

## **GAMBIA November 2023- a trip report by Bob Swann**

Having visited Gambia in January 2023 and done a few trips with Malick Suso we asked him to organise a five night trip up river for us, with an extra days guiding tagged on at the end. Malick arranged all the itinerary, including accommodation and transport for the trip – all at a very reasonable price. Malick can be quite busy so it is 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 flew from Gatwick to Banjul using TUI airlines.

**3 November.** We arrived at 2030 and after negotiating the various queues for security payments and passport control we met up with Malick at the airport and he drove us to the nearby Woodpecker Hotel, which was reasonable enough for a one night stay.

**4 November.** Malick arrived to pick us up at 0730. The hotel were a bit disorganised for the 0700 breakfast we had ordered, so it was more like 0800 when we began our journey. First we headed to Farasuto, where we walked round some of the fields adjacent to the forest reacquainting ourselves with Gambian birds. **African Grey Hornbill, Western Red-billed Hornbill, Red-eyed Dove, Laughing Dove, Speckled Pigeon, Pied Crow, Little Bee-eater** and **Common Bulbul** were all quickly encountered. In the scrub lots of **Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, Village Weaver**, a few **Little Weaver** and my first lifer of the trip – **Vitalline's Masked Weaver**. All the weavers were in full breeding plumage, unlike during our January trip, as were the very showy **Northern Red Bishops**. Also present were **Red-cheeked Cordonbleau, Bronze Mannikin, Variable Sunbird** and **Beautiful Sunbird**. A pair of **African Grey Woodpecker** gave good views, as did a **Striped Kingfisher** and a dust bathing **Double-spurred Francolin**. A few northern migrants were present – **Willow Warbler, Western Olivaceous Warbler** and **Great Grey Shrike**. Feeding above us were **African Palm Swift, Little Swift** and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, then a calling **Temminck's Courser** flew over. Raptors comprised the usual **Hooded Vultures, Yellow-billed Kites** as well as three **Dark-chanting Goshawk** and an **African Harrier Hawk**.

We headed for the forest proper where we had a **Violet Turaco** feeding along the edge and a nice **Long-crested Eagle** by the entrance. We sat by the drinking pools for a while, but due to the recent rain not much came into drink bar a pair of **Red-billed Firefinch**. We picked up one of Malick's trainee guides – Mohammed, who was going to accompany us on the trip.

We then began the journey east. First stop was by the village of Bullock where we had four **Greater Blue-eared Starling**, some smart **Black-winged Bishops** in full breeding plumage and our first **Blue-bellied Rollers**. Continued east to Killy where we drove down a track signposted Albert's Photohide. Walked further down the track past the photohide finding a **Brubru, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Red-winged Warbler**, a **Whistling Cisticola, Scarlet-chested Sunbird** and best a **Levaillant's Cuckoo**, which eventually gave good views.

Further east we stopped at the "raptor hotspot" just before the village of Kampanti. Overhead amongst the **Hooded Vultures** we had a **Wahlberg's Eagle, Palm-nut Vulture** and a **Lanner**. By the adjacent rice fields **Red-chested Swallows**, a few **Long-tailed Glossy Starling, Rufous-crowned Roller** and some **European Bee-eaters**. As we continued further east we had more raptors – a **Brown Snake Eagle** near Geniya, then a **Short-toed Eagle, a Tawny Eagle**, and our first **Bateleur**, an adult

male. Other birds seen included **Abyssinian Roller**, **Red-rumped Swallow** and **Zitting Cisticola**. Eventually at 1700 we ended up at Tendaba Camp. We had read some pretty dire reports about this camp. All we can say is the hut we were given (one of the large circular ones with a thatched roof) was perfectly adequate and the meal we had was very nice.

**5 November.** Outside our hut first thing was an adult **Shikra**. A quick pre-breakfast walk produced **Long-tailed Glossy** and **Purple Glossy Starlings**. Along the riverbank **Common Sandpiper** and **Whimbrel**.

After breakfast we headed east and took a track down into the Kiang West National Park. Here in the scrub we found many **Bush Petronia**, **Red-billed Quelia**, along with some **Lavender Waxbill**, a pair of **Cut-throat Finch** and a few **Chestnut-headed Sparrow Weaver**. I also got another two lifers – a pair of **Black Scimitarbill**s and several **Brown-rumped Bunting**s. Other birds in this area included **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater**, a pair of **Senegal Batis**, several **Senegal Eremomela**, **Black-crowned Tchagra**, **Fork-tailed Drongo**, a **Greater Honeyguide** and a small group of **White-crested Helmetshrike**. As well as more **Scarlet-chested Sunbird** I saw my first male **Pygmy Sunbird**. As we returned to the car we had good views of an **African Cuckoo** and another **Levaillant's Cuckoo**.

Continued a bit further east to Sibito and walked down another track through some scrub. Several **Namaqua Doves** and another **Brubru**. Good views of a **Pale Flycatcher**, then in the same tree a female **Brown-backed Woodpecker**. Malick's calling attracted in a few other birds, first some **Black-rumped Waxbill**, then a **White-rumped Seedeater** and a **Melodius Warbler**. As we returned to the main road we disturbed a **Grey Kestrel**, then had a group of c20 migrating **Great White Pelicans** overhead.

Continuing further east we stopped by some roadside flooded fields just before Kolor Soka. Here in the field several **Woolly-necked Storks**, two **Yellow-billed Stork**, **Black-Headed Heron**, **Squacco Heron**, **Great Egret**, **Intermediate Egret** and **Hammerkop**. On the roadside wires a **European Roller**, then as we entered the village two **Mottled Spinetail** and on the mobile phone mast a **Brown Snake-Eagle** gave excellent views. Next stop was the lagoon at Soma, where there was a flock of 13 **Senegal Thick-knee** as well as some **Black-winged Stilt** and two **Greenshank**. A few **Grey Heron**, **Western Reef Heron**, **Reed Cormorant**, **African Darter** were out in the water and in the bushes several **Pied Kingfisher**.

A brief lunch stop under a large tree by a school produced a group of **Piapiac**. We continued on our way stopping to scan a large wetland where cranes breed, though unfortunately no sign of them. We did find our first **Little Egret**, a **Eurasian Marsh Harrier** and got very good views of a **Gabor Goshawk** in a roadside bush. Continued to the Dalaba lily pool where the target species was pygmy goose, but like the cranes they were a no show. There were a few **Squacco** and a **Purple Heron** and some **African Jacana** with chicks. Along the pool edge were flocks of **Red-billed Quelia**, with some smart **Yellow-crowned Bishops**, a few **Yellow Wagtail** and our first **Red-throated Bee-eaters** by a small colony.

Continued east and had c20 **Gambian Mongoose** run across the road in front of us. At Kudang we stopped by some burnt savanna, where a walk through the area revealed our first **Grasshopper Buzzard**, six **Black-headed Plover**, flushed three **Stone Partridge** then found a few very smart **Chestnut-backed Sparrow Larks**. Final stop was Jabally ricefields a key site for black coucal. Unfortunately we were running out of time to cover this large area. Some of the tracks were also flooded and had **African Jacana** and **Black Crakes** running along them. Reluctantly we decided to

move on to get to our accommodation before it got dark, so eventually checked in to the very comfortable Bansung River Lodge just after 1800.

**6<sup>th</sup> November.** A pre breakfast stroll round the grounds revealed **Brown Babbler**, **Abyssinian Roller**, **Purple Glossy** and **Long-billed Starling**, many of which were feeding on the masses of insects attracted during the night to outside lights. Along the river a pair of **Pygmy Kingfisher** and flying over a flock of c20 **White-faced Whistling Duck**, followed later by a single **Fulvous Whistling Duck**. After breakfast we drove back west to George Town, where we boarded a small boat for a trip exploring the main river and a large creek. Quite a few **Mallachite**, **Woodland** and **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, but best was a **Shining Blue Kingfisher**, seen well in flight before it flew into deep cover. Along the wooded banks we were seeing a few **Black-crowned Night Heron** and several **Striated Herons**. Perched on high trees **Hadada Ibis** and perhaps more surprising 20+ **Spur-winged Geese**. Raptors comprised an adult **African Fish Eagle** and two **Palm-nut Vultures**. The riverside trees provided habitat for **Violet Turaco**, **Western Plantain Eaters**, **Ring-necked Parakeets**, **Senegal Parrots** and **Broad-billed Rollers** all of which showed well. In the scrubber mangroves several **Swamp Flycatchers**, also **Yellow-throated Leafloves** and **Oriole Warblers**. There were also colonies of **Black-headed Weavers** and associated with them a pair of **Cut-throat Finch**. Unfortunately no sign of the key target bird – African Finfoot. We did get good views of **Green Vervet** and **Red Colobus Monkeys**, two hippos and a very large **Crocodile**.

Before leaving the island we checked some abandoned rice fields. Not too much around bar a pair of **Vinaceous Dove** and good views of a **Village Indigobird**. Overhead **Mosque Swallow** and a group of vultures that included three **White-backed Vulture** and a **Ruppell's Vulture**. We returned to the lodge for lunch, where there was a flock of **White-throated Bee-eater** feeding above the river.

In late afternoon headed out with Malick to a sand quarry on the outskirts of Bansung. This is a massive (1000+pairs) **Red-throated Bee-eater** colony. The pools held a couple of **Common** and a **Green Sandpiper**. There were lot of **Bush Petronia** coming in to drink, plus a pair of **Chestnut-backed Sparrow Lark**, but highlight were two male **Gosling's Bunting** (now split from Cinnamon-breasted Bunting) which gave good close views. Our final stop were the ricefields on edge of Bansung, where Malick called in a **Grey-headed Bush-shrike** which showed well. There was also a family of **Yellow-billed Shrikes**, plus masses of **Red-billed Quelia** and **Village Weaver**.

**7<sup>th</sup> November.** Left the lodge after breakfast and headed back west with a stop just before the junction to George Town. Here in the roadside scrub good views of **Senegal Eremomela**, **Northern White-eye**, **Grey-backed Cameroptera** and **Pygmy Sunbird**. We continued our journey to George Town and got the ferry to the north side of the river. Next stop were pools near Wassu. Good views of **White-throated** and **Red-throated Bee-eaters**. We also flushed an immature **African Hawk Eagle** and nearby had a pair of adults and another **Grasshopper Buzzard**. Another stop to check a roadside pool revealed **Common Moorhen** (unfortunately no lessers) and **Black Crake** as well as a **Lesser Blue-eared Starling**.

Continued further west to Njau water pool. Here we located our main target within minutes of arriving – six superbly plumaged **Egyptian Plover**. Masses of **Cattle Egret** were roosting on the pond and there were large groups of **Namaqua Dove**. In adjacent scrub an **African Paradise Flycatcher**. We had our lunch at this nice site before moving on to the Kaour Wetland. Here there was a huge flock of 2000+ **Collared Pratincole** roosting on the mud as well as c50 **African Wattled Lapwing**. A few kilometre further west a small muddy pool produced another pair of **Chestnut-backed Sparrow Lark**, but highlight was the ridiculously long-tailed male **Exclamatory Paradise Whydah** flying between the nearby trees.

Eventually around 1530 arrived at our accommodation for the night at Morgan Kundu Lodge. Settled in and sat watching a variety of birds coming in to drink by the water feature in front of our room, which included **Senegal Coucal**, **African Mourning Dove**, **Black-rumped** and **Lavender Waxbill**, **Bronze Mannikin** and **White-billed Buffalo-weavers**. In late afternoon drove to some agricultural land on south edge of village, where we checked some scrub and fields near a pool. Flushed three **Stone Partridge**, had a pair of **Four-banded Sandgrouse** fly over and a pair of **Exclamatory Paradise Whydahs** then got excellent close views of a **Mottled Spinetail** flying low over the pool. Unfortunately no sign of our key target bird – ground hornbill, as most of the vegetation in the fields was too high.

**8<sup>th</sup> November.** After a good substantial breakfast we were packed and on our way by 0800. First stop was the nearby Baobolond Wetland. Apart from a few **Slender-billed Gulls** and a couple of **Gull-billed Tern** not much else of note. We then drove back south and checked out an area of groundnut/maize/millet fields. This is a site for saville's bustard, but once again a key target species eluded us. Nice views of **Grasshopper Buzzard** plus a couple of **Common Kestrel**. Flushed six, then two **Four-banded Sandgrouse**. In scrub a **Woodchat Shrike** and another male **Exclamatory Paradise Whydah**. We abandoned our bustard search and continued along the road, before turning off down a track to the village of Geromg. Checked another area of scrub finding a male **Brown-backed Woodpecker**, a female **White-fronted Black Chat** and a **Chestnut-headed Sparrow Weaver**. Overhead good views of a pair of **Beaudouin's Snake Eagle**, a **Brown Snake Eagle** and a **Bateleur**.

Continued on our way south crossing the Sene-gambia bridge before returning to Tendaba. Settled in and in early afternoon myself and Malick went up to a photo hide in the woodland on the hill above the village. Lots of activity with **Black-billed Wood Doves**, **Bush Petronia**, **Northern Grey-headed Sparrow**, **Yellow-fronted Canary**, **Black-rumped Waxbills** coming into drink. Other birds included a **Pygmy Kingfisher**, a female **African Oriole**, a **Fork-tailed Drongo**, **Lavender Waxbill**, **Red-billed Firefinch** and surprisingly a male **Exclamatory Paradise Whydah**. Another visitor to the pool was a **Black-tailed Mongoose**. Eventually after three hours our main target came in a **Red-winged Pytilia**. Delighted we walked back down to the camp seeing a wee flock of **Bruce's Green Pigeon**, some **White-throated Bee-eater** and a male **Northern Puffback**.

After our evening buffet meal, we were sitting outside our hut when we heard, then saw a **Gambian Epauletted Fruit Bat**.

**9<sup>th</sup> November.** After breakfast we embarked on a boat trip to the creeks on the north side of the river. Several **Brown (or Mangrove) Sunbirds**, though mostly flight views as they flew across the creek between mangroves. Also brief tantalising views of an **African Blue Flycatcher** in the mangroves. Lots of kingfishers – **Pied**, **Woodland** and **Blue-breasted Kingfisher**. Also lots of bee-eaters – **European**, **White-throated** and **Blue-cheeked**, plus several **Broad-billed Rollers**. Numerous **African Darters**, **Great** and **Intermediate Egrets**, **Western Reef**, **Striated**, **Squacco**, **Grey** and a **Purple Heron**, some **African Sacred Ibis** and lots of **Woolly-necked Storks** all feeding along the creeks and on the "saltmarshes". A large colony of **White-breasted Cormorants**, some sitting, others nest building. In a small bush in the river a pair of **White-backed Night Heron** close to their nest which held two downy chicks. Feeding over the creek **Sand Martin**, **House Martin** and **Red-rumped Swallow**. Raptors seen included a couple of **Osprey**, an **African Fish Eagle**, a **Beaudouin's Snake Eagle** and a **Red-necked Falcon**. Other interesting sightings were a large Olive Sand Snake on a mangrove and a couple of huge monitor lizards.

The trip lasted just over three hours. On our return to the camp we quickly packed and were soon underway. We drove west before heading down a track into the Kiang West National Park. Here we

began checking the trees and scrub before finding two pairs of our target species – **White-shouldered Tit**. We also came across another **Brown-backed Woodpecker**, a **Northern Crombec**, **Brubru**, **Senegal Eremomela** and on the track a **Eurasian Hoopoe**.

Began the long drive back towards the coast. The Woodpecker Hotel was full, but Malick got details of an apartment for us in Lamin. It was down a back street so we weren't quite sure what we were heading to but Kujabi Holiday Home turned out to be perfect. Located within a compound it was very comfortable with a very accommodating owner who not only went out to find cool beers for us, but brought in a chef to prepare us a lovely evening meal and breakfast the next morning. Contact details for the apartment are [papiskujabi9@gmail.com](mailto:papiskujabi9@gmail.com) or on 002203596215.

**10<sup>th</sup> November.** Our final day. Malick picked us up at 0730 and we drove to Bontu-Pirang Forest, where we met up with an excellent local trainee guide. She soon located some feeding **Brown-necked Parrots** in a large fruiting tree that eventually gave us very good views. Next she took us to see a roosting **Verreaux's Eagle Owl**. Then by the pathway we got nice views of a **Green Hylia**. Also in this area **Common Wattle-eye**, **Little Greenbul**, and a pair of **Red-breasted Paradise Flycatcher**. We spent quite a bit of time observing the birds coming in to drink at the water pools by the entrance hut. These include **Black-billed** and **Blue-spotted Wood Dove**, **Blackcap Babbler**, **Grey-headed Bristlebill**, **African Thrush**, **Orange-cheeked Waxbill**, **Black-necked Weaver** (now split as Olive-naped Weaver) and best of all a **Green-headed Sunbird**, my final lifer of the trip.

In mid afternoon we headed south to another woodland area in a forlorn attempt to find white-breasted cuckooshrike. Unfortunately it was difficult to access the forest so we could only watch from the edge. Best was a displaying male **Northern Puffback**, puffing out its white feathers to impress a female and then a **Pearl-spotted Owlet** that was attracted to Malick's call. It was then time to sort out our gear, prior to Malick driving us to the airport for our 2125 TUI flight back to London Gatwick.

It had been a good trip we saw 201 different species of which 24 were new to me. We did miss quite a few target species. It is obviously difficult to get all the birds you expect. On hindsight a trip slightly later in the season may have been better once a lot of the vegetation had died down. On the other hand by that time many species would be in non-breeding plumage and much more difficult to ID.