Northern and Central Senegal, 26/3/18 to 6/4/18  

Andy Mears

After some careful research, and advice from bird guide Carlos Abdou Lo together with the thoughts of a couple of top birding mates who have each been to Senegal recently, I was able to plan a successful Easter trip. I was keen to comprehensively cover Senegal and Gambia in two shortish trips whilst making sure the seasons would be right for both. Additionally, Ollie Wardman and I both had a free window for a trip over Easter 2018 to fill.

A few trip reports were also really useful – Birdquest’s, Heegaard/Jensen/Lehmberg Nov17 and Hendriks Feb17 to name a few. Thanks for posting, everyone.

Here are some notes from our recent trip with Carlos guiding. First off, the answer to how to effectively make two shortish trips, with one over Easter, seems to be this:

- At Easter, visit Northern and Central Senegal, going as far south as the Saloum Delta (this would also work earlier in the season), but see my kite notes below.
- Earlier in the season, between Nov and Feb, visit Gambia and Eastern Senegal (Niokolo-Koba NP). Not recommended any later than early March though due to the heat and seasonal bird movements/plumages.

On our Easter trip, the dusty Harmattan desert wind was not a problem. We had a couple of half days in the north with a strong breeze and we could see the visibility degenerating but it didn’t affect birding much at all. It was very hot during the middle of the days throughout but with dawn at 6.30 and dusk around 7.30, there was plenty of time to get all the birding in we needed during the cooler hours. I suspect the heat between 11am and 4pm could frustrate some at this time of the year.

European migrants were still around although I presume in smaller numbers than they would be earlier in the year. Western Bonelli’s Warblers were very common in the north, we saw several superb Montagu’s Harriers, hundreds of hirundines, many Woodchat Shrikes and Northern Wheatears, and a great range of other migrants heading north. It was pretty good in this respect so must be exciting a month or two earlier.

I was dismayed when Carlos told us on 1st April, at Kaolack, that the Scissor-tailed Kites may well have abandoned their winter roost by April. This was a problem that no-one had mentioned to me beforehand as far as I could remember and I had not considered. More details below.

We deliberately allowed plenty of time for this trip and ended up with 12 full days in country. I reckon that really keen and motivated birders could have a similar and worthwhile trip with just eight or nine days, as long as they were prepared to have less chance of connecting with the more difficult species.

We stayed at these locations (with number of nights) and bired the surrounding areas: St Louis (2), Richard Toll (2), Djoudj NP (1), Toubá (1), Kaolack (2) and Toubakouta (3). We day-tripped Podor, more on that below. Having done very well up to Djoudj, we dropped our planned second night there and stayed en route at Touba, an interesting Muslim city. Carlos efficiently made the changes as we travelled and it proved to be a really good option.

Our birding priorities were as follows:

1. Have time for extensive searches for Quail-plover and White-crested Tiger-heron.
2. See Scissor-tailed Kite.
3. See the Sahel specialities.
4. Enjoy Senegal’s wide range of other notable species (e.g. Black Bush-robin and Allen’s Gallinule).

We were lucky and had great success. Notes on a selection of species follow:

White-crested Tiger-heron
With three days pencilled in at Toubakouta, not far north of the Gambia, part of me thought we had allocated too long here - but we might be arriving late after protracted Quail-plover searching and the tiger-heron could take time and still be dipped. Also, it’s Carlos’s home town so he knows plenty of local birding sites.

Birdquest started seeing the species here recently on the adjacent Saloum Delta and they allocate two half-day boat trips, I believe. On this basis, they reckon on having a 50 to 75% chance of scoring. We could potentially make six
boat trips but that would start to get expensive. Two were included in our tour package and we chose to add a third. Low tide and either evening or early morning are the killer combos for having a chance. We were lucky that low tide coincided with dawn while we were there. This little detail would be worth investigating prior even to choosing trip dates as it would be hugely disappointing to turn up and find that low tide was, for example, at 2pm.

**Boat trip 1** – we left at 7am, which was too late really as it was well past dawn by the time we hit the smaller mangrove channels. No views or calls heard but it still felt great. It was nice and quiet with no other boats about and I could well believe that sometime over the next two days, we might connect. We quit around 9.30am.

**Boat trip 2** – left at 6am and while waiting for it to get light at the head of a small channel, we heard a tiger-heron calling. We also came across a Finfoot deep in the mangroves today, a very nice surprise. Later, Carlos glimpsed a tiger-heron as it scooted up a muddy bank and straight into the exposed mangrove root complex on a large channel. I think that if we’d played it cool at this point, we may well have seen this bird. We pushed the boat into the mangrove fringe and tried to see the heron in amongst the roots. Perhaps we should have backed off and simply waited. I bet it would have come back down to resume fishing. Carlos was obviously gutted that we’d missed it.

**Boat trip 3** – left at 6.30am, again slightly late IMHO. We requested a boat with no canopy today as they occasionally get snagged in the mangrove branches of the smaller channels and are then noisy. By 7.30 things were not looking good but on a larger channel, Carlos suddenly exclaimed that he could see one. A tiger-heron was stood in the shallows in amongst a few mangrove roots below a narrow mud bank, about 40m away. We drifted closer and it stayed put giving superb views. It started fishing and stalked along the shallows before cautiously heading up into the mangroves when our boatman had to move around to keep us in position. No cameras between us other than Ollie’s iPhone and we did miss a rare photo opportunity here I admit.

Amazed at our luck, we relaxed and toasted a very successful trip. With time to kill before heading to the airport, we again gently pushed the boat into the mangrove edge to try to relocate the heron. In short, we did and had more good views as it moved through and over the mangrove roots, comically hopping two-footed from root to root at times. Then this happened: the heron purposefully stalked back down to the water’s edge and resumed fishing about 10m away. More astonishing views, it caught a fish after a few minutes and appearing happy, headed back into the mangroves and properly out of site. This was completely surreal and left me in a bit of a daze. Had that really just happened?

So, they can be quite tame if approached with patience and care; and they can be seen as late as 8am. Our individual had little warmth in its plumage tones so I wonder if the mangrove birds have been selected with a greyer, more monotone plumage than other populations. At one point, it flared its crest showing the extensive white plumes, which normally showed merely as a small white flash. It regularly swung its tail in a curious sideways jerk and at one point, extended its neck at 45 degrees. The jetty at our lodge faced an extensive mangrove edge and I think that just occasionally, a tiger-heron must be viewable with a scope from here – worth trying if you find yourself kicking your heels in the evening with a low tide. If by some miracle you did spot one, I suspect a boat could very easily be raised to take you closer straight away.

**Quail-plover**

We had plenty of time allocated to search for these but after just two short sessions, we found a pair. The habitat consists of dry, open areas with plenty of scattered low bushes, each with subtle undergrowth underneath and
around them. There are tonnes of it in Senegal near Kaolack. After five minutes of searching on our third attempt, at a patch of roadside habitat that simply looked good to Carlos, two plovers flew up with fluttering, pied wings and landed just 30m away. We were then able to creep closer and take our time in obtaining good views.

They relaxed and started feeding, bobbing backwards and forwards with one leg lifted and gently placing it on the ground on each forward ‘bob’. After half a dozen bobs, a step forward would be taken and the dance repeated with the other leg. Eat your heart out White’s Thrush and Jack Snipe. One individual was pale and quite plain, the other darker with coarser upperpart markings – male and female perhaps. The plovers let us come within about 10m but also, could be gently herded towards someone if they remained nice and still. One walked past me at just 2m range. We eventually flushed them just once more and they flew about 20m, being easily relocated.

Scissor-tailed Kite
A painful dip for me in Ethiopia in 2010 – but with several thousand wintering close to Kaolack on Kousmar Island, we couldn’t possibly fail in Senegal. Or could we? After Carlos told us they may have all gone by April, we headed down to the roost site anyway just to check. We walked across an extensive dry mud flat to scope across a narrow tidal channel and more flats to a wooded island in the early evening. Distantly perched up were a few kestrels, presumably Commons as surely all the Lessers had headed off north by now. We were a depressed little group when we noticed another small raptor that seemed to be grey... Our luck was in and around 70 Scissor-tailed Kites came in to roost during the course of the evening, and we were thrilled to watch them even if it was at a range of about 1km. Two Hyenas languidly crossing the mud flats were also great to see.

The next evening, we crossed the channel by dugout canoe and stationed ourselves close to the roost trees. Watching the kites cruise in to take their positions in the roost was memorable. Is this the most elegant bird on the planet? It might well be. Our experience was quite magical and a trip highlight but I can only imagine the spectacle when 8,000 kites and 4,000 Lesser Kestrels are present. Kite numbers were as high as 16,000 in 2007 apparently so I presume they are in serious decline. I suppose our birds must have been late migrants or non-breeders and again, we counted around 70. There were probably more on the island out of view I suspect. If like us you visited late in the season, it would be wise to plan your Kaolack days as early in your schedule as possible.

Golden Nightjar
The other disconcerting moment of the trip for me was when I realised that we had no night in Podor pencilled in and that that was the Golden Nightjar location. This meant that we would be restricted to looking for roosting birds during the day. My pre-trip reading had been below par... Carlos willingly tried to change a Richard Toll hotel night for one at Podor by phone but was unsuccessful. Unless the nightjar is not important to a crew, I suggest birders make sure at least one night at Podor is planned to give a spotlighting opportunity should it be necessary. We actually did no spotlighting and I wonder if Carlos simply doesn’t like it.

So we went to Carlos’s best nightjar spot with fingers crossed early morning and ready for some hard work. It’s in sandy semi-desert with sparse bushes and is a two-hour drive from Richard Toll. In the event, Carlos quickly found a roosting bird close to where he has seen them before and this turned into yet another terrific experience.

After scoping, we crept up to the bird, which was roosting in the shade of a bush, and had wonderful close views. It’s
an intricately and beautifully marked nightjar and the closer we got, the better it looked. It’s also another species you can relax with and enjoy once found. If flushed, they don’t fly far at all and can be easily relocated. Cricket Warblers were common in the area although we had already connected at Richard Toll.

Four-banded Sandgrouse
Carlos has a nice stake-out in an area of mixed habitat near Toubakouta. We visited twice at dusk to see the birds coming in to drink and on the second evening, I made a simple screen with an old palm leaf. I was then able to watch them at just 10m range. This area held a good selection of typically Gambian species too.

Arabian Bustard
Mainly mentioned because it was our prime motivation at the amazing Djoudj NP, being a tick for Ollie. We found a male after quite a bit of effort on our afternoon in the park. We’d found tracks earlier and if we’d simply followed their direction, we’d surely have found this bird. As it was, we came across him by chance on our way back to the lodge. The reserve, however, is amazing for the sheer number of waterbirds that inhabit the Senegal River mouth here. We must have had over a million on view at one time. Flamingos, pelicans, ducks and waders. It was jaw-dropping and we were only really looking for bustards. An honourable mention goes to Saville’s Bustard too as it’s a very beautiful bird and we found several during the trip.

Dips
Nothing of real significance or that cannot be seen on a Gambia & Eastern Senegal trip. See the trip reports mentioned above for the full range of specials.

A final few words on Carlos. This is simply reiterating what others have already written about the guy. He is one of the most competent bird guides I’ve ever had the pleasure of spending time with. He doesn’t just know the specialities but can sort out the likes of Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler and Olivaceous Warbler, often at a glance; he knows the difficult raptors; and the tricky waders. He’s genuinely enthusiastic and I’m certain he’d be a regular finder of rarities if he lived here in the UK. He would regularly keep birding while Ollie and I went in search of coffee, for example. He rarely uses playback but will when necessary. He doesn’t carry a camera so has no motivation to ‘get to the front’. He always has your best interests at heart, including getting you in the best position for views.

He takes requests to see specific species very seriously – so be careful what you ask for! His organising is impeccable and he provided a comfy van and excellent driver for our trip. And on top of all that, he’s a really nice chap and fun to be with. Too good to be true? Just watch similar reports trickle in, I’m certain they will. Carlos is also pretty good at responding to email:

carlosToubacouta@yahoo.fr
(the spelling of ‘Toubakouta’ seems variable, make sure you head to the right one if you go)