Birding Trip Report

Sierra Leone: Tingi Hills Forest Reserve

Eid-ul-Adha Weekend, 24-27 September 2015

Summary

With the West Africa monsoon finally tapering off, the long weekend of Eid-ul-Adha (24-27 September) was an opportunity to come out of birding hibernation and visit the Tingi Hills Forest Reserve of Kono District in north-eastern Sierra Leone.

Location: The Tingi Hills Non-hunting Reserve is the easternmost forest preserve in Sierra Leone, close to the Guinea border. It occurs between the Nieya Chiefdom, Koinadugu District, Northern Province and the Sando and Lei Chiefdoms in the Kono District, Eastern Province, about 470 km east of Freetown. The forest reserve includes areas encompassing the massif called Sankan Birriwa, which has two peaks separated by a narrow gorge. Both peaks stand over 1800m - the second highest in Sierra Leone. The terrain is generally rocky, with numerous streams, which have their sources from the massif. These streams are the tributaries of the Mano River which a little further south, defines the border with the Republic of Liberia.

A survey of birdlife conducted in 1974 recorded 200 species, including the majority of the Upper Guinea endemics. Despite some mining activity (Tingi is 70kms north of the major diamond mine at Kono), and logging in the 1960s, the Tingi Hills retain some tracts of primary rainforest, although much of the accessible areas is now secondary forest (at best). A sturdy 4WD is required to negotiate the poor track into the reserve from Kono. There is no resident park management. Visits should be coordinated with the Paramount Chief based at Kono. Camping can be arranged with local villagers. Given the rains, we obtained the permission of the village headman to set-up tents inside school rooms (it being a weekend). A small fee was levied for the privilege and the local villagers seemed delighted to have visitors (after a long hiatus caused by Ebola).
Thursday, 24 September

My driver, Henry Turay, and I collected Kenneth Gbenga, Sierra Leone’s leading birder and set-off from Freetown at 14:30 on the very good sealed road to Makeni Town (2.5 hrs). Travel was slowed by several active Ebola checkpoints. From Makeni, travel was more difficult due to the sometimes very poor condition of the road to Kono (3.5 hrs.). We arrived at Kono after dark and booked into the comfortable Uncle Ben’s Guesthouse for the night (Leones 175,000 = US$35). No restaurant, but meals can be arranged by the staff from outside eateries.

Friday, 25 September

We departed Kono Town for Tingi at 06:30am. The road north to the reserve from Kono was only cut two year’s ago, but is in bad shape being reduced at several points to a steep, muddy track. The course needs to be negotiated by sturdy 4WD (or by Okada – local motorcycle service). The 70kms took us four hours. Wet weather also hampered progress. That said, the scenery was beautiful and we were blessed with a cooling light rain.

At the end of the road, we arrived at our village and were greeted by the friendly locals.
With an improvement in the weather, we decided to begin birding immediately and leave the camp set-up until our return in the evening. We recruited two local guides and set-off on a series of trails leading to the foothills and riverine forest. We encountered the common savanna species in cleared agricultural lands and abandoned plantations for the first hour before reaching a true forested area:

- Red-billed Firefinch, *Lagonosticta senegala* – common in tall *Elephant Grass*
- Orange-cheeked Waxbill, *Estrilda melpoda* – common in long grass
- Magpie (Pied) Mannikin, *Spermestes fringilloides* – small groups in defoliated trees
- Black-and-White Mannikin, *Spermestes bicolor* – less common than above; foraging in pairs in shorter, cut grass
- Black-necked Weaver, *Ploceus nigricollis* – only one small group seen in a clearing
- Speckled Tinkerbird, *Pogoniulus scolopaceus* – very common
- Lesser Striped Swallow, *Hirundo abyssinica* - common
- Square-tailed Saw-Wing, *Psalidoprocne nitens* – relatively common
- Fanti Saw-Wing, *Psalidoprocne obscura* – less common than the above
- Green Hylia, *Hylia prasina* – very common everywhere
- African Green Pigeon, *Treron calvus* – large groups encountered mostly feeding on fruit
- African Pied Hornbill, *Tockus fasciatus* – the most common hornbill and encountered throughout
- Grey-headed Negrofinch, *Nigrita canicapillus* – several in mixed species groups
- Red-faced Cisticola, *Cisticola erythrops* – common
- Short-winged (Siffling) Cisticola, *Cisticola brachypterus* – common
- Naked-faced Barbet, *Gymnobucco calvus* – very common in small parties 6-8
- African Harrier Hawk, *Polyboroides typus* – we were surprised at how few raptors were seen, this being one of only two in the forest area
- Klaas’ Cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx klaas* – several heard calling from high in the tree tops
- Red-rumped Tinkerbird, *Pogoniulus atroflavus* – amusingly termed the “BBC Bird” on account of it giving a bell every second!
- Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, *Pogoniulus bilineatus* – several in the canopy
• Red-tailed Greenbul, *Criniger calurus* – common in low-storey groups
• Buff-spotted Woodpecker, *Campethera nivosa* – one with a mixed-species flock
• Sabine’s Puffback, *Dryoscopus sabini* – heard on several occasions
• Little Bee-eater, *Merops pusillus* – several hawking insects from dead branches in an open field
• Tambourine Dove, *Turtur tympanistria* – common at forest edges
• Red-eyed Dove, *Streptopelia semitorquata* - common
• Swamp Palm Bulbul, *Thescelocichla leucopleura* – appropriately named; seen only in loud groups in palm swamp areas!
• Honeyguide Greenbul, *Baeopogon indicator* – common in brush
• Velvet-mantled Drongo, *Dicrurus coracinus* – at forest edge with mixed-species flock
• Tawny-flanked Prinia, *Prinia subflava* – common in low bushes
• Grey-backed Camaroptera, *Camaroptera brevicaudata* – common in low bushes
• Variable (Yellow-bellied) Sunbird, *Cinnyris venustus* – common
• Johanna’s Sunbird, *Cinnyris johannae* – seen on two occasions
• Common Bulbul, *Pycnonotus barbatus* – ubiquitous
By midday, we had reached a deep gully which was heavily forested. Several new species were seen (marked in bold):

- **African Crowned Eagle** (*Crowned Hawk-Eagle*, *Stephanoaetus coronatus*) – a pair circling in the sky and descending into the forest. Our guides knew the bird well and noted that it predated on monkeys and duiker
- **Blue-billed Malimbe**, *Malimbus nitens* – several in low shrubbery at the (primary) forest edge
- **Buff-throated Sunbird**, *Chalcomitra adelberti* – two pairs seen feeding on the flowers of an African Tulip tree
- **Spotted Greenbul**, *Ixontus guttatus* – several groups of the ‘electric bird’ detected
- **Willow Warbler**, *Phylloscopus trochilus* – in mixed-species flocks
- **Slender-billed Greenbul**, *Andropadus gracilitrostris* – not common in the area
- **Grey-chinned (Green) Sunbird**, *Anthreptes rectirostris* – my first sighting of the bird; later proved to be the most common sunbird in the area
- **Crested Malimbe**, *Malimbus malimbicus* – the most commonly encountered malimbe
- **Western Nicator**, *Nicator chloris* – encountered on two occasions; very vocal
- **Forest Robin**, *Stiphrornis erythrothorax* – heard several times at close range from within the forest gloom
- **White-tailed Alethe**, *Alethe diademata* – heard frequently in the forest interior, possibly attending to an ant swarm low to the ground
- **African Shrike Flycatcher**, *Megabyas flammulatus* – only one brown-striped female seen
- **African Paradise-Flycatcher**, *Terpsiphone viridis* – common in mixed-species flocks
- **Western Bearded Greenbul**, *Criniger barbatus* – common in small groups within the forest interior
- **White-tailed Ant-Thrush**, *Neocossphus poensis* – heard in the forest interior
- **Finsch’s Flycatcher-Thrush**, *Stizorhina finschii* – forest interior; only hear once
- **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher**, *Halcyon badia* – heard calling on two occasions
- **Western Black-headed Oriole**, *Oriolus brachyrhynchos* – only one seen
- **Brown-throated (Common) Wattle-Eye**, *Platysteira cyanea* – uncommon; one pair seen
- **African Yellow White-Eye**, *Zosterops senegalensis* – one seen with mixed species group
- **Icterine Greenbul**, *Phyllastrephus icterinus* – several in mid-storey
- **Blue-spotted Wood-Dove**, *Turtur afer* – 2-3 seen during the trip
- **Tambourine Dove**, *Turtur tympanistria* – common throughout
- **Slender-billed Greenbul**, *Stelgidillas gracilirostris* – two seen during the day
- **Great Blue Turaco**, *Corythaëola cristata* – several of this lumbering giant crashing from tree-to-tree

In a forest glade by a stream, a fast flying flash of blue and a tssssip! may have been White-bellied Kigfisher, *Alcedo leucogaster*, but this could not be confirmed.
After several hours birding in high humidity, a decision to take a short-cut back to the river through thick forest proved fortuitous. A bird wave appeared which contained several new species:

- **Red-billed Helmet Shrike, Prionops caniceps** – my #1 bird for the trip, having failed to see it at Gola in April
- **Fiery-breasted Bush-Shrike, Malaconotus cruentus** – my 3000th life bird and a beauty!
- **Lowland Sooty Boubou, Laniarius leucorhynchus** – one viewed at close range at mid-storey

Exiting the forest into plantations of dry-land rice, we birded the forest edges and hillsides for the rest of the afternoon:

- Guinea Turaco, Tauraco persa – several individuals seen at various stages of the trip
- Yellow-Casqued Wattled Hornbill, Ceratogymna elata – a pair flying into the forest
- African Palm Swift, Cypsiurus parvus – relatively common in open areas
- Grey Woodpecker, Dendropicos goertae – one seen foraging in dead tree
- Brown-backed Woodpecker, Picoides obsoletus – ditto above
- Dybowski’s Twinspot, Euschistospiza dybowskii – a pair of this gorgeous bird seen in rice fields; quite confiding

Unfortunately, despite the favourable terrain, we did not find Rock-loving Cisticola, Cisticola emini.

We spent an hour from 21:00 in the evening searching for owls, but were unsuccessful. Calls of an African Wood Owl, *Strix woodfordii*, were heard at approx. 04:00am close to our camp.
Saturday, 26 September

Given the overcast weather and threat of rain, we confined birding to small forest patches around the village for most of the day. The terrain was flat and included plantations, (wet) rice fields, riverine gallery, flooded, and secondary forest areas. A number of new species were seen and added to the trip list:

- **Fraser’s (Scarlet-tufted) Sunbird**, *Deleornis fraseri* – an old bug bear of mine; very similar to a non-descript warbler and usually high in the canopy. For a moment, I was able to see the pectoral tufts (more yellow than red, however)
- **Senegal Coucal**, *Centropus senegalensis* – common in rank herbage
- (African) Moustached (Grass) Warbler, *Melocichla mentalis* – easily seen calling on top of blades of long grass
- **Yellow-bearded Greenbul**, *Criniger olivaceus* – uncommon and localized endemic
- **Yellow-whiskered Greenbul**, *Andropadus latirostris* – common throughout in groups
- **Red-tailed Greenbul**, *Criniger calurus verrauxi* – confusingly named; we saw the western ssp with green-olive tail
- **Grey-headed Bristlebill**, *Bleda canicapillus* – common in sense vine tangles in under-storey
- **Honeyguide Greenbul**, *Baeopogon indicator* – several individuals seen
- **Little Greenbul**, *Eurillas virens* – several individuals seen
- **White-crested Hornbill**, *Tropicranus albocristatus* – unlike any other hornbill; a low growling was detected by our guides (who mistook the calls initially for an owl). Closer investigation off-piste in the forest revealed several birds calling from the cover of dense shrubbery in several low trees. Persistence paid off and eventually two birds were seen very low. Sinclair’s advice that the bird is rarely found in secondary forest.
- **Puvel’s Illadopsis**, *Illadopsis puveli* – distinctive call in dense undergrowth
- **Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher**, *Trochocercus nitens* – detected by quivering monarch-like voice in lower understory; moving with mixed species flock. Easily attracted by playback.
- **Blue Malkoha (Yellowbill)**, *Ceuthmochares aereus* – two seen in palms
- Scarlet-chested Sunbird, *Chalcomitra senegalensis* – would appear to be on the extreme edge of its range; one seen well
- Black-throated Coucal, *Centropus leucogaster* – much less common than the above; a denizen of more forested zones, often heard close to thick shrubbery by water
- Lizard Buzzard, *Kaupifalco monogrammicus* – only the second raptor for the trip; seen inside low trees hunting
- **Melancholy Woodpecker, Dendropicos lugubris** – I had not encountered this split from the Gabon Woodpecker, *D. gabonensis* in Sierra Leone before; later proved to be common in this flooded gallery forested area
- **Red-cheeked Wattle-Eye, Platysteira blissetti** – one of my most wanted birds; a single of this beautiful species in the same habitat as above; highly responsive to playback
- White-throated Greenbul, *Phyllastrephus albigularis* – several seen in group containing other forest greenbuls

We returned to camp for lunch and passed through open fields of elephant grass:

- Red-collared Widowbird, *Euplectes ardens* – very common with displaying males
- Red-headed Quelea, *Quelea erythrops* – common
- Double-spurred Spurfowl (Francolin), *Pternistis bicalcaratus* – covey of up to a dozen seen on trail; also commonly heard in the mornings calling around the village
- Bush Petronia (Lesser Rock Sparrow), *Gymnoris dentata* – one seen perched in a dead tree

We birded again at 16:00 southwards along the road back to the next village. The habitat was mostly open fields (wet rice), palms and small stands of secondary growth:

- Ussher’s Flycatcher, *Musciaca ussheri* – a single on a dead tree hawking insects
- **Black Scimitarbill, Rhinopomastus aterrimus** – a surprise find; one perched on a dead limb and then flew revealing white wing patches
- Copper Sunbird, *Cinnyirs cupreus* – several seen in open country
- White-spotted Flufftail, *Sarothrura pulchra* – commonly heard in swampy areas, but not seen; difficult to access swampy areas
- **Black-and-White-Casqued Hornbill, Bycanistes subcylindricus** – one individual female flew in and perched high on a tree
- Hammerkop, *Scopus umbretta* – single foraging in rice fields
- Copper-tailed Starling, *Lamprotornis cupreocauda* – brief view of a group of 20-30 flying over fields to return to roost at sunset.

We retired early. None of the villagers had discovered any owl roosts (despite our posting a reward earlier in the day).

**Sunday, 27 September**

Travel day to return to Freetown via Kono. Total travelling time: seven hours.

**Total species seen:**

**New Species for life-list: 12**
Our guides, Mohammed and Douda

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