

# Gambia

**11–25 November 2016**

**Participants**

Graham Bright  
Roger and Liz Charlwood  
Henry Cook  
Maura Deegan  
Ian Enlander  
Rodney Goodman  
William (Rob) and Freda Green  
Alan Moore  
Paul and Diane Richardson  
Ian Robinson  
John Williamson



**Giant Kingfisher**

**Leaders** Solomon Jallow, Fatou Colley  
and Bill Blake

**Day 1** We left a rather chilly London Gatwick Airport on time and arrived at Banjul (Yundum) International Airport mid-afternoon. The great thing about travelling to Gambia is that it is on GMT and therefore ‘jet lag’ is not a problem. An air-conditioned coach was waiting to take us to our hotel, the Kombo Beach; it was a rather warm 34°C but as its name implies, our hotel was right on the beach, which meant there was a nice cooling breeze off the sea. We met up with our final group member, Henry Cook, who flew in from Manchester a few days earlier and stayed a couple of nights further south. Our hotel was a few minutes’ walk from the famous Kotu Creek and after checking in and freshening up we had time for a brief exploration of the mangrove-lined creek and its environs to familiarize ourselves with some of the local birds. A dark phase Western Reef-heron, a Hamerkop, a Common Kestrel, Black-winged Stilt, Senegal Thick-knee, noisy Spur-winged Lapwings, Whimbrel, Common Sandpipers and Pied and Blue-breasted Kingfishers were on the creek, whilst small parties of White-faced Whistling-ducks flew to-and-fro and Blue-bellied Roller and Beautiful Sunbird perched in the open for all to see. Cattle Egrets fed in the fields whilst Black (Yellow-billed) Kites, Hooded Vultures and African Palm-swifts graced the skies and Speckled Pigeons, Vinaceous Doves, Laughing Doves, Western Plantain-eaters, Common Bulbuls, Pied Crows and Village Weavers showed well, all of which were to become familiar species that we would see daily. After a tasty buffet style dinner in the hotel restaurant we retired to bed looking forward to a full days birding tomorrow.

**Day 2** The hotel served a buffet style breakfast with plenty of hot coffee and tea from 06.30; cereals, freshly-baked bread, freshly-prepared eggs, toast or English style with all the trimmings gave those that wished plenty of time to have a hearty breakfast before leaving to go birding just after dawn. Our

first stop was at Abuko rice-fields, which proved to be an excellent introduction to many of the common and colourful species of the country. Notable birds were Long-tailed Cormorant, Grey, Black-headed, Purple, Squacco and Striated Herons, Great Egrets, Hamerkop, a single Sacred Ibis that proved to be our only one of the trip, African Harrier-hawk, Shikra, Grey Kestrel, a calling African Crake, Black Crake, African Jacana, Wattled Lapwing, Common Snipe, Green Sandpiper, Red-eyed Dove, Mourning Collared-dove, raucous Senegal Parrots and Rose-ringed Parakeets, Senegal Coucal, Malachite and Blue-breasted Kingfishers, Western Red-billed Hornbill, Grey Woodpecker, Wire-tailed and Mosque Swallows, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Piapiac, Greater Blue-eared Starlings and Long-tailed Glossy-starlings, Northern Red Bishop, Red-billed Firefinch and Bronze Mannikin. We moved on to nearby Abuko Forest Nature Reserve, a typical savanna and gallery forest landscape with trees of over 30 feet that, in 1968, became The Gambia's first designated reserve. It is surrounded by rice-fields and mixed 'farmland' and is a green oasis for forest dwelling species in an otherwise urban sprawl. As we entered the forest a male Greater Honeyguide flew across the path ahead of us. We made our way to a large 'hide' on stilts and sat for a while overlooking a forest pool where, amongst others, we saw Black-headed Heron, Hamerkop, Palm-nut Vulture, Mottled Spinetail, Common Swift, Woodland Kingfisher, Broad-billed Roller and Fanti Sawwing plus Nile Crocodile and Nile Monitor Lizard. We walked some of the trails seeing Black-billed Wood-dove, Guinea and Violet Turacos, Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, African Pied Hornbill, Little Greenbul, Grey-headed Bristlebill, African Thrush, Snowy-crowned Robin-chat, Brown-throated Wattle-eye, African and Black-headed (Red-bellied) Paradise-flycatchers, Beautiful and Copper Sunbirds, Fork-tailed Drongo and Red-billed Firefinch. Red Colobus Monkeys were also seen here. Although it was still relatively cool in the shade of the forest the temperature was rising out in the open so we retired to Lamin Lodge for lunch and cold drinks overlooking a river channel lined with mangroves and enjoyed a cooling breeze whilst watching Whimbrel, Osprey fishing and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. We relaxed in the shade waiting for the midday heat to subside watching the antics of the Green Vervet Monkeys on the lookout for an easy meal whilst Fiddler Crabs and Mudskippers hurried about on the mudflats looking for tasty morsels on the dropping tide. With the temperature starting to subside it was time to leave the lodge to go birding again. As we left the lodge some locals pointed out a Pearl-spotted Owlet they had seen fly in to a large tree; we had excellent views of the bird as it peered down on us with eyes blazing. We drove a short distance to the Lamin rice-fields for the rest of the afternoon. A good selection of birds were seen that included both Intermediate and Little Egrets, Western Marsh-harrier, Little Swift, Little Bee-eater, Green Woodhoopoe, Zitting Cisticola, Melodious Warbler, White-crowned Robin-chat, Yellow-billed Shrike, Northern Puffback, Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Black-necked Weaver and Yellow-crowned Bishop. Liquid refreshment, an excellent dinner and the bird log rounded off a good first full day.

**Day 3** Another early breakfast and start saw us heading out to Marakissa woodland and wetlands for the whole day. Our morning walk through open woodland and grassland produced some good birds; the pick of the bunch for most people was the pair of huge Verreaux's Eagle-owls Fatou found roosting in a large tree beside the track that flashed their pink eyelids and dark brown eyes as they stared down at us. A close second was a beautiful Lizard Buzzard perched in the open showing off the fine grey and white vermiculations on the breast. Other new birds this morning were a distant Beaudouin's Snake-eagle and a brief Wahlberg's Eagle, a female Namaqua Dove, African Grey Hornbill, a distant pair of Bearded Barbets, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Variable Sunbird and Red-cheeked Cordonbleu. African Harrier-hawk, Grey Kestrel, African Jacana, Wattled Lapwing, African Palm-swift, African Pied Hornbill, Green-backed Camaroptera and Senegal Eremomela were just some of the other birds seen. We lunched at the Marakissa River Camp after which we sat in the shade overlooking the well-planted gardens watching birds come in to various drinking and bathing pools. Most of the birds gave close and prolonged views and we had superb views of the scarce Spotted Honeyguide at point blank range. Other new birds were Blue-spotted Wood-dove, a Greater

Honeyguide for all, Little Greenbul, Yellow-throated Leaflove, Blackcap Babbler, Lesser Blue-eared Starling and Northern Grey-headed Sparrow. We also had much better views of a pair of White-crowned Robin-chats plus Piapiac, Red-billed Firefinch and Red-cheeked Cordonbleus. On the river we saw Nile Crocodiles and Yellow-billed Kites taking discarded scraps from the kitchen and also had great views of a perched Giant Kingfisher. We spent the afternoon at Darsilame, an area of mangrove wetland close to the Senegal border. African Darter, Black-shouldered Kite, Lanner Falcon, Double-spurred Francolin, Common Redshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Gull-billed Tern, Caspian Tern, Malachite Kingfisher, Woodland Kingfisher and Giant Kingfisher were just some of the birds seen. On the way back to our hotel we stopped at some large trees close to the road where we were able to scope roosting African and Bruce's Green-pigeons.

**Day 4** We spent the morning at Brufut Woodland where Ian R. spotted a Northern Black-flycatcher as soon as we left our bus and a couple of Gambian Mongooses were seen on the track ahead of us. We also found Black-shouldered Kite, Shikra, Senegal Parrot, Violet Turaco, Broad-billed Roller, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Melodious, Western Subalpine and Western Olivaceous Warblers, Northern Crombec, Splendid Sunbird, Vitelline Masked-weaver and Village Indigobird. It became rather crowded however when another bird tour group arrived so we went off to some quieter woodland where we sat in the shade for a while watching some shaded 'watering holes' where birds came in to drink or bathe. Various birds seen here included an African Pygmy-kingfisher and Little Weavers plus Lavender Waxbills. We were escorted into the woodland and a local guide showed us a cryptically-camouflaged Long-tailed Nightjar roosting on the ground amongst a tangle of leaf litter under a thicket of young trees. Next on the menu was a Northern White-faced Owl that was extremely well hidden at its daytime roost and, as such, difficult to get a decent view of the whole bird. It did occasionally stare down at us showing its 'white face' and ear tufts. We enjoyed a very tasty lunch at the Tanji Eco Lodge whilst watching more shaded 'water holes' just a few metres away from our also-shaded tables. The star birds here were a pair of Western Bluebills that showed well to all; normally a shy bird of dense vegetation, we were lucky to be treated to such views. The steel-blue bill and prominent white eye-crescents of the male showed particularly well (the latter feature not shown well in the field guides). An Oriole Warbler was well seen as it came in to drink and Orange-cheeked Waxbills were also new here. We had much better views of Snowy-crowned Robin-chat and Brown-throated Wattle-eye plus Blackcap, Black-headed (Red-bellied) Paradise-flycatcher, Brown Babbler, Yellow-crowned Gonolek and Red-cheeked Cordonbleus. Once the heat had subsided we drove to Tanji Beach where the local fishing fleet was in and unloading the days catch for drying, smoking or freezing; it provided a very colourful though somewhat smelly backdrop to our afternoon birding. Whilst scanning through the waders on the beach Ian E. and Henry independently picked up an odd looking 'grey plover'. The rather slim, long-legged and upright jizz coupled with the pronounced whitish eyebrow giving a capped effect pointed to American Golden-plover and this was confirmed by closer views and when the bird flew showing an entire dusky grey underwing lacking the black 'armpits' of a Black-bellied (Grey) Plover. It allowed close approach and the photographers were kept busy taking plenty of pics. Solomon believed it to be the 4th Gambian record. We also saw Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans, Osprey, Black-bellied Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Black-headed, Grey-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Common and Royal Terns, Crested Lark, Bank Swallow, Barn Swallow and House Sparrow.

**Day 5** We spent the morning amongst the magnificent old trees of the Pirang Forest Reserve walking through the cool and tangled dark gallery forest, an increasingly rare habitat in this part of Gambia. Here we were met by Gaisu, a local forest guide who escorted us through some of the trails in this beautiful forest. A target species here was Buff-spotted Woodpecker, which we had only heard at Abuko. Gaisu heard one calling but it was surprisingly skulking for a woodpecker and this small, dark 'woodie' gave us the run-around with

most people getting flight views but not all seeing the bird on the tree as it blended in remarkably well among the dark bark and shadowy leaves. Another of the main targets here was the elusive White-spotted Flufftail, a rail-like bird renowned for its secretive behaviour. Gaisu took us to an area with some rustic seating and as we waited patiently he mimicked the call of the flufftail, which eventually called the bird in. The bird appeared from a dense tangle of tree roots and leaves; it was a female that gave us a “now you see me, now you don’t” walk past giving, what for this species were, excellent views. Other new birds seen were the long-tailed Yellow-breasted Apalis, a tiny ‘tailless’ Green Crombec and the Radde’s Warbler look-alike Green Hylia plus more colourful Violet Turacos, a Woodland Kingfisher, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and African Golden Oriole. Before leaving for lunch we relaxed for a while overlooking yet more shaded ‘water holes’ where a number of species gave close views as they came in to drink. New birds were a stunning male Green-headed Sunbird with a blue-green head that glistened like a precious jewel in the sunlight plus a bright male Collared Sunbird and Black-rumped Waxbills and another Northern Puffback put in an appearance. We had a very tasty lunch at a local restaurant that had an enormous Silk Cotton (Kapok) Tree in the grounds, supposedly the oldest tree in the Gambia at over 1500 years old. Whatever the age it is an astonishingly huge tree and it had a pair of Barn Owls nesting within it and one of the pair flew out of its nest hole to check what all the noise was about as we admired the tree. We spent the afternoon at the Farasutu Forest Nature Reserve, a remnant piece of isolated primary coastal forest near Kuloro. Here we found a well-hidden White-backed Night-heron and a roosting Greyish Eagle-owl plus another Lizard Buzzard and yet another roosting Northern White-faced Owl but the hoped for African Wood-owl had been flushed from its daytime roost by an over-zealous birding group earlier in the day. Ladyfish was on the menu again tonight, a delicious firm and meaty fish very popular in Gambia.

**Day 6** This morning we visited Tujereng Woods, an area of coastal scrub, open woodland and farmlands. As we left our bus I was surprised to feel a few drops of rain and the sky briefly looked threatening but it did not last although the sky did remain overcast for most of the morning. Initially the area seemed rather quiet but bird song and bird activity soon increased. It seemed rather incongruous watching Little Bee-eaters chasing insects as Willow Warbler and Common Chiffchaff song mingled with the songs of Singing and Winding Cisticolas and a Black-crowned Tchagra. Eurasian Wryneck, Western Yellow Wagtail, Melodious and (Western) Subalpine Warblers, Blackcap, Greater Whitethroat, Common Redstart and Whinchat all added to the Western Palearctic flavour. Everyone finally got to see Double-spurred Francolin as one perched up on a distant low tree bough allowing scope views; a Dark Chanting-goshawk perched nearby and Fine-spotted and Brown-backed Woodpeckers also showed well. We walked to a small open area where some rustic seating overlooked a platform where water containers and water melon and bananas had been put out for the birds. A good selection of birds came in to feed and drink and these included singles of Klaas’s and Dideric Cuckoos plus Vieillot’s and Bearded Barbets, a pair of White-fronted Black-chats, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver and Yellow-fronted Canary. A Black Scimitarbill was only a fly through and what was presumably the earlier perched Dark Chanting-goshawk gave us a fly past too. Henry spotted a Senegal Batis that flew in behind us but we were looking into the sun and views were poor for some people. As we headed back to the bus I stayed behind for a call of nature and refound the Batis but the group were out of earshot when I shouted. I made my way back to where we left the bus but the bus was gone; the group had taken a different route back to the main track and our driver, Aladin, had driven up to collect them. I thought they were playing a joke on me but Fatou and Lamin had not counted everyone back on to the bus; they did come back to collect me. Lunch was again taken at the Tanji Eco Lodge where we ate on day four. Red Patas Monkeys and Green Vervet Monkeys frolicked along the entrance road as we drove into the lodge. As before the food was excellent and the ‘water holes’ attracted plenty of birds to keep us busy but the number of species was not as diverse as before. An over-wintering Garden Warbler was new for the trip and we saw repeats of Blue-spotted Wood-dove, Violet Turaco, Levaillant’s Cuckoo, African Pygmy-kingfisher, Little Greenbul, African Thrush, Black-headed and African Paradise-flycatchers, Yellow-fronted Canaries plus

various waxbills and cordonbleus. As the afternoon cooled we visited Tanji Reserve, an area of remnant forest, patches of scrub and orchard-like land on old dunes and lagoons. We failed to find our principal target, Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike, but we did find several small groups of Four-banded Sandgrouse (flight views only), Levillant's Cuckoo, Little, Swallow-tailed and European Bee-eaters, Rufous-crowned Roller, Red-chested Swallow, Pied-winged Swallows, Northern Wheatear, Collared Sunbird and a Northern Puffback plus a 'flock' of at least 12 African Golden Orioles. The electric colours of a fine male Splendid Sunbird displaying to a female as the light began to fade was a great end to the day.

**Day 7** In preparation for tomorrow's journey upriver we spent the day birding locally. After breakfast we spent the morning walking the Kotu Creek Nature Trail and the Golf Course. The usual collection of herons and waders were present on the creek plus Osprey and a Black Kite with the ever-present yellow-billed Black Kites overhead plus Malachite, Giant and Pied Kingfishers. On the nature trail we saw Woodland Kingfisher and Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird and we were shown yet another roosting Northern White-faced Owl; we also saw White-billed Buffalo-weavers at their bulky, untidy social nests reminiscent of huge clumps of Mistletoe in the bare branches of large trees. The rice-fields held African Jacanas, Zitting Cisticola, Northern Red Bishops, African Silverbills and Bronze Manikins plus a single Black Heron employing the 'umbrella' hunting technique. We walked back to the hotel via the very dry golf course seeing Lizard Buzzard, Red-necked Falcon, Broad-billed Roller and Red-chested Swallows. The tide had come in cutting off any possible shortcuts alongside the creek so we returned to the hotel for lunch via the beach. People did their own thing around the hotel until we left for a late afternoon walk along the Casino cycle track where a pool provided us with side by side views of a Black Heron and a dark morph Western Reef-heron plus family parties of White-faced Whistling-ducks, an Osprey with a Garfish in its talons, Black Crake, Common Moorhen and Malachite Kingfisher. A Giant Kingfisher looked out of place as it appeared to be sheltering on a window sill of a deserted building and a party of four Oriole Warblers by the creek bridge rounded off the day. After dinner and the log most retired to prepare for tomorrow's early start.

**Day 8** A very early start this morning saw us packed and ready to be taken to the Banjul-Barra ferry. Solomon's plan was for Aladin to take our bus on the ferry yesterday crossing to the north bank of the Gambia River so that we could cross as foot passengers this morning. Unfortunately this plan did not take into account that the President of Gambia was campaigning for re-election in the upcoming National Election on December 1<sup>st</sup> and that his campaigning would coincide with our time upriver. This meant that Aladin was unable to take our bus across yesterday as planned as the ferries had been commandeered by the President for himself, his entourage and all their associated vehicles plus his police and army escorts and all their vehicles. Although we were late being picked up at our hotel, so missing the first ferry as foot passengers, our bus would not have made it on. Aladin managed to manoeuvre the bus into a position where we would get on the next ferry. Another ferry was pressed into service but first a broken-down bus had to be removed from it. With the bus removed chaos ensued in the rush to drive on to the ferry but thanks to Aladin's driving skills he made it on to the ferry, albeit with a smashed sidelight; we followed as foot passengers. As Little Swifts screamed overhead the ferry moved away from the south bank and we were able to scrutinize the gulls and terns present on the river. A Eurasian Spoonbill flew over as we departed on the 45-minute crossing. Among the many Grey-headed Gulls were a few Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a single Kelp Gull; Caspian, Royal, Sandwich and Common Terns were being harassed by a few Parasitic Jaegers (Arctic Skuas) and at least two Pomarine Jaegers. Once on the north bank we sped east following the Gambia River inland. On route to our first planned stop we saw a fine Long-crested Eagle in a tree close to the road with a Dark Chanting-goshawk perched nearby and a distant flying White-backed Vulture. Our first proper stop was at Darusalam Wetlands where a group of 11 Greater Flamingos were close to the road plus many other species of bird. We stopped at various other wetlands on our journey east along the North Bank Road, including Baobolong, N'Jau and Kaur wetlands seeing a wealth of bird life. Pink-backed and Great White

Pelicans, Intermediate Egret, Woolly-necked Stork, White-faced Whistling-ducks, Northern Shovelers, Osprey, Western Marsh Harrier, Grasshopper Buzzard, Black Crake, Greater Painted-snipe, Pied Avocet, Little Ringed Plover, Ruff, Slender-billed Gull, Gull-billed Tern, Malachite and Woodland Kingfishers, Blue-cheeked and European Bee-eaters, Red-rumped Swallows (sometimes split as West African Swallow), Zitting Cisticola and White Wagtails were just some of the birds seen. However, THE bird all wanted to see was EGYPTIAN PLOVER, the so-called Crocodile Bird, and we were not disappointed. A beautiful mix of blue-grey, black, white and salmon-pink, we saw several of these iconic birds at a couple of stops and they proved to be very popular with the photographers in the group. We stopped for a late lunch at a secluded lodge on a hill top with a spectacular view overlooking the Kaur Wetlands seeing Brown Snake-eagle, Black-headed Lapwings, Namaqua Doves, Red-rumped Swallows and a Gosling's Bunting (a recent split from Cinnamon-breasted Bunting). Moving on we stopped on the edge of a village where we watched a few Yellow-billed Storks at their nests, some feeding young. Overhead pelicans and storks were rising on thermals and moving overhead in some numbers; on closer inspection, it turned out that the storks were virtually all White Storks and they were in their 100s. There were well over 300 birds (maybe closer to 500) and were a write-in for the log. At a final stop at some pools close to the main road we saw Black-headed Lapwings, Pygmy Sunbird, Red-billed Queleas, Cut-throat, Exclamatory Paradisewhydah and another Egyptian Plover. As we left the pool a couple of Stone Partridges were seen on the side of the road before they flew into cover. It was dusk when we arrived on the river bank at Lamin Koto to get the ferry across to Janjanbureh (formerly Georgetown) on MacCarthy Island and we made the five-minute crossing in the dark. We checked into our accommodation for the next two nights, the Baobolong Camp, just a short distance from the ferry. A nice surprise was that our rooms had air-conditioning although the water pressure left something to be desired. Election fever was all over Janjanbureh tonight and the roads were lined with the President's supporters waiting to catch a glimpse of him as he too was staying on the island overnight. Some of the supporters had been waiting all day in the hope of seeing him. We ate a truly delicious dinner in the courtyard and most of the group agreed it was one of the best meals we had in the Gambia, particularly the vegetarian option; after the log call we retired to our air-conditioned rooms.

**Day 9** After a tardy breakfast we walked down to the riverbank to take the ferry back to the north side; whilst waiting for our bus a small group of Spur-winged Geese flew upriver. Back on the north bank we boarded our bus and made our way to the Kantaur Rice Fields where we quickly found our two target species here – Black Coucal and Winding Cisticola plus Western Marsh-harrier, Shikra, Grey Kestrel, Levaillant's Cuckoo and Pied Kingfisher. We moved on to Wassu to visit a bee-eater colony and found three new species of bee-eater for the trip list. Red-throated Bee-eaters were the nesting birds but a few Northern Carmine Bee-eaters were in attendance as were some Green Bee-eaters – three stunning species and we had now seen all the bee-eaters on the Gambian list. For most of the group it was a choice between Red-throated and Northern Carmine as to which was the best but my vote was for the Green, a more-subtle, less gaudy species. More new birds were a pair of Gabar Goshawks, a distant Bateleur, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-larks, Northern Anteater-chat, Bush Petronias and White-rumped Seedeaters. A Beaudouin's Snake-eagle was found perched high in a tree before it flew low over our heads giving much better views than the distant bird seen at Marakissa on the morning of Day 3. Other notable species seen here were White-backed Vulture, African Harrier-hawk, Grasshopper Buzzard, African Hawk-eagle, Namaqua Dove, Mottled Spinetail, Abyssinian Roller, Red-chested Swallow, White-billed Buffalo-weaver, Red-billed Quelea, Cut-throat and Village Indigobird. It was hard to tear ourselves away from this superb area but we returned to camp for a tasty lunch. The thought of relaxing in an air-conditioned room for a while was dashed when the electricity went off so we had to make do with sitting in the shade being entertained by a Yellow-crowned Gonolek and Bronze-tailed Starlings. With the temperature dropping we crossed over to the south bank by the Jahally Bridge and traveled west along the South Bank Road to visit some pools near Fula Bantang but they were rather quiet with just a few waxbills and firefinches visiting. On the edge of the village we stopped for a

nesting colony of 15–20 pairs of Marabou Storks; when these huge birds came in to land on a branch it always looked as if the branch would break but surprisingly never did. Still in pursuit of Abyssinian Ground-hornbills and coursers we searched various peanut crops and at Sinchu Magai we found Yellow-billed Oxpeckers feeding on some cattle. Our final stop was at Sapo where a pair of magnificent Verreaux's Eagle-owls was seen well roosting in some large trees; our continued search for ground-hornbills and coursers drew another blank but we did see Black-headed Lapwings and Bruce's Green-pigeons. Back at camp the power was back on and another tasty dinner was served before log call.

**Day 10** After a punctual breakfast this morning we left our luggage with Aladin so he could load up the bus and meet up with us later in the day. We walked down to the quay and boarded our boat (with a makeshift sun shade) for a trip on the river. We headed across towards the north bank and then drifted slowly down river keeping an eye on the river ahead and on the fairly-dense vegetation lining the riverbank and the tangle of roots dipping into the river. One of the first birds we saw was a Banded Snake-eagle perched on a large branch of an open tree but we had to turn around and drift past the spot again for everyone to see it well; the diagnostic broad white band across the middle of the tail was clearly visible on this perched bird. Another holy grail for many who visit The Gambia is AFRICAN FINFOOT so when Ian R. shouted finfoot everyone paid attention and strained to see the bird. Normally a shy and retiring species quick to dive into cover this bird was about 200 metres ahead of us and continued to swim in the open. Our captain nudged the throttle a bit to get closer quicker and everybody had decent views while some even managed to get shots of the bird. The white throat and brown and white face sexed the bird as a female. As we got closer her jerky head movements suggested she was getting agitated and soon she disappeared into the tangled roots under the bank; we drifted past the spot where she vanished but we could see no sign. Resting in the tall trees we found Hadada Ibis, African Fish-eagle and a group of vultures sunning themselves included Eurasian Griffon and Rüppell's Griffon as well as White-backed Vultures. An African Pygmy-geese flew into the middle of the river, a Eurasian Hoopoe flew across the river from north to south and a Red-necked Falcon, carrying what looked like a weaver in its talons, flew across in the opposite direction. Other notable species seen included Purple Heron, Black-crowned Night-heron, Palm-nut Vulture, Eurasian Turtle-dove, Grey-headed Kingfisher plus Woodland, Blue-breasted and Pied Kingfishers, Yellow-throated Leaflove, a pair of Swamp Flycatchers, Pygmy Sunbird and Black-headed Weaver. Guinea Baboons were also seen on the riverbanks. We had traveled downriver for nearly three hours and now we tied up at a rather ramshackle pier on the south bank that appeared to be in the middle of nowhere but our excellent driver, Aladin, was there with our bus waiting for us. We then drove through the Jakhally Rice Fields checking various damp paddies and pools. Marabou, African Jacana, Little Ringer Plover, Common Snipe, Common and Spotted Redshanks, Common Greenshank, Common and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stint, Ruff, blue-headed Western Yellow Wagtails and Yellow-billed Oxpeckers were some of the birds we saw. Leaving the Rice Fields behind us we re-joined the South Bank Road and continued westwards. The villages were lined with people waving flags waiting to get a glimpse of their President and even away from the villages people lined the road, often without any shade waiting for the President's motorcade to pass. We were often overtaken by army vehicles and occasionally stopped at checkpoints but always waived through without any problems. Near Kudang an area of trees provided shelter from the sun for our packed lunch. The intense midday heat started to subside and we moved on towards Tendaba stopping to check peanut crops for Abyssinian Ground-hornbills and coursers and at wetlands near Choya and Pakali Ba looking for Black Crowned-cranes but without success. We did see a couple of Bateleurs that performed beautifully overhead for us showing off their very short tailed silhouette (the scientific name means tailless) and their characteristic habit of rocking their wings from side to side when gliding. The wetlands held large numbers of White-faced Whistling-ducks and Black-tailed Godwits plus Marsh Sandpipers, Spur-winged Geese and Gull-billed Tern whilst Eurasian Reed Warbler and African Swamphen were only heard. We investigated some pools close to Soma where Black-headed Lapwings, Northern Wheatear, Bush Petronia, Red-billed Queleas, Red-cheeked Cordonbleus, Lavender and Black-



rumped Waxbills, Village Indigobird and Gosling's Bunting were seen. Turning off the South Bank Road at Kwinella we headed for Tendaba Camp on the Gambia River and checked in to our cabins for a two-night stay. We had a buffet style dinner in the open-sided restaurant before calling the log.

**Day 11** The river is wide here and, although we are over 100km inland, it is still tidal. After breakfast we walked across to the 'jetty' where we boarded a Pirogue, a kind of large canoe, for our 'creek-crawl' to explore among the mangroves on the far bank (part of Baobolong Wetlands Reserve). As we climbed aboard a Peregrine Falcon zapped overhead also heading for the far bank. Once across the river we headed into a creek lined with mangroves, slowed the engine and followed the twists and turns of the creek; sometimes gaps in the mangroves revealed areas of flooded savanna where many waterbirds fed. Among many pelicans, herons and egrets we saw Great Cormorants of the white-breasted form '*lucidus*' plus many African Darters perched with wings outstretched drying in the morning sunshine. A Little Bittern showed briefly as it flew a short distance before dropping back into the reeds and an African Spoonbill was also seen. Yellow-billed and Woolly-necked Storks stalked the pools and a party of Hadada Ibises flew over. Bee-eaters were well represented with Swallow-tailed, Blue-cheeked, European and a couple of distant Northern Carmines being seen plus smart but rather subtle White-throated Bee-eaters, which were new for the trip. An African Blue-flycatcher was heard and Ian R. pointed out the bird in some dense mangroves but sadly only a few people saw this little gem. Mouse-brown Sunbirds were common in the mangroves but rarely stayed still long enough to get decent views. The boatman showed us the nest of a Martial Eagle but sadly the chick had recently left the nest. White-faced Whistling-ducks, Spur-winged Geese, Osprey, African Fish-eagle, Grey Kestrel, Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwits, many Common Sandpipers lined up on horizontal branches, Gull-billed and Caspian Terns, Bruce's Green-pigeon, Malachite and Woodland Kingfishers, Bearded Barbet, Grey Woodpecker, Mosque Swallow, Western Yellow Wagtail, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Senegal Batis, Pygmy Sunbird and White-billed Buffalo-weaver were some of the other birds seen. All too soon it was time to rejoin the main river and head back to Tendaba; we had spent a very enjoyable three hours or so in the creeks. Landing back at the jetty Little Swifts were investigating nesting holes under the jetty and Fatou pointed out an African Hobby carrying prey as it flashed past those of us that were slow to get off the pirogue. After lunch in the restaurant some people had a siesta, some sat in the shade and some searched the camp gardens and environs waiting for the midday heat to subside. Various birds were seen that included male and female Pygmy Sunbirds and Purple Starlings. We spent the rest of the afternoon in the Kiang West National Park, one of the largest nature reserves in Gambia, searching the Guinean savanna and dry deciduous woodland of the Batelling Tracks primarily for ground-hornbills and coursers. Solomon had solicited the help of local children to aid our search for these species; we did find Spotted Thick-knee and more Black-headed Lapwings plus a Eurasian Hoopoe but, even with the help of the children our primary targets eluded us. However, we did have superb views of a singing Brown-rumped Bunting and as dusk fell a Helmeted Guineafowl was seen by some as it ran across the track ahead of us. We were also able to spotlight a Standard-winged Nightjar (without standards) on the track and a couple of Long-tailed Nightjars both in flight and on the track. Tendaba is a well-established 'camp' but electricity is rationed here so no air conditioning but we did have a fan and decent water pressure. The rooms have mosquito nets and whilst we ate dinner and called the log our rooms were sprayed against mosquitos as an extra precaution.

**Day 12** This morning we loaded up our bus after breakfast and left Tendaba headed west for the coast. We called in at a disused airstrip known as Tendaba Airport – Terminal One and scanned the distant trees hoping for a perched Martial Eagle but no such luck; the 'airport' held a few waders and herons but little else of note. On the way we had fantastic views of a pair of Four-banded Sandgrouse from the bus as they hid in the trackside vegetation and even posed for photographs as the bus slowly inched past on the narrow track. We found more Spotted Thick-knees and many other species that included Common House-martin and huge



Red-breasted Swallows (both new birds for the trip) with more Mosque and Red-rumped Swallows, Blue-cheeked and European Bee-eaters and Eurasian Hoopoe. Back on the South Bank Road we had good looks at Bateleur, Dark Chanting-goshawk and Grasshopper Buzzard plus Yellow-billed Oxpeckers on our way to our lunch stop. We had lunch at AbCa's Creek Lodge at Bintang on the Bintang Bolon, a quiet tributary of the main river, overlooking mangroves. We had an excellent lunch and also had great views of a male Green-headed Sunbird and a Yellow-throated Leaflove that came into drink. Close to the coast now we decided to visit Pirang Shrimp Farm; this once excellent site has been off limits to birders for a few years but Solomon managed to sweet talk the army guard in to letting us in for a brief walk to look for Black Crowned-cranes. Sadly there were no cranes present but we did add Dunlin and Little Tern to the trip list amongst the Black-tailed Godwits, Marsh, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Common Terns and (Western) Subalpine Warbler. Our final stop of the day was at Tujereng as Solomon had received a call to say the owl had been found at roost and was still there. The African Wood-owl was well hidden amongst leaves and branches but scope views helped piece together the bird. Arriving back at the Kombo Beach we were pleasantly surprised to find our rooms had been upgraded when we checked in; it was nice to walk into an air-conditioned room and have a power shower. After another tasty buffet style dinner and the log call it was good to retire to a cool room.

**Day 13** Back at the coast and with just two full days to go we decided to visit the extreme south-west at Kartong on the border with Senegal. It is an area of disused sand pits that flood during the rainy season creating an excellent wetland area close to the beach and has a Bird Observatory and ringing station run by a British birder. We were greeted by a Malachite Kingfisher (having a bad hair day) in the hand and shortly afterwards the ringers showed us a Striated Heron looking so tiny in the hand. The pits held various herons and egrets, many White-faced Whistling-ducks, a single African Pygmy-goose, Western Marsh-harrier, a perched Banded Snake-eagle being mobbed by kites, Black Crake, African Jacana, Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwits, Zitting Cisticola, Melodious Warbler and Black-headed Weaver. New birds for the trip here were Little Grebe, African Swamphen, and Allen's Gallinule (for some) plus a couple of Red-winged Prinias. After a brief visit to the makeshift ringing station where a Blackcap and some Village Weavers were ringed we turned our attention to the beach. Trip ticks here were White-fronted Plovers with at least one Kentish Plover and Eurasian Oystercatcher plus more Black-bellied (Grey) Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderlings. A Baird's Sandpiper had been found here a few days earlier by the ringers but we could find no sign of it today. Lunch was taken at a lodge overlooking a creek that formed part of the border with Senegal. Eurasian Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Black-headed and Slender-billed Gulls and hundreds of Caspian Terns fed in the creek, whilst the lodge gardens and surroundings held Crested Lark, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Senegal Eremomela, Senegal Batis and Mouse-brown Sunbird were seen, the latter repeatedly visiting its flimsy nest to feed young. The rest of the afternoon was spent at Berrending where more new birds were found in the form of Cardinal Woodpecker, African Yellow White-eye, Black-winged Bishop and Pin-tailed Whydah plus a Red-chested Cuckoo that was heard only and refused to respond to play back. A good list of birds was seen here that included Double-spurred Francolin, Violet Turaco, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Fine-spotted Woodpecker, Grey Woodpecker, Collared, Scarlet-chested, Beautiful, Splendid, Variable and Copper Sunbirds, Yellow-billed Shrike and Black-crowned Tchagra. Some cold beers, a delicious dinner and the log call rounded off an excellent day.

**Day 14** Our last full day; we spent the morning at Tujereng where we walked out to the drinking/feeding station we had visited a week earlier. Sadly no fruit had been left out and the water containers were drying out so the number of species was not as high as our first but we did see African Harrier-hawk, Dark Chanting-goshawk, Wahlberg's Eagle, Dideric Cuckoo, Striped Kingfisher, Little Bee-eater, Abyssinian Roller, Fine-spotted and Brown-backed Woodpeckers, Singing and Whistling Cisticolas, Common Redstart,

White-fronted Black-chat, Black-crowned Tchagra and Yellow-fronted Canary. We decided to move on to another more wooded part of Tujereng where we found Pied-winged Swallows, Scarlet-chested, Beautiful and Splendid Sunbirds and Fork-tailed Drongo. Ian R. found a late European Pied Flycatcher before the real stars of the morning were found, a group of delinquent White Helmetsrikes that entertained us for a few minutes as they moved noisily through the area. A striking black-and-white bird with a long forward curved white crest and forecrown, yellow eye-wattles and dark pink legs. Before lunch we called in at Tanji Beach again where the American Golden-plover was still in residence among the Bar-tailed Godwits, Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderlings. Western Reef-herons, Ospreys and a Kelp Gull were present and among the many Caspian Terns were a few Royal Terns plus a single Lesser Crested Tern with a couple of Sandwich Terns. Lunch was taken at the Tanji Eco Lodge again where African Pygmy-kingfisher, Little Greenbul, Oriole Warbler, Blackcap, Brown-throated Wattle-eye, Yellow-crowned Gonolek and Little, Village and Black-necked Weavers kept us entertained while we waited for the afternoon to cool. The afternoon was spent on the Tanji Reserve seeing Double-spurred Francolins, Wattled Lapwings, African Green-pigeons, Senegal Coucal, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird and Village Indigobird. We moved on towards Brufut Woodland but were unable to cross a stream; with the light fading we headed back to the Kombo Beach Hotel. It was our last meal together and dinner tonight was 'American Thanksgiving' themed so roast turkey with mashed potatoes, stuffing, cranberry sauce and assorted vegetables were on the menu as well as the usual fish, meat and vegetarian options. Everybody had enjoyed the food here especially the evening meals and there was always a good choice.

**Day 15** The last morning and whilst half the group packed and relaxed the other half were keen to get out so we decided to drive the Old Cape Road out to Cape Point. We stopped at a reed-fringed pool where a Little Bittern was seen yesterday but we had to make do with a Striated Heron, Malachite and Pied Kingfishers and Caspian Terns swooping down to drink. Moving on we walked round the back of the pool and out towards Cape Point; Solomon heard a Black-backed Cisticola singing from some reeds but it gave poor views as it flew further into the reeds. The muddy pools held a mix of various herons, waders, gulls and terns and we also saw Osprey, African Harrier-hawk and Shikra plus Crested Larks, Western Yellow Wagtails and Zitting Cisticola. All too soon it was time to head back to the Kombo Beach where we had a group photo taken before saying our goodbyes to Solomon, Fatou and Lamin and not forgetting the best driver in The Gambia, Aladin. We had a few hours to finish packing, have lunch and relax around the hotel before an air-conditioned coach took us to the airport for our flight home where the tour ended.

Because of the ongoing campaigning for the upcoming National Election on December 1st we were occasionally stopped at police or army checkpoints but we were never stopped for more than a minute. The only real disruption the campaigning caused us was the day we crossed to the North Bank but we were powerless to stop it and it did unfortunately lose us some time.

The group total for the tour was 312 species of which five species were only heard (African Crake, Red-chested Cuckoo, African Scops-owl, Red-faced Cisticola and Eurasian Reed Warbler), but we did see many special West African species. My special thanks go to Solomon, Fatou and Lamin for their skills as a bird guides and to Aladin for his exceptional safe and tireless driving. As always it is the group that deserves special thanks for their humour, birding skills and patience.

Bill Blake

## **Birdfinders**