Guinea-Bissau

Bijagós Archipelago: João Vieira, Poilão and Orango Islands

2-4 November 2018

Great numbers of Palm-Nut Vultures, Gypohierax angolensis, gather on the islands to feast in the peak turtle hatching months

Synopsis: I joined a group of enthusiastic young researchers for a weekend tour from Bissau by motor boat to the João Vieira and Poilão Islands National Park (2-3 November). The tour was timed to coincide with the peak month of turtle egg-laying (November). According to the researchers, the tiny island of Poilão is globally important to sea turtle conversation, being the single largest nesting aggregation of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in the eastern Atlantic (between ca. 7,000 and 29,000 nests laid annually). A few hundred more nests are laid on the surrounding islands. In addition to the most common Green Turtle, are records of nesting by Olive Ridley, Hawksbill and Leatherback turtles. During the night, we managed to see approximately sixty turtles nesting. Meanwhile, in daylight hours, we took time to do a quick census of the avian population on the islands, including of the significant resident population of Timneh Parrot on João Vieira. On 3-4 November, we visited the Orango Island National Park to bird and to visit the resident population of hippopotami and conduct a flash bird census.

Arriving at the main marine park and research station on João Vieira. Top right shows the location of the islands in the southernmost reaches of the Bijagós archipelago of Guinea-Bissau

João Vieira Island - 2 November

The boat trip form Bissau to João Vieira took approximately four hours. Immediately after landing on the island, we set off on foot to a roosting site for the **Timneh (Grey) Parrot**, *Psittacus timneh* (now split as a full species from the Grey Parrot, *Psittacus erithacus* of central-west Africa). According to the resident African Bird Club (ABC) Representative, Hamilton Monteiro, the island is the largest extant breeding site for the parrot in Guinea-Bissau and may hold more than 100 individuals. The birds on the island are now protected from hunting (but are heavily persecuted in other parts of Guinea-Bissau (and the wider sub-region) for the pet trade). After some time, with evening approaching, we managed to observe two large, fast-flying flocks circling and preparing to roost. These flocks each contained 30+ birds. We alerted to their arrival by their high-pitched screeching:

Timneh Parrots in flight – photos by Ignacio Morales

On the shore, were several **Whimbrel**, *Numenius phaeops*. Inland, the other birds observed were: **Malachite Kingfisher**, *Alcedo cristata*; **Woodland Kingfisher**, *Halcyon senegalensis*; **Common Bulbul**, *Pyconotus barbatus*; **Village Weaver**, *Ploceus cucullatus*; and **Green-headed Sunbird**, *Cyanomitra verticalis:*

Beach scene on João Vieira Island. Whimbrel was the main shorebird (u/r). The Peregrine Falcon was located at this site.

Also significant was the sighting of a single Peregrine Faclon, *Falco peregrinus*, which on closer examination was found to have been ringed above its left talon:

With light fading, we departed hastily to Poilão Island (30 minutes), where we would camp for the night and observe turtle egg-laying and hatching. This was a highly satisfying experience, with between 50-60 female Green Turtles observed laying eggs in deep excavated nests in the sand throughout the night.

Departure from João Vieira for Poilão

Poilão – 2 & 3 November

I got a dawn start to do some birding around the island on foot. The evidence of turtle nesting activity was everywhere:

Every 100 metres exhausted females were painstakingly returning to the sea:

Some would become stuck in more rocky terrain and were assisted by the researchers to return to the water before heat and dehydration could harm the great reptiles, some weighing well over 100kgs:

An investigator attaches a transmitter to the back of a young Green Turtle

The most common bird encountered was the **Palm-Nut Vulture**, *Gypohierax angolensis,* which seemed to festoon every tree that overlooked the sandy beaches. More than seventy individuals were observed. The vultures are believed to congregate on the island each turtle nesting season to feast on the hatchlings (which normally emerge 60 days after laying):

Also present, in smaller number were African Fish Eagle, *Haliaeetus vocifer* (7 counted):

Other ‘island’ birds seen were: Pied Crow, Common Bulbul, Black-headed and Village weavers; and a single *phylloscopus* migrant warbler, most likely Common Chiffchaff.

Of the shorebirds, Black and Sandwich Terns could be seen fishing off-shore. Royal Terns were in good number and resting by rock pools. The only other waders seen were: Common Ringed Plover, Whimbrel, and very large number of Western Reef Egret, including the less common white morph:

Western Reef Egrets were especially common: in shades of dark grey, light grey and the white morph

We bid farewell to the chelonian researchers based on the island and departed Poilão late in the morning to journey to the much larger island of Orango (3 hours by boat).

Leaving Poilão – turtle tracks clearly visible in the sand

Orientation to the National Park inside the research station.

Orango Island – 3 & 4 November

Pelican rookery in mangroves on the approach to Orango Island

Goliath Heron, Ardea goliath, are a common sight on muddy shores around Orango. Photo Ignacio Morales (Spain)

En route, we encountered large numbers of migrant shorebirds: Oystercatcher, Godwits, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Red Knot, Sandpipers, Greenshank, Redshank, etc. We finally arrived at dusk at our accommodation for the night at a local community guesthouse in Anôr Village after an exciting one hour navigating the narrow and twisting mangrove-lined waterways of the interior of Orango:

Anôr community guesthouse, run by local villagers offers comfortable rooms and meals to travelers

We got an early start the next morning, to visit a highlight of the islands, the colony of hippomotamus, a 45 minute walk from Anôr to a series of freshwater marshes.

The birdlife in the area was abundant; good birds seen were: Hadada and Sacred Ibis, Western Plantain Eater, Squacco, Black, Purple and Grey Herons, Great and Little Egrets, Hamerkop, African Spoonbill, Caspian Tern, Pied, Woodland, Blue-breasted, Malachite and African Dwarf Kingfishers, an enormous colony of Village Weavers and a gaggle of Egyptian Geese:

A special hide has been constructed by the villagers for hippo watching

In all about, 25 'river horses' were seen at the pool

Village Weaver nests topped by a Great Egret

We departed Orango by our boat in the late morning, making a lunch stop at the comfortable, Orango Parque Hotel. Apart from light meals, the lodge barman makes an excellent *caipirinha*.

I birded the lodge gardens and came up with several new species for the trip:

African Paradise Flycatcher, Terpsiphone viridis; Common Wattle-eye, Platysteira cyanea; Little Greenbul, Andropadus virens

Green-backed Heron, Butorides striata; African Green Pigeon, Treron calvus; Rose-ringed Parakeet, Psittacula krameri

We arrived back at Bissau at 17:00. It had been an action-packed weekend, with no life birds, but with a satisfying snapshot of the wildlife of some of the less traveled and largely unspoilt Bijagós islands. A systematic list of the 81 avian species seen follows…

Sources:

The website of the Marine Turtle Research Group provides a good orientation to the turtle nesting sites of the Bijagós:

http://www.seaturtle.org/mtrg/projects/guinea_bissau/

Bird identification using Borrow and Demey: *Birds of Western Africa*. Helm. 2008

Conservation:

Our researchers report that: “interviews all over the coastal zone suggest that sea turtle populations have markedly declined within living memory. Main threats are poaching of eggs and of nesting females and the incidental capture in fishing gear. Amongst the major achievements of sea turtle conservation efforts are that all species are protected by law, the most important nesting beaches have been included in the protected area network, and significant progress has been made in removing the presence of settlements of foreign fishermen from the areas near the turtle concentrations where accidental captures used to occur. On the down side, it should be pointed out that protection in the national parks is insufficient. The main problem seems to be the weak enforcement of park and national rules by park authorities, which creates a feeling of relative impunity in park residents and visiting fishermen”.

Systematic List: Birds seen on João Vieira, Poilão and Orango:

1. Long-tailed Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax africanus*
2. Pink-backed Pelican, *Pelecanus rufescens*
3. Grey Heron, *Ardea cinereal*
4. Purple Heron, *Ardea purpurea*
5. Goliath Heron, *Ardea goliath*
6. Black Heron, *Egretta ardesiaca*
7. Black-crowned Night Heron, *Nycticorax nycticorax*
8. Squacco Heron, *Ardeola ralloides*
9. Western Reef Egret, *Egretta gularis*
10. Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*
11. Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta*
12. Great Egret, *Egretta alba*
13. Hamerkop, *Scopus umbrette*
14. Green-backed Heron, *Butorides striata*
15. Black Stork, *Ciconia nigra*
16. Woolly-necked Stork, *Ciconia episcopus*
17. African Spoonbill, *Platalea alba*
18. Greater Flamingo, *Phoenicopterus roseus*
19. Hadada Ibis, *Bostrychia hagedash*
20. Sacred Ibis, *Threskiornis aethiopica*
21. White-faced Whistling Duck, *Dendrocygna viduata*
22. Spur-winged Goose, *Plectropterus gambensis*
23. Egyptian Goose, *Alopochen aegyptiaca*
24. African Fish Eagle, *Haliaeetus vocifer*
25. Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*
26. Palm-Nut Vulture, *Gypohierax angolensis*
27. African Harrier Hawk, *Polyboroides typus*
28. Hooded Vulture, *Necrosyrtes monachus*
29. Eurasian Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*
30. Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*
31. Grey Kestrel, *Falco ardosiaceus*
32. Black Crake, *Amaurornis flavirostra*
33. African Jacana, *Actophilornis Africana*
34. Senegal Thick-knee, *Burhinus senegalensis*
35. Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*
36. Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*
37. Spur-winged Lapwing, *Vanellus spinosus*
38. African Wattled Lapwing, *Vanellus senegallus*
39. Common Ringed Plover, *Charadrius hiaticula*
40. Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*
41. Bar-tailed Godwit, *Limosa lapponica*
42. Whimbrel, *Numenius phaeopus*
43. Sanderling, *Calidris alba*

44. Red Knot, *Calidris canutus*
45. Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*
46. Common Redshank, *Tringa tetanus*
47. Common Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia*
48. Gull-billed Tern, *Gelochelidon nilotica*
49. Sandwich Tern, *Sterna sandvicensis*
50. Royal Tern, *Sterna maxima*
51. Caspian Tern, *Sterna caspia*
52. Black Tern, *Childonias niger*
53. African Green Pigeon, *Treron calvus*
54. Red-eyed Dove, *Streptopelia semitorquata*
55. Laughing Dove, *Streptopelia sengalensis*
56. Western Grey Plantain-Eate, *Crinifer piscator*
57. Rose-ringed Parakeet, *Psittacula krameri*
58. Timneh (Grey) Parrot, *Psittacus timneh*
59. African Dwarf Kingfisher, *Ispidina lecontei*
60. Woodland Kingfisher, *Halcyon senegalensis*
61. Blue-breasted Kingfisher, *Halcyon malimbica*
62. Pied Kingfisher, *Ceryle rudis*
63. Malachite Kingfisher, *Alcedo cristata*
64. African Grey Hornbill, *Tockus nasutus*
65. Grey Woodpecker, *Dendropicos goertae*
66. Red-chested Swallow, *Hirundo lucida*
67. Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava*
68. Little Greenbul, *Andropadus virens*
69. Snowy-crowned Robin Chat, *Cossypha niveicapilla*
70. Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*
71. Pied Flycatcher, *Ficedula hypoleuca*
72. African Paradise Flycatcher, *Terpsiphone viridis*
73. Common Wattle-eye, *Platysteira cyanea*
74. Brown Sunbird, *Anthreptes gabonicus*
75. Green-headed Sunbird, *Cyanomitra verticalis*
76. Variable Sunbird, *Cinnyris minullus*
77. Beautiful Sunbird, *Cinnyris pulchellus*
78. Pied Crow, *Corvus albus*
79. Village Weaver, *Ploceus cucullatus*
80. Black-headed Weaver, *Ploceus melanocephallus*
81. Red-headed Quelea, *Quelea erythrops*
82. Bronze Mannikin, *Spermestes cucullatus*

ABC Rep. Hamilton Monteiro, taking it easy at the Orango Parque Hotel

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Dolphins accompanied our boat at many stages of the journey – photo by Ignacio Morales