

## **GAMBIA January/February 2023- a trip report by Bob Swann**

We decided to visit The Gambia for some birding and organise it ourselves, using the Senegambia Hotel, Kololi as a base. The cheapest way to do it was as a package holiday with TUI. A bit of internet research came up with a list of good birding sites and details of potential bird guides. I contacted Malick Suso and arranged for two days guiding. Malick turned out to be an exceptional guide and so we booked him for a 3<sup>rd</sup> day. He can be quite busy so it is probably worth contacting him before you head out to Gambia. His e-mail is [malicksuso@hotmail.com](mailto:malicksuso@hotmail.com) or he can be contacted on WhatsApp on 00 220 992 1720. See also <http://www.gambianbirdguide.com/>. We also used two other local guides once we arrived.

**25 January.** Our first full day, having arrived late the previous evening. I decided to get up around sunrise (0730) and explore the famous hotel grounds before and after breakfast. First birds I saw were **African Palm Swifts** flying low over the palms outside our block. Quickly came across **Speckled Pigeon**, **Red-eyed Dove**, **Laughing Dove** and a pair of **Vinaceous Collared Dove**. The trees and bushes held lots of **Common Bulbul** and **Village Weaver**, several pairs **Western Red-billed Hornbill**, a couple of pairs of stunning **Blue-bellied Roller**, a family of **Green Wood Hoopoe**, a small group of **Long-tailed Glossy Starling**, a few pairs of **Beautiful Sunbird**, the males in superb plumage, a pair of **Northern Black Flycatcher** and a lovely **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird**. In the larger trees came across my first **Western Grey Plantain-eaters**, a pair of **African Grey Woodpecker**, **Rosy-ringed Parakeets** and perched near the top **Broad-billed Rollers**. On the lawns lots of **Cattle Egrets**, some very approachable **White-crowned Robin-chats**, **Brown Babblers**, **Blackcap Babblers** and my first amazing **Yellow-crowned Gonolek**. Later in the morning by the feeding station on the lawn 150+ **Hooded Vulture**, with lots of **Yellow-billed Kite** and some **Pied Crow** (they really are a handsome crow). Along the boundary wall where there was a bit more rough ground were wee flocks of **Red-billed Firefinch** and **Bronze Mannikin** with a few **Red-cheeked Cordon-blue**. Although I had picked up 12 lifers I was slightly disappointed with the grounds as I had expected even more species. Speaking to another birder he said that over the years more accommodation blocks had been built (it is now apparently the largest hotel in Gambia) and the grounds are a lot more manicured than they used to be.

After lunch I decided to walk out to Kotu creek. I headed along the main road and eventually turned left, then right and walked along the Kotu cycle track which runs alongside some harvested rice fields. In a scrubby area near where I turned down found a nice **Abyssinian Roller**. Walking along the cycle track I started picking up new species such as **Senegal Coucal**, **Little Bee-eater**, a pair of **African Grey Hornbill**, a group of **Piapiac**, a pair of **Yellow-billed Shrike** and a **Shikra** soared over. In the wetter areas either side of the track a flock of c50 **White-faced Whistling Duck**, **Hammerkop**, **Squacco Heron**, **Black-headed Heron**, **Black Heron**, **African Sacred Ibis**, **African Jacana** and **Spur-winged Plovers**.

I was then approached by a bird guide offering to show me a variety of different species. I was a bit wary and did not really encourage him but he just tagged along with me as I headed towards the bridge. At the bridge a party of **Red-chested Swallow** on the wires and a pair of **Wire-tailed Swallow**. Feeding on the edge of the creek were **Great Egret**, **Grey Heron**, **Striated Heron**, **Western Reef Heron**, **Reed Cormorant** and a couple of **African Darter**. Nice views of **Pied Kingfishers** and **Giant Kingfisher**.

Bob, as the guide was named, offered to show me the way to the old sewage works. This took us via the Nature Trail on the south side of the creek. Great views in the mangroves of my first **Blue-breasted Kingfisher**. We walked through some scrub which held a pair of **Double-spurred Francolin**, **African Mourning Doves** and our first **Senegal Parrots**. As we returned towards bridge found a **Glossy-backed Drongo** (recently split from fork-tailed drongo). Walked back along the cycle track where, by the remains of the old hotel, Bob pointed out a **Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher** and then called out a **Pearl-spotted Owlet** which gave nice views. Further along by the rice fields added a **Striped Kingfisher** and a flock of **White-billed Buffalo Weaver** to the list. I was quite impressed with Bob's birding skills so agreed that we would go with him the next morning for some local birding at a cost of GD2000. Returned to hotel for a well earned beer. It was very hot!

**26 January.** Bob (or Buba Barry to give him his correct name) picked us up outside the hotel entrance at 0730 as agreed. We returned to the Kotu rice field area where he took us to a pool at the back of the abandoned hotel. Nice view of a fishing "umbrella style" **Black Heron**, as well as **African Spoonbill**, several **Black-crowned Night Heron**, **Hadada Ibis**, a **Common Moorhen**, some **Black-winged Stilt**, a **Green Sandpiper**, **Common Sandpiper** and a **Greenshank**, with four **Caspian Tern** overhead. We walked along the edge of the rice fields seeing a **Woodland Kingfisher** and a **Grey-backed Camaroptera** in the trackside scrub and **Intermediate Egret** in the rice fields.

Returned to Kotu Bridge and Bob took us in one of the canoes for an hour long trip up the creek. It was low tide so lots of waders on the exposed mud – many **Senegal Thick-knee**, as well as **Grey Plover**, **Whimbrel** and **Yellow-wattled Lapwing**. A wide range of heron species including our first **Purple Heron**. Good numbers of kingfishers, mainly **Pied**, with **Great** and our first **Mallachite Kingfishers**. In the mangroves an **Oriole Warbler** and a **Fine-Spotted Woodpecker**. We got very good close views of most species.

After our return to the bridge Bob drove us to the entrance of the Fajara golf course. First target here was **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater** and we found a couple of pairs on the tree line between the "fairways". Then continued to a scrubbiest area near the creek where Bob soon located a roosting **Long-tailed Nightjar**, which gave excellent close views. As we walked back we found a pair of **Black-billed Wood Dove** and an **African Thrush**.

Finally drove to the Calypso restaurant at Cape Point. Here the target was the long-staying **Black-casqued Hornbill** – an amazing bird, which gave superb views. Had a beer overlooking the crocodile pool, where we watched a **Black Crake** by the reeds and lots of **Little Swift**, **Red-chested Swallow** and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** feeding over pool. In the adjacent scrub a **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, **Tawny-flanked Prinia** and three **Black-necked Weaver**.

Returned to hotel after an enjoyable morning for a late lunch. A stroll round the grounds in the afternoon added **Variable Sunbird** to the list, along with another **Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher** and in the adjacent small agricultural area **Grey Kestrel**.

**27 January.** Another early 0700 breakfast and then met up with Malick Suso for a day's guiding. Headed east through the busy town of Serekunda towards Abuko. First stop was the Lamin rice fields on the north side of the busy road. In the treeline by the entrance Malick quickly put us on a pair of **Yellow-throated Leaflove** high in a fruiting tree along with **African Thrush**, a **Blackcap** and **Black-necked Weavers**. As we walked out into the fields good views of our first **Lizard Buzzard**. Birds inhabiting the rice fields included flocks of **Northern Red Bishops** (all in non-breeding plumage), **White-billed Buffalo Weavers**, **Singing Cisticola** and a couple of **Shikra**. In the wetter patches good views of **Black Crake** and **African Jacana**. In an adjacent area of scrub Malick skilfully picked out a

**Pearl-spotted Owlet.** In the same area a male **Greater Honeyguide**, two female **Northern Puffback**, an **African Paradise Flycatcher** and a **Fine-spotted Woodpecker** all of which gave good views.

Returned to the car and drove the short distance to the entrance to the Abuko Forest reserve. First stop was at the hide overlooking the lake. **Fanti Saw-wings** were feeding over the water and a **Palm-nut Vulture** was sitting in a distant palm tree, though later got better views of two in flight above the wood. We started to walk slowly through the forest, where Malick's skills began to show. He was quick to hear forest birds and could imitate their calls to attract them closer so we could actually see them. First **Yellow-breasted Apalis**, then **Brown-throated Wattle-eye**, followed by a superb male **Western Bluebill**, then with a lot of patience he got us good views of a **Little Greenbul**. As we continued through the forest nice but brief views of a couple of **Green Turaco**. In a scrubby area we located **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater** and a female **Collared Sunbird**.

At lunchtime we arrived at the photographic hide. It was nice to sit here in the cool and be entertained by the birds coming in to drink. Lots of **Red-billed Firefinch** and **Bronze Mannikin**, but highlights were an amazing **Violet Turaco**, a few **Black-billed** and a **Blue-spotted Wood Dove**. Then to cap it a **Harnessed Bushbuck** came in followed later by a huge Nile Monitor Lizard.

As we walked back through the wood good views of **Green Velvet Monkey**, **Red Colobus Monkey** and **Gambian Sun Squirrel**. Finally, again with a lot of hard work, Malick eventually got us good views of a **Buff-spotted Woodpecker**. Returned back late afternoon, through heavy traffic after an excellent day out with Malick.

**28 January.** After an early breakfast we walked back down to Kotu Bridge. Nice views of a group of **Northern Grey-headed Sparrow** and a **Singing Cisticola** enroute. At the bridge met up with Malick. Scanned the creek adding **Common Ringed Plover** to the list and then walked down the north side of the creek towards the mouth. Our main target here was **Golden-tailed Woodpecker** and we eventually got reasonable views. Also close views of **Oriole Warbler**, a **Brown-throated Wattle-eye** and came across **Willow Warbler** and **Chiffchaff**.

After leaving Malick we followed the nature trail towards the Kotu sewage works. Here in some acacias just below the sewage area got great views of a male **Splendid Sunbird** and in the same trees a **Northern Crombec** and **Yellow-fronted Canary**.

Walked back to the hotel – it was very hot c35C. In late afternoon I took a wander round the hotel grounds the highlight being the bizarre **Bearded Barbet**.

**29 January.** An early breakfast as we had arranged another day out with Malick. He picked us up at 0730 and we headed east to Mandina. Luckily being a Sunday morning the traffic was not too heavy, but it still took one and a half hours to get there. We stopped in an area of open grazed savanna by a large flowering tree. This held lots of sunbirds – **Splendid**, **Beautiful** and **Variable** as well as a few **Little Weaver**. As we walked through the scrub found several **Tawny-flanked Prinia** and with them a **Red-winged Prinia**. A large fruiting tree gave us good views of an **African Golden Oriole**, a pair of **Northern Puffback** as well as a **Western Bonelli's Warbler** and **Yellow-fronted Canary**. Flying overhead were small groups of **Splendid Glossy Starling**. Then came to an area with two large fruiting Fig Trees. These were an absolute magnet for birds, they must have contained 50+ **Common Bulbul**. Sitting high in the tree were three **Bruce's Green Pigeon** and a couple of **African Green Pigeon**. A mixed flock of starling kept coming and going. Mainly **Purple Glossy Starling** (with their yellow eyes), with some **Bronze-tailed Starling** (with their red eyes) and eventually a few **Splendid Glossy Starling** (with their white eyes). Also in the tree four **Bearded Barbets** and three **Northern Yellow White-eyes**. In the surrounding scrub a couple of pairs of **Senegal Eremomela** and a pair of

**Yellow Penduline Tit.** This was frantic birding but with the scope we were getting excellent views of all species.

We continued walking through the scrub and flushed three **Yellow-billed Oxpecker** from the back of a cow. Three **Palm-nut Vulture** flew over, followed later by a juvenile **Lanner**. An adult **African Harrier Hawk** was hunting over the area and perched on an acacia a **Dark-chanting Goshawk**. There was also a scattering of Western Palearctic migrants – a **European Hoopoe**, a **Barn Swallow**, three **Northern Wheatear**, a **Common Redstart**, a **Western Olivaceous Warbler**, some **Yellow Wagtail** and a **Woodchat Shrike**. In a more open area a pair of **Yellow Wattled** and a **Black-headed Lapwing**. After a lot of calling Malick eventually attracted in three superb **Vieillot's Barbets**, which gave great views as they perched high in the nearby trees. Also in the same area a couple of **Abyssinian Roller** and a **Striped Kingfisher**. We returned to an area of larger trees, including some huge Baobabs, where we found a pair of **Klaas's Cuckoo** and a pair of **Northern Crombec**.

Drove a short distance to a compound with lots of bushes, drinking pools and a photographic hide. Immediately had small groups of **Black-rumped Waxbill** and **Lavender Waxbill** coming in to drink. These were soon followed by honeyguides. First a couple of male **Greater Honeyguides**, soon followed by a **Spotted Honeyguide**, then a couple of **Lesser Honeyguides**. Other birds attracted to the water included **Northern Grey-headed Sparrows**, **Village Weavers**, a **Village Indigobird** and a juvenile **Shikra**, along with a **Striped Ground Squirrel**. As we left the hide good views of a **Snowy-crowned Robin-chat** feeding below one of the bushes. Malick's trainee – another Bob! took us through the compound to show us a roosting **Northern White-faced Owl**. Drove a short distance and Bob took us into another area of trees and pointed out a pair of roosting **Greyish Eagle Owl**.

Next stop was Farasutu Forest. We walked through it, but it was very quiet. A few **Black-rumped Waxbill** and a pair of **Oriole Warbler**. Stopped by some pools on the edge of the forest and Malick pointed out a roosting **White-backed Night-Heron**. This was quite unexpected and we got good scope views of it. The pool also held a **Blue-breasted Kingfisher** and flying over a **Woolly-necked Stork**, a **Pink-backed Pelican** and two **Osprey**. Walked back towards the entrance where there was a seating area overlooking some drinking pools. We sat in the shade as two **Violet Turaco**, a **Little Greenbul**, another **Spotted Honeyguide**, a couple of **Black-winged Red Bishop** (in non-breeding plumage) and several **Black-necked Weaver** came in to drink. A **Pygmy Kingfisher** appeared and splashed in and out of one of the water containers on several occasions. Finally a **Red-cheded Goshawk** (recently split from African Goshawk) flew through, landed in a tree in front of us, before quickly flying off.

It had been another excellent day's birding and we began the long journey back to the hotel.

**30 January.** A later start today as we decided to walk south from the hotel down the coast to the Bijilo Forest NP. We followed a path through the scrub, flushing a **Double-spurred Francolin**. Birds along the forest edge included **Little** and **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater**, **Northern Black Flycatcher**, and an **African Harrier-hawk**. In the scrub found a nice **Grey-headed Bristlebill**, **Oriole Warblers**, **Grey-backed Camaroptera** and **Yellow-crowned Gonoleks**. We walked into the forest but did not see much bar lots of Green Velvet and a few Red Colobus Monkey. Returned back up the beach to the hotel observing **Sandwich Tern**, **West African Crested Tern** and **White-breasted Cormorant** offshore and a couple of fishing **Osprey**.

A walk round the hotel grounds in late afternoon added **Lesser Honeyguide** to the hotel grounds list.

**31 January.** We decided to visit Tanji NR today. Before leaving I had seen a post regarding a local guide Lamin Bojang and got his contact details (+220 6436637). I got in touch via WhatsApp to see if

he would be able to guide us for a morning around the reserve. I also spoke to a local taxi driver outside the hotel and agreed a reasonable price for him to take us to the reserve and wait and bring us back to the hotel. We met Lamin at the southern entrance to the reserve at 0800, then walked into an area of long grass surrounded by bushes where almost immediately we flushed a **Four-banded Sandgrouse**. Lamin quickly relocated it giving us good, but brief views, as it sat on some open ground before taking off again. As we moved on we flushed it or a second bird. Continued north through the scrub towards a lagoon getting good views of a variety of birds including **Lizard Buzzard, Cardinal Woodpecker, African Golden Oriole, Abyssinian Roller, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Beautiful** and **Splendid Sunbirds**.

On the lagoon lots of **Caspian Tern, Grey-headed Gull**, a few **Little Egret** and **Western Reef Heron**. Only a few waders though – **Whimbrel** and **Greenshank**. As we cut back through the scrub a **Red-necked Falcon** flew by. Then brief views of two **Banded Mongoose** before continuing down along the edge of some larger trees. Highlight here were three **Stone Partridge** that scurried along in front of us. Lamin had done a very good job helping us see the key Tanji target species.

Got back to the taxi and Lamin asked if I would be interested in joining him in the afternoon at Gunjur woods where he would be with other clients and we could look for a couple of Gambian specialities. After discussion with Dora and the taxi driver I agreed that I would meet him at 1500 at Gunjur. We arrived on time but got a message from Lamin to say he was running an hour late! I walked round the trees behind the fuel station getting nice views of **Purple Glossy Starling, Green Wood Hoopoe** and two **Bearded Barbet**. Lamin eventually arrived, though not with keen birders but some folk from a nearby eco-lodge. We all walked down to the flooded sandpits so Lamin could show his clients some birds. These included an **African Harrier-hawk**, a **Black-winged Kite** and a **Western Marsh Harrier**. There were also a few **White-faced Whistling Duck** and a scattering of other birds including **Senegal Thick-knee, Yellow-wattled Lapwing** and **African Jacana**.

Returned to the wood where myself and Lamin walked down to the photographic hide by the pool. Arrived to find his son just finishing filling it up with water. As a result very few birds came in to drink, highlights being an immature male **Western Bluebill** and a **Little Greenbul**. All in all it was a bit of a wasted visit.

**1 February.** Decided to visit Brufut Woods but do it on our own. We arranged with our taxi driver to be picked up at 0800. As we arrived we were met by a local “trainee” guide who offered to show us around and we could pay her whatever we wanted. I explained we had a couple of target birds so she said she could take us to locations where she had recently seen them. Checked the forest edge and then walked out through the adjacent agricultural area. Did not see much out of ordinary but good views **Lavender Waxbill**. Returned to the wood, where we got nice views of **Yellow-throated Leafloves** and flushed a **Stone Partridge**. Had a **Lanner** overhead and three migrating **Great White Pelicans**. No sign though of our target species.

Returned to hotel and I decided I would revisit Gujur, but on my own. The taxi dropped me off at 1500 and I walked through the wood down to the hide. It was still full of water and lots of birds were coming in to drink. Had at least four **Little Greenbul**, a male followed later by a female **Western Bluebill**, a **Grey-headed Bristlebill**, **Red-bellied** and **African Paradise Flycatchers**, a **Snowy-crowned Robin-chat**, a **Blackcap** and a **Willow Warbler**. It was quite enjoyable and I got lots of nice photos but no sign of the babblers or green hylia that Lamin had “guaranteed”.

**2 February.** We were so impressed with Malick as a guide that we had arranged a third trip with him. He picked us up at 0730 and we headed south to Tujereng, where he parked the car in an area of

mixed scrub and agricultural land. Good numbers of sunbirds comprised **Beautiful, Variable, Splendid** and **Scarlet-chested Sunbird**. Later Malick picked out a female **Pygmy Sunbird**, they are apparently quite rare at this site. Popping up on the walls of the compounds we got good views of **Black-crowned Tchagra** and also **Singing Cisticola**. Eventually in a scrubbiest area found some **Whistling Cisticola**, which eventually gave good views. In isolated trees we viewed **Bearded Barbet, Fine-spotted Woodpecker**, a pair of **Namaqua Dove**, a perched **Black-winged Kite** and a **Long-crested Eagle**. Later had nice views of two of the eagles in flight. In a more open area a perched **Rufous-crowned Roller** as well as a pair of **Black-headed Lapwing** and three **Yellow-wattled Lapwing**.

As we walked through the scrub Malick picked up the call of a **Senegal Batis** and quickly got us on to it – a female. Later we saw a male. We also saw a **Senegal Eremomela** and a pair of **Yellow Penduline Tit**. In an area with a large flock of **Northern Red Bishop** Malick picked out the call of a **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver** and soon got us on it, though it was a bit silhouetted. We continued and he pointed out three nests. A sparrow-weaver popped out of one of them and gave us very good views. Continued searching for chats but with no luck.

Then drove south to Kartong and stopped to view the wetlands. Lots of **White-faced Whistling Duck** and three **Spur-winged Goose**. Good numbers of **African Jacana**, a few **African Swampphen** and a **Black Crake**. A big group of **Spur-winged Plover**, along with a few **Black-winged Stilt, Green and Wood Sandpiper**, six **Little Ringed Plover**, a few **Common Snipe** and brief flight views of a **Greater Painted Snipe**. An adult and an immature **African Harrier-hawk** hunted over the wetland, whilst two **Palm-nut Vulture** drifted low over us and we spotted a perched **Western Banded Snake Eagle**. At one pool a small group of **Village Indigobirds** came in to drink.

Drove down to the point, where we had a nice cool drink, before taking a walk along the shore. On the beach a few **Oystercatcher, Grey Plover**, a **Sanderling** and a **White-fronted Plover**. Off shore lots of **Caspian** with a few **Sandwich** and **West African Crested Tern**. A large flock of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** included at least two **Kelp Gulls**. In the scrub at the top of the beach a pair of **Crested Lark**, some **Senegal Eremomela** and lots of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**.

It had been another excellent day out with Malick, he really works hard to find the birds for us and then get us good views of them. He is also a very good companion and was very caring, particularly towards Dora. We got back to the hotel by 1700 just in time for a nice cool beer.

**3 February.** Our final morning so I decided to take a taxi back to Brufut Wood. Almost immediately after I arrived I spotted my number one target bird – an **African Pied Hornbill** perched high on one of the trees at the edge of the forest. I then revisited the agricultural area we checked with the local guide on our previous visit. I did not find the scimitar-bills but did find a **Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike**, which was a bit of an unexpected bonus. Continued down various tracks finding a pair of **Red-winged Prinia**, a **Lanner** and another **African Harrier-hawk**. A wet area bounding a small stream gave good views of **Black Crake, African Jacana** with youngsters, **Intermediate** and **Great Egret, Grey** and **Purple Heron**. I returned to the wood and walking along the top edge got good views of a **Green Turaco**.

Got back to hotel by 1200, just in time to vacate the room. A walk round the grounds revealed nothing new but two **Great White Pelican** flew over. Then got coach to airport and a bit of a long wait till our 2100 TUI flight back to Gatwick.

It had been a great trip we saw 202 different species of which 67 were new to me. We enjoyed it so much we have booked with Malick to go back in November and explore some of the inland up river sites with him.