Our principal quarry, the Gola Malimbe, wall painting at the Gola National Park HQ

Summary

The Easter long weekend provided a good opportunity to visit the Gola Rainforest National Park in south-eastern Sierra Leone (and before the rainy season). Gola was only declared a National Park by Presidential Decree in December 2010. The park is an amalgam of three almost contiguous reserves: Gola North Forest Reserve, Gola East Forest Reserve and Gola West Forest Reserves. Gola is Sierra Leone’s largest tract of rainforest, covering 71,070 hectares. Surveys show that the Forest is home to more than 330 bird species, and importantly all of the Upper Guinea endemics (except Liberian Greenbul). Despite logging in the 1960s, Gola North hosts some large tracts of primary rainforest which straddles the Liberian border.

The Park is managed by the Government of Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone Conservation Society and the RSPB. At the time of writing, it was expected that the RSPB team, which had left last year due to Ebola, would return in early April to resume management activities.

The birding was relatively easy, but some stamina required for the long walk into the primary rainforest of Gola North for Gola Malimbe (approx. 9 kms in). Tents and camping supplies are necessary, but good supplies of water can be found in the many streams. On Sunday, 5 evening and Monday, 6 April morning, we birded the Gola East reserve. All-in-all, 99 species were seen over two days, including the endemic Malimbe (18 lifers). Unfortunately, we failed to connect with our second priority, White-breasted Guineafowl.
Friday, 3 April

An early start from Freetown (08:00) by very good sealed road to Bo and Kenema. My companion and guide was Kenneth Gbenga, Sierra Leone’s leading birder. We arrived at the Park HQ at Kenema Town at 13:30 and collected the Tourism Officer assigned for the visit, Mohammed. From Kenema it is another two hours on a reasonable unsealed stretch of road to the Gola North Park HQ. By 15:30 we were at the park’s comfortable office and settled into the newly constructed accommodations available for visitors. Comfortable Individual rooms with communal bathrooms are available for 20 guests.

At 16:00, we explored the secondary forest around the HQ and along the trail to the Picathartes site. We did not seek out the Picathartes however, it also being seen quite easily on the Western Peninsula near Freetown. During the casual late afternoon walk we saw a good number of forest outlier species, frequently encountered through most parks of Sierra Leone: Chestnut Wattle-eye, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Superb, Collared and Variable Sunbirds, Common Bulbul, Grey-headed Bristlebill; Slender-billed, Yellow-whiskered, Icterine, Cameroon Sombre and Little Greenbul; Black-headed Oriole, Western Nicator, Shrike Flycatcher, Chestnut-capped Flycatcher, Green Hylia, Yellowbill, Finsch’s Flycatcher Thrush, Yellow-casqued Hornbill (very common), African Dwarf Kingfisher, Yellow-billed Turaco, Forest Robin (heard only) and Green Crombec.
New species for me were:

- **White-throated Greenbul**, *Phyllastrephus albigularis* – uncommon and seen in a small flock at mid-storey with Red-tailed Greenbuls
- **Olivaceous Flycatcher**, *Musicipa olivascens* – a very restricted range species in Sierra Leone, confined to the Gola area.

**Saturday, 4 April**

We set off at first light (06:15) from the camp, through the local (former logging) village (Lalehun) and into the park proper. A buffer zone of mixed agricultural land separates the park from the villagers. Species seen through the morning were (new for me in bold):

- Blue-breasted Kingfisher, *Halcyon malimbica* – only one seen, perched in a cleared forest patch
- Black-necked Weaver, *Ploceus nigricollis* – only one small small group seen in a clearing
- Red-vented Malimbe, *Malimbus scutatus* – the most commonly encountered malimbe
- Speckled Tinkerbird, *Pogonius scolopaceus* - common
- White-throated Bee-eater, *Merops albibcolis* – very common in large groups, but only in cleared areas
- Ussher’s Flycatcher, *Musicipa ussheri* – a small group on a dead tree hawking insects
- Pale-fronted Negrofinch, *Nigrita luteifrons* – an isolated population in the Gola area, not found elsewhere in Sierra Leone
- Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* – in mixed-species flocks
- Buff-throated Sunbird, *Chalcomitra adelberti* – confined to the south east corner of Sierra Leone – one seen in the canopy feeding on flowers
- Lesser Striped Swallow, *Hirundo abyssinica* - common
- Green-tailed Bristlebill, *Bleda eximius* – heard on several occasions in the under-storey, but not seen (VU)
- African Palm Swift, *Cypsiurus parvus* – common in open areas
- Yellow-spotted Barbet, *Buccanodon duchaillui* – one seen
- Thick-billed Honeyguide, *Indicator (minor) conirostris* – one seen feeding in a flowering tree
- Great Blue Turaco, *Corythaeola cristata* – several of this lumbering giant crashing from tree-to-tree
- Blue-headed Wood Dove, *Turtur brehmeri* – a disappointingly brief view of a pair flying
- Square-tailed Saw-Wing, *Psalidoprocne nitens* – relatively common
- Klaas’ Cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx klaas* – several heard calling from high in the tree tops
- African Pied Hornbill
- Naked-faced Barbet, *Gymnobucco calvus* – two seen on the trip, but disappointing not to have encountered the Bristle-nosed Barbet
- African Harrier Hawk, *Polyboroides typus* – we were surprised at how few raptors were seen, this being one of only two in the forest area
- Black-throated Coucal, *Centropus leucogaster* – heard only calling in a logged clearing; without playback it was not prepared to show itself
- Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo, *Cerococcyx olivinus* – one bird seen well in a low tree over the path
- Spotted Greenbul, *Ixotus guttatus* – several groups of the ‘electric bird’ detected
• **White-tailed Ant- Thrush, Neocossphus poensis** – at last my sighting of this skulker, surprisingly exposed on a branch and calling

• Red-tailed Greenbul, *Criniger calurus* – common in low-storey groups

• Shining Drongo, *Dicrurus atripennis* – several seen at mid-storey; often as sentinels with mixed-species flocks

• Johanna’s Sunbird,

• Yellow-bearded Greenbul, *Criniger olivaceous* – uncommon and localized endemic

• Brown-eared Woodpecker, *Campethera caroli* – one seen with mixed flock

• **Little Grey Greenbul, Andropadus gracilis** – finally seen well, small size and restricted tawny flank distinguishing form the very similar Ansorge’s Greenbul

• Yellow-billed Turaco, *Tauraco macrorhynchus* – two seen on the trip

• Slender-billed Greenbul, *Andropadus gracilitrostris* – not common in the area

• Grey-headed Bristlebill, *Bleda canicapillus* – common in sense vine tangles in under-storey

*Crossing a creek near in Gola North by an old British logging bridge*
We came across a largish mixed-species flock which contained some welcome new species:

- **Red-rumped Tinkerbird, Pogoniulus atroflavus** – amusingly termed the “BBC Bird” by our local guides on account of it giving a bell every second!
- **Olive Sunbird, Cyanomitra olivacea** – quite common but a cryptic species, difficult to distinguish
- **Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill, Tockus camurus** – one of our most-wanted species; two seen on the trip and both in mixed-species flocks; a bit like the big, gawky adolescent joining a children’s party – quite a surprise to see with its “jungle red” lipstick on!
- **Little Green Woodpecker, Campethera maculosa** – West African endemic; seen on each occasion in the midst of mixed-species flocks
- **Gola Malimbe, Malimbus ballmani** – also known as “Ballmann’s Malimbe”; our most-wanted species; a family of three tending a low-hanging weaved nest high in the forest canopy; the birds were on the edge of a feeding flock and returned to the flock after briefly tending the nest. Kenneth quipped that another birder had named it: the ‘Neck-breaking Malimbe’!
- **Fraser’s Forest Flycatcher, Fraseria ocreata** – the most commonly encountered flycatcher
- **Chestnut-breasted Negrofinch, Nigrita bicolor** – a few in the same mixed species group
- **Green Hylia, Hylia prasina** – very common everywhere

![Me at our campsite](image)

While the team prepared our camp for the night, I decided to slip away for one hour to try and stake out the White-breasted Guineafowl (reputed to be relatively common and confiding in the area). Unfortunately, no sighting. Attempts to locate several calling Afep Pigeons high in the canopy of some large trees, were also unsuccessful. Return to camp was greeted by the welcome aroma of a wood fire and spicy rice and beans!
Sunday, 5 April

Woke early to a relatively quiet forest. As yesterday evening, I set off with our guide to try and stumble across the Guineafowl, but no luck. We headed back along the same trail out of the primary forest area at 07:00. New birds we saw along the trail were:

- **Latham’s Forest Francolin, *Francolinus lathami*** – I did not expect to see this species, but we eventually spotted three, raking leaves on the forest floor
- **Crested Malimbe, *Malimbus malimbus*** – seen on two occasions; single individuals feeding mid-storey
- Yellow-whiskered Greenbul, *Andropadus latirostris* – common throughout
- **Maxwell’s Black Weaver, *Ploceus albinucha*** – a party of 4-5 feeding like little woodpeckers; this weaver is limited in Sierra Leone to the Gola Forest area
- Forest Robin, *Stiphrornis erythrothorax* – heard several times in the forest gloom
- White-tailed Alethe, *Alethe diademata* – this and the species below were very confiding, attending an ant swarm low to the ground
- Brown-chested Alethe, *Alethe poliocephala* – ditto above
- Buff-spotted Flufftail, *Sarothrura elegans* – replaces the White-spotted Flufftail in the Gola area. Commonly heard in swampy areas – not seen
- Western Bearded Greenbul, *Criniger barbatus* – common in small groups within the forest interior
- Blue-headed Bee-eater, *Merops muelleri* – a pair of this stunning forest bee-eater at the very edge of the primary forest
- Blue-billed Malimbe, *Malimbus nitens* – one in low shrubbery at the (primary) forest edge
- Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, *Pogoniulus bilineatus* – one in the canopy
- Buff-spotted Woodpecker, *Campethera nivosa* – one in a mixed-species flock
- Sabine’s Puffback, *Dryoscopus sabini* – one in the above flock
- **Crested Guineafowl, *Guttera pucherani*** – small covey crossing the path near native gardens
Mid-way pause at the first forest camp

We arrived back at Lalehun Village at 14:00 and decided to drive to Gola East NP to get some birding in before evening. The drive is approximately 90 minutes on an unsealed road. We stopped at the camp HQ at Sileti. On the road into the park and around the park we saw:

- Wooly-necked Stork, *Ciconia episcopus* – 3 perches on a dead tree over a burnt field
- Little Bee-eater, *Merops pusillus* – several hawking insects from dead branches in an open field
- Black Bee-eater, *Merops gularis* – a small group in a cleared area
- Copper-tailed Starling, *Lamprotornis cupreocauda* – brief view of a group of three flying over the forest
- Red-chested Cuckoo, *Cuculus solitarius* – heard calling and then seen flying over the forest
- Swamp Palm Bulbul, *Thescelocichla leucopleura* – appropriately named; seen only in loud groups in palm swamp areas!
- Grey Parrot, *Psittacus erithacus* – a small flock (6-8) flying fast and high back to a roost in the late evening
The entrance to Gola (East) National Park on the local road to the Liberian border

By 19:00 it was too dark to bird and we settled into the comfortable rooms of the researcher’s house for the night.

Monday, 6 April

We birded the open fields around the research station in the early morning light, but were surprised by the lack of activity. The situation remained quiet for most of the morning, but some good species seen (none new to me):

- Chocolate-backed Kingfisher, *Halcyon badia* – only heard and in the early mornings
- African Green Pigeon, *Treron calvus* – large group on a roosting tree at dawn
- Palm-nut Vulture, *Gypohierax angolensis* – several flying above the forest
- Honeyguide Greenbul, *Baepogon indicator* – common in brush
- Hairy-breasted Barbet, *Tricholaema hirsuta* – one feeding on lantana berries
- Tambourine Dove, *Turtur tympanistria* – common at forest edges
- Cameroon Sombre Greenbul, *Andropadus curvirostris* – in dense undergrowth
- Square-tailed Drongo, *Dicrurus ludwigii* - at forest edge with mixed-species flock
- Violet-backed Hyliota, *Hyliota violacea* – one with a flock
- Tawny-flanked Prinia, *Prinia subflava* – common in low bushes
- Red-vented Malimbe, *Malimbe scutatus* – a pair at low hanging nest and feeding young

We departed for Freetown at 11:00am. Overall, a rewarding trip, but if given the opportunity, we probably would have spent more time in the primary forest at Gola North. The accommodation facilities at both Lalehun (North) and Sileti (East) are very good and affordable. The total cost for two night’s accommodation, guiding and porterage was SLL 580,000 (approx. US$ 120). It is good that part of the money is distributed as a local community surcharge to encourage villagers to protect the forest and its wildlife.

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Kenneth and one of the giant land snails commonly found in the forest; the locals call them “Chief’s Meat”, on account of the delicious flavor and lack of bones!