

Gambia

11–25 November 2005

Participants:

Peter Forbes

James Hamilton

Stuart McLean

Jeffrey Mettam

Anne Peterson

Andrew Ross

Sol Satin

Martijn Voorvelt

Hans-Joachim and Reinhild Waschkies



Leaders:

Vaughan Ashby and Solomon Jallow

Red-necked Falcon

Birdfinders 2005 tour of The Gambia tour was an outstanding success to say the least. Not only did we achieve a new day record for the country of 161 species but also we also totally eclipsed the old record of 331 species seen on a two-week tour by recording no less than 340 species! It would be impossible to list all the highlights but we will try.

Day 1: Unfortunately, the plane from Gatwick was three hours late taking off due to an unscheduled service! The Manchester contingent of the group were luckier however, as their flight took off on time and they had spent a pleasant hour birding on the Casino Cycle Track before we arrived!

Day 2: We knew it was going to be a good tour when a gentle, introductory, local, second-day walk yielded a creditable 105 species including many of the common and colourful species of the country. The most notable was a Levaillant's Cuckoo, which proved to be the first of an amazing 15 records during the tour! Other good species included a Black Crake on the Kotu Ponds, the first of several Fine-spotted Woodpeckers seen on the tour and a migrant Spotted Flycatcher.

Day 3: Today we visited Brufut Woods in the morning and Yundum Woods in the afternoon with a leisurely lunchbreak being taken back at the hotel in the heat of the day. Highlights were an African Cuckoo chasing a Red-chested Cuckoo out of its territory, a group of three Cardinal Woodpeckers, a male African Masked-weaver, Black-necked and Yellow-backed Weavers all in breeding plumage, and finally a Eurasian Hobby over the Senegambia Hotel on the way home.

Day 4: In the morning we visited the Yundum fields adding several difficult Gambian birds: Klaas's Cuckoo, Black Scimitarbill, Greater Honeyguide, White Helmetshrike and two Lesser Blue-eared Glossy-starlings (rare at the coast). On our way back to our hotel we searched several areas for Northern White-faced Scops-owls, and were eventually rewarded with two at roost. After another relaxing lunchbreak back at the hotel, the afternoon saw us first at Tanji seeing a pair of the now-difficult White-fronted Plovers as well as Audouin's and Baltic Gulls, Caspian, Common, Lesser Crested, Royal and Sandwich Terns and three African

Green-pigeons before we finished the day at a new site where Wahlberg's Eagle, Klaas's Cuckoo and Grey-headed Bush-shrike were the highlights.

Day 5: Today was spent at Abuko with a relaxing couple of hours in the middle of the day at Lamin Lodge. This was possibly one of the best days I have ever spent in this tiny forest reserve as specialist forest birds came thick and fast, aided by playback. We initially played cat and mouse with a group of Ahanta Francolin before everyone finally got good views. Giant Kingfisher, Little Greenbul, Snowy-crowned Robin-chat, Green Hylia, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Common Wattle-eye, African and Red-bellied Paradise-flycatchers all proved fairly easy before we scored with another difficult and rare bird when a Spotted Honeyguide gave amazing views. A male Western Bluebill then showed to most. Not to be outdone, a pair of Lesser Honeyguides then showed well before we walked on to the animal sanctuary, viewing two Verreaux's Eagle-owl (one on a nest and the other roosting nearby) en-route. We then spent a very pleasant couple of hours at Lamin Lodge enjoying lunch, drinks and a cooling breeze whilst watching Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters hawking over the mangroves and Fiddler Crabs and Mudskipper on the mudflats. If you get a good morning in Abuko then the afternoon is generally quiet (or visa versa) but today was the exception. The photo hide was quiet so we headed back along the main path towards the entrance where a Yellowbill was coaxed into view, another very rare bird under the belt. Amazingly, then a pair of Buff-spotted Woodpeckers flew into a dead tree and displayed right in front of us. Surely it couldn't get any better but it did when a male Copper Sunbird was found shortly followed by no less than four Grey-headed Bristlebills.

Day 6: After a comfortable journey to Pirang, two Black Crowned Cranes were seen almost immediately, something that rarely happens here! Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans, Yellow-billed Stork, African Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo and many waders, gulls and terns were seen well as were very confiding Plain-backed Pipits and Black-faced Quailfinch. Swallows were well represented with Eurasian, Mosque. Rufous-chested, Red-chested, Red-rumped and Wire-tailed. Moving on to the Faraba Banta Bush Track, birding proved a little more difficult although Bateleur, Booted, Long-crested and Tawny Eagles and Grasshopper Buzzard were nice. Seleti Waterhole had more water in it than I had ever seen before and Little Weaver, Long-tailed Paradise Whydah and Red-winged Pytilia rewarded us for our visit. We decided to make the return journey by the bush track rather than on the bumpy road and this turned out to be a good plan. Stopping in suitable habitat for a try at some of the specialities, we just 'reeled in' one bird after another; Brown-backed Woodpecker, Pale Flycatcher, White-fronted Black-chat, Senegal Batis and Brubru all gave fantastic views. But we were still not done as Black-winged Bishops proved common and a huge, distant raptor gradually came closer and turned into a Martial Eagle, wow!

Day 7: As we were heading upriver next day, we spent the day fairly quietly, visiting Tanji again in the morning where a couple of adult Kelp Gulls, another Audouin's Gull and great looks at African Green-pigeon were the highlights. After a relaxing lunch break back at the hotel, we spent the afternoon around Banjul where Arctic and Pomarine Skuas, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and a Hoopoe were the highlights.

Day 8: And so to the upriver part of our adventure. We left at 06.30 and by 07.30 were watching Yellow White-eyes at Bamakuno Forest Park. The rest of the journey to Tendaba was uneventful (if a little bumpy and dusty!) but we did add great views of Ruppell's Griffon-vulture and African White-backed Vulture to our lists. After a pleasant rest and lunch at Tendaba we took a three-hour pirogue trip into the mangrove creeks on the opposite side of the river where is the beautiful tranquillity we most notably saw White-backed Night-heron, Spur-winged Goose, African Fish-eagle, Bruce's Green-pigeon, Grey-headed Kingfisher, European and White-throated Bee-eaters and Mouse-brown Sunbird. After just one week we had already seen 262 species in a very relaxed manner.

Day 9: We left early for the bumpy journey to Farrafenni ferry but en-route we were lucky enough to pick up two African Hawk-eagles perched in a tree, an Egyptian Plover at Soma and a policeman who guided us to the front of the ferry queue! Whilst waiting for the ferry, we enjoyed great views of Winding Cisticola. We had unfortunately missed Goliath Heron at Tendaba so we were extremely pleased to see one here! The north bank road is now perfect so we had most of the day to stop at waterholes en-route without worrying about the time. At a succession of waterholes we added Chestnut-backed Sparrow-lark, Rufous-tailed (African) Scrub-

robin, Sudan Golden-sparrow, Black-rumped Waxbill, Cut-throat, Northern Paradise-whydah, White-rumped Seedeater and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, whilst Green Bee-eaters were seen en-route. At Kau-ur, more Egyptian Plovers were seen together with good numbers of Kittlitz's Plover and two White-crowned Lapwings. Collared Pratincoles were numerous but the real surprise was a male Ferruginous Duck, the first record for 22 years we believe. Four Comb Ducks were scattered in with the numerous White-faced Whistling-ducks. As we continued east we stopped first for Northern Anteater-chat, then Purple Heron and Purple Swamphen followed by Temminck's Courser and Marabou Stork before finally crossing to Georgetown Island. After a rather dark dinner (power cut!), we enjoyed excellent views of two African Scops-owls.

Day 10: Today we headed further upriver towards Basse but not before we had seen a Black Coucal right by the ferry crossing. Stopping at Bansang Quarry, we enjoyed spectacular views of the colony of 200 pairs of Red-throated Bee-eaters, which were saved from disturbance by sand quarrying a couple of years ago by a donation from Birdfinders. As usual, it was hot at Basse but 11 Northern Carmine Bee-eaters made it more bearable! Once again, Birdfinders had seen all the bee-eaters on the Gambia list! On our way back, we first stopped at a new waterhole where a White-rumped Swift gave several impressive flypasts, then had to make an emergency stop for a pair of magnificent Abyssinian Ground-hornbills. Arriving back on Georgetown Island mid-afternoon, we took a short break before going for a walk. Almost immediately we heard a Grey-headed Bush-shrike and after a search enjoyed great views of this bird at the top of a tree. A male Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrike was coaxed into view before we saw our final species of the day, three African Collared-doves flying over. Our total had now exceeded 300.

Day 11: We started our return downriver in a very tranquil way on a pirogue, enjoying our breakfast on board. New birds were rather slow to come at first with just a few Swamp Flycatchers but we were seeing plenty of common birds. A pair of Red-faced Cisticolas showed briefly before we fell silent as all eyes scanned the riverside vegetation. And there it was, the holy grail of Gambian birding, an African Finfoot, firstly swimming furtively under the branches, then standing on a log before swimming into dense cover. In all we watched it for only a minute but it was long enough to enjoy every fine detail of this elusive bird. Shortly afterwards we found an equally elusive bird, Shining-blue Kingfisher, to once again see all the kingfishers on the Gambian list. Boarding the bus, we visited Jahally rice fields where three Greater Painted-snipe showed well. Our next stop was at a previous lunch site where we had found Spotted Thick-knees. Sure enough, they were there again this year! As we headed along the bumpy south bank road we kept our eyes to the sky for raptors and stopped at every congregation of vultures. Eventually our perseverance was rewarded with cracking views of two White-headed Vultures soaring directly overhead whilst Pygmy Sunbirds (and a Pearl-spotted Owlet!) came in to a Pearl-spotted Owlet tape. After a couple of minor breakdowns (well this is Africa!), we arrived at Tendaba again and enjoyed dinner before going for a night drive. It was the quietest night drive I have ever made there but we were finally rewarded with a fine male Standard-winged Nightjar on the track, watched down to just three feet!

Day 12: We took an early breakfast to ensure that we would be on the Batelling Bushtrack by first good light and this paid dividends with the first birds seen flying from roost being White-breasted Cormorants. With very few speciality birds now needed (we had seen most of them!), we concentrated on Yellow Penduline-tit, White-winged Black Tit and Chestnut-backed Sparrow-weaver, all of which we managed to see well. But the best was yet to come, with a yell of 'what's that flying over' we looked skyward to be greeted by the sight of a male White-bellied Bustard flying low over our heads, incredible! So, after lunch, we headed back downriver with only a couple of brief comfort stops so we could arrive at Madina Ba before dark. We got there but sadly the Hadada Ibis hadn't read the book and weren't there! Carrying on, we made a last stop at an eco camp where Brown-necked Parrots were regularly seen. We arrived just after two had flown off but most of us were fortunate enough to see another bird flying over later as well as another Shining-blue Kingfisher. Arriving back at our hotel at about 20.00 we were able to enjoy the 'luxury' of a warm shower again!

Day 13: So, with just two days to go we decided to revisit Pirang. Eurasian Spoonbill, Northern Shoveler and Barn Owl were three nice additions but not what we were looking for! So we headed into Pirang Woods

where we managed to find not only two Green Crombecs but also more Green Hylias, Yellow-breasted Apalis and Grey-headed Bristlebills. An added bonus however, was a male Collared Sunbird, which meant that we didn't need to return to Abuko for it! After returning to the hotel for lunch, we headed to the Cape Road in the afternoon where after a thorough search we eventually found a singing male Yellow-throated Longclaw. With a little light left, we headed to Camalou Corner where eventually six Sacred Ibis flew in to roost. It was now getting dusk, did we have enough time? We thought we'd try anyway so we headed quickly back to the hotel and then to the beach where almost immediately we were able to spotlight a pair of Long-tailed Nightjars for an incredible end to the day. So, at 333 species, we had broken the Gambian record with still one-and-a-half days to go!

Day 14: Our last full day was spent in a leisurely fashion. First we birded the area around the airport again, seeing a few Whinchats before bumping into another star bird, an Ovampo Sparrowhawk. Next we moved on to the agricultural fields but sadly there was still no sign of the Greyish Eagle-owls (frightened off by superstitious children). Compensation was had however, in the form of Dideric Cuckoo and Heuglin's Masked-weaver before we moved on to Marrakissa. By now it was hot so we decided to relax at the small restaurant whilst they cooked some omelette and chips for us. After lunch we walked around the area looking for a reported Golden-tailed Woodpecker. No sign, so we decided to walk further afield but at the last try amazingly a female Golden-tailed Woodpecker flew in (we later heard the male about half a mile away) and sat on an open branch for 15 minutes for all to admire. Walking down to the bridge we unsuccessfully tried to tempt an Oriole Warbler into sight but enjoyed several other good birds before slowly walking back to the Land Rovers to try for White-breasted Cuckoo-shrike. Suddenly, a huge raptor was found with the Hooded Vultures overhead. Looking almost twice the size it was an adult Lappet-faced Vulture, well out of range. Lady luck was certainly with us! We didn't see the cuckoo-shrike but no-one seemed to mind too much.

Day 15: The last morning we decided to do our own things and part of the group found an Icterine Warbler at the Kotu Ponds to bring the group total up to 340 before returning to the airport and our (on time) flight home.

Although this was a bird-filled tour, we took breaks of 2–3 hours in the middle of the day on most days so those so inclined could use the swimming pool or just relax in the heat of the day. It is not the number of hours you spend in the field that gives you the highest number of species, but how you best use your birding time. Birdfinders has a considerable amount of tropical birding experience and knows when to bird and when to take things easy!