

Gambia Trip Report 12th-26th December 2023

INTRODUCTION

This is not an exhaustive list of birds seen - there are plenty of other reports which do this. Suffice it to say we saw 270 species of birds in two weeks and had a great time. This report is an overview of the trip with, I hope, some useful tips for those new to the Gambia.

I opted to use **Musa Jatta of Turaco Birding** <info@turacobirding.org> My choice was based on the fact he was the only listed professional guide on the **Birding Pals website** and he was hired by **Bent Poulson** whose helpful report is on **Cloudbirders**. Musa offered a 7 day trip (£950) and 14 day trip (£1400), both included Senegal. As it turned out it was a great choice though there were things that I would have changed (see the AFTERTHOUGHTS section at the end). We had the 7 day tour and then had seven days at **Footsteps Eco Lodge near Gunjar on the coast**.

We used TUI (Thompson group) and flew for £617 which included the extra 15Kg of luggage (£48 extra).

I got a local **SIM** in Georgetown because the **WiFi in the lodges was very erratic**. 130 Dalasi for 1 GB but I could have done with a little more as I ran out on the last day.

ARRIVAL

On 12/12/23 David Lee and I left Gatwick North and after an hour delay arrived at Banjul Airport. There was only our plane on arrival so the waiting wasn't too long though some red tape had to be negotiated with the US\$20 entry tax (also an exit one) and the taking of finger prints.

Musa picked us up from the airport; his solid 4X4 was a well used vehicle (other guides did have newer pickups but it suited me fine). First he took us to the money changer in the main hotel area. We got 80 Dalasi to the £1 and we both changed £200 - this was plenty. Musa wanted cash and his £1400 (I paid a £500 deposit prior to this) was after changing to Dalasi the size of a couple of bricks.

Our 1st hotel, the Baobab, was near the main road but it was clean and the breakfast was good - the latter was a bit of a feature of the tour!



DAY 1

After breakfast, we departed to **Bintang Bolong Lodge**. Our driver was Musa's nephew, Alieu - a very laid back guy and a brilliant driver. We had a couple of stops on the way starting with **Farasutu Forest** and then **Faraba bush track**. After lunch, we visited **Killy Woods**. They were all productive stops and we saw a lot of new savannah type birds.

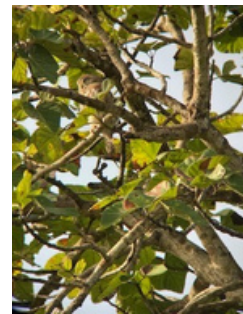
These were the birds we were hoping to see '*Lesser and Spotted Honeyguide, African Wood Owl, Verreaux's Eagle Owl and White faced scops owl, Greyish Eagle Owl, Leavelove, White Spotted Flufftail, Grey headed Bristlebill, Western blue bill and Yellow Penduline Tit just to name few.*' As it turned out we saw the Verreaux's Eagle Owl and Greyish Eagle Owl. I later found out that the **Flufftail** is no longer at Pirang - one of the places we were going to stop at.

Bintang was a lodge built on stilts in the mangroves. A very atmospheric place in the evening and morning overlooking the impressive Gambia river. Great for bat watching at dawn and dusk.



DAY 2

After breakfast, we departed for **Tendaba Camp**. A large busy complex on the River Gambia. The bed I had in hut 14B was painful so I didn't get much sleep. David fared a bit better. It was clean and the cold shower worked. Before Tendaba, we went to **Kampanty track**. We hoped to see raptors, Ground Hornbill and Temminck's Courser. We saw plenty of raptors and later in the trip the coursers but not the Ground Hornbill. **The White Crested Helmetshrikes** came into a playback and these were our only sightings of this rather bizarre looking species. Again plenty of good birds to enjoy here.



DAY 3

After a morning walk around Tendaba and **Kampanti** we took an afternoon **boat trip across the river into the mangroves** - it was brilliant. We didn't see the hoped for African Finfoot but lots of storks, including Yellow Billed and Woolly-necked. The highlight was the **Goliath Heron** and for Dave Lee the Monitor Lizard. It was also the only place we saw a Harrier of any description, a female **Montagu's**.

We had a brief look for Nightjars with Musa later that day (some brief flight views) but there was no excursion for the Bush baby. David and I went out for a night walk but saw little and we couldn't get close enough to the three **African Scops Owls** that were calling not too far away.

DAY 4

After breakfast, we departed upriver for **Georgetown** and crossed the new bridge to the north bank of the Gambia. We stopped at **Njain Sanjal** - a vast grassland area. The latter place we saw the **Temminck's coursers**, **White-bellied Bustard** and **Chestnut bellied Sandgrouse**.



Our next stop was **Kaur Wetlands** - it wasn't very wet - it was hot and dry and the chance of seeing **Egyptian Plover** there seemed remote. I needn't have worried as at **Njao**, a small lake not far away, we saw the hoped for plovers (4 in total) - they were literally yards away on the shoreline. My bird of the trip.



At **Kantaur** on the River Gambia we had an enjoyable boat trip to see the introduced **Chimpanzees** and native **Hippos**; and more importantly - a pair of **Finfoot**. We also saw both **European Turtle Dove** and **Adamawa Turtle Dove** The hoped for Black Crowned Cranes and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters didn't appear - we never completed our Bee-eater list just missing the Carmine. We also only needed Shining Blue Kingfisher to have seen all the Kingfisher species.



DAY 5

The accommodation at **Georgetown, Baobolong Lodge** was the most basic place we stayed in though the bed was a blessed relief from Tendaba; the pillows, however, were almost as hard as stones. Cold shower as usual, friendly staff and the food was good. It did have **Red-throated Bee-eater** in the small grounds as compensation - I was okay with it but other guests moaned a bit about its cleanliness. A new place is being built close by so I suspect the lodge's days are numbered.



In the morning (after breakfast of course) we headed to the vast **rice fields** of **Jahaly** about 40 minutes away. They were full of wetland birds; the highlights here were the spectacle of 400+ **Collared Pratincoles** and tracking down **Quailfinch** which we frequently heard but struggled to see until leaving the place where a small flock were feeding on the track.

The highlight of the day; however, came later on when Musa took us to the **Four-banded Sandgrouse** 'roost' not far from our lodge. Several flew in and landed close to our vehicle as dusk was setting.

David and I said we wanted to go and look for **Nightjars** where we had seen the Sandgrouse, a short walk away but Musa called up a friend to take us - a bit of a fait accompli. It was a long exhausting walk that neither of us were expecting or wanted but we did see plenty of **Long-tailed Nightjars** at close quarters. We paid Fordy something like 800 Dalasi which wasn't the 2500 that he wanted to buy his bag of rice. Not sure if he was happy or not because we were too damn tired!



Fordy aiming to catch a Long-tailed nightjar until we stopped him.

DAY 6

After, yes, an 8 o'clock breakfast, we departed to **Senegal**. We stopped at **Wassu Stone Circle** and saw **Mosque Swallow** but no lingering Carmine Bee-eaters. The border crossing was hot and a little tense but after much queuing and red tape we got across and headed through unbroken, and rather dull to look at, Savannah. I was asked about my **Yellow Fever vaccination certificate** and replied I didn't have one but no further action was taken. Musa was expecting that we might have to pay. We had no idea it was required though Dave had had an injection in Denmark where he live but hadn't brought his certificate.

The main reason for going to **Kaolack** was to see the **Swallow-tailed Kites** and they were fabulous: hordes of birds heading over to their roost on the **island of Khursmarr** but alas we didn't take the boat over. Apparently there are Hyenas on the island which cross the water to feed on cattle - we saw their tracks - they would have been great to see. We did see **Savile's Bustard** and **Chestnut-bellied Starling** here; the latter is I believe a bit trickier in Gambia.



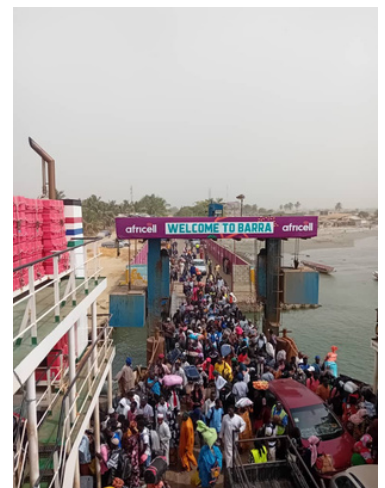
Somewhere in the distance were 17,000 Swallow-tailed Kites going to roost.

DAY 7

The overnight accommodation in **Koalack**, The **Hotel Relais** was a significant step up from the other places and we enjoyed the pool and bar. The town of Kolalack was busy but Alieu negotiated the traffic well.

We began our long drive back to Gambia and didn't make any notable stops for birding though the **ferry from Barra to Banjul** provided some new birds. There was a brief stop at **Tanji** market to see the fish and plastic strewn beach before arriving at Footsteps around 4pm.

We didn't take the boat trip to the Salum Delta to look for White crested Tiger Bittern which was in the original itinerary.



DAY 8 - DAY 16 (Footsteps Eco Lodge near Gunjar)

This lodge is quite smart and well frequented by middle-class people - mainly Brits - we matched the latter category if not the first. I booked the self-catering bungalow (£600) and it was a great place to relax. This was a time for Dave Lee to get some sunshine and beach which he did to the utmost. I continued birding with two days at **Kartong** but in retrospect, I should have done a morning and an evening visit - mid-day was hot! I also walked to **Gunjar forest** and saw **Capuchin Babblers** - apparently they can be shy but I saw two groups, one at around 10am and the other near midday.



One of our neighbours behind Dave's loo! The one and only large spider that we saw.



Our very smart self catering bungalow at Footsteps

I booked a day with the bird guide **Ansu Jawara** (£90/day/person with lunch included). He arrived at 8am and we headed to a bit of farmland and saw very little before going to **Pirang Forest**, reaching there about 10am - we had great views of **White-faced Owl** and a lovely lunch at **Marakissa Lodge**. There was also the spectacle of the crocodiles being fed; however, we didn't see anything new that hadn't seen or I wasn't to see later. The hunt for **Painted Snipe** was in the hottest part of the day and not surprisingly drew a blank. We got back at 4.30pm - not really a full day of birding but Ansu did help us with some food shopping upon our return.

Birding round Footsteps was reasonably interesting but I could have done with a couple more days out. I saw the local White-faced Owl and the other striking bird from this week apart from the Capuchin Babblers was the **Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike**.

Lammin, the guide at Footsteps, can arrange trips to local places such as **Brufut Woods** for **Standard-winged Nightjar** which the wardens will take you to see.

AFTER THOUGHTS

Let me stress, we had a great time with Musa and Alieu. Musa is a top, top bird guide. He really has unbelievably good eyesight, hearing and identification skills!

However, now I am at home, there are areas upon reflection that I thought could be improved upon:

1) **Earlier starts.** We often hung around for breakfast until 9am and the heat was building up by 10am. The birders I normally bird with (not Dave Junior) would not tolerate such late starts.

2) The trip to **Kaolack** was a long one and it took up two days. If we had done the boat trip and seen the **Swallow-tailed Kites** at closer quarters it may have been worth it. I was left standing on the shoreline looking wistfully at the kites a kilometre away. Bizarrely, I also ended up tipping the boatman who would have taken us. It seems the boat trip would have been an added expense as I had to get £30 in CFA from an ATM.

3) Rather than going to Koalack, an extra couple of days on the coast would have been ideal. We didn't go to **Tanji, Abuko or Brufut Woods.**

4) I would like to have done at least one **night walk** with Musa looking for Nightjars, Owls or other nocturnal creatures. Fordy's trip was okay but he was no Musa and it was unexpected add on that appeared and I find negotiating prices awkward and embarrassing.

5) The 'expected' birds and places in the itinerary didn't quite match what actually happened. Rather than 'expected', I would suggest '*hoped for at the right time of the year*' or '*if time allows...*'

Despite these reflections, I would certainly use Musa and Alieu again because of their skill and sense of humour. Have a great time - we did.

David Buckingham (30/12/2023)

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