

Ethiopia

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Participants:

Lyn Griffiths
Simon Fogg
Kerry Harrison
Ian Taylor
John Mortemore
Ruth Hayman
Pauline Montgomery
David Jones
Bob Pease
Susan Sayers
Andrew Senior
Graham Senior
John Sutherby

Leaders: Solomon Berhe and Ray O'Reilly



Prince Ruspoli's Turaco

It gave me great pleasure to be able to co-lead this year's Birdfinders tour to Ethiopia with expert African birder Solomon Berhe, and it was a memorable occasion for all of us that were involved. Ethiopia is one of the world's oldest countries, located in the northeast of the continent. It is a mountainous country with the Great Rift Valley being a prominent feature. It has the greatest preponderance of world heritage sites in Africa and is famous for its extraordinary Olympic long-distance runners (many of whom we saw training) and rock-hewn churches (literally carved out of rock). It boasts the origin of the coffee bean and under the leadership of Emperor Haile Selassie I, became a member of the League of Nations and has been a defining figure in both European and African history. When several other African countries gained independence they adopted Ethiopia's national flag colours of red, gold and green as symbolic of Africa. The Ethiopian Julian Calendar amazingly has 13 months each containing 30 days and single month containing just 5 or 6 days between our August and November. But it was the wonderful scenery and unique wildlife that I especially relished and I was not disappointed.

Day 1: The tour started well with the group checking in on time but leaving Heathrow slightly late. However, we managed to catch our connecting flight and we arrived on time at Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa at the foot of Mount Entoto. After an extremely quick transit through customs, we changed our money into Burr and met Solomon and Andreas our driver and headed to the Ghion Hotel. Addis Ababa was named by Queen Taitu and the name means "New Flower" she was inspired to name the city after a flowering Mimosa Acacia Tree! En route we passed by some establishments with enchanting names such as The Jolly Shop, Bolewood (after the airport) and The Honey Pub. It was a short journey and we were soon resting for what was left of the night and excited as what the morning would bring.

Day 2: After breakfast, we had a brief look around the hotel gardens (we would have more time during the tour to experience how special they were). One of the first birds enjoyed were shining Tacazze Sunbirds (incidentally the word tacazze translates as purple in Swahili), they were drinking nectar from a Bottle-brush Tree. Other species watched included Pale Flycatcher, Dusky Turtle-dove and Montane White-eye, which is also known as Broad-ringed White-eye, its bizarre 'spectacles' actually look ridiculous! Black (Yellow-billed) Kites glided overhead, a Mountain Thrush was scoped and a pair of incredible Thick-billed Ravens brought gasps from the whole group as they were such impressive birds that they were voted joint bird of the trip along with two other species.

Driving north out of town on Highway 3, we started noticing common roadside birds for this altitude: Sacred Ibis, Speckled Pigeon, Pied Crow, Swainson's Sparrow and lots of Hooded Vultures at the kerbside that were looking for tidbits. They are one of the smallest vultures in the world and unafraid of humans. There were also prodigious numbers of Nyanza Swifts whizzing above St George's Square (complete with bust to commemorate a famous battle). The swift is named after the Bantu word for lake and this dark brown *Apus* is best appreciated when flying against a dark background.

As we started to climb, we passed through sterile Eucalyptus Forest (this insidious Ribbon Tree has rapidly spread after being introduced from Australia). However we soon passed through it and made our first birding stop of the tour at the amazing Sululta Plain and as with any first day's birding in a new country, one didn't know what to look at first in this high altitude grassland as the birds came thick and fast. We marvelled at bright Yellow Bishops feeding on buttercup-coloured Meskel flowers, Cattle Egrets, White Storks, at least 50 Wattled Ibises with their wattles swinging to and fro like a pendulum. The aptly named Yellow-billed Duck, Garganey and a pair of African Black Ducks complete with five ducklings. A male Pallid Harrier glided past, both light- and dark-morph Augur Buzzards, Tawny and Steppe Eagles proving a good ID test, Common Kestrel, Lanner Falcon and another endemic in the shape of a White-collared Pigeon that is found only in Eritrea and Ethiopia and it is featured on the latter country's stamps. We also spied Speckled Mousebird and European Bee-eater. Palearctic migrants would be a major feature of this tour here on their wintering grounds, more surprisingly was that many of them had already moulted out of their basic plumage and were back in their breeding dress, a real bonus! The scopes were busy as we watched Thekla and the endemic Erlanger's Larks (named after Baron Carlo von Erlanger he was a German collector who travelled to Ethiopia twice in 1893 and 1897 and wrote one more trip report than me, so far anyway). This is indeed a bonny red-crested lark and was pretty common and tame here. Plain Martins buzzed us and we watched Long-billed and Red-throated Pipits (the latter showing salmon pink throats). Whinchats were admired as were Northern, Pied, Red-breasted and Isabelline Wheatears, and Moorland Chats were abundant. But it was soon time for another very special bird that is the sole member of its genus, the erect-postured Groundscraper Thrush which was numerous and put on quite a show for us. Ethiopian Cisticolas were singing confidently in the open as were Tawny-flanked Prinias. Shrikes were also on the lookout with both Isabelline and Common Fiscal prowling. Cape Rooks shone iridescent in the sun purple-blue as did the scintillating Greater Blue-eared Glossy-starlings and Red-billed Oxpeckers clung to livestock (they are closely related to the starling family and are one of just two species in the genus, who line their nests with hair plucked from livestock). Whilst removing ticks from mammals they also keep any wounds open by feeding on their blood. There were a few trees scattered about the grassland and some freshwater pools were still present from the recent rains so the area was relatively verdant. Baglefecht Weaver became the first member of this challenging group of birds to enter the trip list and some of the group enjoyed views of White-winged Widowbirds, the only sighting of the tour. Small finches were apparent in the shape of Red-cheeked Cordonbleu and Red-billed Firefinches and Ortolan Buntings were a nice find. Black-headed Siskin, Streaky and Brown-rumped Seedeaters were also all recorded.

We headed back to the vehicle and were proceeding back along highway 4 when Andreas was pulled over for not wearing his seatbelt and was admonished severely, but he did not learn his lesson and this was to be a re-occurring misdemeanor throughout our time with him and caused much amusement. A toilet stop produced Tree Pipit and African Stonechat of the local race *albofasciatus*. Shortly after this we stopped at another wetland area where locals were washing their clothes, cornflower-blue skimmers (dragonflies) abounded

collecting salt and our stop coincided with a raptor-fest as many vultures were slowly gaining height on the thermals. They included White-backed, Rüppell's, Lappet-faced and White-headed Vultures, a Common Buzzard of the steppe race *vulpinus* was noted and our first of many write-ins of the holiday a fine African Hobby that put on a real display for us. The pools themselves produced several sought-after birds, including the rather quiet Blue-winged Goose; this red-listed vulnerable goose belongs in its own genus and is also endemic to Ethiopia. The unobtrusive Three-banded Plover and Temminck's Stint was also added together with several species of commoner European waders including Ruff and Wood and Green Sandpipers.

Lunchtime brought us to the grounds of the Etio Germany Park Hotel, which overlooked an immense gorge, and the al fresco dining area supports a splendid vista. The area is also known as the Portuguese Bridge and is part of the Debre Libanos Gorge. We birdwatched from the veranda as we ate lunch watching Lammergeiers (the black-bristly feathers give it its alternative name of Bearded Vulture), Fan-tailed Ravens and Verreaux's Eagles at head height. White-winged Cliff-chat, Rüppell's Chat and Erckel's Francolins were watched (the latter with chicks). Theodore Erckel was a taxidermist friend of Wilhelm Rüppell and they visited Ethiopia together and Rüppell named the francolin after his dear friend. We were soon in for a laugh as Andy had part of his lunch pilfered by a swooping Black (Yellow-billed) Kite who gleefully flew off with it tightly grasped in its talons. Fragrant Wild Lavender filled the air here and we all marvelled at the sight of a close African Harrier-hawk (locally it is also known as Gymnogone) as it perched atop a bush. We went for a scenic walk and photographed our first primates, a large troop of Gelada's or Lion-headed Baboons that contained one leucistic individual. Rock Hyrax were scampering around the crags and we observed White-billed Starling, Hemprich's Hornbill, Black Saw-wing (they are known also as Brown Saw-wing, which is the colour of the juvenile birds) and Rock Martins. We found Rüppell's Vultures nesting and many Variable Sunbirds in an array of plumages. We then boarded our chariot and started heading back towards Addis Ababa for our second night in the Ghion Hotel. We drove back across the Sululta Plain and stopped late afternoon at a fairly large lake that contained myriads of waterbirds. Walking out to the foreshore, we watched Little Grebe, Long-tailed and Great Cormorants (the latter of the White-breasted race *lucidus*), Black-headed Heron, Intermediate Egrets, Yellow-billed Stork, Glossy Ibis, African Spoonbill, numerous common wintering European dabbling ducks, Black-shouldered Kite, African Fish-eagle, Black-winged Lapwing, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocets and Hamerkops (their anvil-shaped head being the subject of many legends including that of "he who destroys its nest will contract leprosy"). Also, truly wild Egyptian Goose, a ubiquitous bird in Ethiopia and the only surviving member of its genus at least three other members have become extinct in recent times. Introduced to Britain it is proliferating in Southern England and has broken away from its East Anglian stronghold.

Day 3: This morning on our way out of town we picked up Marshall, Solomon's trainee, who turned out to be a great asset and greatly helped towards the success of the trip. We were soon trundling along highway 6 in a southerly direction onto a wide open plain that is part of the Great Rift Valley and as we descended altitude new birds were spotted. Red-eyed Dove was quickly added and the route was brightened up by crimson Flame Trees dotted along the roadside displaying their vermilion flowers. At Cheleklek Marsh on Lake Koka we stopped by some greenhouse that were used for cultivating flowers for export and birded the surrounding farmland. Naturalised flora abounded here especially Gallant Soldier and Thorn Apple, through the Phragmites small patches of open water could be viewed and there was much birdlife as we watched Great Crested Grebe and Great White Pelican with their bright pink skin around their eyes and their drabber smaller cousins Pink-backed Pelican. African Darters were present with many drying their wings (they are also known as the Snakebird as it has a habit of swimming with its body submerged and just its serpent-like head above the surface). Squacco Heron, Little and Great Egrets were studied and our first Marabou Storks going by the nickname of undertaker bird as they gorge on dead animals. The word marabou is derived from French meaning Holy Man. Greater and Lesser Flamingos, White-faced Whistling, White-backed and Knob-billed Ducks were all seen (the latter is also known as Comb Duck). A pair of Mallards were found that turned out to be the only sighting of the tour, and still further new wildfowl were watched: Spur-winged Goose, Red-billed Duck, Hottentot Teal and Southern Pochard.

Throughout the day we enjoyed twenty African Fish-eagles often devouring their prey and giving their resonating call that penetrates far and wide and is quintessentially the sound of Africa. These charismatic vociferous raptors are the national bird of some African countries and even young crocodiles feature in their diet! More birds of prey were found: Western Marsh-harrier and Imperial and Booted Eagles whilst a Long-crested Eagle was observed shortly afterwards standing sentinel on a telegraph pole with its crest billowing in the wind. We 'scoped several African Jacanas with their blue bills and shields and extraordinarily long toes, the males, like phalaropes, take responsibility for egg incubation. Red-knobbed or Crested Coots, Spur-winged Lapwing, Gull-billed and White-winged Terns and Laughing and African Mourning Dove were all seen, as in the very different American Mourning Dove known for its forlorn call. Namaqua Doves were also showing well. This striking, tiny dove is named after an African ethnic group of people the Nama's whose main population lives in Namibia, early Dutch colonialists referred to them as Hottentots, and the birds range extends to the north into Arabia.

Little and White-rumped Swifts and Eurasian Hoopoes were on view as were many Malachite Kingfisher who are named after their bright green hue, they occur as vagrants in the middle east as far north as Oman, and beautiful Northern Carmine Bee-eaters that skimmed low over the meadows. Dave and some other lucky observers found four Chestnut Sparrows on some telegraph wires, which were the only record of the tour. Little Bee-eater, Village Indigobird, African Citril (not a species of high altitude here) and Northern Red Bishop all put in an appearance but we were still not finished as Red-eyed Rüppell's Weavers were soon found. This is the only weaver that naturally occurs in Arabia and they are noticeable by their convoluted nests. Wilhelm Rüppell (who also has several other birds named after him) was so enthusiastic that his expeditions left him somewhat impoverished. Although he had many friends he also had a foe in the form of Dr Jacob Cretzschmar of the bunting fame.

Flocks of Red-billed Quelea inhabited the reeds, claimed to be the world's most abundant wild bird with an estimated population of around 1.5 billion. Although restricted to sub-Saharan Africa, it is said that flocks can block out the sun and take up to five hours to fly past. Our next birding stop was at the superb Koka Dam at Lake Ziway whose barrage stretches the River Awash and luckily we had chance for a future visit here later on the holiday. Beautiful lilac-coloured Water Hyacinth bloomed in the water and Marsh Sandpipers were delicately feeding by the roadside, Senegal Thick-knees favoured the stony banks, Wire-tailed Swallows were perched on twigs protruding out of the lake their tail feathering reflected off the water, and four Bruce's Green-pigeons (named after the Reverend Henry Bruce an American missionary who also has a scops-owl named after him) were merrily feeding on ripe figs. Two African Pied Wagtails catching insects on a pontoon were much admired as were a pair of Black Crowned Cranes (they are listed as near threatened along with the Grey Crowned-crane and are the only cranes that nest in trees). Some very large Nile Monitors were warming themselves up before a swim.

After lunch, we had a look at a small patch of woodland on the shore of Lake Ziway where at least fifty Grey-headed Gulls were observed in a multitude of plumages scattering the beach, Whiskered Terns were feeding offshore and yet more Marabou Storks dominated the environment. A fine Banded Martin performed for us as did a flock of Fulvous Whistling-ducks. Landbirds were particularly apparent here and we saw ten Blue-breasted Bee-eaters (an extremely dandy charismatic bird), Red-billed Hornbill, Red-fronted Tinkerbird and a superb Rufous-necked Wryneck. Along with Eurasian Wryneck that we occasionally see at home, they are the sole members of the unique *Jynx* genus of woodpeckers and on this trip we were able to study both species. African Grey-headed Woodpecker was found as was Yellow-bellied Eremomela and wintering Willow Warblers were in sub-song. Red-faced Crombec was enjoyed (this tailless African warbler that is constantly foraging moves from tree to tree and is often in amongst other bird flocks (it is named after Alexander Whyte (*whytii*) a naturalist who spent time in Malawi). African Dusky Flycatcher, Black-headed Batis and the very long-tailed Grey-headed Fiscal were additions to the trip list (like most shrikes its scientific names proclaims its fondness for keeping guard). Beautiful Sunbirds were watched feeding young together with a couple of beautifully coloured Superb Starlings. White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Fork-tailed Drongo, Stout Cisticola, Common Bulbul and Reichenow's Seedeater were all seen before we got back to the bus. We took a short journey to another area of flooded fields and small pools with some mangroves. Many

of the birds here were tame and Black Egrets spread their wings umbrella fashion as they fished in the shallows whilst a Goliath Heron was 'scoped. This is the world's largest heron and in flight it has a slow ponderous look about it. Yellow Wagtails were abundant and many were in fine livery with both Black-headed and Grey-headed races being identified. A migrant Sedge Warbler was watched by all, it may have spent the summer in the UK! An African Darter was seen to spear a perch-like fish and we watched in awe as it wriggled it off its bill into its mouth without losing it. Much to Simon's delight, I picked up a pair of African Pygmy-geese, he had finally nailed this bogey-bird! Surprisingly, its scientific name *autitus* refers to it being long-eared or attentive; surely this is named after its green ear patches? Giant and Pied Kingfishers juxtaposed for size, a Woodland Kingfisher added a splash of colour whilst rangy Crowned Lapwings pranced the grassland.

Our final stop of the day was in some dry Acacia woodland called the Adami-Tulu Scrubland where Horus Swifts flew low overhead and our first Ring-necked Dove watched us with its black beady eye. Black Scimitar-bill, White-headed Buffalo-weaver, Northern White-crowned Shrike, Marico Sunbird and bright yellow Abyssinian White-eyes of the race *poliogastrus* were all viewed as was a stunning white-tailed African Paradise-flycatcher and our first of many Grey-backed Camaropteras. Grey Kestrel, Orange-bellied Parrot, a pair of Striped Kingfishers and a Dark Chanting-goshawk finished off another memorable day. The lasting memory of the day was of locals cutting a crop with scythes whose heads were being buzzed by Northern Carmine Bee-eaters and a mixed flock of swallows hawking the insects that were being disturbed. We spent the night at the Lewi Hotel, Awasa. The city lies on the Trans African Highway and this road winds from Cairo to Cape Town! The main industry here is fishing from the natural freshwater Lake Awasa that is held in a basin without any outflow whatsoever.

Day 4: Today we travelled southeast on Highway 44 out to Negele Borona, deep in the Ethiopian hinterlands. It was a memorable journey as the highway was being developed, the road was brightened up by fiery-red Aloes, Candelabra Trees and False Banana Plants which the local people use the roots for mixing into a nutritional paste like a type of vegemite. Roadside vendors were selling fruit, wicker baskets and bundles of the narcotic drug Ghat or Chat as it is called here. We stopped just outside Awasa and watched three Silvery-cheeked Hornbills and a small flock of endemic Black-winged Lovebirds. This is the largest of the lovebird genus and found only in this region. They are unfortunately sometimes kept as pets. Along the highway there is much ribbon development much of which is thatched mud huts. During a toilet stop I was lucky enough to find a nesting pair of Yellow-bellied Waxbills, whilst Pin-tailed Whydahs and Bare-faced Go-away-birds were also admired. We had a picnic lunch at a superb highland meadow where Simon found a stately pair of Wattled Cranes. It is the second largest crane in the world and red-listed as vulnerable, we duly 'scoped them up as they nonchalantly wandered across the fields. Woolly-necked Stork, Hadada Ibis and Wattled Lapwing were all observed. Rouget's Rail was high on everybody's want list as it is an endemic that is red-listed as near-threatened and also belongs in its own genus. This showy aquatic rail has everything going for it, and they were much admired by the whole group. The bird is named after a French explorer who collected specimens in Ethiopia during 1839–1840. A group of staggering Abyssinian Ground-hornbills were pointed out by Bob.

A late afternoon stop in some woodland yielded White-rumped Babbler, Blackcap, Lesser Whitethroat, Northern Black-flycatcher, Abyssinian Oriole, Red-backed Shrike, Red-winged Starling, Abyssinian Waxbill, Yellow-crowned Canary and the star bird, seven Prince Ruspoli's Turacos. This is an outstanding endemic gem and this delightful bird is named after Prince Eugenio Ruspoli an Italian aristocrat and explorer who collected the bird in around 1892 before he was killed in an encounter with an elephant that he had wounded. We ventured on and checked into the infamous Green Hotel in Bale Road. However I couldn't get used to the local custom of clapping one's hands to attract the waiters attention relying on the very British excuse me. With beer at around thirty pence per bottle they were kept very busy!

Day 5: This morning we did some birding around the hotel gardens that were brightened up with mauve-flowered Jacaranda Trees and magenta Bougainvillea. Driving out of town, we stopped to look at some

hirundines on telegraph wires adjacent to the road in fantastic light. There were two Ethiopian Swallows and four Lesser Striped-swallows, the latter being such a hit that it was short-listed in the bird of the trip vote.

We stopped at an area of bush south of the town where we saw Crested Francolin, White-bellied Go-away-bird, African Thrush, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, African Black-headed Oriole and White-crowned Starling. It was a short journey to the Liben Plains, which is the home of the Sidamo Lark. This distinctive leggy, long-necked endemic has an extraordinary display flight and we were left awestruck as one bird exhibited this flamboyance at very close quarters. They are named after the Sadamo tribe of people and this red-listed endangered restricted-range lark was discovered only in 1968 and is at risk from habitat destruction. The plain was very reminiscent of Extremadura in Spain and so were the birds we watched large flocks of Lesser Kestrels, seven Montagu's Harriers, Eurasian Hobby, Tawny Pipits and European Roller. There were, however, also African birds to admire as Simon found a Kori Bustard that was joined by another and simply walked straight towards us, before doing an impressive fly past. A small pool of water brought a lifer for many of us with five African Openbills and a splendid adult Bateleur drifted low overhead. The sensational Bateleur often pair for life and its scientific name proclaims it as tailless. Temminck's Coursers took some searching for but it was not fruitless and we had excellent views of five birds. They are named along with the stint and many other birds after Dutch ornithologist Coenraad Temminck who was extremely wealthy and kept many live specimens as well as collecting skins. His father Jacob also collected skins and was good friends with François Levaillant, the naturalist from Dutch Guiana, now called Suriname. Lilac-breasted and Rufous-crowned Rollers were present and another sought after lark the Somali Short-toed proved to be a very obvious looking species when seen. We also found a pair of Pectoral-patch Cisticolas that were admired.

We then visited a Sidamo settlement and around the habitation we found Dwarf Raven formerly called Somali Crow, Cut-throat Finch, Shelley's Starling and Shelley's Rufous Sparrow. Captain George Shelley was actually the nephew of the famous poet, and related to Mary Shelley, the authoress of Frankenstein. He wrote books on Egypt and had a special love for sunbirds. He suffered a debilitating stroke which left him paralysed in 1906 and his travelling days were no more but not before he had seven different birds named after him and not one but two of his beloved sunbirds. We went back to the Green Hotel for lunch and a rest in the middle of the day. Afterwards, close to the hotel, we saw the monstrous Grey-headed Bush-shrike and a small colony of Village Weavers.

We headed out mid-afternoon heading eastward on highway 44 and birded some very vicious thorny-scrubland that had some impressively tall termite mounds where we watched a pair of smart White-tailed Swallows hawking these mounds and a diminutive Salt's Dik-dik idled by. We watched many new birds for the tour this afternoon: Red-billed Buffalo-weaver, Yellow-spotted Petronia, Vitelline Masked-weaver and Red-headed Weavers. Bob found a shocking Rosy-patched Bush-shrike that looked like it had been opened up with a samurai sword. It is a beautiful bird that is coveted by Western Palearctic bird-listers as its range extends just into southern Egypt. Slate-coloured Boubou was also watched and is the only dull-grey shrike in the region; this rather shy bird is often seen in pairs. Its scientific name of *funebri* in Latin announces it as murderous, very apt for a shrike. European Golden Oriole, Common Whitethroat and Spotted Flycatchers were already this far south, the richly-vocal Grey Wren-warblers were busy swishing their tails and the frog-sounding Croaking Cisticolas were prominently singing. Rufous Chatterers were less obvious as they stealthily moved through the undergrowth whilst several White-browed Scrub-robins were showing well as they fanned their tails. Nubian Woodpecker, Greater Honeyguide, Red-fronted Barbet, Emerald-spotted Wood-dove and Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbills were also all seen. Von der Decken's Hornbill was watched. The hornbills and the Giant Lobelias seen later in the tour are named after Baron Von Der Decken, a German explorer, who sent a considerable collection of specimens to Hamburg. He suffered an untimely death after being slaughtered by natives in 1865. A group of Black-billed Woodhoopoes were viewed feeding on the termite mounds and as the sun set we made our way back to base to sit in the garden enjoying a cold beer looking at a rainbow encircling the moon. The peace was shattered that night however, when at 11:10pm Solomon knocked us all up proclaiming that it was 5am the next morning!

Day 6: We left Negele and headed back on Highway 44 north-east towards Yirga Alem where we saw four species of vulture including a very square-headed White-headed Vulture in a startling feeding frenzy dining on a dead dog. During our breakfast stop, David found a splendid Rameron Pigeon that was scoped up in stunning light. We purchased some freshly cooked corn-on-the-cob to munch as we tootled along. We made a few birding stops en-route seeing a pair of Eastern Chanting-goshawks, a couple of fine Wahlberg's Eagles, a Chestnut-naped Francolin feeding on the road allowing close approach, further views of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco, and a Klaas's Cuckoo was heard calling. Three Blue-headed Coucals were watched; its scientific name refers to its monk-like appearance, the head and nape really do look ink-blue in certain light. At one bird-filled stop we saw Pale Prinia, Abyssinian Slaty-flycatcher, Collared Sunbird, Black-crowned Tchagra, Tropical Boubou, Spectacled Weaver, Bronze Mannikin and a magnificent *Zoothera* namely an Abyssinian Ground-thrush. After a long day, we arrived at our lovely quarters at the Aragesh Lodge in time for dinner and a huge Bat Moth was photographed by all that wanted to, we also enjoyed a delicious Guava smoothie before retiring to bed.

Day 7: Most of us were up for a pre-breakfast birding sojourn around the hotel grounds that are set in forest. It is in a beautiful setting close the town of Yirgalem, also known as Irgalem, located some 260 km south of Addis Ababa and was occupied by the Italians from 1936 during the Second World War. David found a fine specimen of a Little Sparrowhawk, which was shortly followed by an African Goshawk that I picked up. We also had super views of a Tambourine Dove and three endemic Yellow-fronted Parrots were eating figs outside the dining room with an Ochre Bush Squirrel also partial to the fruit. The gardens were a riot of colour with Flame Trees and Fritillaries with their hanging bell-shaped flowers. Vervet Monkeys were scampering around the gardens looking for anything that they could obtain being indeed 'cheeky monkeys'. It was here that we conclusively identified a White-browed Robin-chat as one specimen was showing well for long periods of time. They are members of a tricky group of birds to identify and often sparked much deliberation throughout our holiday. Pale Flycatcher was once again also studied before an excellent later than usual breakfast.

We packed up the vehicle and we were underway travelling south on highway 6 towards Yabello. During our journey, we bought some fresh pineapple and stopped to watch a small group of Abdim's Stork, their blue facial skin shining in the sunlight. Bey El-Arnaut Abdim was a Turkish governor in Sudan and he was of such great assistance to Wilhelm Rüppell that he named this stork after him in his honour. During the journey today, one thing that was apparent was how friendly everybody was, giving us big wide smiles and waving profusely. It was a pleasure for us to give out some confectionary and stationary. Even though we could only give to such a small number of the people that we met, brightening their days up with their joyous expressions was a sight to behold. We also just avoided a jay walking Hadada Ibis that just strolled across the trans-African highway 6 on a death mission. Cassia Bushes, with their pyramidal yellow flowers, added a splash of colour to the scenery during our journey.

We arrived at an area of sandy Acacia scrub covered habitat mid-afternoon and set off to search for Stresemann's Bush-crow, which is named after the German Ornithologist Professor Erwin Stresemann. He was curator of birds at the Berlin Natural History Museum and we soon found eight of these confiding red-listed endangered and endemic very special birds that allowed close photography and it was easy to see why this species is on the front of the *Birds of the Horn of Africa*, a deserving accolade. Several other avian delights were on show namely Yellow-vented Eremomela, Foxy Lark sometimes known as the Abyssinian Lark with its distinctive teardrop mark on its face, the formidable Bearded Woodpecker and d'Arnauld's Barbet. The latter bird with its bristle-bill, is named after a French pioneer explorer who after finding the source of the White Nile travelled in Abyssinia. A pair of African Grey Hornbills, a single Pearl-spotted Owlet and a Northern Puffback was also present. This shrike has a liking for tall trees and the puff-back display of the male alters its shape into a soft woolly ball. Another Grey Kestrel and an African Harrier-hawk finished off the day and we retired to our motel in Yabello.

Day 8: We had a pre-breakfast walk to the outskirts of town to an area of farmland with a mosque and some Acacia trees with a rocky craggy escarpment. It was a bird-filled early morning that included bright yellow

Abyssinian White-eyes, some of which had bright orange throats presumably dyed from nectar, a Little Weaver, a colony of Lesser Masked-weavers, Grey-capped Social-weavers, Brubru, Northern Grey Tit, Mouse-coloured Penduline-tit, Grey-headed Batis, Buff-bellied Warbler in song, Banded Parisoma, Spotted Mourning-thrush and three displaying Mocking Cliff-chats. As we strolled back to breakfast, some of the group bought Samosas from local costermongers. We left town southwards and entered the Yabello Wildlife Sanctuary with our packed lunch heading towards the Kenyan border and after a short time Solomon spotted a splendid cock Straw-tailed Whydah the first of ten birds this afternoon. Simon found a Pygmy Falcon, and a further three were later watched, and when we stopped the bus to follow up a Bare-eyed Thrush, we stumbled across several bird flocks which gave us an eclectic mix of species: Gabar Goshawk, White-cheeked Turaco, White-crested Helmet-shrike, Didric Cuckoo, Rattling Cisticola, Black-throated Barbet, Cardinal Woodpecker, Abyssinian Scimitar-bill with its red chough-like bills, Yellow-bellied Apalis, Red-fronted Warbler, Black-capped Social-weaver, Chestnut Weaver and the militarily named Purple Grenadier. Our lunch spot was wisely chosen under the shelter of Acacia trees dominate the region. These savannahs are characterised by giant red termite mounds that apparently always face north. Some tower up to 5 metres high and we watched some more White-tailed Swallows that showed that both the upper and under tail was white as they hawked around the termite mounds. At this site we added three write-ins, Red-naped Bush-shrike, Taita Fiscal (named after a Kenyan tribe of people) and Black-cheeked Waxbill! Both Northern Grosbeak-canary and White-bellied Canaries were also present and while we were watching the bush-shrike I managed to 'pish-in' a Somali Crombec. They are also known as Long-billed Crombecs and this range-restricted stub-tailed bird's plumage is accurately described by its scientific name. We all marvelled at the wonderfully golden-plumaged Somali Bunting whilst we dined a stones throw away from a nesting colony of Black-capped Social-weavers.

Due to our success, we decided to drive back up towards Yabello and en-route, made yet another stop for two more special birds as forty bizarre camera-shy Vulturine Guineafowl and four outrageously-coloured, resplendent Golden-breasted Starlings left the group speechless. We drove out on the appalling Negele track for the last part of the afternoon and found a family party of Verreaux's Eagle-owls, the largest of the African owls and famous for their bright pink eye-lids. They are one of the few birds that will feed on hedgehogs. As their scientific name suggests, they are also known as the Milky Eagle-owl. The Verreaux's name comes from two French brothers: the eagle-owl is named after Jules and the eagle after Jean. A Buff-crested Bustard was enjoyed and then we found our main target, Gillett's Lark. This is another restricted range bird and it is a type of bushlark named after the big game hunter Major F.A. Gillett who died in 1944 during the war.

Dusk fell swiftly and we went back to the hotel to put in our order for dinner and had some refreshments before heading back out and spotlighting closely perched Donaldson-Smith's Nightjar, which was a new will-o'-the-wisp for everyone and a fitting end to a cracking day. Thanks to photographic evidence we realised that a bird that we had found roosting earlier that day was this nightjar species.

Day 9: This morning we all bought some local produce outside the motel and watched a party of Red-winged Starlings before heading north up Highway 6 and having a proper breakfast stop at Agere Maryam. Again, we were greeted by warm friendly people waving and giving us big smiles on our route to Awassa. At a toilet stop, we discovered an impressive Tiger Moth, whilst along much of the route grew naturalised *Daytura* plants with their preposterously large magnolia trumpet shaped flowers embellishing the verdant roadsides. We arrived in Awassa around mid-afternoon and birded the excellent hotel gardens. Late afternoon, we walked to the lakeside where it was nice to see some more waterbirds including seven White Storks and a dozen African Pygmy-geese. We watched with open mouths as a Banded Snake-eagle caught a serpent and preceded to devourer it in front of us. We visited a nearby patch of reedbed and found several Black Crakes. Fortunately, this bird is rarely hunted due to its unpalatable flesh, although it is rather aggressive to other birds especially rails and crakes. They have frequently been observed perched upon hippopotamuses and warthogs removing parasites. We also watched Lesser Swamp-warbler. This fairly large dark *Acrocephalus* warbler is also known as Cape Reed Warbler and has a preference for *Phragmites*. A Grey-headed Kingfisher allowed all of us to who needed to play catch up to do so, Lyn found a Grey Wagtail, we saw our first Common Redstart of the tour together with a Common Whitethroat of the eastern race *icterops* whilst other

wintering birds that were evident in large numbers were European Reed-warblers and Sedge Warblers. The hotel gardens came up trumps with fine views of a pair of Spotted Creepers, a species of arid terrain, with a distribution south of the Sahara in Africa and also Northern India. A Narina Trogon put on a show. The bird is named after a beautiful Hottentot or Khoi-khoi girl and in that language it signifies a flower. Other catch up birds were 'scoped namely Grosbeak Weaver and Spectacled Weaver. In the reeds, we saw small parties of Common Waxbills and several Purple Swamphens complete with young. They were once called Purple Gallinule and in French they are affectionately known as the Sultana Bird. As dusk fell, we made our way upwards to Wondo Genet and dined at the Waba Shebele Hotel where I called the log and we retired for the night.

Day 10: Wondo Genet is famous for its natural hot springs, in fact even the hotel swimming pool and showers use its waters, and it is surrounded by primary forest. The picturesque hotel grounds also support troops of the Grivet form of Vervet Monkeys with long-white hair tufts on the sides of the faces. They are known to be the prey of large snakes and occur only in Sudan and Ethiopia. We studied Guereza or Abyssinian Black-and-white Colobus Monkeys, a stunning pied primate with its calloused rump that allows it to sit for long periods of time on slender branches with its penduline tail dangling.

Early morning birding around the garden soon paid off with a large flock of Slender-billed Starling posing for us. The grounds filled with the sound of Hadada Ibises that were strolling around the lawns. A walk around the hot pools brought us our first Common Chiffchaffs and along an adjacent riverside habitat an African Harrier-hawk was watched displaying, whilst Beautiful and Variable Sunbirds were found nesting on tiny domes. The stream was home to several Mountain Wagtails and its scientific name proclaims that it has a clear '*clara*' call. A Woodland Kingfisher was watched: this is an aggressive, tree-loving startling-looking kingfisher that has been known to even attack humans. They take over woodpecker and barbets nest holes for their own use. The flat roof above the restaurant gave panoramic views and we watched more Rameron Pigeons and Verreaux's Eagles and our first House Martins of the trip. This is actually a high altitude *hirundine* that has descended over a long period of time, hence the feathered legs and feet.

After breakfast, we ascended into the forest for the rest of the morning. African Hill Babblers were heard tantalisingly close and saw Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Banded Barbet, Lesser Honeyguide, Grey Cuckoo-shrike and the coveted endemic Abyssinian Woodpecker. This tiny golden-backed woodpecker is best located by its rapid tapping. A Crowned Hawk-eagle soared over our heads looking indomitable, we watched four Booted Eagles and a closely perched Brown Snake-eagle had us reaching for the field guides until it flew off revealing all. We descended for lunch and a rest for some and others opted for searching for Half-collared Kingfisher. Despite extensive searching and coming tantalisingly close, only John Sutherby and Pauline gaining fine views before the bird disappeared, never to be seen again. The garden primates were once again photographed and mid afternoon we walked up to a forested quarry with a small pool where we had yet another kingfisher: a pair of African Pygmy-kingfishers sat unobtrusively motionless. This diminutive little gem is a quality bird even in this prestigious family. The whole group had views of Lemon Dove who's scientific name refers to it being bewitching! We saw our first cute Little Rock-thrushes whilst Rüppell's Robin-chat and White-winged Cliff-chats showed well. I had brief views of an Abyssinian Crimsonwing an inhabitant of undergrowth in highland forest but it was extremely elusive. We headed back to the Wondo Genet resort with a plan of looking for the missed kingfisher in the morning. We ate a delicious dinner washed down with a couple of beers and I called the log.

Day 11: We got up bright and early this morning so that we could search for the Half-collared Kingfisher but, once again, failed to find it and for me personally found this a bitter pill to swallow which epitomised the lows that one can reach in birding. The mood in the bus was pretty quiet as we set off along Highway 40 and we had to drive much of it along the filter road as the main highway was under construction towards Adaba village that was our lunch stop. Here we saw and heard several Thick-billed Ravens uttering their swine like call that is reminiscent of a grunting pig. At Dodola it becomes Highway 8 and onto Goba across some very high altitude terrain. We stopped to do some birding and mammal watching as we entered the Bale Mountains National Park and were treated to a mammal fest seeing Mountain Nyala, Bohor Reedbuck,

Warthog, Common or Grey Duiker, Spotted Hyena and two Black-backed Jackals feeding on a dead cow. Today was another day that we would see several Lammergeiers and we saw this majestic raptor on no less than 10 separate days during our holiday! We also had our first Shikra and Peregrine Falcon and more Rouget's Rails that were running around our bus, even underneath it. Diligence brought us an African Snipe and we visited a quarry that yielded Blue-spotted Wood-dove and a tremendous Cape Eagle-owl, whilst Alpine Swift was an addition to our growing list. We were delighted to find Abyssinian Longclaws as this is another Ethiopian endemic and a bird of the high grasslands. It is another sought-after species and looks superficially like the North American meadowlarks. When we reached the right altitude, large numbers of Red-billed Choughs were found, often wheeling around in tight flocks whilst Red-collared Widowbird and Yellow Bishops added a splash of colour to the afternoon. Solomon pointed out some Globe Thistles whose globular flowers were the size of large Christmas tree baubles and on entering the park we noticed many St John's Wort Trees that were flowering on the plateau, their sun-coloured petals shining brightly. The people in this region are of the Oromo tribe and are mostly Muslim and as great swathes of people passed us with heavily-laden donkeys and oxen pulling carts, carrying chickens and water, it was reminiscent of biblical times with life virtually unchanged for centuries! We had a comfortable night in Goba where some of us watched live premier league football before dinner and the log. Goba is in south-central Ethiopia some 450 km from Addis Ababa and is renowned for its delicious honey.

Day 12: After breakfast, we headed out of Goba uphill towards the Senetti Plateau. En route, we stopped at an enchanting site just as the sun was warming the mountainside and the light and temperature were just perfect. We birded this beautiful sub-alpine environment and several Abyssinian Catbirds were observed and heard to give their mewing call. This endemic babbler-type species is the sole representative of a monotypic genus and it has some plumage similarities to the Grey Catbird of North America. Today we visited the world famous Bale Mountains National Park with the highest peaks in Ethiopia including the formidable Mount Batu. We found several Brown Woodland-warblers, which is poorly named as this *Phylloscopus* is a delightful diminutive imp with distinctive bright green wing-coverts and rivals any of its rather large genus aesthetically. Several other birds were also watched including Yellow-crowned Canary and Rufous-necked Wryneck. The flora here was also rather impressive including 1.5 metre high Red Hot Pokers. At the main park entrance, we met an official who would have won the Esther Ransen's 'That's Life' award for job's worth of the year and he would have worn that peaked cap proudly. He would not let us into the park as we hadn't purchased our entrance tickets that morning back in Goba. He was completely intransigent and would not lift the park barrier. After several phone calls to this chap's superior from Solomon we finally gain access and continued up the windy road to the summit and the highest road in Africa! As we ascended the Bale Mountain massif (a compact group of mountains) and onto the Sanetti Plain (the home of the Ethiopian Wolf) one could not help noticing the Giant Lobelias in this Afro-alpine habitat. They festoon the countryside and live for around seven years before producing several pink flowers at a height of up to 5 metres. They are pollinated by Moorland (formerly known as Alpine) Chats before seeding and dying off and are red listed as vulnerable. Other vascular plants included Alpine Ragwort and both White and Yellow Everlasting. The many mountain pools held Common Greenshanks that must feel as though they are on their breeding grounds thousands of miles north of here. Ruddy Shelduck and Black Stork were viewed, as was a very special endemic wader, Spot-breasted Lapwing, which was fairly numerous at this altitude and exceedingly tame allowing close photography. Mammals were in abundance and we soon found our first Ethiopian Wolf. This is a red-listed highly endangered canine that rather resembles a fox and is actually omnivorous. We watched them prance and pounce as they tried to catch their prey, the Giant Root Rat, who were coming out of their burrows and were sunning themselves. Other rodents here included the Grey-tailed Ethiopian Meadow Rat. Many of the rocks were encased in orange lichen adding a splash of colour to the vista. We ate lunch before commencing our descent and stopping at a settlement at the treeline. A Golden Eagle soared low overhead casting its shadow on the ground and we soon found the extremely range-restricted Brown Warbler (or Parisoma) of the *griseiventra* race sometimes known as Bale Parisoma who as its name suggests, does not occur outside of this mountain range. Several close Cinnamon Bracken-warblers were found before we rejoined the vehicles and descending slightly further into the predominately juniper forest for some more birding and another impressive endemic, White-backed Black-tit, which were rather easily found and we saw many birds that we had previously recorded such as Little Swift and the rather noisy

Red-chested Cuckoo. After a fairly lengthy hike back to the bus for those that wished, we returned to the hotel for a wash and brush up before supper and the log.

Day 13: Today we went on a sojourn to Sof Omar. Due to the abnormally intense monsoon season, the journey took rather longer than planned. As we travelled along the badly damaged highway 8, a flock of glossy-starlings flew alongside the bus at a similar speed their shimmering emerald-green plumage and short-tails proclaimed them Lesser Blue-eared Glossy-starlings although later in the tour at Bahar Dar, this would become the default starling, but it was new for most of us today. We slowly drove through some extremely fertile agricultural land whose fields of Wheat and Horse Beans were ready for harvesting, a far cry from the many years of drought they had suffered. There were fields of cornflower blue Linseed or Flax plants that were very easy on the eye.

We were deep in the Oromo hinterlands when a stop to stretch our legs brought us Black-crowned Tchagra, Black-shouldered Kite, African Stonechat and numerous scarlet-necked Red-collared Widowbirds. Susan found a mystery falcon that actually turned out to be a Common Kestrel after giving us all plenty of head scratching. Traditional farming methods are used in this region, methods that have been employed for eons of time and these included cattle-drawn ploughs. The habitat at Sof Omar consists of broad-leaved and Acacia woodland so there was plenty of shade. Almost immediately we found our first good bird when a small group of Northern Brownbuls showed for everyone. This plain, warm-eyed bulbul occurs in flocks and has a habit of tail pumping. We had descended to 1600m and this meant we were to enjoy the warmth of the region that is eponymous after a Muslim holy man who lived and worshipped in the area and it is home to a famous cave system. Our main target bird here was Salvadori's Seedeater or Serin, which is one of the most sought-after of the Ethiopian endemics and is also a vulnerable listed endemic finch. It is named after Italian ornithologist Conte Salvadori who was vice-director of the Museum of Zoology at the University of Turin. Several males were easily seen, some of which allowed us prolonged 'scope views. Bristle-crowned Starlings were watched and marvelled at as they clambered over Bactrian Cattle. This special starling is another bird named after Conte Salvadori and is one of the largest of the red-winged starling complex with an exceptionally long tail. Egyptian Vultures were soaring within the valley, as did our second Bateleur of the trip.

We ate lunch under a tree with Vervet Monkeys sharing our food and posing for photographs and a group of locals joined us one of whom apocryphal claimed to be a direct descendent of the imam Sof Omar. A spectacular African Hawk-eagle glided in front of us and perched in a tree for us all to study its plumage. We wanted to explore the mysterious caves that are set deep in the valley so we birded our way to the entrance. A covey of Crested Francolins, several Emerald-spotted Wood-doves, many White-bellied Go-away-birds, a large flock of wintering Common Swifts, a group of Black-billed Woodhoopoe, and three species of hornbill were viewed and Lesser Whitethroats found this valley a fine wintering ground. Northern Crombec continued to elude Ian as we failed to get him onto one, although he would finally lay this ghost to rest later during our holiday. The whole group caught up with Shining Sunbird; many of the cock birds who indeed shine and were simply scintillating. We arrived at the mouth of the caverns that extend into the Oromo interior some 75 km. The opening sits by the bank of a picturesque river whose tributaries flow through the subterranean system and form a mirror of illusion. It was explained that one particularly domed chamber was once used as a mosque and was a veritable holy shrine. We found a small colony of Horseshoe Bats that we filmed before exiting the caves and making our way out of the valley back to the bus that was parked by a tiny settlement with both Ruth and John Mortemore making the journey as pillion riders of a motorbike! Careful checking of doves around the settlement paid off when I found spanking pair of gleaming African Collared-doves showing why they were once called Pink-headed Dove. Spectacular birds were not finished today as on the road back to base, Solomon found a superb Jacobin Cuckoo that showed well for us. En-route home, we stopped at the second village to be called Goro on this road (how confusing) and drank a cold Miranda (orangeade) and ate freshly made Samosas whose tasty fillings included black beans, spicy rice and potato. We arrived back in Goba for a rather late supper, log and cold beer.

Day 14: After a brief look around the hotel gardens, nothing new was added so we were back on the road heading west towards our lunch stop once again at Adaba. We once again stopped within the National Park to

do some high altitude moorland hunting for the Moorland Francolin managing three birds and nine Chestnut-naped Francolins. More Mountain Nyalas showed us what an impressive mammal this is and further views of Abyssinian Longclaws were appreciated. We stopped at a small settlement and looked at a flock of a dozen or so Dwarf Ravens that were sifting through some rubbish proving what we all know that not all birding is romantic. We purchased some baked potatoes to supplement our diet from roadside vendors. The road back seemed even worse than going and so there were few stops although both Red-throated and Tree Pipits were discovered. Late afternoon we reached the town of Sashemene and as we drove through a suburb of the town, we saw some of 100 Rastafarian families that live here. They mostly hail from Jamaica although some are from Ethiopia and England. We also saw the churches dedicated to Emperor Haile Selassie I, proclaimed as Jah, and the Zion shops specialising in dreadlocks and clothes with ganga leaves on. We arrived at the village of Arsi Negale, a completely different village to Negale Borona that we had visited earlier as both places go by the name of simply Negale. Because of an injury to one of the group, we had to visit a doctor's surgery down a back street. It was very busy but we were immediately moved to the front of the queue, as the doctor was worried that an injured arm may get infected. All in all, we could not have received a better and more attentive service if we had been anywhere in the world. The doctor seemed to have an affection for Brits having been trained by an Englishman. Despite our detour we were in the Bekel Mola Hotel on the shores of Lake Langano in good time for dinner with plenty of time for relaxing before bedtime.

Day 15: The Bekel Mola Hotel stands right on the shore of Lake Langano with views of the impressive Arsi Mountains in the distance. The lake is a popular place lying in the Central Ethiopian Rift Valley and forms a group of three lakes that are rather brown in colouration and are free of Snail Fever. They are, of course, a magnet for wildlife and despite being at the epicentre of two major earthquakes during the last century, are still surrounded by woodland ensuring some superb birding in and around the hotel grounds. An early morning walk around these colourful grounds brought us many birds especially Palearctic migrants such as Spotted Flycatcher, Blue Rock-thrush, Common Nightingale, Common Redstart, Eurasian Wryneck, Masked Shrike, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat, and African birds included Black-billed and Banded Barbets. Black Scimitar-bills were probing in a rotting stump foraging for larvae, Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Mocking Cliff-chat, Brubru and nesting Namaqua Doves were watched. Several Blue-naped Mousebirds were discovered. This long-tailed, grey bird has also been called Blue-naped Coly in the past. Three Cardinal Woodpeckers put in an appearance as did Rufous Chatterer and Buff-bellied Warbler and on the mammal front, we found a small colony of the superbly named Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bat.

What are the chances of being killed by an elephant? It must be small even in Africa but having said this, no fewer than three naturalists who have animals named after them, James, Prince Eugenio Ruspoli and Johan Wahlberg, were all killed by such beasts! The hotel gardens abutted a rocky buff that we explored more thoroughly after breakfast and spent time studying cock and hen Mourning (Abyssinian) Wheatears. We moved on to another nearby hotel garden on the lakeshore further north, predictably called once again the Webe Shebelle Hotel, where we easily found our target species, Greyish Eagle-owl, which perched showing well and became our third species of eagle-owl of the tour. We also found and photographed a splendid roosting Slender-tailed Nightjar with its long-graduated tail. We had cold drinks and lunch on the balcony overlooking the lake. I went for a short walk and found a cracking adult male Common (Ehrenberg's) Redstart in full breeding livery that stayed in the same area for all to see.

After lunch, we ventured to the nearby Rift Lakes National Park and we visited the amazing Lake Abijatta. It was just how one would imagine what a Rift Valley Great Lake should be, a real slice of East Africa. The lake was shimmering with thousands of pink birds that on closer inspection proved to be both Greater and Lesser Flamingos along with African Spoonbills. Lesser Flamingo is a firm favourite of mine and it is now red listed as near-threatened. They feed primarily on a blue-green algae that contains bacteria, which gives the bird its cerise plumage and soft part colouration and although their African range extends to southern Arabia, their numbers are dropping due to pollution and habitat loss. There were also hundreds of Kittlitz's Plovers scuttling around in a variety of plumages that ranged from basic to alternate. Their range tenuously extends up to Egypt so is a highly sought-after species for Western Palearctic listers. This pleasant vinaceous-coloured little plover is named after Friedrich von Kittlitz, a polish born artist and ornithologist

who was a close friend of Wilhelm Rüppell. They toured North Africa together in 1831. The lake was also the denizen of many Black-necked Grebes and Pink-backed and Great White Pelicans were fishing the lake. There were myriads of other shorebirds that were using the site as a feeding stopover including Little and Temminck's Stints, Curlew Sandpipers and Pied Avocets and the only Lesser Black-backed Gulls of the trip of the nominate race *fuscus*. The surrounding bushes and grassland also produced good birds and mammals with Southern (Steppe) Grey Shrike, African Pipit and Common Cranes. Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse was a feature bird today with several showing very closely. We saw our second Stout Cisticola of the holiday and after meeting some tribesmen with spears, and with the sun set quickly, we made our way out of the park and back to our hotel, but not before we all marvelled at a shuffling Aardvark and yet more Black-backed Jackals. On arriving back at the hotel, we immediately visited the rocky crags and were soon watching Freckled Nightjars as they hawked for moths. Another comfortable night was had by all.

Day 16: A few of us got up this morning at ridiculous o'clock and decided to have another look at the Freckled Nightjars and we weren't disappointed as we obtained even better views and were also rewarded with a calling Greyish Eagle-owl. As day broke, we looked over Lake Langano from the cliff top and it was a sight to behold. We loaded up the bus and headed north up highway 6 and had a pre-breakfast stop at Lake Ziway. What a hit this was as Simon pulled a Lesser Jacana out of the bag and we all managed fine 'scope views of this smallest of jacanas. We had a traditional Ethiopian breakfast which was scrumptious, especially when washed down with mango juice.

We visited Koka Dam again this morning seeing many of the birds that we had seen there on day three. Star birds this morning were two Goliath Herons, Red-billed Duck, Hottentot Teal, Helmeted Guineafowl, White-rumped Swift, Abyssinian Roller, Greater Honeyguide, and Bearded Woodpecker. Just as we started to question our earlier sightings of Common Ringed Plover, the very next *Charadrius* plover that we saw was that species – we shouldn't have doubted ourselves. Four rangy long-legged Marsh Sandpipers were feeding by the roadside again and some very smart Lesser Striped and Wire-tailed Swallows were flying under the road bridge catching bugs. We all watched three Nile Monitors sunning themselves and flicking out their long forked tongues. We continued north up highway 6 and then north-east on highway 4 through Nazeret towards Metahara where we stopped for lunch. During lunch at the restaurant, we were visited by a flock of twenty or so Wattled Starlings that were clambering around the tables and bushes in the garden. Onwards, we ventured towards Awash only to stop after a short distance after Solomon had spotted an Eastern Paradise-whydah that we all watched display-fighting. The bird looked incredible with its flamboyant tail. We also saw a couple of Woodchat Shrikes here. Desert Apple plants bedecked the roadside verges with their large bulbous globular green fruits that protect their seeds. The next stop was in a unique habitat, the black solidified lava fields of the Fantale Volcano that dominate the horizon. It was extremely hot while we were looking for Sombre Rock-chats but despite extensive searching we could only manage Isabelline and Pied Wheatears and African Silverbill. Rock Hyrax had made this inhospitable land their home. In Greek the word hyrax means shrew-mouse.

On arriving at the famous Awash National Park late in the afternoon, we first bought some souvenirs from the park headquarters before spotting several species of mammal that included Beisa Oryx, Soemmering's Gazelle and Lesser Kudu. We decided to carry out a 'bustard run' before nightfall. A perched Gabar Goshawk was a pleasant start and we were soon watching both Buff-crested and White-bellied Bustards. We spent the night in Awash.

Day 17: In the trees around the hotel this morning migrant Black Kites intermingled with resident Black (Yellow-billed) Kites which was another addition to our trip list. Awash is a market town in central Ethiopia standing on a river of the same name and specializing in local craft. We spent a full day exploring the Awash National Park. It was established in 1966 and contains a varied mix of habitats from riverine forests, wetlands, Acacia woodlands and savannah grassland to rocky hills, cliffs and escarpments making it a wildlife watchers paradise. The park is traversed by a series of well-maintained tracks and we drove slowly around them stopping from time to time before making our way to Kerelew Lodge for breakfast. The lodge overlooks the Kirayawa Gorge with the River Awash flowing through it. We saw many mammals and birds

included Somali Fiscal, White-bellied, Kori's and Hartlaub's Bustards. The latter being a female that was identified thanks to photographic evidence and tenacity from David. Karel Hartlaub was an academic German explorer who proclaimed his hobby as "exotic ornithology". When isn't it? Another star bird of the morning was a Red-winged Lark whose habits were reminiscent of a hoopoe-lark as it ran courser-like on its very long-legs. A pair of melodic Singing Bushlarks were 'scoped as were several White-browed Coucals.

At Kerelew Lodge we dined al fresco, enjoying the terrific scenery and bird watching. The surrounding camp had old caravans in situ that reminded one of an old British seaside resort. Until relatively recently, this was the accommodation for visiting birders in this part of the world. There was also a derelict swimming pool and some old notice boards from a very different era. A soldier stopped to show us his rifle explaining how it worked (duh!) and we were soon back out into the main part of the park once again. This year the rains had fallen early in some parts of the country making those areas lush and verdant, but not here, as everything looked sunburnt and parched and even camels were seeking shade! We made a cold drink and scenic stop at the Awash Falls Lodge and with a cold lemonade in our hands we watched recumbent Nile Crocodiles by the river. A short walk gave us African Pied Wagtails and some more huge Grey-headed Bushshrikes. A nearby picnic site yielded some of us of good views of a small covey of Yellow-necked Spur-fowls with their bright yellow bare skin literally gleaming and we all had good views of Eastern Grey Plantain-eater. A small troop of Hamadryas Baboons were spied by the road. This enchanting primate is named after a mythical nymph who inhabits a tree and dies when the tree dies. It is also a sacred animal of the ancient Egyptians and is depicted greatly in artwork from that period. But today's best was yet to come as we visited the Ali Dege Plain Reserve but not before we made a stop to look for Arabian Bustard with no less than ten birds being seen including a bird just strolling across the road in front of us making it a five bustard species day!

The Ali Dege Plain Reserve is a truly incredible scene that is synonymous of Africa and here from one spot we saw Northern Carmine Bee-eaters riding on the backs of a Kori Bustard, huge flocks of Helmeted Guineafowl, twenty Somali Ostriches, strutting their stuff and Grevy's Zebras grazing. Suddenly sandgrouse, oryx, gazelles and everything went into a blind panic when a superb Martial Eagle swooped over and perched on a bush for us to 'scope it. This was a difficult site to tear ourselves away from but we had to move on and find the track for our lodge for the night while it was still daylight. Other birds of note that were recorded today included Somali Bulbul, Northern Crombec, Mouse-coloured Penduline Tit and an elusive Green-winged Pytilia that gave us the run-a-round.

Day 18: Several of us were up before dawn once again as we could hear Plain Nightjars calling around the lodge. We were rewarded with some excellent views, although not as good as the roosting bird that we found during our early morning walk. This is another poorly-named species as plain it is not, its plumage is subtly marked with vermiculations, striations, blotches and spots and quite frankly it is an absolute stonker!

The lodge is situated in an excellent position close to Awash National Park in a wooded area on the edge of marshes and we were in for a very bird-filled morning. It is located in the Afar region of Ethiopia and this area is home to the oldest known remains of a human being ancestor, a female nicknamed "Lucy". The remains are estimated as being 3.2 million years old. Our first major bird was Saddle-billed Stork and they don't come much bigger than that and we were treated to views of this monster stork several times during our stroll. Several other birds of note were watched and these included Isabelline Shrike of the Daurian race *phoenicuroides* often called Daurian Shrike, many African Fish-eagles, Purple Heron, Lesser Masked-weaver, Northern Red Bishop and a Nile Valley Sunbird. We found an amazingly close pair of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse who relied on their cryptic plumage to hide but were actually sitting right out in the open. Martin Lichtenstein was a German ornithologist who founded Berlin Zoo in 1815 and he made several visits to Africa between 1802–1806. In the bushes by the reception, we found a pair of Yellow-breasted Barbets and a rather friskier pair of Black-eared Wheatears, the cock bird in alternate plumage was looking ready for breeding. We made the short drive to Bilen Hot Springs where pleasant geothermally heated pools are located in an open area and were a popular place for local bathing and laundry, and there were also quite a few birds here that included Three-banded Plover, Temminck's Stint, Spur-winged Lapwing and Blue-headed Wagtail. There were also some bright crimson dragonflies gleaning salt from the mud.

We moved on from here back to Awash National Park and en-route stopped to photograph Gunther's Dik-dik and a short drive on the tracks still gave us four species of bustard again. We left the park mid-morning and drove back to the Fantale Lava Fields. It was once again extremely hot and lorries full of livestock coming from Djibouti had dumped piles of goat corpses attracting the attention of vultures, kites and Marabou Storks, an extremely macabre sight. Once again, the lava fields failed to give us Sombre Rock-chat but we did find Southern (Steppe) Grey Shrike and Dave discovered a Chestnut-backed Sparrow-lark that we all enjoyed good views of. It was soon farewell to this surreal habitat and we made our way back to Addis Adaba on highway 4 back to the Ghion Hotel and we said our goodbyes to Ian who would be missed on the extension.

Day 19: A truly mega day as we took a flight to Bahir Dar some 578 km northwest of Addis Ababa. It is in the Amhara region where the country's main language Anharic originates from and translated from that language the words mean seashore. Located on the shore of Ethiopia's largest lake, Lake Tana, which is the source of the Blue Nile, it was to be our base for the day. Our flight left and arrived on time and on exiting the airport terminal we were greeted by a colony of Village Weavers just outside the airport. We met our transport and drove straight to the lake and were soon aboard our vessel and heading for two small islands that are home to the Kibran St Gabriel Monastery where we were hoping to see African Finfoot. Unfortunately it was not to be but the lake was certainly not void of birds and we saw our first Caspian Terns and several Striated Herons as well as Whiskered and White-winged Terns. Other birds included several Black Crowned Cranes and we saw our only Hippopotamus of the tour. Our second Giant Kingfisher caused some excitement as did our only Slender-billed Gull and we also had wonderful views of a Lemon Dove on one of the holy islands much to the amusement of the monks. The lake is home to tall Papyrus reeds and we saw canoes that were made out of them. We also met two rowers of wooden canoes hewn out of tree trunks that were literally laden with firewood, rowing for the mainland, a round six-hour arduous trip. Late morning and lunchtime were spent in the hotel grounds and there were many birds here including Grey Woodpecker, Rüppell's Robin-chat and Dark-hooded Oriole and Ruth found a superb pair of Double-toothed Barbets that showed exceptionally well. The male bird's bill was clearly notched showing the 'dual-tooth' hence its English name. We saw only our second Shikra of the holiday and a White-cheeked Turaco.

In the afternoon, we visited the Tississat or the Blue Nile Falls and this hillside proved to be a fine birding spot we soon found our target species, White-throated Seedeater, with some birds in song, as were Cinnamon-breasted or African Rock Buntings. Bush Petronia here was a new bird for most and we watched them tail flicking in a manner rather reminiscent of a Common Chiffchaff. I spotted a pair of small woodpeckers that proved to be Brown-backed Woodpeckers and these were quickly followed by another write-in found by Bob, a splendid Green-backed Eremomela. An Erckel's Francolin was also 'scoped and Lesser Blue-eared Glossy-starlings were numerous, and on our way back to Bahar Dar for supper after buying more souvenirs we saw no less than three Greyish Eagle-owls. After dinner and a cold beer we caught our flight back to Addis Ababa and stayed once again in the Ghion Hotel.

Day 20: This morning started with a magical walk around the hotel gardens the light was perfect and the sprinklers had been running overnight so many of the birds were drinking or bathing including a Eurasian Wryneck that allowed close photography. We transferred into our Land Cruisers met our new driver Ahmed and sped northwards out of Addis on Highway 3 towards Muka Turi. Some roosting swallows on telegraph wires elicited a stop and we were soon scoping a Mosque Swallow whilst an adjacent tiny field yielded a dozen Groundscraper Thrushes. After another few miles, we stopped by a stream and watched a splendid African Black Duck whose amethyst speculum sparkled like a jewel in the African sunlight. John Sutherby and I found a strange wheatear that turned out to be a transitional plumaged Northern Wheatear moulting from juvenile into adult male dress the like of which we don't usually see at home. We stopped at a previously visited marsh and had even better views of the African Hobby that was present here before and four species of ibis. Lyn discovered an intriguing style of feeding by the Cattle Egrets as they gorged on mating dragonflies and we were transfixed as we watched them shake their heads and necks vigorously before striking the unfortunates.

We reached the Jemma Valley around 15.00hrs, the view here was spectacular and we enjoyed some pleasant birding where we saw many Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Blue and Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes, Rüppell's Black and White-winged Cliff-chats, Mourning (Abyssinian) Wheatear, Long-billed Pipit, Black Saw-wing, Erlanger's Lark, Erckel's Francolin and Verreaux's Eagle. We stayed the night in basic accommodation in Lemi Ketema, which is located in Western Ethiopia and stands on the Bales River. The word translated from Amharic means "Fortified Encampment" Ketema is also a common first name for men out here. We all went for a night out which was a hoot and it turned out to be our best night of the tour that included a body-popping Policeman!

Day 21: We took an early morning drive out to the Jemma Valley searching for Harwood's Francolin a gamebird endemic to Ethiopia and red-listed as vulnerable once again due to habitat loss. It is also known as a Montane Francolin and it is named after an Englishman Leonard Harwood who was a keen naturalist and has a varied mix of wildlife named after him. We had further views of the localised White-billed Starling, it is the only red-winged starling with a white-bill and it also has a short-square ended tail. It often inhabits waterfalls and consequently roosting birds utter a cacophonous resonate roar so that they can be heard above the rushing water. We found several Harwood's and Erckel's Francolins with a stunning backdrop with snake-like roads meandering down to the river. Triumphant, we went back to last night's establishment where the policeman was somewhat more sober showing no dance moves today. We had a breakfast of fresh rolls, bananas, honey, peanut butter, coffee and tea as today was Wednesday, the holy day, and vegan principles apply so we gladly partook according to these rules. We took a slow drive down to the Jemma River birding along the way and in the millet fields we saw Cut-throat Finch, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Black-winged Bishop, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver, Little Rock-thrush, Blue-spotted Wood-dove, Booted Eagle and Eastern Chanting-goshawk. On the riverbanks stood Senegal Thick-knee and Nile Crocodiles and many Wire-tailed Swallows were under the bridge. We took a walk up a wadi and were delighted to find a pair of rufescent Fox Kestrels. This atypical kestrel put on quite a show for us. Andy scrambled up an escarpment that contained breeding Abyssinian Ground-hornbills, an African Goshawk went through the riverbed and a small flock of Crimson-rumped Waxbills were scoped. We then moved on to Debre Birhan in the Shewa region of the country, stopping at a highland wetland on route and finding another African Snipe.

Day 22: Three weeks and one day and we are still going strong, the day started well with a Winding (Ethiopian) Cisticola in an Oleander shrub hanging upside down on one leg whilst retrieving a bee at arms length range! We headed out on the Ankober road and made a couple of pretty cold stops. Raptors were numerous and we marvelled at an amazing Great Sparrowhawk. This pied giant accipiter is also known as Black Goshawk and it is another stunner. We rose to 3,550 metres and were soon watching another new bird of prey for us as a Mountain Buzzard sailed over our heads. With adrenalin flowing we descended to the village of Ankober that was once the capital of the Shoa kingdom and has a very special bird named after it, but we would leave that one to another day. At our lunch stop by some millet fields, we watched singing Yellow-throated Seedeaters, a red-listed endangered serin that occurs only in Ethiopia and is suffering from habitat loss. Among these fields grow a pretty little lilac flower called Striger whose looks are deceiving as it is parasitic and sucks the life out of the millet robbing it of much needed nutrients causing severe crop damage. We saw three Martial Eagles and a Brown Snake-eagle and when we reached the river I was scoping up a small group of Bush Petronias when the shout went up and it was music to our ears "Half-collared Kingfisher". What a bird, ultramarine blue of a colour I had not seen the like, with a long broad black-bill, apricot underparts with a blue-breast patch that was rightly voted the joint bird of the trip and created a buzz throughout the group that would be talked about for a long period of time. This time it epitomised the highs that birding can take one to. What a 'grip back'! We returned to the Eva Hotel in Debre Birhan via a rubbish dump that was home to Lammergeiers. We dined on Lamb Tibs that was served up on red hot coals with the food sizzling thus sealing in the flavour.

Day 23: Debre Birhan translated means "Place of Light" and was founded by Emperor Zara Yaqob in the 15th century when he was inspired after viewing Halley's Comet from here. Today would be our final day in

the country and we all felt that we had experienced a giant slab of Ethiopian life and wildlife. The cisticola was once again showing well and caused some tremendous debate after the bird was photographed and identified by David it emphasized what a challenging group of birds these are to identify. Having said that, they are still very charismatic in their habits and actions. We headed north on Highway 1 towards Debre Sina and we stopped high in the clouds just before the road tunnel of the same name. As soon as we alighted from the vehicle we obtained our quest and were watching and snapping Ankober Serins, which is a birder's bird. To the non connoisseur it is a brown streaky finch and to us an enigmatic subtly-plumaged rare endemic. A Golden Eagle showed, as did a fine cock Blue Rock-thrush. The hillsides here were littered with at least 100 Gelada or Lion-headed Baboons many of them were at close quarters. After lunch back at Debre Birhan, we walked around the hotel gardens butterfly watching seeing a Small Orange-red Admiral before we headed back towards Addis Adaba. We stopped at a vulture picnic and watched Hooded and Rüppell's Vultures gorging whilst an Imperial Eagle was a nice bonus. We took a leg stretch by a small stream with our time was running out but we saw Plain Martins nesting, Northern Wheatear and Common Waxbills. The latter is a popular cage bird and has been introduced to many other parts of the world including Spain. After a brief search instigated by Solomon for Montane Nightjar we broke my golden rule of never finish a tour on a dip. We had our last supper at the Zebra Grille which was where we said goodbye to Solomon and we were off to the airport for our overnight flight.

Ray O'Reilly