cuu have been a tremendous help and support and will continue to protect the areas the gibbons are in from hunters.

At the release sites small cages were put together to hold the two families for a day or two after we had moved them out into the forest. We wanted them to be calm when we finally opened the door so that they did not run away in terror. We also put a feeding tray on a pulley up in the trees at the release site so that we give the gibbons supplementary feeds until we were happy that they were feeding themselves enough wild fruits and young leaves. The plan worked and on the day of the release, both families made their way out into the forest calmly. We have put GPS collars on the males, Lee Lee and Da, but not on the females as they are carrying babies and we did not want the collars to get in the way or trap a baby's arm. It is hard to believe, but this is the first time any gibbons have ever had radio or GPS collars so we had the collars made as light weight as



*Lee Lee, Merry & Noel in their forest release cage*

possible (240g) and monitored the boys for the first day or so to make sure they were not too upset carrying the collars.

Da and Lat were the first to be released and they headed straight up into the trees and fed from our supplemental feeding station. They kept an eye on all of us on the ground but kept their distance and stayed up high. Lee Lee and Merry were a different story. As soon as Merry headed out of the cage, she disappeared into trees, not to be seen again but this is her usual style. Merry was originally captured as an adult and has kept a lot of her wild instincts. In the semi-wild enclosure on Dao Tien, we rarely saw Merry as she always kept herself very well hidden and this is exactly what she did when released. LeeLee followed her while keeping an eye on us over his shoulder.

The released gibbons are checked every day by the Dao Tien Gibbon Monitoring Team, headed by Mr Binh. He has worked with Marina for years studying the behaviour and ecology of wild golden-cheeked gibbons and with the GPS/radio collars on it is not difficult to find both families every day. The early news is good. Both families are staying together and while LeeLee and Merry are travelling quite a bit they are not too far from the release site. Meanwhile Da and Lat are travelling less and are more reliant upon our supplemental feeds than the others. The areas both families are in are heavy with ripe fruit so they should be able to feed themselves but we are monitoring them carefully to make sure they are not losing too much weight. This is a very delicate and trying time – will the two families be able to feed themselves enough, will they stay together, and will they be safe from hunters in future? We believe that we have done everything possible to encourage and ensure they are able to lead a wild life in forests of Southern Vietnam, but only time will tell!



*Only the male gibbons were fitted with GPS collars*



*Da, Lat and Ngoan ready to move to the forests of Vinh Cuu*



*Moving the gibbons out to the release sites was hard work*



*Can you see him? Lee Lee's first day in the wild*



*Da, Lat & Ngoan stayed up high in the trees*



*Data from Lee Lee's GPS collar shows he has moved 820m away from the release site and is moving around through fruiting trees*