

Gambia

13–27 November 2009

Participants:

Tony Baker
Dave and Jackie Bridges
Bert and Heike Charest
Robert Davidson
David Jeffries
Pauline Robinson
John and Sue Rowe
Bob and Jenny Sandy
Julian and Anna White
Kevin White
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Bruce's Green-pigeon

Leaders: Solomon Jallow
and Martyn Kenefick

Day 1 It was absolutely tipping down with rain as we left London (probably much the same in Bristol and East Midlands). The near six-hour flight from Gatwick was uneventful, if a little bumpy for the first hour, but as is so often the case, despite flying over Portugal, Morocco, Western Sahara and Senegal, there was nothing to look at. By contrast, the pilot carrying our tour members from Bristol seemed to have been a tour guide in a past life, banking the plane to offer views of Gibraltar as they passed.

At first glance, Banjul International Airport's Immigration, Baggage Reclaim and Customs areas appeared absolutely chaotic, but it works with a little bit of patience. Within an hour we were taking the short coach ride to Kotu and the Kombo Beach Hotel, our base for much of the tour. En-route, our first taste of Gambian birds included Hooded Vultures, Black-shouldered Kite, Wattled Lapwing, Red-eyed, Vinaceous and Laughing Doves, Blue-bellied Roller and Piapiac with a probable Red-necked Falcon perched on telegraph wires for a lucky few. Registration and room allocation took that little bit longer, but this is Africa and everything has a pace of its own. The last hour of daylight was varyingly spent; a few species lurked in the hotel grounds whilst a lazy shower or bath was the choice for many, whilst acclimatizing to 90-degree temperatures. The buffet dinner (as was every meal at the hotel) was an unequivocal success, leaving a relatively early night's sleep to the very subdued background sound of a local percussion band.

Day 2 Following our buffet breakfast, just as the sun came up, we met Solomon and his partner Abdulai, who were to be our guides and mentors for the next two weeks, for an introductory walk along the road towards Kotu Bridge. Common birds came through thick and fast. Indeed, after looking intently for the first hour, little if any attention was subsequently paid to the ever-present Cattle Egrets, Yellow-billed Kites (the resident African race of Black Kite), Spur-winged Lapwing, Speckled Pigeon, African Palm-swift, Red-chested Swallow and Pied Crow. The one exception was Beautiful Sunbird – yes we saw loads, but they didn't get their name for nothing.

As always, the bridge across Kotu Stream attracts both birds and indeed birders – both visiting and resident “wannabe” guides. Here we found our first Long-tailed Cormorants, Black-headed Herons, dark-morph Western Reef-herons, a quick fly-by of White-faced Whistling-ducks, Senegal Thick-knees; up to 30 Wattled Lapwings amongst numerous

Spur-winged Lapwings; Common Ringed Plovers, Whimbrels and Common Greenshank. On the wires, Pied Kingfishers were ever present whilst a few immature Wire-tailed Swallows were bunched in with their Red-chested neighbours. Indeed, this flock seemed to be the preferred prey target for the local Shikra. Having enjoyed several views of Western Plantain-eaters, our first hornbill was African Pied Hornbill (more commonly a woodland species), quickly followed by African Grey Hornbill, whilst our first Little Bee-eaters sat atop bushes, resplendent in the sunshine. Raucous Long-tailed Glossy-starlings appeared with ever increasing frequency. Continuing along the road, a pair of Yellow-fronted Tinkerbirds played hide and seek with us (they actually were disappearing into a nest cavity) but an extrovert Woodland Kingfisher perched right out in the open for ages. Overhead several Senegal Parrots appeared, seriously outnumbered however by long-tailed Rose-ringed Parakeets.

Walking though a small grove, we came out onto a bund road criss-crossing Kotu Ponds. The nearest open pond held our first African Jacanas and an Mourning Collared-dove whilst Little Grebe and Wood Sandpiper were much more familiar fare. Kevin then noticed a Senegal Coucal deep in some long grass. By now it was mid-morning and getting decidedly warm. Walking along the back of the ponds produced little, but it did lead us to a birders' shack replete with a cold drinks cooler. Whilst slaking our thirst, the ever-vigilant Heike pointed out three falcons flying towards us – a playful trio of Lanners. Less glamorous, but new nevertheless, were our first Fork-tailed Drongos and a party of White-billed Buffalo-weavers. The walk through the rice paddies came to a sudden halt when Solomon commented upon a Pied Crow, calling agitatedly in a nearby tree. Closer inspection brought us extended views of a superb African Hobby – certainly bird of the day so far. Back on the road we walked into the shaded driveway of a hotel and began the “merry Moho dance”. It probably took 30 minutes for all of us to see all of the bird well, and prompted, without doubt “quote of the morning” when Abdulai looked at us, grinned and uttered “lively jubbly” in pure cockney – I had no idea that *Only Fools and Horses* had reached The Gambia.

We were then introduced to Alladin and his coach – the former certainly in better repair than the latter – who were to become firm friends of ours and our transportation facility for the entire tour. By now, “decidedly warm” had become “seriously hot” and so we adjourned to Cape Point and the quaintly rustic surrounds of Ana's Sandplover Bar for lunch for an excellent buffet of shrimps, curried vegetables and rice. From the shade of the eating area, we were entertained by several Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, whilst a Western Marsh-harrier flew in off the sea and a very young Striated Heron paddled up and down the mangrove-fringed creek. Initially, the seabirds on the tide-line were predominantly Grey-headed Gulls with a smattering of Caspian Terns. However, of the course of the next two hours (whilst the sun was at its fiercest) these were joined by parties of Sandwich, Common, Royal and Lesser-crested Terns (the “orange-billed” tern debate even reached Gambia over several individuals) and Jackie picked out the sole Slender-billed Gull of the day.

In the relative cool of late afternoon, we returned to walk the Casino Cycle Track close to our hotel. This is a well laid out path cutting through secondary scrub and rice paddies. Right in the car parking area a Subalpine Warbler flicked around one tree and an African Silverbill the other. Whilst single Blue-bellied and Broad-billed Rollers graced the utility wires, the walk produced several sightings of Green Woodhoopoe, our first Hamerkop, a stunning pair of Bearded Barbets, rather drab Tawny-flanked Prinias and Zitting Cisticolas and, right by Jufureh's Beach Bar, a confiding Malachite Kingfisher. It had been a long, rather hot first day with wall-to-wall birds. We had amassed a total of 94 species and some had time to add Fine-spotted Woodpecker, Variable Sunbird and Yellow-billed Shrike on the short walk back to Alladin's bus. There just followed an equally short drive back to Kombo Beach at the end of the birding day.

Day 3 Immediately after breakfast we boarded our bus and headed towards Brufut Woods. Having left the tarmac road behind, we wound our way along dirt tracks through the rather sprawling village of Brufut before parking up at the entrance to this local (and protected) nature reserve. The area is a mixture of light woodland with tall undergrowth, dense in patches, criss-crossed by a myriad of narrow dirt paths – and it was teeming with birds. From the moment we got off the bus, we were surrounded by birds new for the tour including Palm-nut Vulture, Blue-spotted Wood-dove, African Green Pigeon, Grey Woodpecker, Fanti Sawwing, African Thrush, Brown Babbler, African Golden Oriole and a delightful, photogenic party of Lavender Waxbills – we had walked no more than 25 yards! Our first local rarity of the day was found by Dave B – a superb male Copper Sunbird (one of only two seen on the entire tour). There's nothing to match local knowledge on a birding tour, and it paid off so handsomely this morning. Firstly, we saw not one, but two separate roosting Northern White-faced Scops-owls and a magnificent trio of Verreaux's' Eagle-owls, pink eye-lids and all – all thanks to Abdulai and two young voluntary wardens. In between, some of the group saw both

Black-headed (Red-bellied) and African Paradise-flycatchers virtually in the same tree and a Kalinjaro snake, which normally preys on small lizards and insects and was sunning itself right beside the track. By late morning it was getting extremely hot as we walked alongside maze fields towards the village. Our first Mottled Spinetails soared through the skies alongside Common Swifts and both Dave and Jackie managed to pick out a Pallid amongst them. A drifting Gabar Goshawk was a welcome find, a “hanging in the air” Black-shouldered Kite even more viewer friendly, and in-between we found a male Vitelline Masked-weaver.

Aboard the bus once more, we drove to the coast at Tanji. Either side of a rather disappointing lunch at Nyanya Beach Bar, we patiently ‘scoped the tideline. Amongst a large party of mainly *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Kevin came up trumps once more by pulling out an adult Kelp Gull. Also on the shore were large numbers of the more regular gulls, terns and waders. After lunch some of us watched an immature Pink-backed Pelican fly in off of the sea and we all managed to enjoy an immature Lanner playing havoc with the roosting seabirds. When the intensity had gone from the afternoon sun we drove a couple of miles north, parking up beside Tanji Bird Reserve. Solomon had indicated a walk lasting around two hours – after 45 minutes we were still beside the bus, so intense and variable was the birdlife in just two Acacia trees right in front of us. Highlights included Grey Kestrel, Black-billed Wood-dove, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Western Olivaceous, Subalpine and Melodious Warblers, Northern Black-flycatcher, Black-crowned Tchagra and Yellow-crowned Gonolek. Once we had torn ourselves away from our roadside lookout, we walked an extensive area of short grass and scattered Gingerbread fruit trees – and the birds kept coming. New for the tour included a delightful party of six Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, low flying Pied-winged Swallows; Julian found a Northern Crombec; fleeting glimpses of a skittish Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike and the “piece de resistance” a responsive Golden-tailed Woodpecker – by far the most difficult of this family to see in The Gambia. All-in-all, another exceptionally successful birding day. Between us we had found 107 species including several of real value. All that was left was dinner and bed with the piercing shrill call of Senegal Thick-knees punctuating the night air.

Day 4 A day of great contrast both in terms of birds and habitat – and it couldn’t have started better. We drove east with ease, watching phenomenal westbound commuter traffic crawl along, with the occasional Blue-bellied Roller, Western Red-billed Hornbill and Yellow-billed Shrike on the roadside wires, and then suddenly we stopped to admire a pair of Red-necked Falcons that alternated between sunning themselves and harassing passing Laughing Doves. Our morning was to be spent in Abuko Nature Reserve, the last remaining patch of riverine forest – it’s hard to imagine that, at one time, most of the country was similarly covered. However, whilst quite small, it is a protected water catchment area and the birds are great value. First stop was the hide overlooking the lagoon where over the course of about an hour we got to grips with new tour birds such as Purple Heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, Violet Turaco and Giant Kingfisher as well as exceptional views of close and confiding Black-headed Herons, our first adult Palm-nut Vulture and a cackling covey of Green Woodhoopoes. For the remainder of the morning, we split into two groups to walk the forest trails. The best plan here is to walk slowly and quietly until reaching a more open area, and then patiently waiting and watching. As always, Abuko was hard work and you have to really dig its jewels out. Both groups saw Black-necked Weaver, Little Greenbul and Green Turaco (although the latter took one group three minutes to see and the other group toiled for over an hour!). Some of each group saw Snowy-crowned Robin-chat and Yellow-breasted Apalis. Some of Solomon’s group saw African Pygmy-kingfisher and Collared Sunbird whilst all of Abdulai’s group saw Western Bluebill. Green Vervet Monkeys were understandably very tame throughout the forest, a young Monitor Lizard on the exit road felt nowhere near as confident belting along the track in front of our bus.

The journey to Lamin Lodge, our lunch stop, took no more than 15 minutes and we were soon ensconced in another rustic rotunda overlooking tidal creeks. Lunch today was a buffet of vegetable curry, Chicken Yassa, a popular traditional Gambian dish, rice and salad followed by watermelon – and very nice it was too. Once again, the middle two hours of the day were hot and still. An African Darter flew downstream, David J. scoured nearby mangrove bushes finding both Western Olivaceous and Subalpine Warblers, whilst the rest of us chilled. Shortly after 15.00, we drove just a short way to an area of overgrown agricultural fields, scattered bushes and reed-beds, with the original site name of Lamin Fields. Just a brief walk here was extremely productive with pride of place going to a confiding Pearl-spotted Owlet, and vivid adult male Northern Red Bishops coming a very close second. Also new for us were a pair of Rufous-crowned Rollers, small parties of Orange-cheeked Waxbills and, for some, a fine Yellow-fronted Canary. Just as enjoyable were at least a dozen Little Bee-eaters. Kevin, sadly alone, was the only person to glimpse Western Violet-backed Sunbird. Alladin had driven round to pick us up at “the other end of the track” and we were introduced to members of Solomon’s family both young and older. Our final birding stop, a few miles further on, was aptly named Lamin rice fields. Here the birding was fairly quiet with perched Lizard Buzzard the only new species for the tour.

Nevertheless, we enjoyed prolonged views of pairs of Senegal Parrots and Grey Woodpeckers together with an immature Malachite Kingfisher. We'd seen nowhere near as many species today as previously but it was definitely quality at the expense of quantity, and thoroughly enjoyable.

Day 5 Today we drove south towards the Senegal border (indeed we spent most of the day within spitting distance of it) with a minimum of 20 Blue-bellied Rollers watching our passing. First stop was the saltmarsh and grasslands of Darsilani, and there were birds aplenty. The first creek held over 15 Senegal Thick-knees, several Gull-billed Terns quartered the shallows, Giant Kingfishers perched up in waterside trees and we found our first and only Marsh Sandpipers of the tour. A little further on we came across our first Intermediate Egrets feeding in a muddy creek, whilst patience was rewarded with excellent views of up to six Double-spurred Francolins scurrying from one area of grasses to the next. A singing Plain-backed Pipit eventually showed itself well and a 1st-winter Slender-billed Gull nonchalantly swam alongside the road. A concerted effort scanning the palm trees that bordered the marsh paid off firstly with a party of Black-winged Bishops, including three males still in full breeding dress landing on a prominent snag, shortly followed by an adult African Harrier-hawk. If you factor in "fly-bys" of both Purple Heron and Western Marsh-harrier, it was a pretty good start to the morning.

We continued to walk the dirt road where the habitat eventually changed to drier grasslands with scattered trees. House points for the morning go to Tony for getting us all onto an adult Red-chested Cuckoo sat atop a dead palm stump (my own embarrassment prevents me from documenting what I initially passed it off as!); David J. called out a flyover Long-crested Eagle, a lucky few saw a Black-backed Cisticola, we all enjoyed protracted views of Fine-spotted Woodpeckers together with our first Abyssinian Rollers – and then it was time for lunch. We crossed the bridge into Marakissa district and walked into a nearby lodge, which became a real birders' bar, as we were shortly to be joined by the Limosa tour party. The gardens act as a magnet for birds, which seek both water and shade from the midday sun. To be quite honest, it wasn't particularly hot – probably no more than "early 80s" – but a party of magnificent Purple Starlings, another group of not so gaudy Blackcap Babblers and a couple of White-crowned Robin-chats were seen by all whilst some of the party managed to find a perched Blue-breasted Kingfisher. Having left the restaurant mid-afternoon, we drove just a short distance before parking up and walking a series of pathways through some magnificent open woodland. This area started well – and the finale was something else! We played hide and seek for some while with an African Pygmy-kingfisher before it gave itself up to the photographers amongst us. Whilst this was going on we added both Northern Crombec and Senegal Eremomela to our lists, some of us briefly saw a female Red-winged Prinia and we all enjoyed repeat showings of Violet Turaco and Northern Puffback. We were within sight of Alladin's bus when we attempted to lure out a calling Levillant's Cuckoo. True to form, it flew in right beside us, but that wasn't the only bird in the tree. John W. got onto a second bird just below, a superb White-breasted Cuckooshrike – the first Solomon had seen for four years and it posed out in the open for perhaps five minutes.

The return drive initially took us on a maze of dirt tracks, not only much to the delight of many local children but also, on the outskirts of Brikama, to the delight of an over-zealous and extremely-officious young Police Constable. He objected to being chastised by Abdulai for smoking whilst on duty and insisted on wasting our time trying to find fault with our driver's documents (which were perfectly in order) and then with the coach itself. Despite the irritating delay, we arrived back at Kotu just as the sun was setting, after a superb day's birding.

Day 6 It had to happen – it always does at some point on a tour – you hit a short-term low. The weather changed, skies remained overcast all day lowering the temperature but increasing the humidity. We headed south once more towards Senegal, stopping briefly in Brikama to buy provisions for a picnic lunch. Our first stop in Farasuto forest promised so much, but realistically failed to turn up a single significant bird, save for some Senegal Thick-knees out in the marsh, and a Willow Warbler. The "normally resident" White-backed Night-heron wasn't at home and the usually social Green Crombecs had turned shy. So off we continued to Pirang Forest, and to be honest fared little better. This time we heard Green Crombec and a lucky few had flying glimpses of two Verreaux's Eagle-owls flying through the trees, but that was it until we reached the agricultural land near the village. Here a couple of Levillant's Cuckoos saved the morning.

En-route to the Faraba Bantu bush track, we spent time with an extremely approachable pair of Dark Chanting-goshawks (and were to see another six or so during the course of the afternoon). At the beginning of the track we found a rather distant perched Grasshopper Buzzard, which dropped down and out of sight before everyone had managed to

get off of the bus. Whilst we failed to relocate it, a concerted effort in the area did produce our first Northern Wheatear and, far far better, a juvenile Klaas's Cuckoo. Our picnic was taken al fresco a short way off of the track, with a Beaudouin's Snake-eagle soaring over, and we were accompanied by Abdullah whose family owns the land. Again, this is where local knowledge is so important to a tour, as we were led on a quest for Greyish Eagle-owl, which was eventually found roosting deep within a Eucalyptus tree. It is fair to say that the chances of seeing this bird un-aided is absolutely zero. As if this was a good omen of "things to come" we managed to find a second Grasshopper Buzzard that was happy to pose out in the open, before returning to the bus. We made two further stops to 'walk the track'. The first produced several Double-spurred Francolins and, for a lucky few, a Stone Partridge. The second stop was one of those birding events that happen all too infrequently – new birds just kept coming and coming. The habitat here is savannah grassland with scattered trees and in a magical hour we accumulated two Dideric Cuckoos, four Striped Kingfishers, two Vieillot's Barbets, a Brown-backed Woodpecker, two Mosque Swallows, two Whistling Cisticolas, two Yellow-bellied Hyliotas, a Pale Flycatcher, a Senegal Batis, a Scarlet-chested Sunbird, an African Yellow White-eye and two Bush Petronias. All were new for the tour and we had walked less than 100 metres! Added to this we had repeat showings of Lanner, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Red-winged Prinia, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Copper Sunbird and Yellow-fronted Canary thereby turning this morning's frustration into just the forerunner of a remarkable birding day.

Day 7 The weather reverted to normal today: clear skies and hot sun. Enough to encourage Common Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers and even Eurasian Reed Warblers into song. We drove south along the coast beyond Tanji to work the open fields and bushy scrub at Tujereng. It was an excellent morning for cuckoos with adult and young of both Klaas's and Dideric on view and they were much easier to see than previously. It was also a good day for Abdulai, he got a new bird – Spotted Flycatcher. Other new birds for the tour included Eurasian Wryneck, Singing Cisticola, Whinchat, Brubru, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver and Cut-throat. Some of the party also took the opportunity to catch up with birds missed earlier as, remarkably, we were treated to a second long look at Brown-backed Woodpecker, Black-crowned Tchagras perched right out in the open, Whistling Cisticolas were singing (and not the other way round), Vieillot's Barbet and Striped Kingfisher. We returned to Kombo Beach for lunch and a siesta before setting off once more after the heat had from the sun had reduced. A brief look in the gardens at the Senegambia Hotel produced a charming mixed flock of Greater Blue-eared and Bronze-tailed Starlings on the lawn whilst the central clump of trees held single Yellow-crowned Gonolek and White-crowned Robin-chat together with a couple of African Paradise-flycatchers. Just as we were leaving, Solomon pointed out an extremely distant Lesser Blue-eared Starling – OK it looked a bit smaller, but it was miles away! The remainder of the afternoon was spent on Fajara golf course, the home of a dozen or so Black-headed Lapwings together with both Spur-winged and Wattled Lapwings on the fairways. The trees were virtually devoid of small birds save for a couple of Bearded Barbets. However, the mangrove edges of Kotu stream produced two very showy Blue-breasted Kingfishers and a Little Egret fed in a muddy canal. A fitting end to our first stint of coastal Gambia. With 207 species under the belt, our journey upriver was to begin tomorrow.

Day 8 What a day – spent mainly traveling and still managing to see 123 species. We left Kombo Beach in the dark and as dawn broke we arrived at the ferry terminal in Banjul. To the untrained eye, the port seemed to be continual total chaos, but really it was both structured and orderly (helped of course by Solomon's forward planning and his "two bus trick"). Once aboard, along with a throng of locals, Tony became the centre of entertainment as he failed to spot the Gambian who had crawled towards him on his hands and knees and promptly started to polish Tony's boots – black shoe polish on brown boots! The actual crossing was entertaining in itself with Gull-billed, Lesser Crested, Sandwich and Caspian Terns on view. Three jaegers (skuas) also flew past; the two dark-phased birds were definitely Parasitic (Arctic); the light phase unidentified (but I suspect a Pomarine). Once we had disembarked at Barra, we spent the rest of the day driving east on the newly-tarmaced 22nd July Highway to Georgetown, birding en-route. Almost immediately we came across our first Northern Anteater-chats, a bird much more common on the north shore. At our first real stop overlooking some freshwater marsh, we found two each of Purple and Squacco Herons, a couple of Long-crested Eagles and the first of many Red-rumped Swallows with deep orange rumps. These are a probable "armchair tick" in the future and their provisional new name is West African Swallow. As we drove east, Abyssinian Rollers became a common roadside bird. Our second stop overlooked some tidal mudflats with perhaps as many as 30 Little Ringed Plovers on view and Tony found our first Sacred Ibis. A noticeable feature of the drive was the swirling flocks of small songbirds, almost all of which were undoubtedly Red-billed Queleas and included quite a few full adult males. We started to see one or two Yellow-crowned Bishops amongst the much more numerous Northern Red Bishops and the occasional Dark Chanting-goshawk perched atop Acacia bushes on sentry duty.

Some 80 km east of Barra lies the town of Farafenni where we bought our picnic provisions – lunch itself being under the shade of a giant baobab a few kilometers out of town. From here we walked across the scattered thorn scrub finding two Savile's Bustards. Both flew only a short distance but either sat very tight in the grass or ran like the clappers after landing because no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't relocate them. Other new birds on this leg of the journey included an adult Great Spotted Cuckoo, Singing Bushlark, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-lark and Tree Pipit. Further east still, we parked up and walked a short way into the bush to overlook a drinking pool absolutely teeming with small birds. Amongst the many hundreds of queleas were at least six each of Yellow-crowned Bishop, Sudan Golden Sparrow, Black-rumped Waxbill and Exclamatory Paradise- whydah together with a couple of Cinnamon-breasted Buntings.

A few kilometers further on brought us to the Ka-ur Wetlands, a large area of reeds, sedges, pools and open mud literally crawling with birds – perhaps the most exciting place we had visited on the tour to-date. First to show was, in all likelihood, the star bird of The Gambia – Egyptian Plover – with two birds right beside the road (we were to find a total of 14 birds here all-told). Now it takes something special to upstage an Egyptian Plover, but equally close to the road on the other side was a superb White-crowned Lapwing. Whilst we were picking out White-faced Whistling-ducks and Comb Ducks, there were odd mechanical noises coming from our bus' engine. A hole had appeared in the fuel hose so Alladin "borrowed" a passing child's bicycle to travel to the next village, and promptly returned in the back of a taxi with a replacement hose and the bicycle in the boot. We therefore had an unscripted stop of about an hour – but if you have to break down, I cannot think of a better birding spot to endure it. It was not just the quality of birds on view, the quantity was pretty impressive with at least 3,000 Collared Pratincoles swirling around, a raft of 50 Slender-billed Gulls sat on the water, 20 Ruffs and 25 Senegal Thick-knees. Tony and Julian still managed to see the others off with a perched up Little Bittern.

Back on the road once more, with the engine positively purring, we paused to check out a trio of Rüppell's Griffons atop one bush, a rather distant Brown Snake-eagle and an extremely close and confiding Grasshopper Buzzard. Eventually, as dark was drawing in, we reached the end of the road at the ferry head. All that was left was a short hop over to Georgetown Island and the five kilometre dirt track down to Bird Safari Camp, our base for the next two nights.

Day 9 Waking up to a dawn chorus comprising the grating shrieks of White-crowned Robin-chat and the bubbly trills of Mourning Collared-dove, we were able to appreciate the wonderful setting of this camp, sited right beside the river, having arrived well after dark yesterday. Accommodation is a combination of large, roomy twin-bedded tents or individual round huts. The plumbing is decidedly "rural African" but in a way that adds to its rustic charm – one pleasant surprise, during the previously "off-season", electricity had been added. It was actually quite chilly at dawn although the day was to swiftly warm up. Before breakfast, a party of nine Spur-winged Geese were seen roosting in the upper branches of a bare tree on the opposite bank of the river. After a meal of omelets, hot bread and fruit, we simply walked the trail around the southeastern corner of the island. Obvious highlights included a superb pair of Red-shouldered Cuckooshrikes sharing the branches of several large Mahogany trees with a couple of African Golden Orioles and a fine male African Paradise-flycatcher. Almost as popular, and much more difficult to see generally were a pair of Yellow-throated Greenbuls (Yellow-throated Leaflove) that, with patience, showed themselves to all. If we add in adult Palm-nut Vulture, Gabar Goshawk, adult African Harrier-hawk, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Levillant's Cuckoo, Cardinal Woodpecker, Western Olivaceous Warbler and a large party of Black-rumped Waxbills, it was a pretty good few hours. The middle part of the day was very much an individual thing. Some slept, some gossiped, those that either watched the river or walked the grounds saw Brown Snake-eagle, White-backed Vulture, Pale Flycatcher and Melodious Warbler.

We set off again once the heat had dissipated, drove through Georgetown and parked up beside some rice fields that were actually farmed by prisoners from the local jail. Here we found a number of Squacco Herons and Western Reef-herons, and with some perseverance a fine male Greater Painted-snipe. In the bushy borders, Swamp Flycatcher was new for the tour. Crossing over to the south bank involved a more "Heath Robinson affair" ferry – those on the eastern side having to work the cable to pull us across, those on the western side just looked on and grinned. We were then quickly on our way driving north to the village of Bansang. The next hour or so's birding was quite magical. At least 100 Red-throated Bee-eaters were ever present and the shallow pools enticed drinking parties of Chestnut-backed Sparrow-lark, Bush Petronia, Black-rumped Waxbill, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting and Exclamatory Paradise-whydah all ever watchful as both Gabar Goshawk and Shikra were also in attendance and looking for supper. The return drive halted briefly for a party of Green Bee-eaters and, at a separate stop, for a Red-necked Falcon, which totally ignored the

attention of a Long-tailed Glossy-starling party of harassers. Whilst waiting for the return ferry to load up, the fruiting trees by the water's edge held a party of nine Bruce's Green-pigeons. The final birding event of the day, a torch-lit quest for African Scops-owl was very successful. We were able to quickly lure in three birds, one of which showed itself off to the happy gathered crowd – and then it was dinner.

Day 10 A long day, perhaps the hottest day of the tour so far, but very, very successful. We left Georgetown by boat shortly after sunrise and enjoyed breakfast on board. We were to spend all morning slowly motoring down river before docking at Kuntaur: an ideal way to watch riverine birds and other wildlife. Whilst the species highlights were both Shining Blue and Grey-headed Kingfishers, together with an immature Black Coucal, the morning will be equally remembered for the sheer numbers of Broad-billed Rollers swooping down to drink “skimmeresque” as we sailed by; our first Hadada Ibis and parties of inquisitive Red Colobus Monkeys. Herons were particularly abundant – indeed we saw at least 75 Squaccos, probably double that number Great Egrets and a healthy smattering of Purple Herons and Black-crowned Night-herons. Alladin met us at Kuntaur and we took a very short drive to the Wassu Stone Circles in a “twitch” for Northern Carmine Bee-eater that had been reported in the area recently – and they didn't disappoint! A little further west, we took lunch well off of the highway at a smaller Red-throated Bee-eater colony before the steady drive back towards Farafenni, stopping en route briefly at Ka-ur where we all saw an Egyptian Plover, and some of us a Black Crake. Knowing that we still had a long drive ahead of us, we eventually turned south onto the Trans Gambian highway (which was in a far worse state of repair despite its grand title), leaving any remnants of tarmac behind us. A modicum of patience and understanding was necessary to cope with our final river crossing. We acted like a magnet for entrepreneurial salesmen and women of all shapes and sizes, and when we finally managed to drive on board, the crew disembarked to go for lunch (at 4.00pm)! Nevertheless, we eventually reached the south bank and traversed dirt roads for a couple of hours before reaching Tendaba. On the way, both the highlights were black. Everyone saw a melanistic Gabar Goshawk perched on a dead branch but only those in the front of the bus managed to see the 7–8ft long black snake that slithered across the road. Solomon named it “Black Mamba” but that is likely just the local terminology – whatever it looked pretty impressive. Finally, just as the sun was setting, we arrived at Tendaba Camp our base for the next two nights.

Day 11 Despite being called a camp, there is no canvas to be found anywhere at Tendaba. It is a village comprising detached and terraced huts; simply furnished but clean, again with varying standards of plumbing, situated right against the bank of the river. Another scorching day was in the offing. However, shortly after sunrise, it was pleasantly cool as we boarded our pirogue for a morning's birding around the mangrove islands and tidal marshes across the river. Highlights were many: those four White-throated Bee-eaters perched on open snags taking in the morning rays; not one but two sightings of White-backed Night-heron – the first an adult; the second an adult with four attendant fledged young; an absolutely enormous Goliath Heron that stood arrogantly on the bank, watching our passing with total disdain; and perched Malachite Kingfishers literally within feet of us. Other species new for the tour included a couple of African Spoonbills flying up river, small numbers of Woolly-necked and Yellow-billed Storks, a Glossy Ibis, rare indeed in The Gambia, perched alongside two larger Sacred cousins, a lone Greater Flamingo accompanying the storks, a rather distant party of perhaps 50 European Bee-eaters, a fly-over Sand Martin and several Mouse-brown Sunbirds – seen well by some, in flight only by others and missed altogether by a few, including the writer! If you add into the mix Woodland and Blue-breasted Kingfishers, Blue-cheeked and Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, Pink-backed and Great White Pelicans, plus exceptional numbers of Great, Intermediate and Little Egrets, it was a wonderful morning.

By noon the sun was fierce and the tide had dropped significantly – time to relax and/or eat before setting off again mid afternoon. Our first birding stop was an area of dried mud, grasses and open water still called Tendaba airfield although it must be many years since an aircraft came anywhere near there. The only birds of real note were a party of five Gull-billed Terns although a distant troop of Red Patas monkeys were good fun. Just as we were leaving a pair of Wahlberg's Eagles (looking confusingly like Black Kites at first glance) put on a magnificent show. The remainder of the day was spent birding several areas within Kiang West National Park. At the first site, the hoped for Abyssinian Ground-hornbills were conspicuous by their absence (actually they could have been there but much of the grass was at least head height!) but we were compensated with a wide selection of passerines. Without doubt the star turn was a male Pygmy Sunbird. The supporting cast included Little Weaver seen by some and juvenile Woodchat Shrike seen by all whilst repeat showings of Grasshopper Buzzard, European Bee-eater, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Lesser Blue-eared Starling were most welcome. A couple of miles further into the park Tony found a particularly skittish White-shouldered Black-tit eventually seen by perhaps half of the group. We all enjoyed a pair of Black Scimitarbills and our third Brown-backed Woodpecker of the tour together with a particularly showy Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird. We stayed

in the area until darkness fell and were rewarded with an excellent view of a male Long-tailed Nightjar but just a brief glimpse of its Standard-winged cousin – did anyone actually see the “standards”? We returned in time for our final dinner at Tendaba, which was, to be frank, best described as “average”. A large party of UK students had arrived and mass catering is clearly not one of the camp’s strengths.

Day 12 The principal focus of today was the return drive to the coast. Whilst perhaps only 100km away, only the last stage of the road is tarmacked, which made for slow driving and lots of dust. However, there was plenty of birding to be had beforehand. On the drive out of camp, a sudden stop heralded a herd of cattle replete with seven attendant Yellow-billed Oxpeckers. We walked several trails once again in Kiang West finding parties of African Yellow White-eyes and Senegal Eremomelas; several African Golden Orioles and a Brubru in the scattered Acacia scrub-forest. However, “find of the area” had to be the restless party of 13 White Helmetsrikes that flitted from tree to tree. It got very hot quite early on today – indeed by 10.00am the forest was still and silent – time to put some miles behind us. Birdwatching took a backseat for a while as we visited a Lower Basic School to deliver a most generous package of stationery items courtesy of the tour participants. The Head Master expressed his sincere gratitude and gave us a potted history of the mechanics of school life here. Time to continue westwards. After a further hour’s drive, we reached the Kalagi River, the border between Western and Lower River Divisions of the country. Initially we stopped to check out a flock of Black-tailed Godwits that were new for the tour. However quite quickly large high-flying birds became the focus of our attention. Over the course of around 30 minutes we added immature Bateleur, immature Eurasian Griffon and an extremely-distant immature White-headed Vulture to our tour list together with close ups of White-backed Vulture and Grasshopper Buzzard. The whole time, small parties of Pink-backed Pelicans drifted over joined on several occasions by both Woolly-necked and Yellow-billed Storks Lunch was taken at a riverside café, accompanied by a couple of soldiers from the nearby checkpoint before the mid-afternoon hot, dusty, bumpy and thirsty drive back to the coast. This concluded the up-river portion of the tour, which had amalgamated a total of 222 species.

Day 13 Having learned just how frustrating riverine forest birding can be, it was obvious that a second visit to Abuko was necessary. Again we split into two groups. On the last visit there were key species seen by one group and not the other and so it was a great relief that after this morning every tour participant had had good looks at Snowy-crowned Robin-chat and Western Bluebill. In the same vein, a number also caught up with Black Crake, thanks to Sue’s keen eyesight. Nothing is ever guaranteed with forest birding and in an ideal world there would be time for three visits to this site on the tour itinerary. Abdulai’s group alone saw Lesser Honeyguide and Solomon’s saw both Green Hylia and Grey-headed Bristlebill – but there’s only so much you can pack into two weeks! Also seen during the morning were Purple Heron, Collared Sunbird, both African and Black-headed (Red-bellied) Paradise-flycatchers, both Green and Violet Turacos, Yellow-chested Apalis and Common Wattle-eye. Also here we found our only Nile Crocodile and a diminutive Bushbuck. Perhaps the most surprising sighting of the whole day came close to lunch time when a lucky few including Dave and Jackie had a brief view of a raptor which they tentatively but correctly identified as Ayre’s Hawk-eagle (a bird seen repeatedly several days later by the second Birdfinders tour).

Lunch was again taken at Lamin Lodge – the shrimp sandwiches were particularly popular. Our scheduled late afternoon birding was to be overlooking the mangrove and tidal mudflats at Bund Road, close to Banjul. Sadly, the state of the tide scuppered our plans and we ended up looking over a tidal lagoon at Toll Point. The vast majority of seabirds roosting and preening were Sandwich Terns and Grey-headed Gulls. However, amongst them were found 50 Gull-billed, 35 Lesser Crested, 15 Caspian and our first Little Terns, around 30 Slender-billed Gulls including displaying adults plus gatherings of waders which included our only Kentish Plovers, Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints of the tour. Of species note however were the two small flocks of Black Herons which flew right in front of us – the advanced guard obviously as we were to find a feeding group of 38 birds beside the road on the drive back at dusk.

Day 14 The last full day birding of the tour. Our aim was to re-visit sites where we could maximise the number of African birds and maybe plug a couple of gaps in our list, which was fast approaching 300 species. We spent the morning back at Tujereng walking the weedy fields with scattered Acacia and Baobab. For some inexplicable reason, birds were flighty this morning – we saw lots, but many rarely perched for long in one spot. In particular, we spent close to an hour trying to get as many people as possible onto Yellow Penduline-tit (which is nowhere near as yellow as depicted in field guides) and Senegal Batis. At the other extreme, Eurasian Wryneck and Dideric Cuckoo could not have been more obliging. Other birds of note included a “dash past” African Hobby just as we were getting off of the bus, Long-crested Eagle, several Dark Chanting-goshawks, a confiding Vieillot’s Barbet, Klaas’s Cuckoo, Northern

Crombec, Little Weaver and the addition of both Blackcap and Common Redstart to the trip list. By 11.30am it was dry, still and hot – so the next three hours were spent back at Kombo Beach.

For our final afternoon, we returned to the Faraba Banta Bush Track. Our local friend Abdullah re-located the Greyish Eagle-owl for us and this time it posed for the photographers, right out in the open, despite the hostile attention of Fork-tailed Drongos and a Dark Chanting-goshawk which came into see what all of the fuss was about. Our second Woodchat Shrike, this time a worn-plumaged adult, perched atop a bush; our second Great Spotted Cuckoo performed a spectacular fly past before sitting in full view and we had fun with Lizard Buzzards. Despite being nearly 17.00, it was still seriously hot and very humid, but a fitting finale was just down the road. After several failed attempts throughout the day, three male White-fronted Black-chats were lured into full view and to top it all, Abdulai found a close and approachable Senegal Batis enabling both Pauline and Robert to finally catch up with what was almost becoming a mythical species for them. There just remained the drive back lasting an hour or so. All this while, David J. had spent a quiet afternoon birding locally at Kotu picking out his own Oriole Warbler and a Northern Black-flycatcher actually in the hotel gardens.

Day 15 With hotel room checkout scheduled for 12 noon, the morning allowed people to do their own thing. Tony made a private arrangement to return to Abuko in search of Grey-headed Bristlebill; others varyingly birded locally or generally relaxed before the rigmarole of the long and tedious journey home to the cold (or pleasantly warm if you were Bert and Heike).

Lasting images of this tour include the contrast between the modern and “westernised” tourist coast and the much more traditional West African simple interior. We became used to smiling faces everywhere and groups of inquisitive but never overly-intrusive children following our progress. The sight of sheep and goats tethered to the roof-racks of vehicles became commonplace and there was always the plea for our empty drinking water bottles. And then there were the birds – collectively the tour found 301 species; two additional species (Four-banded Sandgrouse and Greater Honeyguide) were only seen by the leader(s) and a further four (Ahanta Francolin, Sedge Warbler, Eurasian Reed Warbler and African Blue Flycatcher) were heard not seen. In Solomon and Abdulai, we could not have asked for more accomplished guides. Without their sharp eyes and knowledge of local vocalisations, the tour would have floundered. Furthermore, the benefit of Solomon’s social network is beyond measure. What we do know is that we glided past virtually every roadblock and queues of vehicles ahead of us at ferry heads weren’t even a minor inconvenience. In Alladin we were constantly reassured by his conscientious, safe and courteous driving and, of course, within the tour party itself, we had a number of very keen-eyed birders who added significantly to our overall success. Yes, at times the heat became oppressive; yes some of the roads, especially on the south bank were definitely “third world”; yes, the dust got in our eyes and throat and yes our transport was at times a little cramped. But this did not detract from what was unquestionably a successful and enjoyable tour

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