Senegal

A weekend trip to Djoudj National Bird Park

17-18 March 2018

Synopsis: A weekend trip from the Senegalese capital, Dakar, to visit the National Bird Park (Parc National des Oiseaux) at Djoudj, located 60kms north of the city of Saint Louis. The trip was timed to coincide with the beginning of the Spring migration of some 2 million birds that winter annually in northern Senegal. The park bird list numbers more than 300 species. The sheer volume of avifauna makes for a spectacular spectacle and in my opinion, a real ‘must see’ for birders visiting West Africa.

Logistics: I arranged a private taxi on my arrival from the new international airport (Léopold Sédar Senghor), located (now an inconvenient) one hour from central Dakar, but most convenient for visitors planning to head up-country on RN 1 straight after arrival. The negotiated price was West African Francs (Cefa) 200,000 for 48 hours and the return trip (approx. US$300). My accommodation was booked at the Hôtel du Djoudj – located right next door to the park entrance. Tel: +221 77 405 4033; E-mail: contact@hotel-djoudj.com. Price per night with breakfast is Cefa 37,000. I engaged a local guide to visit the park for Cefa 30,000 per day. Entrance to the park is Cefa 25,000 per foreign visitor. A boat tour of the park can be booked with the hotel receptionist at a very reasonable Cefa 10,000.

Djoudj hosts a huge colony of Great White Pelican, Pelecanus onocrotalus
Having arrived very late the Friday night before, I was rudely awoken at dawn by the cacophony of thousands of birds, among which the call of whistling ducks was distinctly audible. A short walk from the hotel to surrounding marshlands revealed the source of the racket and I stumbled onto hundreds of early risers: White-faced and Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, Long-tailed Cormorants, egrets, herons and ibis. The waders were also present in good numbers: stilts, avocets, plovers, sandpipers, red and greenshanks. The sheer abundance was a delight to behold:
White-faced Whistling Duck, *Dendrocygna viduata*, possibly one of the most abundant species in the park

Fulvous Whistling Duck, *Dendrocygna bicolor* - a lifer for me – having only seen them previous on Lake Geneva! - found intermingled with their far more numerous White-faced cousins

After a rushed breakfast, I met my park guide for the day and we explored the immediate vicinity. A good find was the somewhat cryptic River Prinia, *Prinia fluviatilis* (a lifer) which seems to be quite vocal and easily found in the reeds behind the UNESCO memorial – right at the entrance to the park:
The *prinia* appears to respond to ‘phishing’ and was obviously curious about our presence:

*Prinia fluviatilis* gave good views in both reeds and in the surrounding bushes.
Having scored a special bird, we drove off in my chauffeured vehicle to visit two of the premier birding hides located at Grand Lac and Petit Lac. On our drive, we were fortunate to encounter Arabian Bustard, *Ardeotis arabs* which was feeding close by the roadside:

Unfortunately, we were not to connect with Savile’s Bustard, *Lophotis savilei* – which has been recorded in more arid habitats around Saint Louis.

Another notable species encountered were a few pairs of Collared Pratincole, *Glareola pratincole* which were interspersed with migratory waders:
A less common bird seen was **Chestnut-backed Sparrow Lark, *Eremopterix leucotis***:

We also encountered very large flocks of Barn Swallows and Common Sand Martin on migration north. Despite, the seeming abundance, my guide opined that their numbers had been in decline in recent years due, in his opinion, to the declining number of insects in Europe.

Other more common resident species seen were Laughing and Namaqua Doves, Speckled Pigeon and a fleeting glimpse of what might have been a migrant European Turtle Dove. Also seen were several European Bee-eaters in high flight. In the dry fields at many locations, we came across large flocks of **Sudan Golden Sparrow, *Passer luteus*** (a lifer) feeding on seed on the ground:
We spent the rest of the morning at a series of bird hides especially constructed to give superb views over the parks lakes:

Here we spent several hours marveling at the sheer numbers of water birds preparing for their long journey north:
It was difficult to do justice to the scene through the limiting lens of a camera; but the water was a veritable soup of teeming avian life:

Flamingos, both Greater and Lesser, formed what seemed to be huge rafts in the distance:
Dozens of Marsh Harriers buzzed the flocks at regular intervals looking for opportunity;

A little overwhelmed by the whole experience, we retreated from the midday heat to rejoin our hotel for a delicious lunch of tilapia, chips and the refreshing local Gazelle beer.

In the mid-afternoon, we boarded our motorized dinghy for a tour of the waterways of the park. This I found to be a highly relaxing and really worthwhile compliment to any visit to the park:

* Cruising tributaries of the Senegal River, in the background a pelican roost
As we cruised the waterways, we came across several specimens of *Lesser Moorhen, Gallinula angulata* – a lifer and species that had long alluded me in West Africa – we also saw the much more numerous Common Moorhen and several Allen’s Gallinule:

We approached a huge pelican and cormorant rookery:
And were amazed by the size of the Nile Crocodiles that lurked on the banks around the colony

Also notable in the area were at last a dozen **African Fish Eagle, Haliaeetus vocifer** and isolated specimens of **Yellow-billed Stork, Mycteria ibis:**
With the sun fading, we puttered back to port (having broken down repeatedly), accompanied by a host of Whiskered Terns in breeding plumage:

![Whiskered Terns](image)

After a very appetizing four course dinner – one of the great pleasures of traveling in the former French colonies: onion soup, green salad, grilled fish and chocolate mousse and a nice white Burgundy – I was early to bed for the long drive and flight home to Bissau on the morrow. Overall, a short, but very satisfying trip with three almost unexpected lifers and a window into one of the truly great avian migration destinations in Africa.

David Karr, Bissau, April 2018

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![Warthog and duck](image)

*One of the many warthogs that frequent all habitats within the park, approaching a flock of White-faced Whistling Duck*