

Gambia

27 November–
11 December 2009

Participants

Phil Blatcher
Neil and Avril Connelly
John Cresswell
Carlos Davies
Tony and Pearl Davies
Alan Gibson
Helge Grastveit
Steve and Jude
Griffiths John and
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African Finfoot

**Leaders Solomon Jallow and Martyn
Kenefick**

This tour was best summarized by Solomon in a conversation we had on the last afternoon. He said ‘this tour has found more quality species than any tour I have been involved with in the last ten years’ and it was a real pleasure to lead.

Day 1 Inter-continental travel can be a weary affair, especially when the host country is enjoying a public holiday. Today was Tobaski, an important day in the Muslim calendar as it celebrates the Feast of the Sacrifice. This resulted in the hubbub of Banjul International Airport being more frenetic than usual. So it was that 16 rather tired faces met me at Kombo Beach Hotel, our base for much of the tour, in the early evening just as dusk was drawing in.

Day 2 Senegal Thick-knees regularly pierced the night air with their shrill calls, now it was the chance to put a face to the voice. The day dawned fairly cool and a little overcast – and amazingly stayed that way almost all day with temperatures probably never exceeding 70°F – however in The Gambia, overcast equates to humid. For most of the tour group this was their first venture to sub-Saharan Africa and today was to be new birds left, right and centre. We amassed a very creditable total of 117 species during the day together with sightings of both Monitor and Agami Lizards and Green Vervet Monkey. Having met up with Solomon and his ever-grinning partner Abdulai who were to be our guides and mentors during the tour, a key objective of a first day it to familiarise fully with the common birds and it wasn’t very long before binoculars were not even raised at the presence of Cattle Egret, Yellow-billed (Black) Kite, Hooded Vulture, Spur-winged Lapwing, Grey-headed Gull, Speckled Pigeon, Red-eyed, Vinaceous and Laughing Doves, African Palm-swift, Little Swift, Red-chested Swallow, Common Bulbul, Piapiac, Pied Crow, Long-tailed Glossy-starling, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, Village Weaver, Red-billed Firefinch, Bronze Mannikin and even Beautiful Sunbirds. The walk of no more than 100 meters between the hotel gates and Kotu Stream bridge produced our first Broad-billed Roller, Blue-breasted Kingfisher, Northern Puffback, Senegal Coucal and Senegal Parrots and then the pace picked up! Standing on the bridge, new birds came through thick and fast. Black-headed and Striated Herons fished the creek; Senegal Thick-knees and Wattled Lapwings fed on the mud; Avril found our first Malachite Kingfisher perched low in a mangrove bush, whilst several of their Pied cousins sallied from the overhead wires; Pallid Swifts and a couple of Wire-tailed Swallows swooped low over the water; Red-billed Hornbills stuttered across the sky almost as if their bills were too heavy for level flight; a lone Grey Woodpecker clung to a tree-trunk whilst a trio of Northern Crombecs attracted the interest of both Common Chiffchaff and a rather dull Subalpine Warbler.

Moving further up the road, we encountered our first “scarce” species. A pair of Little Weavers clung warbler-like to the undersides of Acacia bushes and an African Silverbill perched right out in the open. Kotu ponds provided a mixture of the familiar and the exotic. On the water, Little Grebes mingled with White-faced Whistling-ducks; on the muddy edges Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers stood alongside Black-winged Stilts and African Jacanas. Despite being mid-morning, a walk through the vegetable fields and rice paddies added Shikra, African Harrier-hawk, Hamerkop, Black-headed Lapwing, Black-billed Wood-dove, Western Plantain-eater, Little Bee-eater and African Grey Hornbill with a most welcome diversion to a “birders shack” where some entrepreneurs had made ready soft drinks in a cooler. Reaching back to the main road, we were introduced to Alladin and his bus, both of which were to become firm friends over the next two weeks. Our destination and lunch spot was Cape Point but we only got half way there before some roadside marsh birds brought us to a shuddering halt. Western Reef-heron stood alongside Black Heron, and we became familiar with the structural and facial differences between Intermediate and Great Egret. And so on to Ana’s Sandplover Bar, perhaps ramshackle and rustic, definitely quaint with the ubiquitous warm Gambian welcome. The first conflict of the tour arose when the arrival of a party of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters coincided with the arrival of the buffet – (lunch won but fortunately the bee-eaters were quite content to hang around!) a traditional chicken and shrimp curry with rice and salad. Along the tide-line, the group of roosting seabirds comprised Grey-headed Gulls and Sandwich Terns with a good smattering of Caspian, Royal and Lesser-crested Terns alongside. The highlight, however were a couple of superb full-adult Slender-billed Gulls with a slight pink flush already on their breast feathers. Out to sea, several jaegers (skuas) passed by at varying distances. One was definitely a Parasitic (Arctic Skua); one quite possibly Pomarine; the other two – well who knows? In the mangrove edge, Carlos found our first Namaqua Dove, Phil, a party of five Curlew Sandpipers and the first of many Abyssinian Rollers perched out in the open.

At 14.15 we boarded the bus once more, set off and then immediately stopped – the culprit being a fine Giant Kingfisher perched on overhead wires. Eventually we made our way back to Kotu and walked the Casino Cycle Track. At some lily-strewn ponds we found our first Squacco Herons, enjoyed amazingly close and confiding Yellow-crowned Gonoleks, watched a Grey-headed Kingfisher consume a grasshopper and found the first of many Yellow-billed Shrikes. Our walk effectively ended at the beach where several more jaegers were harrying parties of Common and Sandwich terns offshore. This time, one was definitely Pomarine, the others... . All in all, a pretty superb first day birding The Gambia.

Day 3 We took advantage of the quiet early morning Sunday roads to cover the fairly-short distance to Brufut Woods where we were to spend an excellent few hours. This is a mixture of fairly-open woodland and dense secondary scrub accessed by a maze of dirt pathways. This is a local and protected nature reserve, warded by the village. Just as we alighted from the bus, we found a shivering, fledged young Levaillant’s Cuckoo begging food from its attendant Brown Babbler foster parents and some briefly saw a couple of African Pygmy-kingfishers. Both Black-headed (Red-bellied) and African Paradise-flycatchers teased us as they flitted through Cashew trees, a party of Lavender Waxbills accompanied a Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird sunning themselves atop a bush and a juvenile Klaas’s Cuckoo perched up briefly. Brufut is renowned for its roosting nightbirds. Thanks in no small measure to Abba, a local voluntary warden, we were able to watch at leisure two charming, diminutive Northern White-faced Scops-owls and, a little later, two enormous Verreaux’s Eagle-owls with their pink eye-lids. A short “off-track” excursion brought us a fine Long-tailed Nightjar seen down to about five meters; obviously aware of us but totally convinced in the security of its camouflaged plumage. The star bird of the morning was seen well by some and briefly by the rest – an adult Blue Malkoha (Yellowbill), perhaps the most skulking of all the African cuckoos.

Walking out onto the agricultural fields at the back of the woods, our first Lizard Buzzard perched up and a couple of Dark Chanting-goshawks drifted over. The fields themselves were quiet, save for Red-cheeked Cordonbleus, non-breeding dress Northern Red Bishops and a Yellow-fronted Canary. Time now for a siesta and/or a swim back at Kombo Beach. By 14.30 cloud cover had spread and the temperature dropped considerably. Some described conditions as “pleasantly cool” all afternoon. We drove south down the coast to the fishing village of Tanji. The tide was quite high, reducing the number of seabirds and shorebirds on the beach, but our target bird, Kelp Gull, was easily picked out, standing on the stern of a fishing boat. Also present were Lesser Black-backed, Black-headed and Grey-headed Gulls; Royal, Lesser Crested, Sandwich and Caspian Terns together with parties of Bar-tailed Godwits, Sanderlings and Ruddy Turnstones.

We then retraced our steps north for a couple of miles, parked up and spent over two hours walking through Tanji Nature Reserve. This is an area of coastal grassland dotted with Cashew, Acacia Mango and Gingerbread fruit trees. Early on, highlights included a particularly obliging Melodious Warbler preening itself right out in the open, a couple of foraging Western Olivaceous Warblers and everyone in the party finally got to grips with African Thrush. It appeared to be a theme this afternoon that normally shy and retiring species had swallowed extrovert pills. Firstly, we had a gang of four Oriole Warblers flitting across the tops of bare bushes, then a party of Four-banded Sandgrouse sitting motionlessly in open view,

and a Snowy-crowned Robin-chat eventually gave itself up to all. Equally visible was a fine Long-crested Eagle that swooped down to perch on an open snag and a group of Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters. Not everything was easy going though. A Greater Honeyguide only paused momentarily in view and was missed by many and the parties of African Green-pigeons flying over were never seen in good light. Nevertheless, new birds continued to mount up. Just before we reached the road, we found a pair of Common Wattle-eyes and last, but not least, roadside utility wires held a perched Woodland Kingfisher. All that remained was the short quiet drive back to Kotu at the end of an excellent day, which had produced a total of 112 species.

Day 4 Amazingly (for The Gambia on the last day of November) we never saw the sun all day. The weather remained overcast and still – indeed for a five-minute spell during the morning there were actually spots of rain. This also meant that the middle of the day was extremely humid. Nevertheless, we saw some cracking birds. Our morning was to be spent walking the trails at the famous Abuko riverine forest reserve, although good birding started en route with a fine Red-necked Falcon perched on a telegraph pole beside the road. Within a minute of entering the reserve, Solomon's keen eyesight had picked out a perched African Pygmy-kingfisher motionless below the low canopy allowing those that missed yesterday's birds to have a wry smile – but the real surprise was a few minutes away. We duly arrived at the hide overlooking the main lagoon. I guess we should have noted the alert, fully concentrated posture of the roosting Black-crowned Night-herons – but never mind. All of a sudden a raptor swooped low in front of us and flew up into one of the tall trees, causing absolute pandemonium. Initially all we saw were the upper-parts, broad winged and rather long-tailed, but with few defining features. We located the bird perched and through telescopes established that it was a hawk-eagle. It was only five minutes later when it launched itself after a Giant Kingfisher and flew right at us that we made out the white "landing-lights" on the leading edge of the forewing – adult Ayres's Hawk-eagle. In actual fact, several members of the previous Birdfinders tour had seen (what was now so obviously) this bird five days previous. These hunting forays were repeated several times with quarry once more the kingfisher and then it seemed that night-herons might be more ungainly in their evasive tactics. There were no obvious kills over the course of an hour and so we split up into two groups to quietly walk the trail network. Much of Abuko is narrow, single file trails with little viewing off to the sides and so the plan was for each group to find openings in the undergrowth and quietly watch and wait. The first group, led by Solomon, found one of the star birds of the forest – Grey-headed Bristlebill, together with Collared Sunbird and Orange-cheeked Waxbill. The highlight bird seen by Abdulai's second group was a Lesser Honeyguide. Both groups independently found both Violet and Green Turacos, Snowy-crowned Robin-chat, Yellow-breasted Apalis and Little Greenbul. There was also time to enjoy a preening duo of Red Colobus Monkeys. With the stillness in the air becoming oppressive, we transferred to Lamin Lodge for lunch. This is a uniquely shaped, rustic wooden structure set on the banks of a tidal mangrove creek. Here we enjoyed a buffet of Chicken Yassa, grilled Mackerel steaks, rice and salad.

Working the overgrown agricultural fields nearby after lunch was quite hard work. An adult Woodchat Shrike perched up, a group of male Northern Red Bishops still with vestiges of breeding dress added a touch of colour, a few Orange-cheeked Waxbills were present but there was little else of note. Onto the Lamin Ricefields, where we walked single file along the raised bunds between the paddies. Without question, the star bird was an adult female Greater Painted-snipe, which flew out of cover and then in circles in front of us. Of equal value, but only seen by a few of the party, was a flushed Little Bittern, which only spent a few seconds aloft. The drive back tonight seemed to take forever, such was the traffic, hustle and bustle that is Serrakunda at commuter time but we finally reached Kombo Beach in time for sunset.

Day 5 This totally unexpected weather pattern continued today with overcast skies, light rain in the afternoon, midday humidity and a temperature in the early 70s. This morning we drove south-east to Brikama where, much to the amusement of the group, we bought basic ingredients for a picnic lunch (bread with tinned sardines that were actually mackerel, tinned corned beef that was actually luncheon meat and bananas). This chore done, we carried on to Farasuto forest. This is another protected area of forest run by the local village community, but really you need sunshine to make it work. We had good views of a Common Wattle-eye. John C. just managed to glimpse a Leaflove found by Solomon – but that was about it. So off to the grasslands and meadows beyond the village of Pirang. As we parked the bus, an exceptionally-confiding Gabar Goshawk kept a beady eye on us, and Carlos virtually trod on two tiny passerines that I guess had to have been Black-faced Quailfinches. Our first squadron of Pink-backed Pelicans soared over and a (presumed) pair of Wahlberg's Eagles gave excellent views. Beyond the grass lies a large area of wetlands, formerly a shrimp farm. Regrettably the new (European) owners flatly refuse any tourist access and so we had to make do with walking one of the boundary paths and viewing the area from a raised bund. Over the course of the next hour we found a large party of spoonbills – perhaps 80 in all and equally divided between Eurasian and African, a few juvenile Spur-winged Geese, four Yellow-billed Storks, a ring-tailed harrier which on close scrutiny was found to be Pallid Harrier and a posing Long-crested Eagle sat atop an isolated bush. Helge found a pair of Black-rumped Waxbills whilst Carlos picked up our first Red-rumped Swallows.

These, in fact, have dark orange as opposed to pale peach coloured rumps looking little like their European counterparts and are likely to be an armchair tick for the future by the name of West African Swallow.

By late morning, we drove on further to the village of Faruba and collected Abdullah, whose family owns the land that was to be our lunchtime and early afternoon birding habitat. Driving onto the Banta bush track, we found another fledged young Levillant's Cuckoo begging from babblers, our first Rufous-crowned Rollers and yet another pair of Four-banded Sandgrouse in the weeds right in front of us. Whilst we ate our "bread and whatever", Helge really came into his own not only finding an excellent Greater Honeyguide trying to have a siesta in an Acacia tree but also picked out our first Vieillot's Barbet eating fruit in a distant fig tree. We also had the opportunity of prolonged telescope views of both Greater Blue-eared and Purple Starlings and a Dark Chanting-goshawk. Abdullah then led us through his land and pointed out not one but two day roosting Greyish Eagle-owls, both nonchalant but fully aware of our presence. The next two hours provided some of the most intense tour birding I have ever experienced. New birds were coming at us left, right and centre, some anticipated, some hoped for and one "not in your wildest dreams". The area is renowned for its raptors and we soon added Lanner, Grasshopper Buzzard and Brown Snake-eagle together with another Long-crested Eagle all perched out in the open. Then the rush set in. Phil glimpsed a Stone Partridge scurrying across the track whilst perched or feeding in roadside trees were both Vieillot's and Bearded Barbets; three Brown-backed Woodpeckers, both Singing and Whistling Cisticolas, Red-winged Warbler, three Western Olivaceous Warblers, Senegal Eremomela, a stunning Yellow-bellied Hyliota, a pair of White-fronted Black-chats, Senegal Batis, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, African Yellow White-eye, a pair of Black-crowned Tchagras, a party of four White Helmetshrikes and a Black-winged Bishop. Even these were surpassed not only by the flying Black-bellied Bustard but also by Solomon's leap of delight! It was really hard to tear ourselves away but shortly after 17.00, with the light dimming slightly, we began the hour or so's drive back to Kotu with many happy faces aboard.

Day 6 There was a slight change in the weather today – it was still overcast but the welcomed breeze of yesterday had dissipated leaving it pretty warm and muggy. Another drive to the southeast and a banana stop in Brikama preceded our visit to Darsilani. This is open country birding with dried mudflats, small pools and areas of short grass and reeds. Early birds seen included our first Marsh Sandpiper (instructively feeding next to a Common Greenshank), a rather tame Slender-billed Gull and several Caspian and Gull-billed Terns. On walking out across the mud, a Double-spurred Francolin perched atop a mound as if on sentry duty even showing off its spurs. We found our first Little Egrets, had extended views of a pair of Plain-backed Pipits and both male and female Western Marsh-harriers quartered the fields. We had our first good look at a perched Grey Kestrel and a hare species hurtled away from us into deeper cover. Continuing our walk along the main track, the land use became more agricultural with groves of trees. Here we managed to entice in a pair of Pearl-spotted Owlets. We then drove a mile or so, crossing the "border bridge" and entered the environs of Marakissa.

By now it was late morning and little was showing. We walked onto our lunch venue at Marakissa Camp finding a couple of African Jacanas and a good-sized flock of White-faced Whistling-ducks in a lily strewn pond. Lunch was a very relaxed affair, save for the awkward, if not perilous climb over the roofing balustrade to view an adult Barn Owl and her three chicks. The gardens here have several water troughs deliberately filled for the birds (and squirrels) and over the course of a couple of hours, the regular Purple Starlings and Long-tailed Glossy-starlings, Piapiacs, Red-billed Firefinches and Red-cheeked Cordonbleus all came into drink. Star slakers of thirst were a Greater Honeyguide and a magnificent Violet Turaco, the latter always nervous and alert but both stayed for over a minute. During this time, a Giant Kingfisher flew through the camp, certainly below head height. Sadly both Alan G. and Alan K. were the only people in situ to glimpse the feature bird of this camp, a Spotted Honeyguide, which stayed for just a few seconds. Other good birds found during our siestas included three White-crowned Robin-chats and a pair of African Pied Hornbills. The rest of the afternoon was spent walking a long loop trail through mixed Acacia, Cashew, Palm and Mango trees interspersed with small rice paddies and a couple of lily ponds. Birding was slow initially but we slowly amassed a creditable list including our first African Golden Oriole, at least three Northern Puffbacks, three Black-headed (Red-bellied) Paradise-flycatchers including a male with full tail and several of the group caught up with birds missed earlier such as Grey-backed Camaroptera and Tawny-flanked Prinia. The best birding, however, was to be had at the lily ponds right at the end of the birding day. Both Giant Kingfisher and African Pygmy-kingfisher sat almost side by side; Malachite and Blue-breasted were perched nearby and we had our first Black Crakes of the tour, walking right out in the open.

Day 7 It's not often that virtually the last bird of the morning's session gets first mention in a tour report – but today was an exception. The weather had reverted to "Gambianesque" – it was sunny and very hot and we were just checking out a burned field with scattered weeds. Slowly, gracefully, cautiously walking slightly away from us, but always looking warily at us was a Bronze-winged Courser, perhaps 40 metres away. Now back to the beginning.

We decided to spend the morning at Tujereng, an area of overgrown groundnut fields south of Tanji with patches of tall grasses (and stinging nettles) and scattered trees. We got off of the bus and immediately two Lanner Falcons flew in and perched atop a nearby Acacia, whilst a much smaller, rather bare shrub hosted up to six Black-crowned Tchagras and occasional Melodious Warbler and Greater Whitethroat. The best birding was to be had in the tall trees at the back of the fields where at least three different Klaas's Cuckoos perched up together with Senegal Batis, our first Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weavers, delightful pairs of Striped Kingfishers and Lesser Honeyguides, a Little Weaver, a female Greater Honeyguide, a Brown-backed Woodpecker, three Bearded Barbets and a scattering of Whinchats. So we came to this burned field. We initially found a couple of Levillant's Cuckoos sheltering in the shade, much to the consternation of a party of White Helmetsrikes – and the rest is history. Walking back to the bus, a spiral of Hooded Vultures contained a dashing African Hobby and a juvenile Montagu's Harrier – not bad for a morning's birding! A smaller group ventured out once more mid-afternoon and drove to Bund Road. This is an area of tidal mudflats on the outskirts of Banjul. Aesthetic is not a word that comes to mind, but there are plenty of birds. Amongst the large flock of Grey-headed Gulls, Sandwich and Royal Terns, Common Ringed Plovers and Sanderling there were smaller numbers of Caspian and Lesser Crested Terns, a couple of Lesser Black-backed and Slender-billed Gulls and a lone Curlew Sandpiper.

Moving back to the coast, we spent time at two areas along Toll Point. The first, a tidal lagoon just inland of the shore, held much the same species as Bund Road with the addition of three Kentish Plovers. The second, a freshwater lagoon close to the road was teeming with birds. Well over 100 Long-tailed Cormorants and African Darters fed, sat and preened. Perhaps another 100 Black Herons adopted their unique umbrella posture. Amongst all this, there were 25 Sacred Ibises and a small mixed group of both African and Eurasian Spoonbills. Our first week birding coastal Gambia had produced an impressive 234 species with the next stage up river to come.

Day 8 The main objective today was the long transfer from Kotu up to Georgetown Island – but we saw some superb birds along the way. We left Kombo Beach in total darkness, heading for Banjul and the cross-river ferry. The Gambian Vice President commandeered the first boat and we were deemed unsuitable to accompany her (as was everybody else), so we boarded the second boat, which departed at 07.30 for the 45-minute crossing to Barra. We saw six jaegers (skuas) on the crossing: one definite Pomarine; four definite Parasitic (Arctic) and one skua sp. Otherwise, up to a dozen Caspian Terns and a constant trickle of Sandwich and Common Terns accompanied us.

Once on the north bank, we got out of Barra as quickly as possible making one brief stop to look at Northern Anteater-chats. Our targets were twofold: to check as many groundnut fields as possible for Temminck's Coursers and to get to Farafenni in good time to buy lunch provisions. Despite our best efforts, coursers eluded us (for the time being) – we had to make do with a Lanner and a number of Black-headed Lapwings. We also checked out a couple of wetlands finding a party of 15 Yellow-billed Storks amongst hundreds of egrets, a couple of Purple Herons and a superb juvenile Pallid Harrier.

Eventually we reached Farafenni (the Brikama of the north bank), brought our provisions and drove a few kilometers out of town to find shade under a huge Baobab. Once again Helge proved to be “birdfinder extraordinaire” finding a rather sedate cuckoo sitting in the shade with a reddish wash on the breast, which was, at the time, considered to be Red-chested Cuckoo (two subsequent sightings later in the tour cast doubt in favour of female African Cuckoo. Hopefully photographic evidence will soon clarify the situation). Close by, a couple of Vieillot's Barbets perched up in bare branches. This area holds a small population of Savile's Bustards and a walk through the weeds and prickles produced a pair quite quickly. What was totally unexpected however were the two pairs of White-bellied Bustards in the same field.

We continued our drive east, reaching the Ka-ur wetlands by mid-afternoon. Several Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-larks, including a stunning male, greeted us as we stepped off of the bus, a drake Comb Duck swam lazily out on the lagoon and then it was all about photographing Egyptian Plovers. We found four very close to the road, whilst on the other side a muddy field held probably upwards of 600 Collared Pratincoles. Several Western Marsh-harriers and a juvenile Montagu's Harrier repeatedly quartered the reeds but despite this disturbance we managed to find four cryptically-plumaged Kittlitz's Plovers crouching down in a small patch of grass.

Next onto “Solomon's waterhole”, a roadside stop attracting wave after wave of birds coming in to drink. Almost all were either Red-billed Queleas or Northern Red Bishops but if you add into the mix half a dozen Exclamatory Paradise-whydahs, two Sudan Golden Sparrows, two Cinnamon-breasted Buntings and a Cut-throat, together with small numbers of both Namaqua Dove and Black-rumped Waxbill, it was pretty lively birding. Whilst all this was going on, two Dark Chanting-goshawks sat in the trees, we literally didn't know which way to turn.

Our next freshwater marsh produced a stunning party of nine African Pygmy-geese. A Common Moorhen fed alongside six Egyptian Plovers whilst up to 20 Yellow-crowned Bishops sat in the reeds. There was just time for one more “groundnut field bash” which again failed to yield the hoped-for courser, but we did find our first Bush Petronias and a group of four White Helmetshrikes. From there it was a straight drive to the river, a quaint five-minute crossing on the ferry and a 15-minute drive south along dusty trails, stopping for a family party of Stone Partridge and a silhouetted Verreaux’s Eagle-owl en route. Eventually we arrived at Janjanbureh Bird Safari Camp, our base for the next two nights and ate dinner to the background calls of African Scops-owl.

Day 9 The magic of Bird Safari Camp is not in its amenities, but in its idyllic setting. The huts and tents are perfectly comfortable, the plumbing antiquated and the cold-water showers vary from refreshing to bracing. Dawn breaks quite late here and the air is filled with the cooing of Mourning Collared-doves and the harsh grating White-crowned Robin-chats. Standing beside the river as the sky turned from red to blue in a fresh 65 degrees Fahrenheit, an African Fish-eagle perched up high, two Hadada Ibises flew downstream, a Swamp Flycatcher sat low briefly beside the jetty and Helge found a Bruce’s Green-pigeon perched on the far bank. Breakfast was at a Gambian 7.00am – indeed at 6.55 the chef was still in bed! Nevertheless, with Solomon taking charge of affairs, freshly-baked bread and hot omelets followed in profuse quantities. We were on foot this morning, walking the bush trail from the camp down to the Mahogany stand at the southern tip of the island. Whilst over the course of about three hours we found some specialist birds of the area, we also caught up with certain common species missed by all or some earlier in the tour. Of the former, the highlight undoubtedly were two fine male Red-shouldered Cuckooshrikes, plus a soaring Marabou Stork, and a small party of Yellow-throated Greenbuls (Yellow-throated Leaflove). Of the latter, Fine-spotted Woodpecker, Village Indigobird and Black-headed Weaver were all seen well. Added into the mix were excellent views of Pearl-spotted Owlet, Woodland Kingfisher, Yellow-breasted Apalis, African Paradise-flycatcher, African Golden Oriole, a large flock of Black-rumped Waxbills and probably the most confiding Yellow-crowned Gonoleks of the tour so far. Lunch was quite a protracted affair – and not particularly impressive – however lunchtime birding was excellent. Far and away the best bird seen by 3–4 of the group was a Shining-blue Kingfisher, which arced out across the river several times before finally hiding itself away in waterside vegetation. Several Marabou Storks soared over and another Swamp Flycatcher entertained the photographers.

At 14.30 we drove off the island using a small, two-vehicle ferry propelled by “muscle power” Fortunately, it’s just a short crossing to the south bank where we turned west, heading for the village of Pachar. En-route at a small waterhole, a gathering of vultures included a party of five White-backed Vultures. In the heart of the village lives a Marabou Stork colony comprising 15 birds whilst we were there, two of which were shading young nestlings. Soaring vultures overhead consisted not only of (presumably) the same White-backed seen earlier but also two Rüppell’s Griffons. Retracing our steps eastwards, a 30-minute drive took us to Bansang village. Close by a track leads to a quarry containing about 100 pairs of extremely-photogenic Red-throated Bee-eaters. Also coming into drink at the small pools were perhaps 50 Bush Petronias, half a dozen Exclamatory Paradise-whydahs and a pair of Cinnamon-breasted Buntings. Overhead, hirundines were represented not only by the ubiquitous Red-chested Swallows but also by up to 10 Red-rumped Swallows and a lone Mosque Swallow looking more like a tiny falcon. Just before we left, we undertook the identification lesson “Glossy-Starling 101”. Sat atop one dead tree were three birds: single Bronze-tailed, Purple and Greater Blue-eared side by side and a Lesser Blue-eared close by for good measure. There just remained the quest for African Scops-owl. Back at Camp, four or five birds were calling but our initial attempts shortly after dark proved fruitless. Nevertheless, over a dinner of lamb curry, vegetable stew and rice, Helge and Alan K. came to the rescue recording a calling African Scops-owl on Alan’s portable dictaphone. Twenty minutes later close if rather brief views of a single inquisitive owl were had by almost all of us.

Day 10 The staff at camp redeemed themselves this morning. After some gentle pre-dawn coercion (i.e. waking them up), all breakfast and packed lunches were prepared and our Gambia River boat trip began on schedule at 7.30am. This was one of the most successful boat trips ever: we saw 86 species of bird plus excellent views of Hippo, Guinea Baboon, Red Colobus and Green Vervet Monkeys and Monitor Lizards. Birds themselves were continually on view and we registered our highest daily totals for some species: 75 Squacco Herons, 40 Black-crowned Night-herons, 60 Hamerkops, 10 Palm-nut Vultures, 25 Senegal Parrots, 50 Pied Kingfishers and 40 African Grey Hornbills. However, the day was highly-rated because of special birds. None would be rated higher than the female African Finfoot, which swam leisurely in front of us before climbing onto the bank. Plus the juvenile Great Spotted Cuckoo flying passed us upriver, the two adult Black Coucals perched high in tall riverside grasses, our second Shining-blue Kingfisher, and the superb, almost gaudy, Grey-headed Bush-shrike sat right out in the open, taking in the morning rays. Some five hours later, we docked at the village of Kuntaur, met up with Alladin and his bus and took a short drive on the pretext of finding Northern Carmine Bee-eaters, which the previous Birdfinders group had found two weeks earlier. They were a “no show” (and the only significant bird

missed on the entire tour) but in their place were three dainty, delicate and definitely delightful Temminck's Coursers slowly strutting across a groundnut field

Lunch was taken just outside Wassu accompanied by both Red-throated and Green Bee-eaters, a flock of at least 50 Cut-throats and perhaps a dozen Exclamatory Paradise-whydahs. We then had a drive west of around 100km to Farafenni, stopping en route for four more Egyptian Plovers and again at Ka-ur to satisfy Avril's hunger for Kittlitz's Plover. Our final ferry of the tour enabled a few of the party to see both Goliath Heron and Little Bittern whilst the rest of us were people watching. These ferries (or more particularly the general hubbub that precedes them) paint a colorful picture of the real Africa. The final two hours of the day should have been just a hot, dusty, bumpy drive west to Tendaba. However, it became a procession of superb birds. First an Egyptian Plover beside the track (a rare sight on the south bank), then a juvenile Bronze-winged Courser running just in front of the bus and only opting to fly when Solomon jnr jumped off of the bus to "shoo" it out of harm's way, then a party of seven Woolly-necked Storks in some tidal marshes. But the best was still to come – a magnificent pair of Abyssinian Ground-hornbills strutting across a weedy field without a care in the world. We came back to earth with a bump shortly afterwards – with a front wheel puncture that Alladin handled in his customary efficient, quiet manner – the delay allowing some of the party a Brubru sighting. So it was that we arrived at Tendaba Camp, our base for the next two nights, just after dark but in time for a welcome cool shower before dinner.

Day 11 Coffee was piping hot, even before breakfast was ready – an auspicious start to the day. Around 07.30 we boarded a motorised pirogue crewed by Kebba, crossed the river and slowly glided down the tidal mangrove lined Tunku and Kissi creeks whilst a squadron each of Pink-backed Pelicans and Eurasian Spoonbills flew over. The sun never really got going all morning, so initially birding was quite hard work. During the first hour, at least one Mouse-brown Sunbird showed sufficiently well to a few observers; probably half a dozen Blue-breasted Kingfishers showed off to the photographers; and there was a continual sprinkle of African Darters, Hamerkops and Western Reef-herons. By the time we reached the open grasses, Woolly-necked Storks began to appear amongst Great and Intermediate Egrets; a small group of Sacred Ibises fed in a muddy creek and both Common Greenshanks and Whimbrels became ever present. Further in, one waterside tree held a mixed group of Woolly-necked and Yellow-billed Storks and a monstrous Goliath Heron flew onto the far bank. One of the principal target birds of the area is White-backed Night-heron. Being strictly nocturnal, they roost about two meters up in the mangrove, It took us a while for everyone to get adequate views but over a period of about 20 minutes, four adults were seen well. The sun appeared briefly mid-morning. A Monitor Lizard lay out in the open taking in the rays, flying insects took to the air and quite suddenly Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were all around us. Amongst several Black (Yellow-billed) Kites perched in a dead tree, one black-billed bird – a migrant of the nominate Black Kite race was found. Shortly afterwards, a thermal of around 30 kites contained a high-flying Brown-Snake-eagle.

The return journey was understandably quieter although perched White-throated and European Bee-eaters were most welcome and a delightful Black-shouldered Kite flew very low over our heads. The final noteworthy birds of the morning were a party of five Gull-billed Terns, which flew past as we crossed the river southwards back to Tendaba. Despite the lack of sunshine, the middle of the day was hot, still and humid and so we varyingly relaxed until mid-afternoon. Our first subsequent birding stop was at an area of dried mud, grass and shallow pools that was once Tendaba airfield. The water held Black-winged Stilts, Common Greenshank, Grey Plovers and Pink-backed Pelicans but raptors were our main focus with two Wahlberg's Eagles perched in one tree and a rather distant soaring Martial Eagle. From here we drove along a maze of narrow tracks into Kiang West National Park, a large area of weed fields, scattered Acacia and Baobab and patches of denser woodland. Birding initially was slow but then one Acacia became the shelter for a Brubru, a Northern Crombec and a pair of exquisite Pygmy Sunbirds. A little further down the track, a party of tiny Senegal Eremomelas flitted through several small trees and Helge found our first and only Black Scimitarbill. Hot on its heels was the most difficult passerine to find in the area – a stunning Brown-rumped Bunting. At this point an extremely large flock of bee-eaters appeared silhouetted against the sky. All that were identifiable, probably about 40, were European Bee-eaters (I really hope that we didn't throw away a Northern Carmine!).

We then drove way into the park on tracks that became narrower and narrower but with confidence that there would be somewhere to eventually turn the bus around. A Yellow-billed Oxpecker favored the back of a sheep and an African Golden Oriole flew in front of us but our focus was on finding one species. Eventually we parked up. Our quarry could be neither seen nor heard, so we walked on to a large waterhole. The only bird of note was an extremely distant Wahlberg's Eagle but we spent more time watching the party of six Common Warthogs. With the light starting to fade, we re-traced our steps back to the clearing and studied a large bare Baobab. From nearby came a guttural shriek and a pair of Brown-necked Parrots tore across the sky. After an anxious 20-minute wait, they flew back and one perched right out in the open – mission (and Helge's *raison d'être* for coming to The Gambia) accomplished! On the drive out of the park, a couple of Stone Partridges ambled across the track. We diverted back to the airfield area just in case any nightjars were performing, but to

no avail. The off-road drive back the short distance to Tendaba was, however, excellent value – Alladin sure knows the coach's capabilities. Then disaster struck – we were made aware of industrial action by the nation's brewery – and the camp had run out of beer – so the parrots were toasted with Coca Cola!

Day 12 Much of the day was taken up with the long dusty drive back to the coast and Kombo Beach, our base for the final three nights of the tour. Yet there was still time to find some top quality new birds. We left Tendaba promptly having topped up with caffeine and made an "on spec" unproductive attempt at finding some Black Crowned-cranes that had recently been seen nearby. All was not lost however, as the first perched raptor seen was an obliging adult Banded Snake-eagle. We were to spend much of the morning walking various tracks through Kiang West once more. It was cool and overcast, indeed it didn't get hot all day, and birds at first were hard to find. Slowly but surely we picked up Brubru, African Golden Oriole, several Senegal Eremomelas and a major prize, Spotted Thick-knee. It was then time to visit a primary school in the only village remaining within the Park boundaries. We were made most welcome and it was blatantly obvious just how poor and ill equipped the facilities were – many of the children could not even afford uniforms. Hopefully our presence, the supplies so generously given over by the tour group and the impression the children made upon us all can kick-start a small difference in their school lives. Back to the birds, one final walk produced firstly a pair of Pygmy Sunbirds and a couple of Striped Kingfishers whilst both Lizard Buzzard and Gabar Goshawk watched our passing. The second real star bird of the morning was White-shouldered Black-tit – a pair caught up in a loose feeding flock with both eremomelas and brubrus. We stopped for lunch at the Kilagi River and had an excellent buffet of Chicken Dommada, cooked traditional Gambian style. Nearby Bruce's Green-pigeon and Bearded Barbet perched out for photographers and a group of three Yellow-billed Storks descended gracefully onto the riverbank. The remaining drive, initially on dusty dirt roads and latterly on tarmac was tedious but uneventful and it was with some relief that we arrived back at Kombo Beach to find that whatever industrial action there had been, was now a thing of the past and that the bar was well replenished.

Day 13 This morning I would actually describe the weather as bordering upon chilly – no sun and thick clouds which thankfully dispersed by lunchtime. The main purpose of a second visit to Abuko is to allow people to catch up with forest species missed earlier in the tour and there is an outside chance of finding something new. Never in my wildest imagination could I have expected a morning so successful. Within minutes of arriving at the main lagoon, an Ahanta Francolin was seen furtively feeding just inside the tangled understorey. The bird remained wholly or partially in view for several minutes allowing everyone to see this most secretive denizen of the reserve. Hot on its heels, a pair of Collared Sunbirds perched out atop a fruiting tree, a "pull back" for many in the group quickly followed by a Buff-spotted Woodpecker – another extremely hard bird to find in The Gambia. We were on a roll – and our main quest was to find that other "arch skulker" – Grey-headed Bristlebill. We found four, three of which were feeding right out in the open! Even so, this wasn't the major find of the morning. Most of the party caught a fleeting glimpse of a Red-thighed Sparrowhawk briefly perched under the canopy – this is a species that Solomon has not seen for five years. If you add two Western Bluebills seen by several of the group, a Green Hylia seen by just one, plus Snowy-crowned Robin-chat, African Pygmy-kingfisher and Giant Kingfishers seen by us all, it was a pretty phenomenal morning.

We enjoyed a second buffet lunch at Lamin Lodge with Chicken Yassa, rice and salad once again on the menu. The sun came out and it instantly became extremely warm. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters hawked insects over our heads, a Goliath Heron perched in the mangrove opposite and Helge found a couple of Mouse-brown Sunbirds from the causeway.

Our late afternoon birding was a visit to the southwestern end of the Faraba Banta bush track. The momentum of classic birds was maintained with a close soaring Beaudouin's Snake-eagle from the road between Tubakuta and Bason villages and then the "cuckoo debate" began in earnest. Basically we saw two cuckoos both with a rufous wash to the underparts. One had a distinctly grey throat; the other more rufous. One definitely had a yellow iris and orbital, the other seemed to have a dark iris. Both appeared to have identical bicoloured bills. Were they both Red-chested? Were they both African? Were they one of each? Were they the same species as seen outside Farafenni the previous week? Further along the track, the now bright sunshine showed birds in all their glory. We found an obliging female, or perhaps immature male, Western Violet-backed Sunbird; a cracking adult male Scarlet-chested Sunbird; had a close fly-by from a Grasshopper Buzzard and found familiar friends in perched Whinchat and our only Common House-martins of the tour. Once the sun had receded behind the early evening cloud, we drove back to Kotu with just one full day birding left.

Day 14 Our last morning began cool and overcast, but the sun broke through around 10.00 and the temperature soared. We planned a second visit to the Tanji coastal fields, with specific targets in mind. En route, the usual Blue-bellied Rollers and Yellow-billed Shrikes on the wires were augmented by two Shikras and a Lizard Buzzard. The first hour or so was quiet however we slowly compiled a respectable species list. Yellow-crowned Gonoleks were particularly active this morning as were Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, Red-billed and African Grey Hornbills. We finally found a perched African Green-

pigeon (no more of the flyovers to scrutinise) and came across Levillant's Cuckoo whilst Vieillot's Barbet and Woodchat Shrike perched in the open. Along the coastal lagoon, the usual tern roost contained our only Little Tern of the tour. We found the first Goliath Heron that Solomon had ever seen at this site and also a white-morph Western Reef-heron, rare in The Gambia. But back to those target birds. The easiest was Cardinal Woodpecker, where we enjoyed repeat showings of a pair at very close range. Much more elusive however, and only seen well in flight were a pair of Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrikes. About half of the group had brief but barely adequate views of a diminutive Yellow Penduline-tit but only Helge had identifiable views of a calling Golden-tailed Woodpecker.

The middle part of the day was spent back at the hotel. The entire group re-assembled once more mid-afternoon to say thank you and goodbye to both Solomon and Alladin before a small group set off once more for a final visit to Tujereng. It was seriously hot and both birds and birders sought shade under the Acacia and Cashew. Initially the only birds to show were Whinchats, Willow Warblers and Common Chiffchaffs; but with patience first Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, then Red-winged Prinia, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Singing and Whistling Cisticolas began to show themselves. As the heat started to subside, the stars of the afternoon were found. First came Dideric Cuckoo, a bird that disappears from The Gambia once the dry season has set in, and then perhaps the best view that any tour group could ever get of Yellow Penduline-tit. Two birds found hanging upside down, as penduline-tits do, feeding on Acacia flowers, so close and approachable you could actually see the black forehead streaking. Heading back across the fields, our last Dark Chanting-goshawk drifted over and a second Dideric Cuckoo perched up – a fitting way to end a magnificent two weeks birding.

This was a most enjoyable tour to be involved with and we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to Solomon, without whom many of the 312 species found would have passed us by. More than that, his efficient organization of logistics made for a smooth, trouble-free tour. In Alladin, we found an excellent, safe and courteous driver. It is not unusual, amongst a tour group, to have several "sharp pairs of eyes" However on this occasion, special thanks must go to Helge for his birding stamina. Whenever we heard that distinctive Scandinavian "erm.." it was worth looking in the same direction as him!

Martyn Kenefick, Birdfinders