Birding Trip Report

Ghana: Mole National Park

6 - 8 March 2015

Summary

A free weekend in Accra (on holiday from Sierra Leone) and a snap decision to try some birding in Ghana’s largest national park, Mole. Mole is located in the northern region of dry wooded savannah. The trip was easily do-able from the capital in a weekend and produced some excellent birds. All-in-all, **102 species** were seen (31 of which were lifers – marked in bold). The park has some very knowledgeable guides who can provide birding services.

Friday, 6 March

An early start to catch Antrak Air’s 06:00am flight to Tamale from Accra’s domestic terminal. The one hour flight departed on time (Ghana Cedis 500 return – US$160).

On arrival, I was met by a car sent by Mole Hotel: info@mole.motelgh.com or +233 244316777. Sylvester is the manager and very helpful in arranging logistics at short notice. The return trip taxi fare (2.5 hours) to Mole was GHC 500. Accommodation in a simple room was GHC 150 per night (US$30), much nicer chalet accommodation is also available for GHC 250 (which have great views over the escarpment and into the park) – highly recommended.

On the drive to the park, I spotted three species new to me:

- **Yellow-billed Shrike**, *Corvinella corvina* – a small party of six calling from a Neem tree
- **Piapiac, *Ptilostomus afer*** – several terrestrial groups feeding around towns
- **Blue-bellied Roller, *Coracias cyanogaster*** – one seen perched on a telephone line

Also seen were great numbers of Pied Crows, Black Kites, Laughing Doves and Cattle Egrets.

I arrived at the park entrance at midday and checked into the hotel. I also visited the park office to make arrangements for a guide for tomorrow’s birding. Cost per birding guide on a walking tour (no vehicle provided) per day is a ridiculously low GHC 20 (US$6). A 4WD can be hired for GHC 100 per hour.

It was very hot (over 40C). But being of mad dog and Australasian persuasion, I birded solo the entire afternoon along the **Office Loop 16 km** road which begins about 500 metres before the hotel entrance. Despite the heat, I found this to be easy and productive birding, it being a flat road into some good wooded savannah:

- Northern Puffback, *Dryoscopus gambensis* – seen regularly in the park
- Common Bulbul, *Pycnonotus barbatus* – the only *bulbul* seen
- **Lavender Waxbill, *Estrilda caerulescens*** – uncommon, seen in mixed flocks of finches feeding on the ground
- Scarlet-chested Sunbird, *Chalcomitra senegalensis* – the most common sunbird seen
- **Green Wood-Hoopoe, *Phoeniculus purpureus*** – one small group of 5-6 birds
- Western Grey Plantain-eater, *Crinifer piscator* – commonly encountered
- **Violet Turaco, *Musophaga violacea*** – small group seen flying from tree-to-tree at mid-storey
- African Grey Hornbill, *Tockus nasutus* – relatively common; seen mostly in late afternoon
- **Red-throated Bee-eater, *Merops bullocki*** – abundant and the only *merops* seen
- Northern Black Flycatcher, *Melaenornis edoloides* – the most commonly encountered flycatcher
- Black-shouldered Kite, *Elanus caeruleus* – one pair in flight
- Helemedet Guineafowl, *Numida meleagris* – abundant and on the restaurant menu!
- Vinaceous Dove, *Streptopelia vinacea* – very common savanna species
- Abyssinian Roller, *Coracias abyssinicus* – one and the only *roller* seen inside the park
- **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, *Pogoniulus chrysoconus*** – one seen, but frequently heard
• Bush Petronia, *Petronia dentata* – very common throughout
• **Black-billed Wood Dove**, *Turtur abyssinicus* – my first sighting, not present in Sierra Leone
• Streaky-headed Seedeater, *Serinus gularis* – often seen with Bush Petronia
• **Bateleur**, *Terathopius ecaudatus* – the most common raptor in the park; seen at least on 10 occasions
• Yellow-fronted Canary, *Serinus mozambicus* – reasonably common in pairs
• Black-faced Firefinch, *Lagonosticta larvata* – seen once in a small group including females and juveniles
• Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu, *Uraeginthus bengalus* – often found resting in thorn bushes
• **Gambaga Flycatcher**, *Muscicapa gambagae* – rather cryptic, but smaller and less streaked than Spotted Flycatcher
• Double-spurred Francolin, *Francolinus bicalcaratus* – very common in large groups, but difficult to locate outside of early morning and evening
• Pied Flycatcher, *Ficedula hypoleuca* – common, out of breeding condition
• African Thrush, *Turdus pelios* – common; often in small groups near the ground
• **Woodchat Shrike**, *Lanius senator* – chestnut crown clearly visible
• Senegal Batis, *Batis senegalensis* – uncommon; seen twice
• Senegal Parrot, *Poicaphalus senegalus* – seen in good numbers returning to roosts in the evening
• **Stone Partridge**, *Ptilopachus petrosus* – covey of 8-10 birds crossing the road in the evening
• Red-billed Hornbill, *Tockus erythrorhynchus* – two seen on the trip; on consecutive days and both in the early evening

I returned on foot to the hotel at 18:30 and enjoyed an excellent meal of Guineafowl and mashed manioc washed down with a cold Star Lager by the pool – bliss.

**Saturday, 7 March**

A 06:00am start and my guide, John Munaba (mobile: 0240701048), was bang on time. We descended the escarpment from the hotel into the park. Given the heat, it is really imperative to bird early and hard; after 11:00am, we recorded very little activity.

• **Senegal Thick-Knee**, *Burhinus senegalensis* – common by pools
• Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos* – as above
• Grey-headed Kingfisher, *Halcyon leucocephala* - common
• **Swamp Flycatcher**, *Muscicapa aquatic* – appropriately found only near water, common
• Common Wattle-eye, *Platysteira cyanea* – two seen on the trip
• Spur-winged Goose, *Plectropterus gambensis* – one female seen; and the first sighting for my guide, John, in the park
• Speckled Pigeon, *Columba guinea* – out of range and according to John, rarely encountered
• Hadada Ibis, *Bostrychia hagedash* - common
• **African Hobby**, *Falco cuvierii* – one seen trying to steal food from Hooded Vulture mid-air (?)
• Squacco Heron, *Ardeola ralloides* – several seen around pools
• Black Crake, *Amaurornis flavirostra* – a very active little colony on the banks of the pond and under the first viewing platform in the park – very confiding
• Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea* – two seen
• Purple Heron, *Ardea purpurea* – quite common
- African Palm Swift, *Cypsiurus parvus* – common
- **Wire-tailed Swallow**, *Hirundo smithii* – uncommon and only over water
- Palm-nut Vulture, *Gypohierax angolensis* – 6 seen
- African Jacana, *Actophilornis Africana* – very common and also seen foraging in groups in dry fields
- African Harrier-Hawk, *Polyboroides typus* – one seen foraging on the ground
- Malachite Kingfisher, *Alcedo cristata* – only one seen, fishing above a pool
- Red-shouldered Cuckoo-Shrike, *Campephaga phoenicea* – the only cuckoo-shrike seen
- Brown Babbler, *Turdoides plebejus* – common (and noisy!) in gallery forest
- **Beautiful Sunbird**, *Cinnyris pulchellus* – gorgeous males seen often
- Bruce’s Green Pigeon, *Treron waalia* – only one seen, perched high on a dead branch
- **Little Weaver**, *Ploceus luteolus* – uncommon; one male seen constructing a nest
- Bronze Manikin, *Spermestes cucullatus* – very common in large flocks
- Red-billed Firefinch, *Lagnosticta senegala* - common
- Senegal Coucal, *Centropus senegalensis* – several skulkers low to the ground
- **Pygmy Sunbird**, *Hedydipna platura* – quite common in canopy

John said where he knew to find a special bird and we took a detour through a dried up lake to find:

- **Saddle-billed Stork**, *Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis* – one individual fishing in a drying pool
We returned to the forest and spent the next few hours birding the gallery forest of a drying creek bed:

- **Hooded Vulture, Necrosyrtes monachus** – common everywhere, roosting in large groups
- **White-shouldered Black Tit, Parus guineensis** – several acting like little pied woodpeckers, feeding upside down on tree trunks
- **Violet-backed Starling, Cinnysyrtes leucogaster** – several males with females
- **Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Laniarius barbarus** – several seen low in gallery forest always in the company of:
  - **White-crowned Robin Chat, Cossypha niveicapilla** – (as above), but more of a skulker
  - **Lead-coloured Flycatcher, Myioparus plumbeus** – one seen
  - **Lizard Buzzard, Kaupifalco monogrammicus** – one seen
  - **African Wattled Lapwing, Vanellus senegallus** – common, (with thick-knees)
  - **Black-crowned Night Heron, Nycticorax nycticorax** – only one seen by the main pool
  - **Pin-tailed Whydah, Vidua macroura** – non-breeding groups
  - **Orange-cheeked Waxbill, Estrilda melpoda** – small groups with firefinches
  - **Northern grey-headed Sparrow, Passer griseus** - uncommon

*Elephant footprints at the Saddle-billed Stork site – a serious impediment to stealthy stalking!*
We took a break at 12:00 to return to the hotel for lunch.

The inviting pool area where luncheon is served

We resumed birding again at 15:00. New birds seen were:

- Senegal Eremomela, *Eremomela pusila* – common throughout
- Plain-backed Pipit, *Anthus leucophrys* - one
- Grey Woodpecker, *Dendropicos goertae* – a pair in open savannah
- Fine-spotted Woodpecker, *Campethera punctuligera* – one foraging on tree trunk
- **Rufous Cisticola**, *Cisticola rufus* – seen in mid-storey of a tree (?)
- Long-tailed Glossy Starling, *Lamprotornis caudatus* – common in small groups
- Black-crowned Tchagra, *Tchagra senegalus* – two seen on the trip perched at mid-storey
- African White-backed Vulture, *Gyps africanus* – a pair at nest and feeding chicks
- Snake Eagle (species - ?) – uncertain ID
- Hammerkop, *Scopus umbretta* – two in flight
- **Black-rumped Waxbill**, *Estrilda troglodytes* – a small number with Orange-cheeked Waxbills feeding on the ground.
- Village Indigobird, *Vidua chalybeate* – common; singles flushed from the ground
Sunday, 16 November

- **Greyish Eagle Owl, Bubo (africanus) cinerascens** – at 06:00 in the carpark, obligingly perched on the ground only several metres from my position
- **Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Campethera abingoni** – a pair feeding low
- Blue-breasted Kingfisher, Halcyon malimbica – only one seen in riverine gallery forest
- **Yellow-breasted Apalis, Apalis flavida** – one in a mixed-species flock
- Oriole Warbler, Hypergerus atriceps – only one seen in the above mixed flock
- Sulphur-breasted Bush Shrike, Malaconotus sulfureopectus – in the above flock
- African Green Pigeon, Treron calvus – only one seen
- African Paradise Flycatcher (White morph), Terpsiphone viridis – delightfully described by the locals as the “wedding bird”
- Fork-tailed Drongo, Dicrurus adsimilis – several seen perched high
- Yellow Wagtail, Motacilla flava – a pair feeding on mud flats
- **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weaver, Plocepasser superciliosus** – several seen very close to the hotel in sparse trees.

The one big disappointment was Ground Hornbill (for which we searched long and hard), despite it apparently being a common site near the Park entrance gate.

At 11:00am I high-tailed it back to Tamale (2.5 hours) to catch the flight back to Accra at 15:30.
Early morning view over one of the main ponds at Mole National Park

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