

Gambia

14–28 November 2008

Participants:

Stephen Elliott
Carl Feltham
Andrew Langford
David Murden
Anthony Myerson
Eamonn and Michael O'Donnell
Margaret Phillips
Lynda and Terry Sibley
Janet Whelehan



Egyptian Plover

Leaders: Solomon Jalow and Bill Blake

Day 1: Despite leaving Gatwick 30 minutes late we arrived more or less on time. Having left a cold, grey England behind it was a balmy 32 °C in Gambia and we arrived at the Palma Rima Hotel for a seven-night stay. Stephen and Andrew had already arrived from Manchester and, having seen African Fish-eagle perched on one of the airport towers, were already enjoying new birds in the hotel gardens. After freshening up in our rooms we had time for a brief exploration of the hotel grounds and environs to familiarize ourselves with some of the local birds. Shikra, Western Grey Plantain-eater, African Thrush, Red-billed Firefinch and Lavender Waxbill were just some of the birds seen, some highlights being Yellow-crowned Gonolek plus superb males of Beautiful and Splendid Sunbirds (both aptly named). Dinner in the hotel restaurant was followed by the log call.

Day 2: After a simple breakfast we birded the Casino Cycle Track close to the hotel. This proved to be an excellent introduction to many of the common and colourful species of the country. Notable birds were Hamerkop, African Harrier-hawk, Grey Kestrel, raucous Senegal Parrots, two Levillant's Cuckoos, Senegal Coucal, Woodland Kingfisher, showy Abyssinian and Blue-bellied Rollers, Green Woodhoopoe, Red-billed Hornbill, Fine-spotted and Grey Woodpeckers, Singing Cisticola, Subalpine Warbler, Bronze-tailed and Long-Tailed Glossy-starlings, Red-cheeked Cordonbleu and Bronze Manakins. Other good species included African Jacanas on the Kotu Ponds plus a superb male Giant Kingfisher with Pied Kingfishers, and a showy Western Olivaceous Warbler at Kotu Creek. Boarding our mini-bus we headed for Kotu Sewage Pools where Little Grebe, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Ruff, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers plus a singing Common Chiffchaff made us feel quite at home but Fork-tailed Drongos and very close Hooded Vultures reminded us we were in Africa. On the way out to Cape Point we admired Blue-cheeked and Little Bee-eaters on the roadside wires. The creeks held Pink-backed Pelican, Western Reef-egrets, a Senegal Thick-knee and a large group of Grey-headed Gulls and Caspian Terns plus some Royal Terns, a single Sandwich Tern and a couple of Gull-billed Terns. Lunch was at the Sandplover Bar, which seemed aptly named when Terry spotted what appeared to be a Greater Sandplover on the beach, which would be a first for Gambia! After much discussion and with the help of Michael's excellent photographs, the bird was found to be a Kittlitz's Plover. After a very tasty lunch we returned to the Palma Rima Hotel to relax and wait for the midday heat to subside. Tujereng was our destination for the afternoon, an area of open woodland and farmland. A good selection of birds were seen, including Palm-nut Vulture, Double-spurred Francolin, Black-headed Lapwing, Striped Kingfisher, Rufous-crowned Roller, Vieillot's Barbet, Cardinal Woodpecker, Whistling and Rufous Cisticolas, Red-winged Warbler, Senegal (Green-backed) Eremomela, an elusive Senegal Batis that was heard only, garrulous Yellow-billed Shrikes, Black-crowned Tchagra and Village Indigobird. Wintering Common

Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Whinchat and Woodchat Shrike added a Western Palearctic flavour.

Day 3: Today we visited Tanji Bird Reserve in the morning and Brufut Woodland Reserve in the afternoon with a leisurely lunch break being taken at the Paradise Inn Lodge in Tanji before returning to our hotel in the heat of the day. Highlights of the morning were Black-shouldered Kite, side by side Black-billed and Blue-spotted Wood-doves, African Green-pigeon, Green and Violet Turacos, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Fanti Sawwing, Western Olivaceous and Melodious Warblers, Northern Crombec, Blackcap Babbler and Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike. Moving on to the beach to look for gulls and waders a magnificent pair of Lanner Falcons and some Senegal Thick-knees performed well for us but the hoped for Kelp Gull and White-fronted Plovers stayed away. We did see Baltic and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Eurasian Oystercatcher and Eurasian Curlew, Dunlin and some Crested Larks. Our lunch stop had large gardens where Malachite Kingfisher, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Red-bellied Paradise-flycatcher and Mouse-brown Sunbird at the nest were seen before returning to our hotel. A pair of roosting Northern White-faced Owls greeted us at Brufut Woodland, later a Klaas' Cuckoo led us a merry dance and we eventually had good views of a well-camouflaged Long-tailed Nightjar roosting on the ground amongst leaf litter. Other birds included Bearded Barbet, Lesser Honeyguide, Western Violet-backed and Copper Sunbirds and Black-necked Weaver in breeding plumage. From the hide overlooking some small pools we had close and prolonged views of three African Pygmy-kingfishers and at least three Snowy-crowned Robin-chats.

Day 4: Today was spent at Abuko Forest Reserve. In the morning we saw Black-crowned Night-heron, Lizard Buzzard, Malachite Kingfisher, African Pied Hornbill, Pied-winged Swallow, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Common Wattle-eye and Collared Sunbird plus a hybrid African/Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher and a heard-only Yellowbill. We then spent a very pleasant couple of hours at Lamin Lodge enjoying lunch, drinks and a cooling breeze whilst watching African Darter, Osprey, African Harrier-hawk and Beaudouin's Snake-eagle plus Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters hawking over the mangroves. The antics of the Vervet Monkeys on the look out for an easy meal entertained us as did Fiddler Crabs and Mudskipper on the mudflats as the tide went out. After lunch we returned to Abuko but it was still hot and rather quiet; Terry was very fortunate to see a pair of Ahanta Francolins as he answered a call of nature. As the heat dropped we visited Lamin Rice Fields where we saw Black and Striated Herons, Western Reef-egret, Black-shouldered Kite, Red-necked Falcon, Senegal Thick-knees, Spur-winged and Wattled Lapwings, Green Sandpiper and Yellow-crowned Bishop.

Day 5: This morning we visited a new forest reserve at Kurolo, the Farasutu Forest Reserve. Here we found White-backed Night-heron at the nest, Wahlberg's Eagle, Stone Partridge, Buff-spotted Woodpecker, Little Greenbul, Leaf-love, Grey-headed Bristlebills, Green Crombec and African Paradise-flycatcher. Ahanta Francolins were calling and we tried to coax them into view but frustratingly they stayed just out of sight. We then moved onto the Farasutu Rice Fields where we soon located our target species, Yellow-shouldered Widowbird. Lunch was on Baobab Island where Goliath Heron, Blue-headed Kingfisher, Pallid Swift, Mosque Swallow and Greater Honeyguide were added to the list. We spent the afternoon on the Faraba Bantang Bush Track, an excellent area of tall grassland with scattered trees. Our main quarry here was Greyish Eagle-owl, which we found, with the aid of a local farmer, roosting in one of the large trees where it gave excellent views. Other birds seen here included Gabar Goshawk, Dark Chanting-goshawk, Grasshopper Buzzard, Black-bellied Bustard, Striped Kingfisher, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and African Yellow White-eye.

Day 6: In the morning we visited Marakissa Forest and nearby rice fields where we were greeted by a calling Pearl-spotted Owllet on arrival, which gave excellent views. Other birds seen here included Lizard Buzzard, some very noisy Black Crakes, African Jacana, African Pied Hornbill, Greater Honeyguide, African Golden Oriole, Yellow-throated Leaf-love, Senegal Eremomela, Northern Crombec, White Helmetshrike and Northern Puffback. We lunched at the Marakissa River Camp where we saw Woodland and Giant Kingfishers on the river. We also had great views of Greater Honeyguide, White-crowned Robin-chat, Piapiac, Purple Glossy-starling, Red-billed Firefinch and Red-cheeked Cordonbleus as they came in to drink at the various pools in the garden. We spent the afternoon at Darsalami, an area of mangroves and forest close to the Senegal border. Black Heron, Intermediate Egret, Western Marsh-harrier, Double-spurred Francolin, Gull-billed Tern, Black Coucal, Malachite Kingfisher and Purple Glossy-starlings were just some of the birds seen.

Day 7: We spent the morning at Pirang Shrimp Farm, having seen a Long-crested Eagle en route, where a good mix of herons, waders, gulls and terns kept us busy. Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans, Black Heron, Yellow-billed Stork, African and Eurasian Spoonbills, a single female Northern Pintail, Pied Avocets, Grey, Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits, Marsh Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Ruddy Turnstone, Little and Temminck's Stints, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruff, Slender-billed Gulls, Little and Black Terns, Rufous-chested and Red-rumped

Swallows (the latter split by some authorities as West African Swallow), White and Yellow Wagtails, Zitting Cisticola, Subalpine Warbler and Black-faced Quailfinch. We had an excellent lunch at an NGO working on sustainable agriculture; Wahlberg's Eagle, Klaas' Cuckoo, Blackcap and Western Olivaceous Warbler were seen. Moving on to the Faraba Banta Bush Track again, this time on the south side, birding proved a little more difficult but Black-winged Bishop and Orange-cheeked Waxbills were added to the list. Later we crossed briefly into Senegal at Joboro where we had a photo opportunity at the Senegal border sign.

Day 8: And so to the upriver part of our adventure. We left for four nights upriver taking the South Bank road to Tendaba Camp for a two-night stay. Our first stop was at Ndemban Quarry track where Pearl-spotted Owlet, African Golden Oriole, Willow Warbler and White Helmetshrike were some of the birds seen. Our next stop was at Raptor Bridge, Kanpant, where a pair of Yellow-crowned Gonoleks showed exceptionally well. At Kanilai we saw Yellow-bellied Oxpeckers on cattle and a little further on we added great views of a Rüppell's Griffon-vulture and 15 African White-backed Vultures to our lists. Other additions to the list here were European Bee-eaters, House Martin plus Heuglin's and Vitelline Masked-weavers. At Kilagi Bridge Camp we had a pleasant rest and lunch adding Bataleur and Tawny Eagle to our growing list. We arrived at Tendaba Camp mid-afternoon with time to freshen up before going out to bird the "Tendaba Airport" area. Spur-winged Goose, African Fish-eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Martial Eagle, three African Hobbies, Plain-backed Pipit and a pair of Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrikes were all new birds here. An excellent dinner at Tendaba Camp was followed by the bird log.

Day 9: This morning we took a leisurely three-hour pirogue trip into the mangrove creeks on the opposite side of the river. Goliath, Purple and Black Herons, many Intermediate Egrets, Hammerkop, Yellow-billed, Woolly-necked and Marabou Storks, Sacred and Hadada Ibises, Spur-winged Goose, Martial Eagle, Peregrine, Bruce's Green-pigeon, five species of kingfisher including Grey-headed, White-throated Bee-eater, Sedge Warbler, African Blue-flycatcher, Mouse-brown Sunbird and Lesser Blue-eared Glossy-starling were just some of the birds seen amongst the tranquillity of the creeks. Nile Crocodile and Monitor Lizard were also seen well. After an excellent lunch and time spent relaxing in the shade around camp we headed out to Kiang West Forest Park for the afternoon. On the way we all quickly exited our vehicle for great views of a Western Banded Snake-eagle soaring directly above us with a snake in its talons. African Hobby, Helmeted Guineafowl, a pair of rare Brown-necked Parrots at their nest hole, two Long-tailed Nightjars, Brown-backed Woodpecker, Melodious Warbler, Northern Crombec, Brubru and Black-rumped Waxbills were all seen.

Day 10: After a hearty breakfast we left early to continue our bumpy journey upriver. En route to our first stop we added Pygmy Sunbird and Cut-throat. Our first proper stop was at Soma Swamp where a much wanted Egyptian Plover gave close views both on the ground and in flight. We crossed the Gambia River at Yele Tende, crossing to Farafenni on the North Bank. Our only Black-headed Weaver was seen from the ferry on the rails of a boat moored to the bank. Leaving the dusty, bumpy South Bank Road behind us we sped eastwards on tarmac roads. Stopping between Farafenni and Dibba Kunda we found a magical spot where, amongst others, Namaqua Dove, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-lark, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Rufous (African) Scrub-robin (another potential split), Common Redstart, White-fronted Black-chat, Brubru, Sudan Golden Sparrow, Bush Petronia, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Red-billed Quelea, African Silverbill and Exclamatory Paradise-whydah kept us on our toes. Driving on to N'gain Sanjal we stopped for our packed lunch. Solomon went to check a report from the local children that Abyssinian Ground-hornbills were nesting in a nearby tree. He returned with negative news of the hornbills but he thought he had heard bustards calling from the adjacent fields. Walking through the fields we flushed two Saville's Bustards plus a Common Quail and two Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (one of which we flushed from a nest) plus five Black-headed Plovers. Our next stop added Brown Snake-eagle and a distant Northern Anteater-chat. At Solomon's favourite "water hole" we had prolonged, close views of some of the smaller birds seen earlier in the day, especially many brightly-plumaged male Sudan Golden Sparrows plus a smart Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, another new bird for the list. We also saw numerous Red Patas Monkeys at the roadside. At Ka'ur Wetland new birds were Comb Duck, Collared Pratincole, Common Snipe plus a stunning White-crowned Lapwing. Also here were another three Egyptian Plovers and some Kittlitz's Plovers; nearby lakes held two more Egyptian Plovers and another new bird for our list, Common Moorhen. A Ferry crossing to Jangiangbureh/Georgetown Island followed and we checked into the Bird Safari Park for two nights. Before dinner we enjoyed excellent torchlight views of an African Scops-owl in the gardens.

Day 11: This morning we took another boat trip up the Gambia River towards Kahai Island, for a fortunate few an African Finfoot was seen briefly on the riverbank before disappearing into dense cover. Other new birds seen were Mottled Spinetail, the elusive Shining-blue Kingfisher, Red-faced Cisticolas, Oriole Warbler (Moho), Swamp Flycatcher and a male Crimson Seedcracker. The latter was initially spotted by Eamonn and was a new bird for Solomon. We also

saw a small group of Hippos with calves in the river, groups of Guinea Baboons on the riverbank and a Yellow-winged Bat (an amazing bright orange-yellow all over) that flew briefly along the edge of the river. Boarding the bus after lunch, we visited Jahally rice fields where two Greater Painted-snipe were seen. Our next stop was at Sapo where a magnificent Verreaux's Eagle-owl was seen well roosting in a large tree and some Warthogs nearby. Racing against the fading light we headed for Bansang Quarry where we watched groups of Four-banded Sandgrouse coming in to drink but unfortunately we were too late for the Red-throated Bee-eater colony here as they had already gone to roost although Eamonn did see a single bird. Crossing back over to Georgetown Island we headed back to camp in the dark and flushed a male Standard-winged Nightjar from the track ahead of us but views were far too brief!

Day 12: We returned to Banjul today along the North Bank road; our first stop was at Wassu on the hunt for bee-eaters. Carl found a Eurasian Hoopoe before we moved on to another Red-throated Bee-eater colony nearby where over a hundred of these beautiful birds entertained us plus we saw at least seven Northern Carmine Bee-eaters close by. Next on the agenda was a visit to a local school where we donated pens, books etc., before moving onto Farafenni for lunch in a shaded courtyard. Our next stop at some roadside pools added a party of six African Pygmy-geese plus yet another Egyptian Plover. Stopping again at Ka'ur Wetlands two stately Black Crowned Cranes were seen feeding in tall vegetation. At Bao Bolon Wetlands Great (White-breasted) Cormorants and Whiskered Terns were new for our list. Eventually we reached the Barra ferry to cross to Banjul but due to an extended wait we crossed in the dark and missed the chance to check for any skuas harassing gulls and terns on the crossing. We arrived back at the Palma Rima for a late dinner followed by the log call.

Day 13: Back at the coast and with just two full days to go we decided to revisit Abuko Forest where we started with another Northern White-faced Owl roosting in a tree opposite the reserve entrance. Inside Abuko we managed to find three Western Bluebills and to see Green Hylia. There was a supporting cast of Yellow-breasted Apalis, Grey-headed Bristlebill, Little Greenbul, White Helmetsrike, Common Wattle-eye, White-crowned Robin-chat and Lesser Honeyguide. An added bonus for Solomon was another Shining-blue Kingfisher seen briefly on the pool close to the entrance, which was a local patch tick for him in over 30 years of birding this site. After returning to the hotel for lunch, we headed to Tanji beach in the late afternoon where Kelp Gull was seen. Moving on to Madiana Forest Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver was the final new bird for the day.

Day 14: Our last full day and we spent the morning at Brufut Woods where an intensive search for Yellowbill failed. The only trip tick for the morning was a fine African Hawk-eagle but we did see another (or the same) Long-tailed Nightjar in the same place as on Day 3 plus many of the other species seen that day. After lunch at the hotel we spent the afternoon at Tujereng; Dideric Cuckoo, Eurasian Wryneck, Yellow Penduline-tit and Little Weaver were the final additions to our trip list. Solomon and some of his team came over after dinner for a farewell drink. We thanked Solomon and his team for their safe driving and remarkable bird spotting skills.

Day 15: The last morning we decided to do our own things, some people relaxed around the pool and some birded the hotel gardens and Casino Cycle track before returning to the airport and our flight home where the tour ended. 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.

The group total for the tour was 316 species of which one species was only heard. We managed to see all the kingfisher and bee-eater species on the Gambian list plus many special West African species. My special thanks go to Solomon for his exceptional skills as a bird guide, to both Aladin 1 and Aladin 2 for their safe and tireless driving and to Ketabou for his sense of humour and keen eyesight. As always it is the group that deserves special thanks for their humour, birding skills and patience.

Bill Blake