The Gambia
Trip Report: 8-11 March 2018

Synopsis: Armed with a target ‘wish list’ of 38 species, I spent a long weekend in The Gambia hoping to get a view of some of West Africa’s more localized and less common species (full list in annex). My companion for the trip by road from Bissau was Hamilton Monteiro, who had recently been appointed the first African Bird Club (ABC) Representative for Guinea-Bissau. Prior to departure, we made contact with the ABC Representative in The Gambia, Solomon Jallow, who proved to be wonderful company and an exceptionally knowledgable birder and guide. Solomon is committed to developing the Gambian tourism niche for birders and is a mentor to a growing cadre of local young birding guides (including a talented young female birder who joined us for the tour as part of her training). Given the time constraints and my target list, Solomon confined our birding to four sites: Marakissa, Pirang Forest, the Gambia River at Tendaba and Kiang West National Park (close to Tendaba). Of the 38 hopefuls, we managed to see 10, and a host of other West African species in what was a most enjoyable and comfortable birding experience.
Day 1: Bissau to The Gambia (Marakissa) – we departed Bissau in the wee hours and arrived mid-afternoon at our rendezvous (having made a wrong turn at Ziguinchor (Senegal) and adding two hours to the drive!). We met Solomon Jallow at what was to be our accommodation for the first night, the delightful Marakissa River Camp (+220 9905852) run by a friendly Dutchman and his Gambian wife. Soon after a late lunch, we were in the garden watching dozens of birds drinking at the lodge’s water fountain:

![Yellow-throated Leaflove, Chlorocichla flavicollis](image1.jpg) – one of many species to visit the garden

But our main quarry was lurking in a clump of tall bamboo near the entrance to the lodge:

1. **Northern White-faced Scops Owl, Ptilopsis leucotis** – we saw two individuals in two different bamboo clumps; undoubtedly testimony to the birds’ preference for bamboo as a roosting site – (lifer).
We spent the rest of the afternoon scouring the semi-forested, fallow agricultural lands opposite the lodge hoping to connect with Yellow-bellied Hyliota and White-breasted Cuckooshrike – both recorded from the area. Unfortunately, we were not lucky with either species, Solomon commenting that the recent, severe deforestation of the area may have been a factor militating against our success. Hornbills (both African Grey and Western Red-billed, sp. *kempi*) were notably common. We also connected with a very smart pair of Western Grey Plantaineaters:

![Western Grey Plantaineaters](image)

Also notable were: Long-crested Eagle, Black-winged Kite, White Helmet-Shrike, African Paradise-Flycatcher and numerous waders. We kept a special look-out for Ovambo Sparrowhawk as one individual was known to the lodge and to frequent the area (no luck).

![Long-crested Eagle and Black-winged Kite](image)
But the highlight of the early evening was ‘cold-beer-birding’ on the banks of the creek right behind the lodge. As the crepuscule descended, so did up to perhaps one hundred Pied Kingfishers – which I had hitherto not suspected to be a colonial roosting bird. Also seen were fly-bys of Giant Kingfisher, Long-tailed Cormorants and more of the common wader species. A truly spectacular spectacle of avian abundance! During a later nocturnal meander, I came across a hissing Barn Owl, which our hosts had earlier reported made a roost inside the roof of the restaurant.

Day 2 Marakissa – Brufut Woods – Pirang Forest – Tendaba: I made an early start solo to re-visit the fields across the road from the lodge. On my return, I was alerted, by an excited Hamilton, to the presence of a special bird that had alluded me for some time in West Africa:

2. **Greater Painted Snipe, *Rostratula benghalensis*** – distant views of 3 or 4 non-breeding birds quietly feeding on the edges of the reed beds of a swampland about 400m from the left side of the entrance gate to the lodge – (lifer).

Later that morning, on the road to Tendaba, Solomon ordered a halt a three sites, all of them productive for ‘the list’. The first was at a small community forest, *Brufut*, to look for African Wood Owl, *Strix woodfordii* (unsuccessful). However, in the surrounding burned fields, we picked up a lifer:

3. **Four-banded Sandgrouse, *Pterocles quadricinctus*** – a small group was feeding quietly on the ground in the shade of a copse of trees.
We moved on to Pirang Forest where the local guard/guide had a stake-out for what was to be another lifer and highlight of the tour:


At Pirang, we had nice views of Black-rumped Waxbill and an African Harrier Hawk (Gymnogene).
On the road to Tendaba, we happened to stop to check out a large group of raptors ascending on a thermal. This was fortuitous because in the flock was another lifer:

5. **Beaudouin’s Snake-Eagle, *Circaetus beaudouini*** – a localized West African Sahelian endemic:
We arrived at **Tendaba Camp** just in time for lunch (and later, a petite siesta). It was very hot. At 16:00 we headed out into the dry savanna above the village and birded around the local school grounds. Here I scored two life birds:

6. **Vieillot’s Barbet, *Lybius vieilloti*** – this bird proved to be very common in the area with at least 8 individual birds seen, all in small vocal groups:

![Vieillot’s Barbet](image1)

7. **Common Quail, *Coturnix coturnix*** – this bird had long been a bug bear of mine; finally I flushed one of these palearctic migrants on the ground getting good views of it in flight & on re-landing.

Other birds here were: Greater Honeyguide, Red-billed Quelea and Bush Petronia (left to right):

![Other Birds](image2)

For Hamilton, two lifers were Yellow Penduline-Tit (which I failed to see) and Bruce’s Green Pigeon:
Note: A special target here was Bronze-winged Courser, *Rhinoptilus chalcopterus* – which has been reported by other groups visiting the area; of that family however, we only managed to see Black-headed Lapwing (numerous) and a few African Wattled Lapwing.

Day 3: Tendaba - Mangrove Cruise on River Gambia and Kiang West National Park: After an early breakfast at the Camp, we joined some other independent birders and boarded a motorized canoe for a cruise through the backwaters and minor tributaries of the Gambia River. Of note was the generally confiding nature of the birdlife, possibly due to the lack of hunting pressure (and frequent visits by friendly birders!). My sole target here was a bird that was eventually first spotted by our eagle-eye female trainee bird guide:

8. **White-backed Night-Heron, *Gorsachius leuconotus*** – only one bird encountered on the trip:
Amongst the many waders, was the notable Goliath Heron, the largest of its family:

Some of the crew also received fleeting views (on two occasions) of African Blue Flycatcher, *Elminia longicauda* – which should be looked for perched low on mangrove branches just above the water level. A mystery raptor was later confirmed to be Brown Snake Eagle, *Circaetus cinereus*:

Before lunch, I re-visited the school area above Tendaba hoping to connect with the Penduline-Tit (not to be!). I did enjoy good views of several other species: Bearded Barbet, Yellow-front Canary and Scarlet-chested Sunbird (left to right):
After lunch, we struck out for **Kiang West National Park**, only a few kms from Tendaba. Here we searched the open savanna (in vain) for Spotted Thick-knee, but were rewarded with close views of Temminck’s Courser and Striped Kingfisher (photo left and right):

![Spotted Thick-knee and Striped Kingfisher](image1)

However, the highlight of the afternoon was the sudden (and most welcome) appearance of a juvenile...

9. **Martial Eagle, Polemaetus bellicosus** – Africa’s largest eagle. The bird was easily spooked, but we did eventually manage to get good telescopic views of the pale sub-adult form – (lifer).

![Martial Eagle](image2)

**Solomon putting the Martial Eagle in the scope for the team at Kiang West**

We then spent some time waiting at what was once a regular evening roost tree for our target, Brown-necked Parrot, *Poicephalus fuscicollis*; however, Solomon advised that it had been apparently abandoned for several years now:
Day 4: Tendaba – Brikama – Return to Bissau: After an early breakfast, we bid farewell to Tendaba Camp and returned to the vicinity of Kiang West, hoping to try our luck at some of the remaining target species. At a local village, we picked up a park ranger known to Solomon to help in our search. This was fortuitous, as he quickly had us onto an elusive species that was located by its call:


During our subsequent search, we also encountered: Grey Kestrel, Rufous-crowned Roller and Pearl-spotted Owlet (photos from left to right).

With time against us, after leaving Kiang West, we made one final stop near the village of Sotokoi where there is reputed to be a roosting tree of Brown-necked Parrot. Unfortunately, the hour of the day also conspired against us – the birds usually being seen leaving the roost after dawn and at dusk. A good excuse for another adventure and we bid farewell to The Gambia for the five-hour return journey south to Guinea-Bissau….

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Annex:

The Gambia

Target Bird List – March 2018

1. Dwarf Bittern, *Ixobrychus sturmii* – lakes and ponds surrounded by grass and trees; also mangroves – UC; intra-African migrant.

2. **White-backed Night-Heron, Gorsachius leuconotus** – more nocturnal than Black-crowned N-H; roosts in thick cover during the day; slow-moving rivers overhung with dense vegetation; UC. No Xenocanto RC
   - Regularly seen at Tendaba Camp on the mangrove safari.
   - Also Farasutu Community Forest, south of Banjul on Gambia River

3. **White-crested Tiger Heron, Tigriornis leucolopha** – Most active at night; reedbeds edging forest rivers, thick vegetation overhanging water; mangroves; UC – easily overlooked. No Xenocanto RC. Seen in Gambia by guide, Ousman Joku at Tandaba Camp
4. **White-headed Vulture, Trigonoceps occipitalis** – white belly diagnostic; open savannas; roosts and nests in trees. VU UC/LC – seen in Gambia by Birdfinders (2007 report)

5. **Beaudouin’s Snake-Eagle, Circaetus beaudouini** – endemic to Sahel. Savanna; hunts from perches. VU/UC. Seen regularly at Tendaba (near mosque - ?); Jakhaly, Central Divisoin, Gambia; often seen hovering

6. **Ovambo Sparrowhawk, Acciptier ovampensis** – woodland, fast dashing flight; all along Gambia River; seen at Gunjur at the Dalaba Ecolodge on the coast south of Banjul

7. Bat Hawk, *Macheiramphus alcinus* – woodland, plantations and forest edge; crepuscular; UC; roosts in thick foliage during the day

8. **Martial Eagle, Polemaetus bellicosus** – Africa’s largest eagle; savanna to desert edge; LC – photo from Kiang West NP in 2009. (Immature birds are pale). Also on road to Tendaba.

9. White-throated Francolin, *Peliperdix albogularis* – grassy savanna; often in recently burned areas; UN/LC – more Ghana/Cameroon; but is recorded in eastern Gambia through to Dakar

10. **Ahanta Francolin, Pternistis ahantensis** – WA endemic; dense vegetation at forest edge; old plantations; C. Only recorded on south bank and in western Gambia: Abuko Nature Reserve (many records); Pipang shrimp ponds. In Senegal: Forêt de Diembering, Oussouye, Casamance

11. **Spotted Thick-knee, Burhinus capensis** – dense tangles in lowland rainforest and secondary scrub; often near streams; LC – less retiring than other flufftails; Pirang Woods; Pirang shrimp pools; Abuko

12. Denham’s (Stanley’s) Bustard, *Neotis denhami* – largest neotis bustard; open grassland and agricultural land; UC/LC. Only non-breeding in Gambia: more of a dry country eastern species

13. **Spotted Thick-knee, Burhinus capensis** – mostly nocturnal; in open country; fields and parks; C; reored at Tendaba (also Richard Toll, Senegal).

14. **Egyptian Plover, Pluvianus aegyptius** – slow-flowing rivers and sandbars; LC; moves in response to changing water levels; often tame close to human settlements! Recorded (seasonally): Njau (Central), Janjanbureh, (Baobolong Wetland Reserve – north bank from Tendaba); Kaur Wetlands (Central); Lliasa Wetlands (Central); Basse, Farafenni...

15. **Bronze-winged Courser, Rhinoptilus chalcopterus**; largely nocturnal, roosts under bushes during the day; FC – Tendaba (February 29 2008)

16. **Greater Painted Snipe, Rostratula benghalensis** – marshes and flooded grasslands; UC/Local nomad – Kotu Stream (special hide at bridge) – Sunset Beach Hotel nearby.
17. African Skimmer, *Rynchops flavirostris* – large rivers, bays and lakes with sandbanks for roosting; Kazinga Channel, Uganda (July); combine with Shoebill tour to Virunga NP.

18. **Four-banded Sandgrouse, Pterocles quadricinctus** – dry savannas and cultivated areas; common resident; drinks soon after dusk; may be nocturnal (?) – Kaffrine/Kaolak, Senegal; in Gambia: Janjanbureh (Central)

19. **Adamawa Turtle-Dove, Streptopelia hypopyrrha** – riverine woodland and hilly country with wooded galleries and adjacent scrub. Rare in Gambia: Kunkilling Forest Reserve, Falladu West (March 2015), near Sankuli Kunda, Janjanbureh (south bank of McCarthy Island).

20. **Brown-necked Parrot, Poicephalus fuscicollis** – WA endemic; savanna, riverine forests and mangroves; Endangered and declining in West Africa: Seen at Sokotoi; a mixed habitat of woods, scrub and adjoining fields- just east of Pirang and near a park called Finto Manares Forest Park.

21. **Jacobin Cuckoo, Clamator jacobinus** – woodland, thickets and acacia savanna; intra-African migrant; C.

22. **African Wood Owl, Strix woodfordi** – evergreen and riverine forests; mature woodland and exotic plantations; C. Pirang Forest; Farasuto

23. Pel’s Fishing Owl, *Scotopelia peli* – large trees around lakes and slow moving rivers; UC – recorded in 2000 at Tendaba

24. **Verreaux’s Eagle Owl, Bubo lacteus** – broadleaved woodland, savanna, thornveld and riverine forests; UC/LC. Brufut Woods (behind Sheraton Gambia) – 30 minutes from Banjul

25. **Northern White-faced Scops Owl, Ptilopsis leucotis** – dry woodland and riverine forest; Local. Kingfisher Lodge; Brufut Woods; Abuko

26. Plain Nightjar, *Caprimulgus inornatus* – small savanna nightjar; semi-arid areas; intra-African migrant, breeding Mar-Aug in Sahel; C

27. Pennant-winged Nightjar, *Macrodipteryx vexillarius* – intra-African migrant; moves north after breeding (Aug-Feb) – seen; but like to see in breeding plumage!

28. **Vieillot’s Barbet, Lybius vieilloti** – dry woodland, scrub and gardens; groups at fruiting trees; UC. Sotokoi, Penjem, Tujering (near Banjul)

29. **White-breasted Cuckoo-shrike, Coracina pectoralis** – tall woodland and riverine forest; UN/LC. Marakissa (Western Division) – Marakissa RiverCamp (driving in from Casamance to eastern Gambia highway turnoff).
30. **Yellow Penduline-Tit, *Anthoscopus parvulus*** – dry wooded savanna and semi-arid savanna; UC. In Gambia: Sokotoi; also Tendaba


33. **Yellow-bellied Hyliota, *Hyliota flavigaster*** – Broad leafed Woodland; LC – in pairs or groups. West Kiang NP.

34. Grey (Lead-coloured) Tit-Flycatcher, *Myioparus plumbeus*. Should be throughout Gambia - ?

35. **Heuglin’s Masked Weaver, *Ploceus heuglini*** – dry savanna; UC. Brufut (Western); Niokolo-Koba

36. **Exclamatory Paradise-Whydah, *Vidua interjecta*** – wooded savannas and adjacent farms; UC. Seen regularly at Bansang Quarry – visit to drink at the pool


END