

16 days in Ethiopia with the worst guide ever : Dec 2013 and Jan 2014

Introduction

I had long wanted to go to Ethiopia since my successful trip to Kenya nearly 20 years' ago. Through its mix of habitats and altitude zones, Ethiopia offers 14 endemics and a number of Horn of Africa endemics easier to see in Ethiopia than elsewhere. My particular targets outside of the endemics were Somali Courser and Yellow-throated Sandgrouse which I had missed in Kenya, and Blue-breasted Bee-eater and Arabian Bustard as missing ticks from favourite families.

Teaming up with Dave Ward from the US, we utilised the services of Elias Bayou who had been recommended to me by two separate birders. Elias organised the car with driver, and itinerary. Owing to work pressures I've not been able to produce a systemic list of birds seen though we saw over 400 species in 16 days. This is a dismal number; well-organised semi-independent birders as well as tour groups easily surpass 500 in a similar time period. By any standards this trip was not successful. The key species seen are shown in bold in the daily log.

I have included Kay and David Whites comments in this report as they used Elias as their guide shortly after my trip.

Money

The national currency of Ethiopia is the birr. The exchange rate at the time of our visit was 19 BIR to \$1 or 31 BIR to £1. The exchange rate in airport arrivals was the same as we obtained elsewhere. The airport arrivals' foreign exchange changes most major currencies. We didn't use any ATMs but David and Kaye who went with Elias immediately after us said ATMs did not work.

It is technically illegal to leave Ethiopia with more than 200 birr. And yet the airport make it impossible to change birr back into a major currency on departure (we also tried a bank next to our last hotel which couldn't exchange our money). The two foreign exchanges are in arrivals to which there is no access (when leaving the country though airport staff will tell you there is access!). The one in departures was only interested in buying foreign currency. We were fortunate in having the equivalent of only \$65. Dave was rather unlucky to be holding considerably more. You could, if you wish, quickly spend your spare birr in the airport e.g. a cheese and tomato pizza costs \$14 or a horribly dry sandwich \$7!

Elias had estimated our average food and accommodation costs to be around \$130 per day for the two of us. So having incurred the costs of foreign exchange it was with mixed feelings - particularly for Dave who had changed more money - that we found our average daily cost per person to be considerably below \$50.

Food

Unless you can get to grips with Ethiopian food with injera bread - and we couldn't (though Kay and David preferred it) - then expect a very limited diet outside of major cities. Most restaurants serve basic fare such as variants of spaghetti, rice or omelette. Once we had been on the road for a few days, we had a good idea of food prices. On several occasions we had to challenge restaurant bills as they were obviously inflated. This seems to be a widespread scam even by those with clear prices in their menus. When challenged bills were often reduced by up to a half as a 'mistake' had been made! Our advice is to ask to see a menu, even if you know what you wish to order, and if a menu isn't available then to ask the price; otherwise your two-egg omelette could cost you more than a peppered steak! On the plus side, the coffee is excellent (although milk isn't always available) and the inexpensive local beer is a treat at the end of a long hot day.

Weather

Very hot in the lowlands with temperatures in excess of 30°C; much more pleasant conditions in the highlands though some morning starts were distinctly chilly.

Insects

We took Malarone more on a precautionary basis though mosquitoes were few and far between. We did get a number of insect bites around our ankles.

Visa

You can obtain a visa on arrival at a cost of \$20. Queues are known to be long but this will depend on the number of arrivals. We had no such problems.

Flight

I flew with Egypt Air from Manchester for £440 each. No frills but efficient.

Getting about

We used a 2008 4x4 which was a little cramped with uncomfortable seats. It had no A/C, the windows weren't tinted and no way of blocking out the sun. As a result some journeys were close to unbearably and uncomfortably hot. It was also very noisy on rough roads. Road signs are rare so it may not be practical to travel independently in Ethiopia as you can in adjacent Kenya.

Guides

We used Elias Bayou (bayou_elias@yahoo.com and tel: 0911077220) for this 16 day tour and he arranged the car, above vehicle with driver, and accommodation. The driver (Soloman) was flawless throughout and very safe. Elias charged us \$180 per day including all driver and guide costs (food and accommodation), diesel and national park fees. Local

guide fees were meant to be included but Elias refused to pay for these. This was about the sixth 'national' tour Elias had organised. We paid Elias mostly in birr and some US \$.

Unfortunately we cannot recommend Elias as a guide. He expects you to fit in with his plans (which he doesn't always share with you) rather than the other way around. More importantly, he is not a good enough birder and really struggles identifying key bird groups such as cisticolas, larks, pipits and eagles. We also successfully challenged a number of his other identifications. He has no sound reproduction equipment though this is important for just a few species in Ethiopia such as the nightjars and Black Scrub-robin. Playing Pearl-spotted Owlet recordings can also help bring birds closer. He also doesn't have a torch.

During the trip he complained that he had got his costs wrong and was in effect doing the tour at cost. This manifested itself not only in being charged local guide fees, but in an invoice produced by him at Bale National Park for 900 birr (\$45) for ranger fees clearly in excess of that stated in our guide book (printed June 2013). Elias insisted the ranger was needed. When we refused to pay saying national park fees were part of the \$180 per day, the invoice was miraculously forgotten and we walked the same area that afternoon that we had earlier in the day without a ranger! We also had none of the night drives promised in his itinerary which was probably a diesel-saving strategy.

In pre-trip emails I had instructed Elias to book cheaper hotels / rooms where there was a choice. A day before we were due to go to Bishangari Lodge, Elias said our room was over \$200. On insisting on a cheaper room Elias became extremely angry, petulant even, saying that the place was full and the change would make it difficult for him for future bookings. When we got there the place was virtually empty and we suspect Elias could only have been relying on significant commission to explain his behaviour.

We also paid for the following which were meant to be part of the \$180 per day, but we had lost the will to argue:

Owl guide at Bale - 450 birr (\$24)

Access to Cape Eagle-owl ridge - 200 birr (\$11)

Guide at Bishangari Lodge – 500 birr (\$26)

In summary Elias is not a bird guide, is not strong enough on identifying key birds, and hasn't visited some sites often enough so lacks valuable experience. Gibe Gorge was a disaster for this reason as it was only Elias' second trip. Overall, we missed far too many birds and would rate the trip close as to disastrous. Elias is easily the worst guide we've ever had. I have never written such a critical report. Our advice: avoid like the plague.

Another client's perspective – copied from their email to me of 4th February 2014

"Southern Ethiopia 12 - 30 January 2014 Kay and David White

We followed a similar itinerary to Mike Hunter.

We do not recommend Elias Bayou as a guide. Elias speaks fair English but lacks social skills. This led to several misunderstandings and confused travel arrangements. His response varied from anger to petulance, both unprofessional and unacceptable to his clients. He gave inadequate daily briefing and never volunteered information about imminent birding walks from the car. He showed no leadership ability; on birding walks he strolled off without a word and made no effort to bird with us other than a distant whistle when he found a 'target'. He often broke off for a smoke or a 'rest' and did not contribute to discussion of identification problems. He needs to learn how to get his clients onto birds - using verbal directions or a laser-pointer rather than pointing with his hand.

His bird knowledge appears to be limited to birds he has seen before. He describes most others - particularly winter migrants and resident swallows, pipits and larks - as 'difficult for him'; he showed no enthusiasm for expanding his knowledge.

On too many days we missed prime birding time – that essential dawn till 9am period. Most days Elias was unable to start early - usually as he did not plan ahead to get his breakfast. He did not offer any evening or night drives for nightjars, owls or mammals. Compared to most guides, and we have experience of many, he was a very poor, part-time guide.

We will be happy to give further details to anyone interested: kew.inval@gmail.com."

References

Behrens, K *et al.* Birding Ethiopia. A guide to the country's birding sites (Lynx, January 2010)

Redman N *et al.* Birds of the Horn of Africa (Helm, 2009)

Spottiswood, C *et al.* Where to Watch Birds in Ethiopia (Helm, 2010)

Handbook of the Mammals of the World: Vol 1, 2 and 3 (Lynx)

Lonely Planet Guide to Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somaliland (June 2013)

Accommodation

Even if hotels show a charge in US \$, payment is required in birr. Generally most hotels were of a low standard and several over-priced. In the list below assume no wi-fi or hot water unless specified. Prices refer to a double room and do not include breakfast unless stated otherwise. In pre-trip Elias said many hotels do three persons to a room but none listed below seemed to offer this option.

- **Ethio-German Hotel** (near Debre Libanos Monastery) – overlooking the beautiful Jemma river valley. The bedroom had a very high ceiling which resulted in it being very

poorly lit and cold. Restaurant opened for us (as we were the only guests), but appeared keen for us to leave! 500 birr (\$26).

- **Eva Hotel** (Debre Birhan town) – a town centre location with a guarded entrance. We had a basic but clean room which much to our surprise had very effective wi-fi. There was a good restaurant on site which was very busy. 240 birr (\$13).
- **Buffet d’Aouche** (Awash) – the sleeping and restaurant areas are separated by a lonely 500m walk. The room had a ceiling fan and mosquito net. However, the bed was soft and the electrical socket didn’t work. The restaurant served decent food. 175 birr (\$9).
- **Awash Falls Lodge** (Awash National Park) – there was no electricity during our one night stay, the room was small and the mosquito net did not close properly. However, the bed was very comfortable. Restaurant service was slow and the evening meal was disappointing. The breakfast which was included, was one of the best that we had during the trip. Not worth the 1905 birr paid (\$100).
- **Bekele Molla Hotel** (Ziway town) – a basic room with a mosquito net. We did not use the on-site restaurant. 160 birr (\$8)
- **Bishangari Eco-lodge** (Lake Langano) – we stayed in one of the lower priced tukuls. The room was small, clean but basic. It had very comfortable twin beds with individual mosquito nets. The restaurant had a fixed price New Year’s Eve menu (with no alternative choice) priced at \$23 for five courses which was vastly overpriced and of a disappointing quality. The breakfast which was included, was one of the best that we had during the trip. We also received some complimentary coffee and fruit in our room. But not worth the 1957 birr paid (\$103).
- **Wondo Genet Wabishebelle Resort** (Wondo Genet) – a large room with a comfortable bed. There’s a bizarre looking restaurant on site which served a decent evening meal and included breakfast. 750 birr (\$39).
- **Wabishebelle Hotel** (Goba Town) – a basic clean room with an on-site restaurant which had very slow service and a limited food choice. It did, however, provide us with an early morning breakfast at 5.30 which was included in the price. There was slow and intermittent wi-fi. Have a read of the guest book which has a range of complaints! 556 birr (\$29).
- **Borana Noc Hotel** (Negele) – this is not a hotel but some basic rooms in the owner’s courtyard. There are no en-suite facilities and the outside toilets and shower leave a lot to be desired! There was, however, a mosquito net but there was a lot of noise from the surrounding buildings. The owner’s restaurant (opposite) did not serve breakfast despite assurances to the contrary. If you do eat here, check the prices before ordering. 200 birr (\$11).
- **Yabello Motel** (Yabello town) – this has good clean rooms with a comfortable bed, a mosquito net and a satellite television. Our first hot water of the trip! The restaurant also served vegetables which were another rarity! However, at 858 birr (\$45) the Lonely Planet describe the prices as “...beyond ridiculous” and we’d have to agree.

- **Hawassa East African Group Hotel** (Hawassa Lake – the new name for Lake Awasa) – a large room with a gorgeous bed and soft pillows! Easily our best room on the trip with added bonus of hot water! There's a smart on-site restaurant which provided a good evening meal and eventually served us a decent breakfast. 1100 birr (\$58).
- **Soressa Hotel** (exact location unknown but a 30 minute drive east from Gibe Gorge) – our worst hotel by far, it had no redeeming features. We would not recommend staying here. They tried charging us twice the normal price of breakfast. 130 birr (\$7).

Outline itinerary

25th December – Airport, Gefersa Reservoir, Ethio-German Park Hotel, and Debre Libanos Monastery

26th December – Jemma Valley (am) and birding plains en route to Debre Birham

27th December – Debresina Escarpment and drive to Melkajedbu.

28th December – Debre Dirham to Awash national Park, birding at Chelekleka Lake and lave fields en route.

29th December – Bilen Plains (am) and Awash National Park (north)

30th December – Awash national Park (am), lave fields (late am), long drive to Ziway stopping at Koka Dam en route.

31st December – Lake Ziway (am), Abijata Shall National Park (pm) and dusk into Bishangari Lodge

1st January – Bishangari Lodge (am) and Wondo Genet (pm)

2nd January – Wondo Genet (early am) and drive to Bale National Park stopping for Cape Eagle-owl en route.

3rd January – Bale National Park (am), Hareenna Forest (am) with long drive to Negele stopping for Prince Ruspoli's Turaco en route

4th January – Liden Plains (am) and birding Negele area to midday.

5th January – Liden Plains and long drive to Yabello birding en route

6th January – Yabello National Park (am) and birding south of Yabello (pm)

7th January – Long drive from Yabello to Lake Hawassa

8th January – Long drive from Lake Hawassa to Gibe Gorge (mid-pm)

9th January – Gibe Gorge (am) and drive to airport

Daily log

For avoidance of doubt, bird names below are taken from the 'Birds of the Horn of Africa'.

Wednesday 25th December 2013.

A spectacularly inauspicious start as we are unable to find Elias with board at the pre-arranged spot in the arrival hall. It takes three nervous hours before we connect. He and the driver had been sat in the car waiting less than 200m away. The reasons given ranged from why should they leave the car as it was cold through to they weren't allowed to leave the

car (both nonsense!). Elias had sent us an email to say there was a change of plan, however, this was after we had commenced our journey and despite a number of efforts, we were unable to obtain wi-fi access at the airport (indeed we only had it at two hotels in the entire trip). Our first Ethiopian endemic as we waited - the impressive **Thick-billed Raven** - a bird we don't see for the next week!

En route to Gefersa Reservoir, a quick scan of grassland plains reveals **Red-breasted Wheatear**, **Abysinnian Ground-hornbill** and the localised **Black-winged Plover**. Gerfusa Reservoir obliges with one of my key targets, two exquisite **Blue-breasted Bee-eaters**, which may one day be split, and **African Black-duck** and **Abyssinian Slaty-flycatcher**. We are not able to do the Sanetti Plateau as planned owing to the debacle at the airport.

Some excellent birding around the Ethio-German Park Hotel as several Horn of Africa endemics fall: **Erkell's Francolin** and **White-winged Cliff-chat** – the latter with nice comparison to its commoner cousin, and **Ruppell's Black-chat**. Some impressive passes by a **Lammergier** attracted to the bones Elias has brought. A mid-afternoon visit to small patch of forest near Debre Libanos Monastery contains a remarkable number of birds including the dumpty-looking **White-backed Black-tit**, **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, **Ethiopian Boubou**, an unexpected male **Black Cuckooshrike**, and **White-cheeked Turaco**.

Thursday 26th December

The impressive Jemma Valley delivers on post-dawn **Harwood's Francolin**, seen well adjacent to **Erkell's Francolins**. In the same area good views of **Abyssinian Black Wheatear** and **White-billed Starling**, plus the surprise find of the trip, 12 *semenowi* **Cinereous Buntings**. Our first challenge identification, predictably, are cisticolas and it is several days later, having got our eye in, that we are happy with our identification of **Siffling and Singing Cisticola**. This is the first indication of Elias being out of his depth on key bird groups. Despite working hard the Jemma Valley definitely leaves us wanting as we leave bereft of **Fox Kestrel** and **Red-billed Pyillia**.

Birding en route to Debre Birham we find the best looking lark of the trip with three **Erlanger's Larks**, and along a stream several **Blue-winged Geese** and a flock of flyover **Black-headed Siskin**. It's a nervous 11 more days before we get the latter species on the deck for tickable views.

Friday 27th December

The spectacular escarpment at Debresina delivers easy, but drab, **Ankober Serin**, typically brief views of **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler** and prolonged views of **Long-billed Pipit**. Best of all though were a few **Gelada Baboons** including a spectacular mature male. We spent a lot of time scrutinising **swifts** but are disappointed with our haul of **Common** and **Nyanza**.

Nearing Melkajedbu our vehicle breaks down and what are the chances of finding a new locality for the scarce and localised **Yellow-throated seedeater** but we do, with a singing pair and a female feeding a juvenile. More **Yellow-throated Seedeaters** at Melkajedbu, though the **Half-collared Kingfisher** refuses to cooperate. **Little Bee-eater** over the river proving that not all bee-eaters by water are **Blue-breasted** – but brilliant to compare the two as we were able.

Saturday 28th December

A long drive from Debre Birham to Awash National Park but we break up the journey at Chelekleka Lake, seeing **Lesser Flamingos**, 200+ **Pink-backed** and a single **Great White Pelican**, both **Temmick's** and **Little Stint**, **Pied Avocet**, **Marsh Sandpiper**, **Garganey**, **African Quailfinch** and **Tawny Pipit**. The hoped for **Black-crowned Crane** proves elusive.

A lunch stop at the birdy Bekele Molla Hotel in Nazret has **Black-winged Lovebird**, **Abyssinian White-eye** and a brilliant male *samamasicus* **Common Redstart**.

Into the famous Awash National Park and over the course of two hours amass quite a list with great views of **Kori** and **Buff-crested Bustards**, a brilliant *pallidirostris* **Southern Grey Shrike** [Steppe Grey Shrike], critical views of **Somali Fiscal**, and study **Singing Bush-lark** noting the way it hovered just before landing. We also enjoyed comparison views of **Pallid** and **Montagu's Harriers**, and an adult **Black-chested Snake-eagle** which flew low over us. Our hopes of **African Swallow-tailed Kite** are dashed when Elias informs us he's only ever seeing the species once here and this is the wrong time of year. A hissing **Barn Owl** in a large acacia ends the day at Buffet d'Aouche, Awash town.

Sunday 29th December

It's counter-intuitive to British birders not to be birding from first light. So despite the best part of an hour's drive meaning a 07:30 arrival, Elias insists that it's not worth setting off any earlier as the birds are 'sleeping'. This sets the pattern for the rest of trip with birding sometimes well into the morning. An *elaeica* **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** in the top of the large acacia, helpfully tail pumping and calling. A traffic jam through roadworks, and Elias arriving 20 mins late having being let down by a national park ranger, means we don't start birding until well after 8am. We later find out that the ranger is to protect us from the locals rather than the animals!

We focus in on an area of the Bilen Plains Elias saw **Arabian Bustard** on his last tour, but we come away with good views of **Buff-crested Bustard** only. We do see several male **Nile Valley Sunbirds**, **Grey-headed Batis**, **White-browed Scrub-robin** and another **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler**. Illala Salsa Plain delivers a distant male **Somali Ostrich**, 250+ feeding **Lesser Kestrels** but no bustards. Near Bilen Lodge we explore dry riparian woodland coming up trumps with brilliant views of **Black Scrub-robin** and **Yellow-breasted barbet**, plus an

adult **Lanner** and adult **Peregrine** perched in the same tree. Bilen Lodge is known to be a very good site for African Collared-dove and we are disappointed to find Elias hasn't seen this bird here and doesn't know the exact here. He promises us sites further south which turn out to be rubbish.

After lunch head back to Awash National Park (North) and within minutes find a **Gillet's lark** feeding on the ground in an area of dense thornscrub. A huge and somewhat thrush-like vocal **Red-winged Lark** not long after leaves us with just Foxy Lark to sort out. Great views of **Crested Francolin** and **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse**. Another three sightings of **Buff-crested Bustard** takes our tally in this area to double figures over two days, and we count ourselves desperately unlucky not to have seen Black or White-bellied, or Hartlaub's that other birding groups see. This anomaly pales into insignificance when we finally clap eyes on an **Arabian Bustard**, which instantly became bird of the trip, walked sedately around the vehicle where we are able to absorb every detail. As if that wasn't enough, we also find a **Striped Hyena** – a tough mammal anywhere – which looks at us for ten seconds before slipping away. Driving to Awash Falls Lodge an owl in the middle of the road confuses, as I confidently shout **Greyish Eagle-owl** only for Elias and Dave to think I'm mad as they both think scops-owl. Such is the way the dark plays tricks on the mind but they are soon convinced it's an eagle-owl.

Monday 30th December

After yesterday's tough but very productive day, we hope that Awash National Park will deliver our remaining ticks of **Shining Sunbird**, **African swallow-tailed Kite** and **Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Lark**, to mention nothing of a different bustard or even a certain bee-eater on a certain bustard. But we spectacularly underachieve as Awash yields little except another **Gillet's lark** with presumably our angle to the sun bleaching it to the extent that it looked like the very unlikely *arorihensis* Somali race. **Ashy Cisticola** is a tick for Dave, whilst Mike flushes two **Common Buttonquails**, a scarce bird in Ethiopia, thereby seeing this globally tricky species on consecutive trips in different continents. What are the chances?! Other birds of note include **Rosy-patched Bush-shrike**, **Tawny Pipit**, **Isabelline Shrike**, and **Straw-tailed** and **Eastern Paradise Whydahs**.

A frustrating time at the lava fields near Berbka Lake; despite walking along the edge or walking in the lava fields we cannot find **Sombre Rock Chat** and Elias can't offer an alternative area. Bird of the area proves to be a female **Common Rock Thrush**, the best of the rest include **Red-faced Crombec**, **Mouse-coloured Penduline-tit**, **Blackstart**, **Blue naped Mousebird** and **Grey-headed Batis**. Now dropped a lot of ticks but this is the compromise we have made in doing Ethiopia this way with a sub-standard guide.

A long drive to Ziway with a 30 minute stop at Koka Dam producing the hoped for **Black Crowned Crane**, as well as **Saddlebill Stork** and **Goliath Heron**. Unexpectedly, nine **Fulvous**

Whistling Ducks, tricky anywhere in its large range, fly around. Arrive too late for any birding at Lake Ziway.

Tuesday 31st December

As I had missed Lesser Jacana at stakeouts in both South Africa and Namibia I hoped my luck would change, Lake Ziway being one of the few sites in Ethiopia for this species. Well it's going to be one of those trips as another target bites the dust. The whole area is very birdy with lots of water birds and passerines and habituated and fearless **Marabou Storks**. **African Pygmy-goose** and **Black Crake** are the pick of the water birds, and **Siffling** and **Red-faced Cisticolas**, and **Buff-bellied Warblers** for the passerines. **Northern Carmine Bee-eaters** fly through from roost and more good views of **Blue-breasted bee-eaters**.

En route to Abijata Shall National Park a group of **Ruppell's Griffin Vultures**, with **Tawny** and **Steppe Eagles** in attendance, at a donkey 'kill'. Lake Abijata is a sea of pink with thousands of **Lesser Flamingos**, and a handful of its larger relative. Four species of gulls with **Black-headed** and **Grey-hooded**, but best of all a *fuscus* **Lesser Black-backed**, trumped by one of the most spectacular of all gulls, two first winter **Pallas's**.

Birding in the grounds of a nearby restaurant where we find two roosting **Greyish Eagle-owls**, our first **White-bellied Canary**, **Little Rock Thrush**, **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler**, **Black-cheeked Waxbill**, **Chestnut Sparrow**, and our first **Von der Decken's Hornbill**. Elias informs us that **Boran Cisticola** has been seen here and a thorough grilling of about 10 birds fails to convince us that we have seen anything other than **Rattling**.

Abijata Shall national Park results in more **Boran / Rattling** chases but always with the same predictable result. Slow birding in the heat but we eventually find our targets of **White-winged Black-tit**, and **Black-billed Wood-hoopoe**. We go on to have many sightings of the latter bird which seems unusual.

Yellow-fronted Parrot along the rough road to Bishangari Lodge proves to be the only good view of the trip.

Tuesday 1st January

A pre-dawn **Slender-tailed Nightjar** and time to think: a choice of **Clapperton's Francolin** early morning along the road, or the forest and chance of **Scaly Francolin**. Having opted for forest, we soon locate some francolins where Elias tries to encourage them to walk in our direction to no avail. A brilliant **Abyssinian Ground Thrush** and three **Red-capped Robin-Chat** reassure us that it's not all about ticks but seeing good birds. **Blue-breasted** and **Little Bee-eaters** feeding together on the forest edge, with other good birds in this area including **Banded barbet**, **Sulphur-breasted Bush-Shrike**, **African Dwarf Kingfisher**, several **Black-billed Wood-hoopoes** and a single **Black Scimitar-bill**, the latter the only one of the trip.

Prolonged views of a **batis** confirmed our suspicions that the dark slate-grey crown did indeed signify our first *erlangeri* **Black-headed Masked Shrike**, a female **Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike**, **Great Sparrowhawk**, **Bruce's Green Pigeon** and a male **Diederik Cuckoo** – apparently a good find at this time of year – kept us so engrossed that we nearly missed breakfast. Of note the **White-rumped Babblers** are of the subspecies *amoensis* which catch us slightly off-guard so different are they to what we have seen earlier in the trip.

Try for Clapperton's Francolin with the lodge's resident guide at a pricey 250 birr (\$13) per hour for two hours along the entrance road but the thick scrub, which might hold the birds during the heat of the day, defeated us.

After the disappointment of dipping two francolins, Wondo Genet proved to be the perfect tonic as Elias leaves us in the safe hands of Mekonen, one of the local guides, as he and the driver take the car for permanent repair in readiness for the rough roads ahead. Leaving the hotel with Mekonen, we are discouraged by a near constant stream of people carrying wood. The forest really is fragmented and in this valley can't be viable for bird watchers for too much longer. For now the birds are still here and we quickly tick off **Abyssinian Oriole** and **Sharpe's Starling**, and it's not long before Mekonen's eyes are straining at some sound we can't hear, and points out the scarce, gorgeous and tiny **Abyssinian Woodpecker**. Three **White-cheeked Turaco** in the same tree. Rounding a corner a raptor sat on top of a tree resolves into a **Western Banded Snake Eagle**, so utterly unexpected in this denuded landscape. Good views of **Abyssinian Ground Thrush** in what can only be described as scrub. Mekonen checks all his sites before finally coming up trumps at his very last: a pair of **Half-collared Kingfishers** on a rock. We soak these gems up when a small honeyguide flies up stream with full white outers which can only have been **Green-backed**, surely on the upper limit of its altitudinal range.

Tuesday 2nd January

In just two hours with the talented Mekonen we notch up **Small Sparrowhawk**, **African Hill-babbler**, our first **African Firefinch** and **Ethiopian Cisticola**, **Somali Crow**, and **Spotted Creeper**, the latter necessitating a tough walk at speed up a deforested slope to reach just a few remnant trees.

Another long drive to Bale National Park stopping at a quarry-like rock face where **Cape Eagle-owl** is easily located. It's hard to describe finally seeing a bird you've always wanted to see and had tried hard for in previous trips to South Africa. Bale National Park finally delivers **Rouget's Rail** and **Spot-breasted Plover**, as well as the very distinctively pied-plumaged *albofasciatus* **African Stonechat**. We try hard for **Abyssinian Longclaw** to no avail. This was to be the owl day of the trip and, with a local guide (450 birr, \$24) quickly see **African Wood** and **Abyssinian Owls**. The latter used to be a mythical creature rarely seen but is now an near-expected part of a birding trip. We still feel privileged to have seen

what turns out to be the second best bird of the trip. Exceptional views of **Abyssinian Catbird** is this unique moist highland forest.

Having dismissed the 900 birr invoice, we return to the area we visited earlier today for the longclaw. Searching hard we draw a blank but do see **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler** well, **Ethiopian Cisticola**, several **African Stonechats**, **Red-throated Pipit**, **Rouget's Rail**, and is there an undescribed subspecies of **Common Waxbills** as these ones seemed to be intermediate between Common and Black-rumped, though I should add they weren't easy to see in the thick vegetation. Driving back to the hotel having given up on the longclaw and counting the cost of the airport debacle, Dave notices a rather distant bird sat on top of a bush which turns out to be an **Abyssinian Longclaw**. It took a brilliant bit of birding to unlock this brilliant species.

Wednesday 3rd January

Make the mistake of not checking the price in advance and agreeing to a packed lunch organised by Elias with the resulting bill a rip-off 177 birr (\$9) between two. Make another mistake as compromised a day at Bale in preference to a day at Gibe Gorge, and find that we are birding too quickly and miss the few key birds we have for this area, notably **Moorland Francolin** though we might have been a little unlucky not coming across one in 28 **Chestnut-naped Francolin**. A brilliant **Abyssinian Wolf** close to the road and an eagle that defies identification. Don't spend long enough in Hareenna Forest but do see **Great Sparrowhawk**, **Yellow-bellied Waxbill**, **Abyssinian Oriole** and **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird**. **Starlings** in flight could not be identified as **Slender-billed**.

Long rough road to Negele with one profitable stop in acacia for **Shelley's Starling**, with **Black-billed Wood-hoopoe** and **Red-and-yellow Barbet**. Further south, and helped by locals, we finally see a pair of **Prince Ruspoli's Turaco**, seeing what seem to be the race *vinaceigularis* **White-crested Helmet Shrike**, though in the chase our concentration was on other things!

Our hotel in Negele is terrible with Elias's justification that it is near a restaurant. Translated, it means that despite better hotels in the town, he doesn't want to be inconvenienced by driving people to and from the restaurant.

Thursday 4th January

Same strategy of arriving at a site when its warm backfires today as a combination of: late departure; plus a more direct route on rough roads taking longer, getting slightly lost; and rather windy mid-morning, means we arrive at Liden Plains with all lark activity over. So although we have brilliant views of **Sidamo Lark** we dip **Somali Short-toed Lark**. Other birds of the plains include **Plain-backed Pipit**, **Temminck's Courser**, **Pectoral-patch Cisticola**, **Black-winged Plover**, **Lesser Kestrel**, **Lilac-breasted Roller**, and **Kori Bustard**. Birding in the

general area of Negele is a little disappointing with only a nominate **Cinereous Bunting** of note, and our first **Dobson's Bulbul**. A real waste of an afternoon when we should have headed south to Yabello.

Friday 5th January

Rectify yesterday's error by being back at the Liden Plains just after dawn, this time seeing double-figures of **Somali Short-toed Lark** well. At least three **Sidamo Larks** too and, at last, **White-crowned Starling**.

It's a tough journey to Yabello in a vehicle that's close to unbearably hot at times. Three **Buff-crested Bustard**, our first **Bateleur**, hunting **Little Sparrowhawk** and a pair and juvenile **African Hawk-eagle** break up the monotony. Our first **Eastern Chanting Goshawk** breaking with tradition from the Dark Chanting we had so far been accustomed to seeing.

At a village we find **White-winged Dove** which proves to be the only one of the trip. Another stop results in **Pygmy Falcon**, **Brown-tailed Rock Chat** and **Pale Prinia**. Hit the jackpot with a stop in good acacia with both **Pringle's** and **Red-naped Bush Shrikes**, **Somali Crombec** and **Pygmy Batis**. Along the road two groups of the strangely attractive **Vulturine Guinea fowl**, a bird I had dipped in Kenya. Another stop produces **African Bare-eyed Thrush** and **Tiny Cisticola**, the latter doing exactly what they're meant to do when flushed, fly straight to the top of a bush and scold. Also in this area **Black-throated Barbet**, **Abyssinian Scimitarbill**, **Northern Grey-tit**, and our third **Gillet's Lark** of the trip.

We search some plains near Yabello for **Somali Courser** but it's just one of those trips. Our first **White-bellied Bustards** make up for missing this species further north. We can only find a female **Shelley's Rufous Sparrow** so hope to find males later. A close pair of **Abyssinian Ground Hornbills** are just awesome.

Saturday 6th January

Our latest start not yet, not leaving the hotel until nearly 9am. But Yabello National Park does not disappoint with almost immediate views of both this region's megas: **White-tailed Swallow** and **Stressemann's Bush-crow**, the latter turns out to be really confiding and feeds away unconcerned by our presence just feet away. A male **Shelley's Rufous Sparrow** makes amends for yesterday, a pair of roosting **Verreaux's Eagle-Owl** with one bird seeming to have one pink eye lid with the other lid dark, **d'Arnaud's Barbet** and our only **White-rumped Swifts** of the trip make the morning's birding easy and enjoyable.

Birding south of Yabello in the afternoon starts off with **Spotted Palm-thrush** and **Somali Ostrich**. At plains **Foxy Lark** finally falls with good views of one perched and in flight. **Taita Fiscal** seems a pretty tough bird in Ethiopia so count ourselves as extremely fortunate in seeing one without trying. Try a site where Elias has seen one of our remaining targets and

within a minute we have good views of the tricky **Northern Grosbeak-canary** under the belt. If only it had been like this throughout the trip! An amazing sight of a **Slate-coloured Boubou**, two **Spotted Palm-thrushes** and two **White-browed Scrub-robins** all in a tiny bush mobbing something which was presumably a snake. Try again for Somali Courser but have to be satisfied with **White-bellied Bustard**, **Black-billed Wood-hoopoe** and **Vulturine Guineafowl**.

Closer to Yabello we end the day clutching victory from the jams of defeat with a finally cooperative **Donaldson Smith's Nightjar**.

Tuesday 7th January

A long journey north but on mercifully better roads. A stop at a tract of deciduous woodland produces **Black-headed Batis** and our first **Collared Sunbirds** of the trip, but little else of note on the entire trip.

Our hotel by Lake Hawassa provides peace and tranquillity until you want to access the gate when it's mayhem as the national holidays bring people out in force. **White-backed Duck** and nest-building **Lesser Swamp Warblers** are the main highlight on the lake, with **Blue-headed Coucal**, **Red-fronted Barbet** and **Little Weaver** the best birds in the hotel grounds.

Wednesday 8th January

The promised 06:30 fails to materialise as someone goes to kick the cook out of bed. This gives us time to quickly check out the lake where Elias points out a pair of **Abyssinian Waxbill**.

A bit of a mad drive to Gibe Gorge where I discover Elias's pre-trip optimistic emails that we would see **Yellow-throated Sandgrouse** is based on his one and only visit to the gorge where they came to drink from the river at about 16:00. Gibe Gorge is not as spectacular as we had expected and it's clear Elias doesn't know the area at all as we fail to see any target species in the area. We do see **Egyptian Plover**, the scarce in Ethiopia **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, and **Zebra** and **Abyssinian Waxbills**.

Thursday 9th January

A return visit to Gibe Gorge with the only new bird a pair of **Black-crowned Cranes**. We subsequently learn that we should not have focused on the river but also the habitat by the road dropping into the gorge. The three-hour journey to the airport is efficient and hassle-free.