Birding Trip Report
Sierra Leone: Tiwai Island and Kambui (South) Forest Reserve
1-2 November 2014
A spur of the moment decision to take a weekend break from the fight against Ebola, was what the doctor ordered as a stress-relieving, sanity check.

My companion was Kenneth Gbenga (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.

Having learned from Kenneth that the RSPB-managed Gola Forest was currently off-limits to birders, we decided on Tiwai Island, a community-managed conservation area in SL’s most southerly Pujehun District (border with Liberia). Tiwai is almost contiguous with the Gola West Forest Reserve.

We departed Freetown on Friday, 31 October at 14:00 and arrived at our camp site on Tiwai at 19:30. We brought with us all provisions (food, water). Comfortable tents were erected by the local community camp managers. A cook from the local village was hired to prepare three meals per day.

Total cost for Kenneth, myself and our driver, Henry Turay, for two nights accommodation, including guiding and motor boat transfer to the island, was Le. 700,000 (approx. US$ 150).

Our reference was: Borrow and Demey: Birds of West Africa. Helm, 2008. An invaluable source for the area is: Klop, Lindsell and Siaka: The Birds of Gola Forest and Tiwai Island, Sierra Leone, published by the RSPB and revised 2010. The report provides an annotated check-list of the birds of the area (287 species in Gola and 133 on Tiwai).

During a day-and-a-half intense birding on Tiwai, 53 avian species were seen (personal lifers (23) marked in bold). An additional 10 species were seen in three hours’ birding in and around the Kambui (South) Forest, a two-hour drive north from Tiwai towards the important commercial centre of Kenema. Primates are in abundance on Tiwai (Red, Black-and-white Colobus and Diana Monkeys). Chimpanzees were also frequently heard.

Herewith, a chronologically ordered account of species encountered:

31 October

- **Long-tailed Nightjar** (*Caprimulgus climacurus*) – three observed on the dirt paths leading to the boat landing for the transfer to Tiwai Island (19:00)

A Pangolin was also spotlighted feeding on ants in a hollowed knot of a fig tree.

![Fresh-caught Tilapia for our dinner](image)
1 November

- **African Green Pigeon** (*Treron calvus*) – several feeding on a ripe fig at the campsite.
- **Yellow-casqued Hornbill** (*Bycanistes fistulator*) – the most common hornbill seen on Tiwai, approx. 30 birds seen individually and in small flocks. No less than eight species of hornbill have been recorded on the island.
- **Palm-nut Vulture** (*Gypohierax angolensis*) – 5 seen in two days, including brown immature birds.
- **Piping Hornbill** (*Bycanistes fistulator*) – two small groups high in the canopy, very vocal.
- **Little Greenbul** (*Andropadus virens*) – common throughout
- **Green Hylia** (*Hylia prasina*) – the very common resident warbler
- **Tambourine Dove** (*Turtur tympanistria*) – common, call very similar to the wanted Blue-headed Wood Dove (not seen).
- **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher** (*Halcyon badia*) – a calling pair located in the forest mid-storey.
- **Shining Drongo** (*Dicrurus atripennis*) – slightly forked tail; seen as good comparator with:
  - **Velvet-mantled Drongo** (*Dicrurus modestus*) – more common than Shining, but seen in the same feeding flock.
- **Yellow-billed Turaco** (*Tauraco macrorhynchus*) – one heard by KG
- **Roller (sp.?)** – unclear if Broad-billed or Blue-throated – glimpsed brown and blue in flight
- **Yellow-billed Barbet** (*Trachylaemus purpuratus*) – only one seen. Unusual bird with yellow bill and yellow breast contrasting with black bib and long dark tail.
- **White-tailed Alethe** (*Alethe diademata*) – split (?) from the Fire-crested Alethe (*Alethe castanea*); quite common, but heard more often than seen.
- **Sharpe’s Apalis** (*Apalis sharpii*) – common in bushes around campsite
- **Yellowbill (Blue Malkoha)** (*Ceuthmochares aereus*) – seen twice
- **Forest Robin** (*Stiphornis erythrothorax*) – male, a stunning little jewel with bright orange breast in the gloom of the under-storey.
- **African Pied Hornbill** (*Tockus fasciatus*) – common throughout in noisy parties
- **Johanna’s Sunbird** (*Cinnyris johannae*) – commonly seen
- **Blue-throated Brown Sunbird** (*Cyanomitra cyanolaema*) – one male seen
- **Finsch’s Flycatcher Thrush** (*Stizorhina finschi*) – two of this West African endemic seen during the course of the day
- **Rock Pratincole** (*Glareola nuchalis*) – a pair seen of this handsome little migrant (or possibly resident?) on a granite boulder in a tributary of the Moa River. Later, 50+ seen in the late afternoon a mass congregation on a small rock in the main course of the Moa River.
- **Common Sandpiper** (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – small numbers along watercourses throughout
- **Red-rumped Tinkerbird** (*Pogoniulus atraflavus*) – only one seen
- **Buff-spotted Woodpecker** (*Campethera nivosa*) – female seen and then male attracted by playback for confirmation
- **Collared Sunbird** (*Hedydipna collaris*) – several seen
- **Ansorge’s Greenbul** (*Andropadus ansorgei*) – two with rufous belly clearly seen
- **Western Nicator** (*Nicator chloris*) – three seen around the campsite and nearby forest
- **(Cameroon) Sombre Greenbul** (*Andropadus curvirostris*) – (cf. Plain Greenbul) – singleton at the campsite; diagnostic broken eye ring.
- **Swamp Palm Bulbul** (*Thescelocichla leucopleura*) – a gang heard and then easily attracted by playback to the campsite. An unusually large and rowdy bulbul; very confiding
• Yellow-whiskered Bulbul (*Andropadus latirostris*) – common
• Speckled Tinkerbird (*Pogoniulus scolopaceus*) – one seen; in a mixed species flock
• Chestnut-breasted Negrofinch (*Nigrita bicolor*) – one seen in a mixed species feeding flock
• Grey-headed Negrofinch (*Nigrita canicapillus*) – as above
• (African) Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus timneh*) – a pair with one feeding young at a nest hole
• White-browed Forest Flycatcher (*Fraseria cinerascens*) – the most common flycatcher; at least 6 individuals seen

In the late afternoon, we took a boat trip along the main course of the Moa River until sunset:

• African Harrier Hawk (*Polybroides typus*) – one of three seen during the trip
• Common Sand Martin (*Riparia riparia*) – seen flying over the river drinking
• Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) – many; ditto above
• African Finfoot (*Podica senegalensis*) – a pair surprised by the river bank; “skimming” the surface to flee into dense rover bank foliage
• Shining-blue Kingfisher (*Alcedo quadribrachys*) – a singleton along the river bank
• Great Blue Turaco (*Corythaeola cristata*) – 5-6 of these huge birds flying over the river
• Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) – one perched high in a tree over the water
• African Black Swift (*Apus barbatus*) – over the water in high flying flocks
• White-throated Blue Swallow (*Hirundo nigrita*) – curious latin name given its gorgeous glossy royal blue plumage; one individual curiously hunched on a very low tree limb in the middle of the river
• African Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla aguimp*) – a pair on a small island in the river
2 November

We set off from the camp at 07:00 in search again of the key target species: the vulnerable White-breasted Guineafowl (*Agelastes meleagrides*); it ultimately proved elusive, although our local guide believed that some rustling in the understorey may have been our quarry. Other locals told us they see the Guineafowl on a fairly regular basis. During our search:

- Black Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter melanoleucus*) – clearly heard and identified by KB, but not seen
- Green-tailed Bristlebill (*Bleda eximius*) VU – several pairs duetting in thick forest of the lower storey, but not seen
- White-spotted Flufftail (*Sarothrura pulchra*) – several heard and responded to playback but not seen
- Western Black-headed Oriole (*Oriolus brachyrynchus*) – one seen in a mixed flock
- Icterine Greenbul (*Phyllastrephus icterus*) – as above; seen in the same mixed flock
- Yellow spotted Barbet - (*Buccanodon duchailui*) – a beautiful large barbet with a bright red crown; feeding in a ripe fig tree at the campsite.

As the morning’s birding had been slow, we decided to up camp at 11:00am and return to our vehicle on the other bank of the river.

*Leaving our camp at Tiwai Island (KG in foreground)*
We drove approximately two hours to reach Kambui (South Reserve) along a poor and unsealed road. On the way, we stopped to observe:

- **Black Bee-eater** (*Merops gularis*) – a hawking pair of this stunning dark blue bird with a bright red throat
- **Black-and-White Mannikin** (*Spermestes bicolor*) – several in a feeding flock in low trees
- Village Weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*) – very common near human settlements
- Pied Crow (*Corvus albus*) – common near human settlements
- White-throated Bee-eater (*Merops albicollis*) – at least 30 congregated on a dead tree
- **Red-vented Malimbe** (*Malimbus scutatus*) - a family building elaborate nests in oil palms
- Red-collared Widowbird (*Euplectes ardens*) – fully plumed long-tailed males in flight; common by roadside.
A mandatory courtesy visit (with a token payment) was paid on the local Chief, before we could visit the forest reserve. A local lad, John, joined us to show the way. Most of the hillsides had been heavily logged for charcoal and slash-and-burn agriculture. According to KG, the logging was uncontrolled (with the connivance of local forestry officials) and poaching was rife (some from bush meat traders from Liberia). It took us some time to reach the remnants of the “reserve” on top of the highest hills.

The birding was very slow (14:00 – 16:00). The only noticeable sightings were of:

- **Blue-headed Bee-eater** (*Merops muelleri*) – with the Black, the only other purely forest merops; a pair hawking insects on the forest edge
- **Tiny Sunbird** (*Cinnyris minullus*) – very small and perched high on a twig at the top of a tree
- **Yellow-headed Picathartes** (*Picathartes gymnocephalus*) – KG wanted to check in with the colony, the largest he reckoned for Sierra Leone. Over 20 minutes, we observed four birds active around the mud nests on the wall of the rock face.

With light fading, and a long drive ahead of us, we departed Kambui at 18:00 to return to Freetown. We arrived at the capital in just under four hours at 22:00.

David McLachlan-Karr, Freetown, 4 November 2014

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