Birding Trip Report
Sierra Leone: Outamba National Park
23-25 January 2015

The riparian location of the Outamba campsite on the Little Scarcies River is a delight

A weekend break from Freetown to visit Outamba National Park (part of the Outamba-Kilimi complex) in the north of Sierra Leone. Outamba is notable for being one of the largest expanses of true savannah woodland in Sierra Leone and has some distinct avifauna not readily found elsewhere in the country.

My companion was Kenneth Gbengba (KG), a leading Sierra Leonean bird guide and conservationist. Kenneth has worked with most of the key researchers and tour groups visiting Sierra Leone over the past two decades.

We departed Freetown on Friday, 23 January at 13:00 and arrived at our camp site inside the NP after dark at 20:00. The road to Makeni is paved and in very good condition (2.5 hours). From Makeni to Kamakwie, the road is sealed with some very slow patches the further north one travels (approx. 5 hours). A sturdy 4WD is highly recommended. We brought with us provisions (food, water). The ferry on the Little Scarcies River is broken down and it is necessary to cross in pirogue, leaving our vehicle at the local police station in Kamakwie for safe-keeping. In Kamakwie Town, we hired motorbike and rider (Okadas) to take us across the river and into the Outamba NP HQ. The cost for transfers (30 - 40 minutes) was Leones 50,000 each (US$10).
Comfortable bungalows are available inside the park on the banks of the Little Scarcies River and maintained by the Forestry Service camp managers. Cost for a hut with bedding, mosquito net was SL Leones 40,000 per night (US$ 8).

Kenneth Gbenga (KG)

Our birding reference was: Borrow and Demey: Birds of West Africa. Helm, 2008. A good source for a bird list of local species is: Surfbirds Birding Trip Report to Sierra Leone (including Outamba-Kilimi National Park) by Duncan Orr-Ewing, 3-24 February 2013.

During a day-and-a-half birding in and immediately outside the park, 93 species were seen (with personal lifers (23) marked in bold).

Herewith, a chronologically ordered account of species encountered:

23 January: Travel from Freetown – Makeni - Kamakwie

- **Grasshopper Buzzard** (*Butastur rufipennis*) – many observed hunting around bush fires along the roadsides. Some were competing for food with Black Kites. My first sighting in Sierra Leone (my first birding in the dry and burn season)
- Abyssinian Roller (*Coracias abyssinicus*) – a pair of this intra-African migrant hunting close to bush fire activity
- **Dark Chanting Goshawk** (*Melierax metabates*) – in open woodland near Kamakwie; a pair flying and then perched on a dead tree.

24 January: Outamba National Park

- **Puvel’s Illadopsis** (*Illadopsis puveli*) – heard singing loudly both mornings in the dawn cacophony in dense bush near our campsite. The far-carrying dawn song lasted consistently for approximately 30 minutes from 06:00 each day and then not heard again. The single bird took some finding and when finally flushed, flew up from a low perch to mid-storey where it continued to sing briefly.
- **Brown Illadopsis** (*Illadopsis fulvescens*) – several encountered on the paths in dense bush around the campsite (bird responded readily to playback).
- Giant Kingfisher (*Megaceryle maxima*) – a garrulous pair fishing over the river close to the camp.
We crossed the Little Scarcies River in a canoe paddled by one of the park rangers to bird the gallery forest along the river banks:

- **African Pied Hornbill** (*Tockus fasciatus*) – fairly common throughout, mostly singles
- **White Helmet-Shrike** (*Prionops plumatus*) – a feeding party of 10+ moving mid-storey
- **Fork-tailed Drongo** (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) – the common *drongo* of wooded savannah. Many encountered as sentinels of mix-species feeding flocks
- **Simple Leaflove** (*Pyrrhurus scandens*) – one small group, elusive; feeding mid-storey
- **Capuchin Babbler** (*Phyllanthus atripennis*) – a group of up to a dozen feeding low in leaf litter along a drying, heavily wooded, watercourse
- **Red-shouldered Cuckoo-Shrike** (*Campephaga phoenicea*) – my first cuckoo-shrike in SL. Striking black bird with brilliant blood-red epaulet
- **Willow Warbler** (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – uncommon
- **Brown Babbler** (*Turdoides plebejus*) – one small party close to the Capuchin Babblers (above)
- **Slender-billed Greenbul** (*Andropadus gracilirostris*) – uncommon
- **Common Bulbul** (*Pycnonotus barbatus*) – common throughout
- **Klaas’s Cuckoo** (*Chrysococcyx klaas*) – two heard during the tour
- **Tawny-flanked Prinia** (*Prinia subflava*) – the most common prinia, in low shrubbery
- **Red-faced Cisticola** (*Cisticola erythrops*) – commonly heard and seen
- **Eurasian Reed Warbler** (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – single seen in long grass, perched
- **African Thrush** (*Turdus pelios*) – only one seen
- **Black-crowned Tchagra** (*Tchagra senegalus*) – several seen (and heard)
- **Northern Puffback** (*Dryoscopus gambensis*) – common, usually in m/f pairs
- **Senegal Batis** (*Batis senegalensis*) – only one seen
- **Turati’s Boubou** (*Laniarius turati*) – my nemesis; this local endemic finally seen well, pinkish tinge to belly not really evident
- **Blue-breasted Kingfisher** (*Halcyon malimbica*) – two seen
- **Buff-spotted Woodpecker** (*Campethera nivosa*) – a pair pecking tree trunks
- **Common Wattle-eye** (*Platysteira cyanea*) – one male seen
- **Vinaceous Dove** (*Streptopelia vinacea*) – relatively common in savannah
- **Hadada Ibis** (*Bostrychia hagedash*) – a dozen seen over two days, not always near water
- **Tambourine Dove** (*Turtur tympanistria*) – two seen flying through the forest
- **Cassin’s Hawk-Eagle** (*Spizaetus africanus*) – ID’ed by KB; was flushed in low storey inside of gallery forest
• Great Blue Turaco (*Corythaeola cristata*) – several seen flying between trees
• Collared Sunbird (*Hedydipna collaris*) – 2 seen
• Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) – 2 seen
• **African Golden Oriole** (*Oriolus auratus*) – my first in SL; common; the only oriole seen
• **Black-bellied Firefinch** (*Lagonosticta rara*) – a small flock in long grass
• **Brown-backed Woodpecker** (*Dendropicos obsoletus*) – two female birds
• Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – two males seen on the trip
• **Palm-nut Vulture** (*Gypohierax angolensis*) – several seen in two days, including brown immature birds
• **African Paradise Flycatcher** (*Terpsiphone viridis*) – my first sighting of this species in Sierra Leone; all other encounters with the forest-dwelling, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher

We entered a copse of heavier woodland where KG had previously seen the Sierra Leone Prinia. Unfortunately, not long after we arrived, we were beset upon by thousands of small flying insects which made birding next-to-impossible. It was also unfortunate, because we soon came upon a very active mixed-species flock:

• Double-toothed Barbet (*Lybius bidendatus*) – 4-5 of this brilliantly liveried bird feeding as a group in a fruiting tree
• Green (Guinea) Turaco (*Tauraco persa*) – several moving with the flock
• **African Green Pigeon** (*Treron calvus*) – a good number feeding silently on figs
• **Levaillant’s Cuckoo** (*Oxylophus levaillantii*) – an excited male with crest rising and falling
• **Black Cuckoo** (*Cuculus clamosus*) – one all-black bird seen
• Vieillot’s Black Weaver (*Ploceus nigerrimus*) – one with the flock inside the forest

There was also a possibility of **Black Scimitarbill**, but the marauding insects made ID impossible. We beat a hasty retreat back to the river bank and to call it a morning and to return to the camp for lunch. It was very hot (at least 35ºC). Along the river bank were:

• Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – small numbers along watercourses throughout
• African Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla aguimp*)
• **African Long-tailed Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax africana*)
Local pirogues are the sole source of river transport

While KG and our driver, Henry, took a siesta, I wandered around the park grounds and out into some farmlands just outside the park entrance:

- **Senegal Coucal (Centropus senegalensis)** – also commonly heard
- **Fine-spotted Woodpecker (Campethera punctuligera)** – great views of four who stopped by in response to playback
- **White-fronted Black Chat (Myrmecocichla albifrons)** – one male and two females on a dead tree in a small plantation
- **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater (Merops hirundineus)** – several of this beautiful migratory species
- **Senegal Eremomela (Eremomela pusilla)** – small numbers in a passing flock
- **Yellow-winged (Red-faced) Pytilia (Pytilia hupogrammica)** – a stunningly beautiful little bird
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- **Pale Flycatcher (Melaenornis pallidus)** – two solitary birds seen on the trip
- **Village Indigobird (Vidua chalybeate)** – seen at various places near human settlement
- **Jambandu Indigobird (Vidua raricola)** – ditto above
- **Variable Sunbird (Cynnyris venustus)** – the most common sunbird of the trip

At 16:00, we crossed the river by canoe again and walked to a small settlement (inside the NP):

- **Lizard Buzzard (Kaupifalco mongrammicus)**
- **Little Buttonquail (Turnix sylvaticus)** – one of several flushed in short, burnt-out grassy areas
- **Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling (Lamprotornis chalcurus)** – stunning in late afternoon sun
- **Togo Paradise Whydah (Vidua togoensis)** – one well-endowed male flying surprisingly high in the sky, extraordinary long tail streaming...
- **Flycatcher (sp.)** – Most probably, Lead-coloured (Myioparus plumbeus), but not 100% sure
- **Violet-backed Starling (Cinnyricinclus leucogaster)** – amazing to see the true violet colour of the males in late afternoon sun; simply stunning!
- **Black-and-White (Vanga) Flycatcher (Bias musicus)** – one male perched on top of a dead tree

With light fading fast, we crossed the Little Scarcies in our canoe and spent a pleasant evening around the camp with a bottle of whiskey (mine) and local Palm Wine for Kenneth and Henry.

NB: No owls or nightjars heard.
25 January: Outamba NP, contd...

KB reported hearing Ahanta’s Francolin across the river. A dawn outing produced Puvel’s Illadopsis, confirming our first sighting yesterday. We then proceeded to walk the road out of the park and into the degraded semi-agricultural lands in the surrounding hills:

- Striped Kingfisher (*Halcyon chelicuti*) – one perched in an open field
- Double-spurred Francolin (*Franolinus bicalcaratus*) – on the road and heard frequently
- Northern Black Flycatcher (*Melaenornis edolioides*) – one hawking insects
- Blue-billed Firefinch (*Lagonosticta rubricata*) – small group in long grass

In a marshy area that was being cultivated with rice:

- Western Grey Plantain-Eater (*Crinifer piscator*) – 3 flying into fruiting trees
- African Harrier Hawk (*Polybroides typus*) – one of three seen during the trip
- Splendid Sunbird (*Cinnyris coccinigastrus*) – only one seen
- Grey-headed Kingfisher (*Halcyon leucocephala*) – one fishing
- Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) – a pair feeding
- Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) – two seen on the mud flats
- Squacco Heron (*Ardeola ralloides*) – one feeding in the rice fields
- Cattle Egret (*Egretta alba*) – common
- African Jacana (*Actophilornis africana*) – a pair

In the surrounding open savannah woodland:

- **Yellow-throated Leaflove** (*Chlorocichla (Atimastillas) flavicolis*) – an unexpected find; 3-4 keeping close cover in dense foliage at mid-storey; song closely allied to Brown Babbler
- Brown Snake Eagle (*Circaetus cinereus*) – very confiding single perched in a tree
- **African Cuckoo** (*Cuculus gularis*) – swept in like a small hawk and circled us for 20 minutes
- Sulphur-breasted Bush-Shrike (*Malaconotus sulfureopectus*) – two heard calling
- Broad-billed Roller (*Eurystomus glaucurus*) – one perched on top of a tree
- Short-winged Cisticola (*Cisticola brachypterus*) – common in grassland
- Cardinal Woodpecker (*Dendropicos fuscescens*) – single tapping a tree
- Yellow-whiskered Bulbul (*Andropadus latirostris*) – fairly common

*KG birding the typical savannah woodland of the park*
At 10:30, we returned to the camp, preparing to cross the river for one last attempt at the gallery forest. On a sandbank in the rover:

- **White-headed (-crowned) Lapwing** (*Vanellus albiceps*) – a pair

We spent the rest of the morning birding gallery and savannah forest along the river side. The birding was exceptionally slow with only a few species seen:

- Grey-headed Bristlebill (*Bleda canicapillus*) – small group in undergrowth
- Johanna’s Sunbird (*Cinnyris johannae*) – one seen
- Wood Warbler (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*) – a pair
- Hammerkop (*Scopus umbretta*) – one feeding on mud flats near the river

With a long drive ahead of us, we departed Outamba camp at 12:00 to return to Freetown. The journey took approx. seven hours with arrival in the capital just after sunset.
David McLachlan-Karr, Freetown, 1 February 2015

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