



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT THE GAMBIA 12TH – 19TH NOVEMBER 2015

www.oriolebirding.com

oriolebirding@gmail.com



THURSDAY 12TH NOVEMBER – *Cloudy in light winds, 30C, dry*

Our flight departed on time from London Gatwick this morning, though on boarding we were informed that the aircraft would in fact be travelling via Faro, where we would make a refuelling stop! This added around an hour to the overall journey time, and so we did not arrive in Banjul until about 1520. The airport development is finally underway at Banjul, and the newly turned ground was proving a magnet for flocks of Yellow-billed Kites, presumably feeding on insects disturbed by the works. Hooded Vultures and Pied Crows aplenty were settled along the runways and a group of noisy Piapiac greeted us outside the terminal building. We enjoyed a surprisingly swift transit through the baggage reclaim and were soon on the transfer coach making the thirty minute trip to our hotel in Kololi, noting along the way many common roadside birds such as Red-eyed and Vinaceous Doves, Speckled Pigeon, Blue-bellied Roller, Lizard Buzzard and White-billed Buffalo-Weaver. Arriving at Senegambia Hotel we checked in fairly swiftly and reconvened as quick as we could to make the most of the last hour or so of daylight.



Blue-breasted Kingfisher, Senegambia

The grounds of the hotel are a birders paradise, and we were soon lapping up great views of many species that would become familiar sights and sounds over the coming days. White-crowned Robin-Chats and Red-billed Hornbill wowed us and three different Yellow-crowned Gonoleks dazzled us from the trees above – such incredibly colourful birds! Brown and Blackcap Babbler, Yellow-billed Shrike, Common Bulbul, Red-billed Firefinch and Beautiful Sunbird were soon added, and the improbable Western Grey Plantain-eater popped into view as we were watching a pair of mating Grey Woodpeckers. A Blue-breasted Kingfisher was a lovely bonus, and gave absolutely superb views perched in a Fig at point blank range before it was hassled away by robin-chats. A Senegal Coucal, creeping around at the base of the perimeter wall, was also a good ‘tick’ to get so early in the tour and great views too. We spent some time separating Red-eyed, Vinaceous and Laughing Doves and as dusk approached, Broad-billed Rollers began hawking over the trees and a Long-tailed Glossy Starling flew in calling. All a lot to take in, and we had only been birding for an hour! We retired to do

a spot of unpacking and take a well-earned shower before dinner, eager to get cracking again tomorrow for what was sure to be a top day.

FRIDAY 13TH NOVEMBER – *Overcast with a NW breeze, 30C*

We met at first light by the upper swimming pool terrace for a short walk around the hotel gardens before breakfast, and we had another opportunity to see common species such as Red-billed Hornbill, White-crowned Robin-Chat and Broad-billed Roller. A Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling perched briefly in the top of a Wattle and a beautiful Woodland Kingfisher obliged for several minutes, perched at close range on a cable. From the beach, we saw quite a few seabirds in the stiff onshore wind – Grey-headed Gulls, White-breasted Cormorant and great views of Caspian Terns flying by. Royal and Sandwich Terns were also noted, and a couple of distant Pomarine Skuas were also passing. Overhead, a long-winged falcon cruised above us – a Lanner Falcon – a very nice bird to add to the list!



Red-billed Firefinch, Bijillo

After breakfast we met with our local guide Ibrahim and began our walk towards the nearby Bijillo Forest Park. Birds came thick and fast as we walked along the ‘Senegambia Strip’ – Grey-headed Sparrow, Laughing Dove, two Little Swifts overhead and a bush full of small finches – mainly Red-billed Firefinch but also several non-breeding plumaged Village Indigobird. A Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird was calling nearby and we had excellent views of it through the scope, sharing a tree with many Village Weavers and a Yellow-billed Shrike. A noisy group of Green Wood-Hoopoe flew into the trees ahead of us, and while watching these we also picked up two African Grey Hornbill, Long-tailed Glossy Starling and a brace of Blue-bellied Rollers! In typical Gambian birding style, we didn’t know which way to look next! The hornbills continued to show well as we carried on towards the park entrance, but once inside the forest activity took a distinct downward turn. It was very quiet as we walked around the leafy, shady paths – Green Vervet Monkeys were easy to see, and we had superb views of Little Bee-eater and Blue-breasted Kingfisher, but not much else. Blackcap Babbler, Tawny-flanked Prinia and a lovely selection of spectacular butterflies were the other highlights. We returned to the hotel for a cold drink and to watch the ‘vulture feeding’ which takes place every day at 1130. Amazing close encounters with Hooded Vultures and Yellow-billed Kites provide quite a

spectacle! Lunch followed, and a break during the heat of the day, before we reconvened at 1500 with Ibrahim for our afternoon excursion.



Senegambia Vulture feeding!

We made the short journey to the start of the 'Casino Cycle Track' near Kotu, to start a birding walk through scrubland and marshes. Again, this is a super place to get to grips with many of the common west African birds but with one or two good ones thrown in too. As soon as we disembarked the vehicle, two Blue-bellied Rollers and a tree full of nesting White-billed Buffalo-Weavers were there to greet us. Taking a path down from the main highway to the cycle track, we began picking up many new birds overlooking the rice fields – White-faced Whistling Ducks, Wattled and Spur-winged Plovers, Great White Egret and Squacco Heron were all common. Senegal Coucal and more great views of Blue-bellied Rollers among the palms were followed by a surprise in the form of a Hadedda Ibis which flew in and landed out of sight among the long grass – the first we have ever seen on our tour here as the species is more common upriver. Taking a path around to a large reed-fringed pool, we saw our first Pied Kingfishers, Long-tailed Cormorant and African Mourning Dove – all these birds giving super close up views. Back on the cycle track, a Black-headed Heron posed motionless at the reed edge and then we saw the Hadedda Ibis again, and this time long enough to get scope views. A Green Sandpiper flew across the path, and then we had great views of a Double-spurred Francolin perched in the open – a common species but seldom seen well, so this was a treat. An absolutely stunning African Pygmy Kingfisher was perched at close range and we were all bowled over by the views through the scope! Our good fortune continued then as an African Jacana flushed a wader from the rice fields which flew a short distance before dropping – plain upperwings but a whitish underwing stripe – looked good for Greater Painted Snipe! The Jacana obliged to flush another one, but this one was a superb female, which flew around in two long circuits right in front of us – awesome!



Woodland Kingfisher and Double-spurred Francolin, Kotu

Finally we reached Kotu bridge, one of the iconic birding spots in The Gambia. Here we bumped into more familiar fayre such as Grey Plover, Whimbrel, Common Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Grey Heron and Little Egret. A Western Reef Heron was fishing just below the bridge and out on the mudflats were large mixed flocks of Wattled and Spur-winged Plovers. The Pied Kingfishers stole the show here, affording ridiculously close views, but we also saw another Blue-breasted Kingfisher and had brief views of a Malachite Kingfisher too. Red-chested Swallows flew overhead, and a Senegal Thick-knee flew in calling, posing briefly in the open before running into cover. With so many great birds in such a small area it was hard to move away, but dusk was approaching and we wanted to visit the nearby sewage pools. The narrow track through the rice fields added a Fork-tailed Drongo, Rose-ringed Parakeet and better views of Malachite Kingfisher, while two Senegal Parrots flew around us before landing partly obscured among the branches of an Acacia. Once at the ponds, several Black-winged Stilts were noted, a Wood Sandpiper, Little Grebe, many Common Sandpipers and Spur-winged Plovers – it really had been a breathless afternoon! We returned to the hotel around 1820, ready for a beer!



Spur-winged Plover and Pied Kingfisher, Kotu

SATURDAY 14TH NOVEMBER – *Hazy sunshine, 30C*

We had an early breakfast today and headed out to nearby Brufut Woods, one of the best birding sites in coastal Gambia. Palm-nut Vulture, Black-headed Heron and two Lanner Falcons flew over the Senegambia as we were loading up. We met up with local guide Abba at Brufut and he took us around the various trails looking for birds among the open woodland and agricultural fields. Senegal Parrots greeted us as we disembarked the vehicle, and we managed good scope views of them perched this time. Village and White-billed Buffalo-Weavers were everywhere and Rose-ringed Parakeets were flying around calling. While watching the parrots, Abba picked out a Pearl-spotted Owllet perched in a mango tree, which gave nice views through the scope. This was followed by another obliging African Pygmy Kingfisher, our first Splendid Sunbird and Singing Cisticola. Along the sandy track, Red-cheeked Cordon-Bleu were seen feeding at close quarters, and we also saw many Bronze Mannikin, our first Lavendar Waxbills and had excellent views of Northern Crombec. Reaching an open area with a few Acacia trees at the edge of some agricultural fields, we spent a while in one spot enjoying a feast of birds. Weavers were just everywhere, and we picked up Vitelline Masked and Little Weaver here, two Orange-cheeked Waxbills and many Pin-tailed Whydah including a spectacular long-tailed male. An African Green Pigeon was roosting in a nearby tree and Wattled Plovers were flying around calling in noisy flocks, often disturbed by people working in the fields. Presumably this was also why a Striated Heron appeared from nowhere and flew right past us before landing in a Mango tree! Along one wall we watched many weavers, Yellow-billed Shrike, Senegal Coucal, Long-tailed and Bronze-tailed Glossy Starlings and a superb Fine-spotted Woodpecker, all of which were flushed first by a Grey Kestrel, and then by a magnificent melanistic Gabar Goshawk! A Willow Warbler was our first palearctic migrant of the trip, and the first of several dazzling Northern Red Bishops was also seen.



Fine-spotted Woodpecker and Northern Red Bishop, Brufut

Heading back up to the main track, we headed towards the woods noting several Fanti Saw-wing Swallows over the path, our first Grey-backed Camaroptera and then a fine Klaas's Cuckoo which Abba whistled into view for us. Variable and Copper Sunbirds both followed, and we also found a male Black-winged Red Bishop – another Grey Kestrel and an African Harrier-Hawk flew by. Another side path afforded us good views of a cracking Black-crowned Tchagra, more Little and Vitelline Masked Weavers and a couple of Melodious Warblers. It had been a whirlwind morning, and now it was time to relax a bit with a visit to the 'woodland bar' where we were able to take a

perch and enjoy a cold drink while overlooking three drinking troughs provided for the birds. It was a constant procession of different birds coming in – Village, Little and Vitelline Masked Weavers, Red-cheeked Cordon-Bleu, Lavendar Waxbill, Blue-spotted and Black-billed Wood-doves, Blue-breasted and African Pygmy Kingfishers, Beautiful and Copper Sunbirds and Red-billed Firefinches. Truly amazing stuff!



Little Bee-eater and Black-crowned Tchagra, Brufut

To round off our visit to Brufut, Abba took us quietly into the bush to view two roosting Long-tailed Nightjars. This is always a highlight here and sightings are never guaranteed, but we were lucky today that the birds were in their usual spot. We viewed them through a scope at no more than five metres distance – unbelievable! We were able to see their intricately patterned plumage in extreme close up, and even see the tough bristles around their bills – they didn't so much as bat an eyelid at all the attention! We crept back out of the bushes, and walked a little further along the path. Grey-backed Camaroptera, another Singing Cisticola and several lovely Little Bee-eaters were about the best of it though as the sun had now burnt through the clouds and it was getting hot –time for lunch!



Long-tailed Nightjar and Klaas's Cuckoo, Brufut

Our lunch stop today was near Tanji fishing village at a small eco-resort, and again drinking pools for small birds are a big attraction for birdwatchers! We sat in the shade and enjoyed another procession of great birds – Shikra at point-blank range, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, many more weavers and Common Bulbuls including a pair of smart Black-necked Weavers, Red-cheeked Codon-Bleu, Red-billed Firefinch and Lavendar Waxbills. The dazzling male Beautiful Sunbirds showed particularly well here, and the star bird was a Western Bluebill which came several times to drink – the first time we have ever seen it away from the renowned Abuko reserve. After a typically protracted Gambian lunch we made the short hop to the beach and walked down to the edge of the main inlet. A Giant Kingfisher flew off just as we arrived and sadly didn't return, but some compensation was offered by spectacular views of an Osprey which plunged into the water right under our noses! Pied Kingfishers were also plentiful and a Crested Lark flew over us. Moving to the shoreline, more new birds were added – familiar faces such as Bar-tailed Godwit, Sanderling and Common Ringed Plover. Among a melee of feeding Grey-headed Gulls were many Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a single second winter Kelp Gull, our target bird for this site. Caspian Terns showed brilliantly down to just a few metres, and we also noted both Royal and Sandwich Terns too. A Pink-backed Pelican was floating just offshore before taking flight and heading out to sea, and a few Whimbrel were also noted. It was getting on for 1700 now, so we rather wearily headed back to base at the end of a very good day. Some of the group saw African Pied Hornbill and Hammerkop around the Senegambia grounds before dusk and the Broad-billed Rollers were swooping in to drink from the top swimming pool!



Western Bluebill and Shikra, Tanji

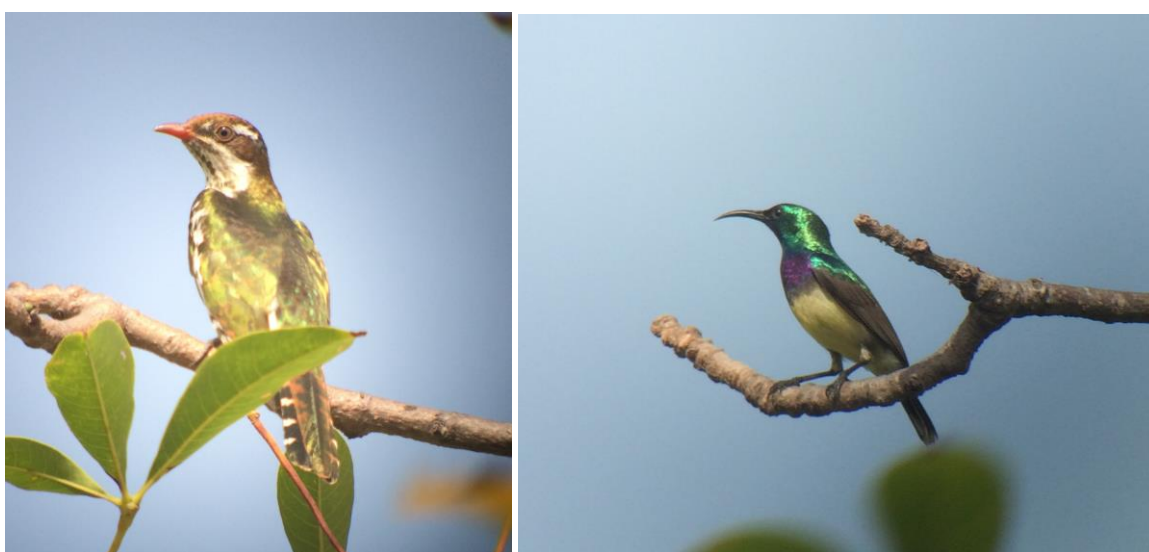
SUNDAY 15TH NOVEMBER – *Sunny and hot, 35C*

A much warmer day today as we headed off towards Tujerang. We stopped first along a track towards the coast just before the village and found an Abyssinian Roller perched up and then an African Cuckoo. We bailed out to look at the cuckoo which gave us better views of the roller too, which was soon joined by a superb Rufous-crowned Roller and a Diderick Cuckoo was nearby being fed by Village Weavers! Back at the main highway we carried on a little further and stopped at some roadside ponds where many Senegal Thick-knee could be seen at close range in a mixed group with Spur-winged Plovers. Two Purple Glossy Starlings were in the trees behind us and we also saw a Singing Cisticola with two fledgelings. Several Osprey were around this area, two Shikra flew over and we also noted Long-tailed Cormorant and Green Sandpiper.



African Cuckoo and Rufous-crowned Roller, Tujerang

Once at Tujerang proper we left the vehicle under the shade of the trees and went on foot through the savannah to look for open country birds. It was already very hot, but Whistling Cisticola were calling all around and two Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weavers were perched up on a dead tree. Little Bee-eater, Northern Red Bishop, Variable Sunbird, Black-crowned Tchagra and Willow Warbler were all common birds in this habitat, and once we reached the stand of taller trees one or two specialities were seen. The superb Senegal Batis showed well, and the in quick succession Veillot's Barbet and Scarlet-chested Sunbird were added. Red-chested and Fanti Saw-wing Swallows were perched in the treetops and we also found Common Redstart, Yellow-fronted Canary, Klaas's Cuckoo, Diderick Cuckoo, Melodious Warbler, Yellow-billed Shrike, Western Grey Plantain-eater and Whinchat. Back at the shade of the main track, we took on some water and had a break beneath the trees to watch for raptors. African Harrier-Hawk, a very distant Black-shouldered Kite and a Dark Chanting Goshawk were seen, and Ibrahim spotted a distant raptor which circled closer and revealed itself as a Tawny Eagle. Walking a bit further along the track, Yellow-fronted Canary, Red-cheeked Cordon-Bleu and Copper Sunbird were seen, and we had fantastic views overhead of a Beadouin's Snake Eagle hanging on the wind. First a Pink-backed, and then three White Pelicans drifting by, were our final birds of the morning session before we headed back to Senegambia for a long lunch break.



Diderick Cuckoo and Variable Sunbird, Tujerang

Our afternoon session had a focus on waterbirds as we headed towards Banjul and the estuarine mangroves around the Cape Point area. Camilo Corner was our first stop and while it was still baking hot here, we managed to see a few new birds. Two African Darters were perched out on the Mangrove trees and there were many Great White, Little and Western Reef Egrets, Pied Kingfishers and Black-winged Stilts. A single Black-tailed Godwit was a good addition to the list and we also saw Common and Green Sandpipers, Common Greenshank, Whimbrel and Senegal Thick-knee. Among huge concentrations of weavers in the reeds we added a single male Yellow-crowned Bishop, and there were lots of Little Bee-eaters around including several landing on the track ahead of us. Some of the group saw European Reed Warbler and a Wire-tailed Swallow flew by, but the best was saved til last as a Black Egret flew in and landed on a small marshy pool by the roadside. We watched the bird for some time doing its 'umbrella' feeding action – a bird which had been high on everyone's wish lists for the tour. A Zitting Cisticola was nearby, perched on the top of the grasses calling and allowing scope views.



Black Egret, Cape Point

Moving to the far side of the estuary on the Cape Point road, we had another productive stop where many Grey-headed Gulls and Caspian Terns were roosting. We picked out two Slender-billed Gulls among the flock, and saw more Wire-tailed Swallows and various shorebirds on the muddy expanse. The best bird though was a superb Giant Kingfisher perched inside a Mangrove tree quite close to the road, which allowed us to creep closer and get fantastic views through the scope. Pied Kingfishers were of course everywhere and an African Harrier-Hawk flew by in the distance.

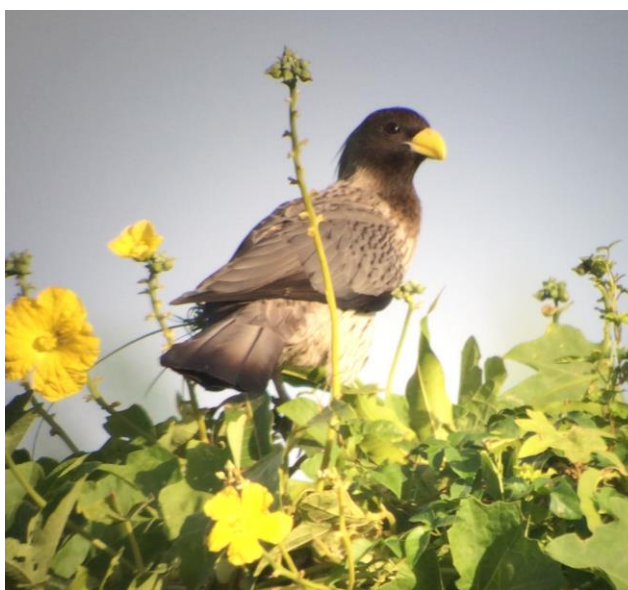


Giant Kingfisher, Cape Point

We ended the day on Bund Road, a service road that runs alongside the Gambia River estuary towards the port areas of Banjul. The area has been recently cleared and whole swathes of Mangroves have been destroyed as the land is prepared presumably for building. In the interim, this has certainly opened up a number of saline pools which are now more easily viewed and we saw many gulls, terns and shorebirds as a result. Two Marsh Sandpipers were the pick of the bunch, but we also saw single Pied Avocet and Eurasian Oystercatcher, many Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Ringed Plover, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Common, Green and Wood Sandpipers, the latter showing very well in a marshy channel by the side of the road. A couple of Yellow Wagtails flew by calling and we picked a Lesser Crested Tern out of the throngs of Royal, Caspian and Sandwich Terns on the flats. Two more Slender-billed Gulls, summer adults this time, were also very nice to see. We returned to base around 1830 just as dusk was falling on another bird-filled day in The Gambia.

MONDAY 16TH NOVEMBER – *Hot and sunny, 32C*

This morning we headed to the oldest nature reserve in The Gambia at Abuko and the surrounding area of Lamin. As it looked as though it would get very hot again, we decided to tackle the more open terrain first and headed to Lamin ricefields. This is always a 'birdy' spot and it certainly was today, with big flocks of weavers, bishops and finches all over the place. Spectacular males of Northern Red and Yellow-crowned Bishop were easy to see, and parties of Bronze Mannikins exploded from every patch of grass. Yellow-billed Shrikes were very numerous during the first part of the walk through the palms where local people shin up the trunks to gather palm wine. A Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling wowed us with its colours, and in the same group of trees we had excellent views of Western Bonelli's Warbler and our first African Golden Oriole – a dazzling male. We had our best views so far of Lizard Buzzard, and there were Senegal Coucals and Blue-bellied Rollers around too. As the terrain opened out into the ricefields, we saw a Hammerkop perched up and a cracking male, and later female, Violet-backed Sunbird – a real bonus indeed! A couple of Shikra were noted, and fly-by herons were regular – Squacco, Great White Egret, Striated Heron and our first two Purple Herons overhead. A Levillant's Cuckoo was calling and we had good views of it in a Fig Tree before it flew off to the Mangroves. On the exposed mud at the base of the Mangroves, very confiding Wattled and Spur-winged Plovers, Senegal Thick-knee, Whimbrel and Striated Heron were seen, and a superb Black Egret flew low along the top of the bushes. A pretty good haul, rounded off by good views of African Harrier-Hawk and a perched Grey Kestrel, but it was warming up in the sun already and time to head into the shade of the woods.



Hammerkop and Western Grey Plantain-eater, Lamin Ricefields

Abuko is a good place to get to grips with several specialities of forest thickets, and we got our rewards for our patience today. An African Pied Hornbill perched in the sunshine was the first of the trip for most people and lovely views of it too. Soon we could hear Common Wattle-eye calling and we found two really close to the path which allowed everyone to get great views before they melted back into the dense tangles of vines. From the tower hide, we didn't see too much other than a lot of Beautiful Sunbirds, Black-necked Weaver, African Thrush and Black-headed Heron, but we did have our first tantalising glimpse of a Violet Turaco gliding across the far side of the pool. Continuing through the woods we found Little Greenbul, Red-bellied and African Paradise Flycatchers and then had super views of a Violet Turaco which swooped over us with crimson wings, and alighted briefly in view before slinking off into the canopy. Two Western Bluebills were beside the path a little further on, and then we came across two Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters sallying from the top of a Fig – they gave splendid views through the scope and we also picked up Senegal Eremomela in the process. Next up was a bush full of sunbirds – Copper, Beautiful and Splendid, the latter really living up to its name, the colours simply dazzling when caught in the light. More views of Senegal Eremomela and a

Northern Crombec followed, before we began working our way back. A quick look back at the spot where we had the Violet Turaco proved a good move – it swooped in again, and this time landed long enough for everyone to see it really well – spectacular! There was time for one last tick before lunch as a Yellow-breasted Apalis was calling above the path and we managed some decent views of it in the canopy – never an easy one to see well.



Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Abuko

Lunch was at nearby Lamin Lodge, sitting in the shade of the rooftop restaurant in a nice cool breeze, overlooking the Mangrove swamps of the tributaries of the Gambia river. We didn't see too many birds but Marsh Harrier was new, a few Great White Egrets, Pied Kingfisher, Sandwich and Royal Tern were seen and a brief Malachite Kingfisher was noted. From here it was back to base camp for just after 1500 for a breather and a chance for a swim for those that wanted.

At 1700 we headed back out again, to Fajara Golf Course to look for the Black-headed Plover and see what else we could find. The walk started at the sewage ponds where many Little Swifts were swooping low to drink from the surface and an Intermediate Egret was among Cattle Egrets around

the edge of one of the ponds. The trees held two Fork-tailed Drongo's and a superb Abyssinian Roller, White-billed Buffalo-Weaver and Senegal Coucal. Walking down through the Mangroves to the edge of the golf course, we then spent some time checking all the fairways for the plover but sadly we couldn't find any – there were lots of Spur-winged and Wattled, but no Black-headed. Double-spurred Francolin showed well again, and we glimpsed another Violet Turaco and saw two African Silverbills which were new for the trip. Flight views of Purple and Striated Herons, perched Shikra, a few Little Bee-eaters and another Abyssinian Roller rounded off the day. We drove back through 'rush hour' enjoying some rather interesting driving, and arrived back in one piece at 1845.

TUESDAY 17H NOVEMBER – *Cloudy start, sunny later, 30C*

Today we travelled one hour to spend the whole day in the Pirang forest area, a new site for us and one which brought promise of many new species, including some that we had never recorded on our tour before. In fairness we enjoyed mixed success, with the forest being generally hard to bird and reluctant to give up some of its rarer inhabitants – but we did see a few very good ones! We were the first people to arrive on site, and met up with a local guide who escorted us throughout the day – his knowledge of the forest was superb and we would have struggled without him. We walked slowly among the shade of the dense part of the forest, listening for calls and looking for movements. An Africa Goshawk called but remained hidden, and a Green Hylia was frustratingly difficult to observe in the canopy – this wasn't going to be easy! We made our way towards an area to look for the rarest inhabitant of the forest, the near mythical White-spotted Flufftail – a tiny rail like bird that skulks unseen among the dense tangles on the forest floor. As we approached the spot, a flock of African Green Pigeons exploded from the canopy above us, with two more perched beautifully allowing for scope views. The pigeons scattered again, and this time the culprit glided silently into view – a superb African Goshawk which we were able to view through the scope. We reached the 'flufftail spot' where a bench was produced from the undergrowth for some of us to sit on. The instructions were to remain silent, and motionless, if we were to have any chance of the bird appearing. This we did, as our guide whistled the bird for several minutes. Nothing at first, and then he pointed us in the right direction with his laser pen and sure enough, quietly walking out from under the bushes was a White-spotted Flufftail! It was just about to walk right out into the open when another group of English 'birders' came crashing onto the scene, a couple of them standing right in front of us and making far too much noise. Needless to say the bird scarpered and after that, despite several further views, it didn't offer to come into the open again. We left the other group to it, thinking it best to get away from them if we could, and went in search of more forest gems.



African Pied Hornbill and Black-rumped Waxbill, Pirang

Gradually more birds began to appear, and we found several species to be more common and easier to see here than for example, Abuko. These included Common Wattle-eye and Yellow-breasted Apalis, which were plentiful. A Buff-spotted Woodpecker paused briefly in the canopy above us long enough for some to get their binoculars on it before it vanished, and we saw several examples of the hybrid between Red-bellied and African Paradise Flycatchers. Back on the main track, we crossed and headed towards the agricultural fields at the far side of the forest. It was hot in the open here as we searched the trees for the giant Verraux's Eagle Owl. A brilliant spot by one of our group produced the nest complete with owl sitting on top, its pink eyelids and big ear tufts clearly visible – brilliant! Back in the shade of the forest, we tried again for various other birds, and managed good views of Grey-headed Bristlebill in the undergrowth, but not much else before we reached the forest entrance. Here a cold drink overlooking some drinking pots allowed us to add Black-rumped Waxbill to the list – very smart little birds indeed. An African Pied Hornbill showed well nearby, before we boarded the vehicle and headed a short way to our lunch stop.



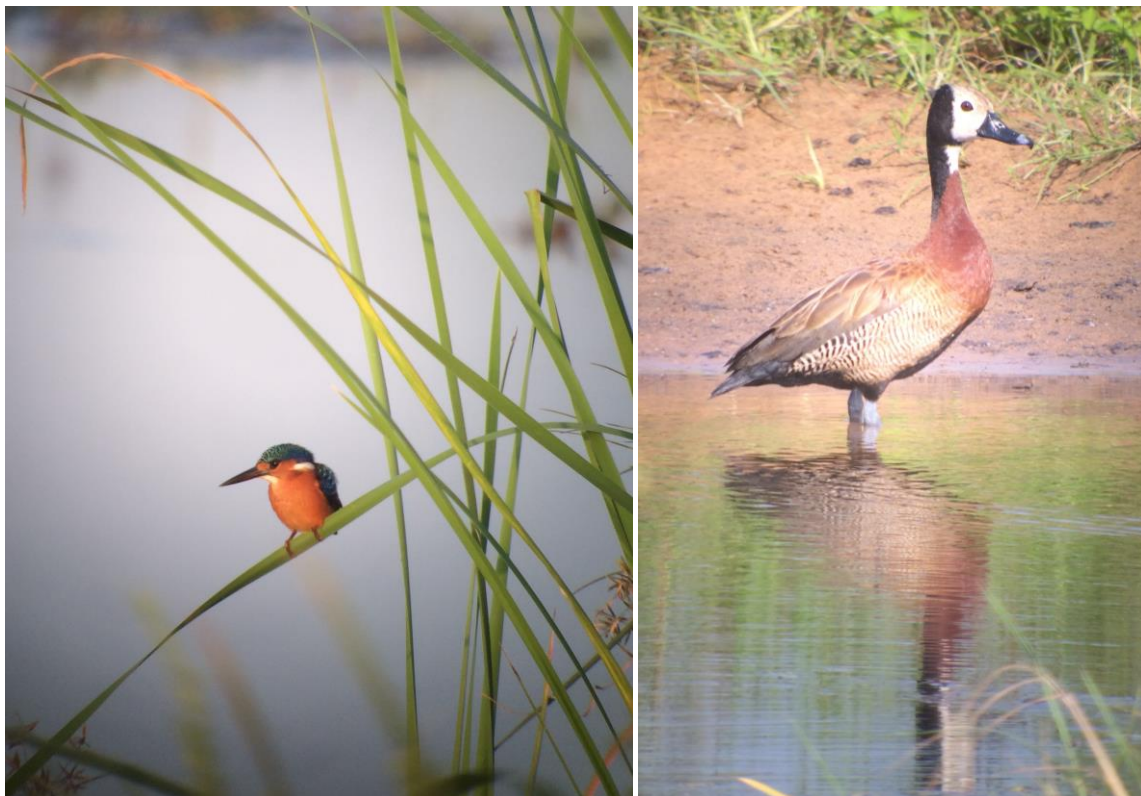
White-faced Scop's Owl and Black-winged Red Bishop, Pirang

As we got out of the vehicle, a Wahlberg's Eagle soared over among Yellow-billed Kites, and around the garden of the compound where we had lunch was a spectacular Kapok tree, complete with roosting Barn Owl – though sadly this was seen only by Ashley before it ducked back inside its hole. After lunch we headed into Pirang village to see a pair of roosting White-faced Scop's Owls – always great to see despite their less than impressed expression! A couple of Vitelline Masked Weaver were also seen here before we headed back to the forest to try for a couple more birds there. It was lovely and cool under the shade of the trees – we had further views of Green Hylia, Grey-headed Bristlebill, Black-rumped Waxbill, Common Wattle-eye and saw a couple of Blue-bellied Rollers. The Snowy-crowned Robin-chat finally gave itself up, with two birds chasing around the canopy, and along the forest edge we found three Yellow-billed Oxpecker on the back of a donkey. Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Diderick Cuckoo, Black-winged Red Bishop, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Violet-backed Sunbird and Northern Crombec were also seen before we began the hour long journey back to Senegambia. We arrived back around 1745 hot and weary after a long day.

WEDNESDAY 18TH NOVEMBER – *Hazy sunshine, 32C*

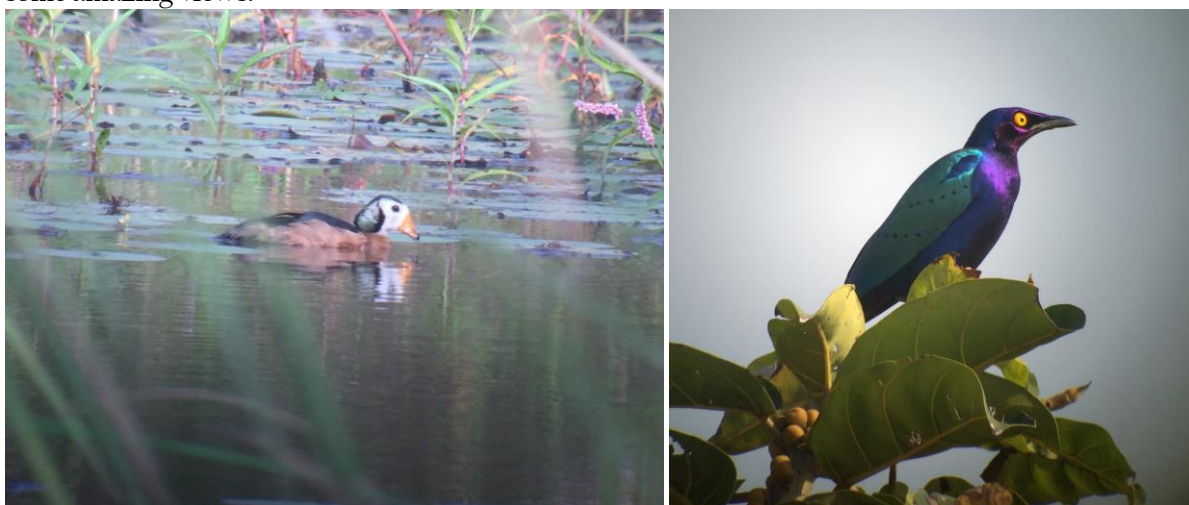
Today we had a full day planned at Kartong Bird Observatory in south Gambia on the Senegal border. We departed early at 0600 to reach the home of ex-pat and good friend Colin Cross and his wife Binta in time for dawn. We were straight out birding from Colin's verandah and adding new species even as we set up our scopes! Black Crakes were scurrying everywhere around the lagoon where African Purple Gallinule and many Purple Herons could also be seen. African Jacana were chasing

each other around and there were constantly Malachite Kingfishers, Squacco, Striated and Black-headed Herons, Pink-backed Pelicans and Black Egrets on show as the rising sun illuminated the birds in a wonderful glow. The icing on the cake was provided by a juvenile Dwarf Bittern which Colin spotted for us, roosting in a Ginger Plum tree fairly distantly but in clear view – a great bird! Such a fantastic setting and great start to what would be a fabulous day hosted by Colin and Binta.



Malachite Kingfisher and White-faced Whistling Duck, Kartong

Breakfast was served on the verandah, and then we prepared ourselves for a three hour bush-walk to look for some of the special birds of Kartong. Green and Wood Sandpipers, Common Snipe and Black-tailed Godwit were some of the more familiar birds we noted on the lagoons, but also nesting Yellow-backed Weavers and scores of White-faced Whistling Ducks which were just everywhere. One of the star birds of the day then followed as we had great views of a male African Pygmy Goose on a marshy pool by the path – always difficult to spot among the reeds, but careful viewing allowed some amazing views.



African Pygmy Goose and Purple Glossy Starling, Kartong

A few Pallid Swifts passed overhead and our first Bearded Barbet of the week flew across and landed in view for everyone to get a look in the scope, a bird which had really eluded us so far. Two Palm-nut Vultures were flying around during our walk, often in the company of a juvenile African Harrier-Hawk and other raptors included Marsh Harrier and Grey Kestrel. We spent some time looking for Four-banded Sandgrouse without success, but in the process found a Grey-headed Kingfisher and our first examples of both Western Olivaceous and Western Subalpine Warblers – Colin said that these birds were recently arrived, as the Sahel region was unusually green this year and holding many Palearctic migrants further north. Abyssinian and Rufous-crowned Rollers were perched together in the same bush and a Diderick Cuckoo was seen briefly by the side of the path – we had done extremely well for this species on the tour. Reaching the beach, we walked south for about half a mile in order to view roosting terns and waders at the mouth of one of the tidal channels. Two Yellow-billed Oxpeckers were attending four cows out on the shoreline, quite a bizarre place to see them! They allowed close approach and only flew off when the cattle owner came to move the animals on. Common Greenshank, Grey Plover and Whimbrel were plentiful and there were good sized flocks of Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone. Among these we saw about sixteen White-fronted Plovers, here at their only mainland breeding site in The Gambia, and a single Curlew Sandpiper in winter plumage. Caspian and Royal Terns were roosting in big numbers, and a single Common Tern was amongst them, but it was the Whimbrel that we would turn our attention to next. By carefully walking the birds up the beach so we could get the light behind them. We were able to scan through carefully. It was hard to pick our quarry out but we were sure it was there, and then the birds flew a short distance and bingo! One with an all dark rump! Hudsonian Whimbrel, a breeding bird of arctic Canada and here for its third winter running on the wrong side of the Atlantic – what a great bird to see! Back to more ‘normal’ Kartong fayre were a flock of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, and what views – swooping from the mangroves and gliding right across the beach in front of us, so close we could hear the audible ‘snap’ of their bills as they caught dragonflies over the sand. Heading back through the Acacia scrub, another Western Subalpine Warbler and Grey-headed Kingfisher were noted, but the heat and humidity had risen markedly now as we came away from the breeze on the shore, and it was time to join the vehicle which came to meet us and take us back to Colin’s place for lunch.



Yellow-billed Oxpecker and Grey-headed Kingfisher, Kartong

The afternoon was a more relaxed affair, as we had arranged a boat trip along the river which forms the boundary between The Gambia and Senegal. Soon we were floating by islands packed with roosting terns, gulls, herons, pelicans and waders as we entered Senegalese waters and headed towards the river mouth. An African Fish Eagle was a nice surprise, though the views were distant, and we saw lots more Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters in the riverside mangroves. Ibrahim spotted a cracking Goliath Heron on the bank and we glided up to it, enjoying fantastic views before it flopped away over the bushes – a very impressive bird. Ospreys were everywhere, and each one either carrying or devouring a fish – you can see why they make such an effort to come here for the winter! Just as we reached the river mouth and began to turn the boat back, we spotted a group of five White-throated Bee-eaters sallying from the tops of the waterside trees – again we were able to get close and enjoy these fantastic birds, a real bonus as they are always unpredictable to see and distinctly scarce at Kartong. As we headed back upstream we spent some time scanning the tern roost – a couple of Slender-billed Gulls could be picked out and Gull-billed Terns were also seen roosting here, yet another new trip bird from Kartong today. Back on dry land it was time to say goodbye to Colin and make the trip back to Senegambia, where we arrived around 1700 to conclude our birding excursions for the tour.

THURSDAY 19TH NOVEMBER – *Sunny and hot, 32C*

Our final morning was set aside for chilling out around the hotel after a long weeks birding, though we did meet up at 0700 for a quick wander around the gardens to see what was about. We didn't add anything new, but saw Western Olivaceous Warbler, Brown Babbler, Hammerkop [gathering nest material and showing down to a few feet], Red-billed Hornbill, Grey Woodpecker, Mottled Spinetail and a few terns offshore. After breakfast we had some well-earned downtime before getting ourselves packed and ready for the airport transfer around 1230. Our flight back to London Gatwick departed on time and we arrived back in the UK around 2200.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Little Grebe
2. White Pelican
3. Pink-backed Pelican
4. Hammerkop
5. Hadedda Ibis
6. Great Cormorant
7. Long-tailed Cormorant
8. African Darter
9. Dwarf Bittern
10. Cattle Egret
11. Squacco Heron
12. Striated Heron
13. Black Egret
14. Intermediate Egret
15. Western Reef Heron
16. Little Egret
17. Great White Egret
18. Black-headed Heron
19. Grey Heron
20. Goliath Heron
21. Purple Heron
22. White-faced Whistling Duck
23. African Pygmy Goose
24. Osprey
25. African Fish Eagle
26. African Harrier-Hawk

27. Palm-nut Vulture
28. Hooded Vulture
29. Pied Crow
30. Wahlberg's Eagle
31. Beadoun's Snake-eagle
32. Tawny Eagle
33. Yellow-billed Kite
34. Black-winged Kite
35. Eurasian Marsh Harrier
36. Dark Chanting Goshawk
37. African Goshawk
38. Gabar Goshawk
39. Shikra
40. Lizard Buzzard
41. Lanner
42. Grey Kestrel
43. Double-spurred Francolin
44. Black Crake
45. Common Moorhen
46. African Purple Gallinule
47. White-spotted Flufftail
48. Greater Painted Snipe
49. African Jacana
50. Pied Avocet
51. Senegal Thick-Knee
52. Spur-winged Plover
53. Wattled Plover
54. Grey Plover
55. Common Ringed Plover
56. White-fronted Plover
57. Eurasian Whimbrel
58. Hudsonian Whimbrel
59. Bar-tailed Godwit
60. Black-tailed Godwit
61. Common Greenshank
62. Common Sandpiper
63. Green Sandpiper
64. Wood Sandpiper
65. Marsh Sandpiper
66. Curlew Sandpiper
67. Common Redshank
68. Common Snipe
69. Eurasian Oystercatcher
70. Black-winged Stilt
71. Ruddy Turnstone
72. Sanderling
73. Pomarine Skua
74. Grey-headed Gull
75. Slender-billed Gull
76. Kelp Gull
77. Lesser Black-backed Gull
78. Caspian Tern
79. Royal Tern
80. Lesser Crested Tern
81. Sandwich Tern

82. Gull-billed Tern
83. Common Tern
84. Laughing Dove
85. Blue-spotted Wood-dove
86. Black-billed Wood-dove
87. Speckled Pigeon
88. African Green Pigeon
89. Red-eyed Dove
90. African Mourning Dove
91. Vinaceous Dove
92. Piapiac
93. Senegal Coucal
94. Klaas's Cuckoo
95. Levaillant's Cuckoo
96. African Cuckoo
97. Diderick Cuckoo
98. Verraux's Eagle Owl
99. White-faced Scop's Owl
100. Pearl-spotted Owlet
101. Long-tailed Nightjar
102. Pallid Swift
103. Little Swift
104. Mottled Spinetail
105. African Palm Swift
106. Green Wood-Hoopoe
107. Giant Kingfisher
108. Woodland Kingfisher
109. Blue-breasted Kingfisher
110. Grey-headed Kingfisher
111. Pied Kingfisher
112. African Pygmy Kingfisher
113. Malachite Kingfisher
114. Broad-billed Roller
115. Blue-bellied Roller
116. Rufous-crowned Roller
117. Abyssinian Roller
118. Swallow-tailed Bee-eater
119. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
120. Little Bee-eater
121. White-throated Bee-eater
122. Rose-ringed Parakeet
123. Senegal Parrot
124. Violet Turaco
125. Western Grey Plantain-eater
126. Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird
127. Bearded Barbet
128. Veillot's Barbet
129. African Pied Hornbill
130. African Grey Hornbill
131. Red-billed Hornbill
132. Grey Woodpecker
133. Fine-spotted Woodpecker
134. Buff-spotted Woodpecker
135. Crested Lark
136. Fanti Saw-wing Swallow

137. Wire-tailed Swallow
138. Mosque Swallow
139. Red-chested Swallow
140. African Golden Oriole
141. Fork-tailed Drongo
142. Yellow Wagtail
143. Common Bulbul
144. Little Greenbul
145. Green Hylia
146. Grey-headed Bristlebill
147. Blackcap Babbler
148. Brown Babbler
149. Whinchat
150. White-crowned Robin-chat
151. Snowy-crowned Robin-chat
152. Common Redstart
153. African Thrush
154. European Reed Warbler
155. Western Olivaceous Warbler
156. Melodious Warbler
157. Western Subalpine Warbler
158. Willow Warbler
159. Western Bonelli's Warbler
160. Singing Cisticola
161. Whistling Cisticola
162. Zitting Cisticola
163. Tawny-flanked Prinia
164. Senegal Eremomela
165. Northern Crombec
166. Grey-backed Camaroptera
167. Yellow-breasted Apalis
168. Common Wattle-eye
169. Senegal Batis
170. Northern Black Flycatcher
171. African Paradise Flycatcher
172. Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher
173. Variable Sunbird
174. Scarlet-chested Sunbird
175. Violet-backed Sunbird
176. Splendid Sunbird
177. Beautiful Sunbird
178. Copper Sunbird
179. Black-crowned Tchagra
180. Yellow-crowned Gonolek
181. Yellow-billed Shrike
182. Purple Glossy Starling
183. Long-tailed Glossy Starling
184. Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling
185. Yellow-fronted Canary
186. Yellow-billed Oxpecker
187. House Sparrow
188. Grey-headed Sparrow
189. White-billed Buffalo-weaver
190. Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver
191. Northern Red Bishop

- 192. Black-winged Red Bishop
- 193. Yellow-crowned Bishop
- 194. Village Weaver
- 195. Little Weaver
- 196. Black-necked Weaver
- 197. Vitelline Masked Weaver
- 198. Yellow-backed Weaver
- 199. Western Bluebill
- 200. Lavendar Waxbill
- 201. Orange-cheeked Waxbill
- 202. Black-rumped Waxbill
- 203. Red-cheeked Cordon-Bleu
- 204. Red-billed Firefinch
- 205. Bronze Mannikin
- 206. Village Indigobird
- 207. Pin-tailed Whydah
- 208. African Silverbill

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