

## Benin

Visit 30 August-1 September 2016

### **Places visited: Cotonou, Lake Nakoue, Ouidah**

This was primarily a business trip, so birding was generally snatched opportunities in the region of the capital, Cotonou. A number of short (2-3 hour) trips really highlighted the excellent birding potential of this part of the country, plus the real potential for cetacean-watching from the shore.

We stayed in the Orisha hotel in Cotonou. While very close to the beach, the staff were unwilling to allow us out of the garden out the beach due to concerns about our safety there. However it was easy and relatively cheap to get a taxi to the Lake Nakoue area, and no problems were encountered.

**Species seen around the hotel:** Laughing Dove, Yellow-billed Shrike, Pied Crow, Western Grey Plantain-eater, and a larger species of dove/pigeon.

### Lake Nakoue marshes

A track runs off the main road running North out of Cotonou to the village of So-Ava: this is easily visible on any map. Took a taxi to the junction, and then walked down the track across the marsh towards So-Ava. This was a most enjoyable 2 hours birding, with typical marsh and farmland species:

Common Kestrel	
Purple Heron	Commonest large heron
Palm Swift	
Little Bittern	Very common
Purple Swamphen	
Cattle Egret	Most numerous egret. Some in breeding plumage
Senegal Coucal	
? Swallow sp.	
Plain-backed Pipit	
Winding Cisticola	
Yellow-crowned Bishop	Common
African Jacana	
? Sparrowhawk sp.	
? Weaver sp	probably both Village and Black-necked Weavers

### Ganvie

Ganvie is an island on Lake Nakoue that is largely constructed on stilts (although can be accessed by car towards the end of the dry season). Tourists can get there by boat, which gives good views of waders, kingfishers, and terns. Additional species seen included:

Little Egret	
Long-tailed Cormorant	
Yellow-throated Longclaw	
Northern Grey-headed Sparrow	
Common Bulbul	
Senegal Kingfisher	
Pied Kingfisher	Commonest kingfisher on the lake
Pygmy Kingfisher	
Malachite Kingfisher	

Moorhen  
Black Crake  
Splendid Sunbird  
African Pied Wagtail  
Western Reef Egret                      Black morph  
Common Sandpiper  
Common Ringed Plover  
?sp. Terns                                  Dozen+ medium and large species, all in winter plumage

**Coast West of Cotonou: whales!**

The biggest surprise of the trip was driving back from Ouidah (the old capital and centre of slavery in the 18th-19<sup>th</sup> centuries). Asked the driver to take the coast road (actually generally a sand track), and we saw a group of 5 Humpback Whales: two full adults and up to 3 young. The coast in this area is sharply shelving to deep water only a few hundred metres offshore, and the whales were easily spotted even without binoculars. They were feeding and moving slowly along the coast, and we watched them for half an hour. Subsequent questioning and research suggests that whales and other cetaceans may be relatively common wintering in the Gulf of Guinea, and frequently seen from the shore around Cotonou. However, they are clearly very under-reported, which is a shame given the clear potential for eco-tourism.