Gambia 2025 - Bansang by bus for Red Throated Bee eaters

Red Throated Bee eater

I visited Gambia between 21st to 28th February 2025. This was my 16th visit to Gambia, but first since 2017. I spent most of my time around the tourist area and on the beach as I had seen most of the expected species many times, but did travel independently inland to Bansang over three days to see the Red Throated Bee eaters there, in my gentle quest to try to see all the bee-eater species in the World – this was number 11.

Much detail about Gambia is contained in many available trip reports but I will add the details of our trip inland as this was where I did most of the birding, and this might be of interest to independent birders. On this trip, I was accompanied by Binta, the daughter of the family I have been sponsoring since 2010 who wanted to have a look at the nursing college there. Binta was great and handled all the local negotiations and hence I ended up feeling very much the participant rather than leader on the trip, a new experience for me. The overall costs arranging our own accommodation at Riverside lodge and travelling by bus made for a very cost-effective trip. Feel free to contact me on the mail at the bottom if you need more info.

Travel logistics

Flew with Tui from Gatwick, arriving late evening, with the homeward bound flight being overnight, which was useful. There is a tourist tax on entry and departure at Yundum airport.

Hotels.

Stayed in the Holiday Beach Club on a bed and breakfast basis, which is just off the Senegambia strip. Perfectly adequate, although quite basic, and now seems to be populated largely by Dutch tourists, as opposed to Brits, as it was when I always stayed there in the 2006 to 2012 period. Breakfast is adequate, as I need 4 cups of coffee in the morning to get moving properly, and their kitchen in the day is good, with the steak sandwiches being excellent.

Upcountry in Bansang, we stayed in the Riverside Lodge, which I can fully recommend. They have a FB page and can be reached on WhatsApp on 02207203000. Accommodation is clean and the food is excellent. The staff are very friendly. They advertise that it's only B and B, but lunch and evening meals are available if arranged in advance. Choices are limited but to be honest the food was so beautifully prepared and presented, I'd eat anything they put in front of me.

Sunrise at the Riverside Lodge.

Up country bus.

We caught the 7.00 bus from Kanifing bus station in Serrekunda– caution is needed here, as not all taxi drivers around the Senegambia strip know where this is, even if they offer to take you there. I enlisted the help of the local Police to find a taxi driver who did. The bus leaves from in front of the station, tickets from the driver, one way 350 D per person. This takes about 5 hours to get to Bansang, arriving about noon, with a stop in Soma for 30 minutes or so. No toilets on the coach, nor food / drinks available, so prepare accordingly. Roads are good and the driver was excellent, quite a character, be prepared for him to ask for a tip, gave him 100D which allowed him to get some lunch.

The lodge is about 1 KM back along the road towards Janjubreh, and we got a tuktuk from the centre of Bansang, it's a 1 min walk to the taxi rank, for 100D.

Returning is another 7 am start from Bansang back to Serrekunda. Ask around locally, we arranged a cab from the camp to the town centre. The bus we had back was an older one, and a bit less comfortable. Once we got back to Brikama, it stopped every half a mile to let people off. By the time we got back to the bus station, only 4 of us were left on the bus.

Money.

Took cash and changed this at the numerous money change kiosks in the Senegambia strip and the exchange rate was about 88 Dalasi to the pound. Beware of "helpers" around these, especially late at night.

Guides.

I did not use a dedicated bird guide on this trip, but if one is needed, I would recommend Fatu Colley on WhatsApp +220 7790535 . If you require a guide at Bansang on an independent trip, I'd recommend one of the workers in the camp by the name of Nuha on WhatsApp +2209115942. He is not a bird guide, but my assumption being that if you've arrived that far on your own, you prefer to bird independently, you just need to know where the local sites are. He was able to organise us a cab with his friend for 100D, return to Bansang quarry to see the Red Throated Bee Eaters, for which I tipped him 400D. The following day, which was officially his day off. He guided us over the river, to the area mentioned below. For this, I later I paid him £25 later, sent via Western Union. He's a good lad, and I know that he spent most of that money on food for all of the people in his compound as he sent me the pictures of what he purchased with it. So therefore, if you need a reliable local to guide you to the sites, are confident identifying the birds yourself, and area keen to help the locals, he is your man. He's very patient, friendly, and will act as your local fixer. We did have an afternoon and a full day out with him, which was a great experience. Note he didn't ask for payment and initially refused.

Food.

Having been floored by Banjul Belly with monotonous regularity in the past, I have always been cautious where and what I eat but had no issues this time. Ate well near the Palma Rima hotel at Rendezvous and Luigi's, and at a Dutch Bar just along from the hotel, can't remember the name but it's opposite the Scala restaurant. After 21 years, I finally plucked up the courage to try Gambia's national dish, Chicken domoda, which is excellent. What I noticed all over was that food and hygiene standards had improved. A decent meal can be had around the tourist area for 700D, and beers are between 150D to 200D. The famous Gambia beer "Julbrew" is unfortunately no more, the main brands now being "Goldfinch" and "Crystal", but they all taste the same.

Security

There is a bit of hassle around the tourist area, and I was approached with a number of dubious offers and stories, but this is easily dealt with by remaining calm and courteous. There is a strong police presence, and I found them very helpful. On the bus journey up country, there were numerous police checkpoints, but only on one occasion each way where they boarded the bus and asked to see people's identity. Given the security conditions elsewhere in the Sahel, this was more reassuring than oppressive, and they were very polite and disciplined. Be sure, as I did, to carry your passport.

Birding Sites.

I really only birded on the up-country trip, other than around the hotel gardens, as I had heard that most of the birding sites in and around the tourist areas and Combos were being subject to encroachment and deforestation. The Holiday Beach Club gardens were good, as were the Senegambia Gardens, although I did not see the Black Casqued Hornbill which had been reported from there.

Up country, the area in and immediately around the camp was excellent. As noted above, the guide took us to Bansang Quarry to see the Red Throated Beaters and a trip across the river on a small ferry boat, powered by an outboard motor, filled with terrified looking Gambians, the reason being, according to Binta, that most of the locals cannot swim. We then walked up the road for about half a mile, then turning to the right, through some compounds, to a marshy area adjacent to a Forest Park, which was excellent. I suggest contacting the guide noted above for these areas.

Total number of species recorded was low for a Gambia trip for the reason's stated above, but I did get two lifers, RT Bee eater and Rock Martin.

Great White Pelican -1 off the beach
Long-tailed (Reed) Cormorant Phalacrocorax -1 over head near Palma Rima
Striated (Little) Heron - From Riverside camp
Squacco Heron - From Riverside camp
Black-headed Heron - Bansang swamp
Great Egret Egretta alba -Common all wetlands
Little Egret - Bansang swamp
Western Cattle Egret - Common all over
Sacred Ibis- One overhead near Palma Rima
Hamerkop From Riverside camp
White-faced Whistling-Duck – Flock of at least 20 seen over the Palma Rima area.
Hooded Vulture -Widespread but in much reduced numbers than before
Black-shouldered (winged) Kite – One seen from the bus near Brumen Bridge going up country.
Yellow-billed Kite - Common all over, with a particular agile example doing well at Soma Bus Station.
African Fish-Eagle - From Riverside camp
Brown Snake Eagle – 1 in tree near Bansang ferry crossing.
Shikra – noted throughout
Ovambo Sparrowhawk- One possibly at Bansang Quarry
Red-necked Falcon – One seen from the transfer bus whilst returning to the airport
Double-spurred Francolin - From Riverside camp
Black Crake - Bansang swamp
African Jacana - Bansang swamp
Senegal Thick-knee - From Riverside camp
Wattled Lapwing - From Riverside camp
Spur-winged Lapwing - Bansang swamp
Grey-headed Gull - Odd birds along the coast
Lesser Black-backed Gull -3 off the beach on the second day
Yellow-legged Gull - At least 2 off the beach on the second day
Speckled Pigeon - Common
Feral Pigeon - Common in urban areas
Namaqua Dove - A few around Bansang
Blue-spotted Wood-Dove Heard at Bansang
African Mourning Dove - Noted at Bansang swamp
Red-eyed Dove - Very common
Vinaceous Dove - Common
Laughing Dove Very common
Senegal Parrot - Common at Riverside camp
Western Grey Plantain-eater - Widespread
Senegal Coucal – Widespread but elusive, mainly detected by call.
African Scops-Owl -From Riverside camp, heard calling at night and I managed to sound record with my phone to get an ID.
African Wood-Owl - From Riverside camp, heard at night

Pearl-spotted Owlet - One showed very well in Bansang Riverside camp, in the big Baobab by the river.
Little Swift- Noted in several places
African Palm-Swift - Common throughout
Pied Kingfisher - From Riverside camp
Blue-breasted Kingfisher - Bansang swamp
Red-throated Bee-eater - The bird of the trip and certainly the major target. About 80+ birds in the colony at Bansang quarry.
Abyssinian Roller – Several noted up-country and one posed nicely for photos at Bansang Swamp.
Broad-billed Roller- From Riverside camp and HBC Gardens
Green Wood-Hoopoe - Very common HBC gardens and at Riverside Camp
Western Red-billed Hornbill - Noted
African Grey Hornbill - Common HBC gardens and at Bansang
Bearded Barbet - HBC Gardens
Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird – One heard in the Senegambia gardens
Fine-spotted Woodpecker - HBC Gardens
Grey Woodpecker - HBC Gardens
West African Red-rumped Swallow - From Riverside camp
Rock Martin - From Riverside camp, a flock of about 10 appeared one first morning with other hirundines
Red-chested Swallow – Noted in both main areas
Wire-tailed Swallow - Saw a group from the bus perched on a wire in one of the villages.
Fanti Sawwing- 1 Over HBC gardens
Yellow-throated Greenbul - 3 at Bansang Lodge
White-crowned Robin-Chat- HBC gardens and at Riverside camp.
Brubru – One heard in Riverside Camp
Yellow Billed Shrike – 3 at the airport upon departure
Common Gonolek – Hotel gardens and Bansang all areas
Fork-tailed Drongo - Bansang swamp
Brown Babbler - Common all over
Blackcap Babbler - HBC Gardens
African Thrush – Bansang Swamp and HBC gardens.
Pied Crow - Fairly common
Long-tailed Glossy-Starling - Very Common
Bronze-tailed Glossy-Starling -Common at Bansang
Purple Glossy-Starling - Very common at Bansang
Beautiful Sunbird - Widespread and common.
Red Billed Quelea - Noted at Riverside camp.
Village Weaver – Noted at Bansang Camp
Orange (Northern Red) Bishop – A few cryptically plumaged birds around the camp

Gordon Shaw
West Molesey, Surrey, March 2025
saxonjohn24@yahoo.co.uk