

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Mbandaka, Equateur Province: ICCN Botanical Garden

5 July 2020



*The very smart, Congo Sunbird, *Cinnyris congensis* – only inhabits a limited range of riparian forest of the central reaches of the Congo River*

Synopsis

I embarked on a 4-day work trip from Kinshasa to Equateur Province from 3-6 July 2020. The visit was associated with the latest (11th) Ebola outbreak in the DRC for which we needed to obtain special quarantine permits to travel during the Covid-19 lockdown. On Sunday, 5 July, I negotiated a quick visit with the provincial governor to the *Jardin Botanique d'Eala* (7kms east of Mbandaka, capital of Equateur). For four hours we wandered the grounds of the expansive park and managed to see 35 species. Highlights (and lifers) for me were **Congo Sunbird**, *Cinnyris congensis*, **Congo Marten**, *Riparia congica* and **Long-legged Pipit**, *Anthus pallidiventris*. On my return to Kinshasa, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that my (poor) photos of the Congo Sunbird were the first to be uploaded onto eBird/HBW. A google search for the same bird also revealed that the only other (purported) photo of the bird (taken at Ituri in eastern Congo), was probably misnamed and more likely to be Red-chested Sunbird, *Cinnyris erythocercus*, given its smaller size, shorter tail streamers, and range far outside the central Congo River.

Notes on the *Jardin Botanique d'Eala* (Mbandaka):



The present-day town of Mbandaka is located 750kms north of the DRC capital, Kinshasa. The original port of Coquilhatville of the then Belgian Congo, served as a major half-way river station between the two principal river ports of Stanleyville (now Kisangani) and Léopoldville (Kinshasa). The expansive botanical garden must have been a jewel in its time. Founded by royal charter by King Léopold II in 1900, the site served as the leading tropical horticultural and botanical research station for the colony. After independence in 1960, the management of the gardens were eventually handed to the *Institute Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature* (ICCN).



Vestiges of the past reveal wonderfully laid out gardens featuring (useful) tropical fruit species from around the globe and acres of nursery plots for the propagation of useful Equatorial species (the park lies only a few kms north of the Equator).



The Palm Alley once graced the dissectional avenue across the park



Park buildings that include a now defunct museum (left) and the residence of the park director (right)



The park stands on the left bank of the Ruki River, a tributary, which 4kms downstream joins the mighty Congo on its flow down to the Atlantic ocean (1500 kms to the southwest):



Conservation efforts by the UN and NGO partners may hopefully one day restore the park to an important research and tourist destination in the DRC.

Avian species record (35):

1. Red-eyed Dove, *Streptopelia semitorquata* – 4
2. Tambourine Dove, *Turtur tympanistris* – 1
3. Senegal Coucal, *Centropus senegalensis* - 2
4. Dideric Cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx caprius* - 1
5. Klaas's Cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx klaas* -2
6. Little Swift, *Apus affinis* – 100+ very common around buildings
7. African Palm Swift, *Cypsiurus parvus* – 50+ common
8. African Darter, *Anhinga rufa* - 1
9. (Reed) Long-tailed Cormorant, *Microcarbo africanus* - 5
10. Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis* – 200+ common; large number of cattle grazing inside the park
11. Congo Serpent-Eagle, *Dryotriorchis spectabilis* – 1 adult soaring over a forest clearing
12. African Pied Hornbill, *Tockus fasciatus* - 3
13. African Pygmy-Kingfisher, *Ispidina picta* - 2
14. Woodland Kingfisher, *Halcyon senegalensis* – very common and vocal; 10+
15. Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, *Pogoniulus bilineatus* - 2
16. African Paradise-Flycatcher, *Terpsiphone viridis* – one spectacular pale morph male in full breeding plumage
17. Pied Crow, *Corvus albus* – very common in murders
18. Green-backed (Grey-backed) Camaroptera, *Camaroptera brachyura brevicaudata* – commonly heard in thickets
19. Congo Martin, *Riparia congica* – 20+ a good number hawking insects low over the river; relatively pale underparts and low flying habit over the river seem to be diagnostic.
20. Lesser Striped-Swallow, *Cercropis abyssinica* - 6
21. Common Bulbul, *Pyconotus barbatus tricolor* – the most common bird encountered
22. Chestnut-winged Starling, *Onychognathus hartlaubi* - 1
23. Splendid Starling, *Lamprotornis splendidus* – common in small flocks



24. Rufous-tailed Palm-Thrush, *Cichladusa ruficauda* – 2



25. Green-headed Sunbird, *Cyanomitra verticalis* – male/female pair feeding on Rambutan flowers:



26. Congo Sunbird, *Cinnyris congensis* – 3 (possibly two pairs)





27. Slender-billed Weaver, *Ploceus pelzelni* – 20+
28. Vieillot's (Black) Weaver, *Ploceus nigerrimus* - in isolated colonies: 60+
29. Village Weaver, *Ploceus cucullatus* – very common near human habitation
30. Western Bluebill, *Spermophaga haematina pustulata* – a male/female pair: the central African form with distinct red rump and red wash on cheeks
31. Bronze Mannikin, *Spermestes cucullatus* – common; feeding in large flocks on grass seeds
32. Black-and-White Mannikin, *Spermestes bicolor* – one flock of 20+ birds in one bamboo thicket

33. Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, *Passer griseus* – common feeding on ground in pairs
34. African Pied Wagtail, *Motacilla aguimp* – adult/juvenile pair were a morning feature of the swimming pool at Nina River Hotel



35. Long-legged Pipit, *Anthus pallidiventris* – two pairs seen; at Mbandaka airport on arrival and at Mbandaka Botanical Garden:



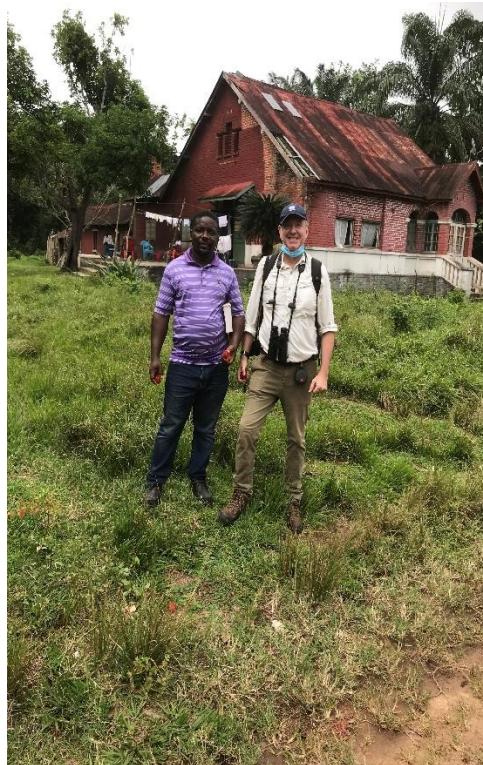
Life on the river: A reasonably good accommodation option is the Nina River Hotel near the central market at Mbandaka, constructed under the Mobutu regime in the 1970s: approximately US\$80 per night; superb river views included!







The local beer, "Tembo" goes down a treat at sundown in the ecuatorian heat...



The author and the current Director of the Botanical Garden

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