

Birding trip to the Gambia 10th-17th November5, 2024

10th November saw me arriving at Manchester for my afternoon flight to The Gambia which arrived at 8pm at Banjul airport where I was greeted by my guide for the week Ebrima Sibideh. I arrived at my hotel for the first two days the Badala Beach, the least said about that the better.

11th November

Down the woods and up Kotu Creek with a paddle

Having been advised that breakfast was 07:00 to 10:30 I arranged to meet Ebrima at 07:30, but being Africa the cook arrived at 07:20 with my breakfast finally arriving at almost 08:00.

However the time awaiting breakfast proved not to be wasted, I could hear Pearl Spotted Owl calling and seen the following birds whilst sitting round the pool drinking tea and waiting for my breakfast

- Numerous Hooded Vultures and Yellow-billed Kites flying over and sitting in the trees
- Shikra sitting on the roof
- Palm-nut Vulture flying over
- Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
- There were numerous Doves and Pigeons also seen flying over.

The first port of call was Brufut Woods where African Thrush and Piapiacs were soon added to the list. At the watering station Blue-cheeked Cordonbleu, Black-rumped Waxbill, Spotted, Greater and Lesser Honeyguide, Pygmy and Blue-breasted Kingfisher and Red-billed Firefinch were amongst the birds added to the list.

Next stop was Kotu Bridge where Klaas's Cuckoo, Pied Kingfisher where amongst the birds added to the list along with Western-grey Plantain Eater.

Next was a boat trip along Kotu Creek where the following birds were amongst those added to the list

- Fanti Sawing
- Red-chested Swallow
- Wire-tailed Swallow
- Rufous-chested Swallow
- Abyssinian Roller
- Broad-billed Roller

The numbers of Kingfishers was also rising

- Malachite
- Grey-headed
- Woodland
- Striped
- Pied

The total of Kingfishers recorded on the first day was 7.



Hooded Vulture.



Pied Kingfisher.

12th November.

Close encounter with crocs, and yet another Kingfisher

The day started when I finally gave up on having any breakfast only to hastily followed to the car with a wobbly long bread roll filled with a sausage of some description a cold egg and cold beans.

The first call was to Farasutu Forrest

On the track down to the Forrest the following were amongst the birds seen.

- Blue-bellied Roller
- Red-billed Hornbill
- Grey Hornbill
- Black-winged Bishop
- Diederick Cuckoo
- Black-crowned Tchagra
- The Forrest itself yielded
- Pin-tailed Wydah
- Variable Sunbird
- Avambo Sparrowhawk
- Greyish Eagle Owl
- White-backed Night Heron
- Common Wattle-eye
- Grey-headed Kingfisher
- Woodland Kingfisher

Marakisa River Lodge was the next stop

Despite the bridge over the river being rickety, in the very least, and 2 crocodiles being just below the surface with only eyes and snouts showing we decided to take the challenge.

Once over we then found

- Giant Kingfisher the 8th and last kingfisher species noted
- Yellow-breasted Tinkerbird
- Harrier Hawk
- African Paradise Flycatcher
- Gonolek, were soon added to the list

The next stop was then back to the hotel for a shower. A shave was not possible as the light was at the opposite side of the room to the mirror which was flaked and of no use what so ever anyhow.

We had seen all of the possible Kingfishers, a total of 8, the 9th was Shinning-blue which had finished breeding and moved on to the non-breeding area.



Crocodile. Greyish Eagle-owl and White-backed Night Heron.

13th November

A rapturous day was had

The day started as usual (no breakfast) with me checking out of the hotel and the start of the long drive upriver to Tendaba.

The drive started as the day was to be with sightings of numerous raptors.

- Grey Kestrel
- Shikra
- Dark-chanting Goshawk
- Lizard Buzzard
- Also seen Rufous-crowned Roller

At Kafuta

- Brown-necked Parrot
- Senegal Parrot were seen

In transit the following birds were added to the list

- Harrier Hawk
- Lanner
- Whalberg's Eagle
- Green Woodhoopoe

The raptor watchpoint added the following

- Broad-billed Roller
- Martial Eagle

- Brown Snake-eagle
- Grasshopper Buzzard
- Dark Chanting Goshawk

We arrived at Tendaba Lodge where after checking in and having some lunch and cold beers we visited the hide recording

- Emerald Cuckoo
- Yellow Wattle-eye
- Bush Petronia
- Purple Glossy-starling
- Viteline Maske Weaver
- Red-winged Pytilia
- Village Indigobird.

The day ended with at least 13 species of raptor seen.

After a hot day a cold shower was the order of the day, in fact it was the only option as there was no hot water



Grasshopper Buzzard



Shikra

14th November.

A tiny boat and a huge river, a close encounter with 2 crocs and an indecent proposal

The day started with a boat trip through the mangrove, the trouble being that the mangrove was on the opposite site of the river which by now was around a mile wide with the boat being a dug-out canoe.

I was re-assured however when the boat man handed me a life jacket. I asked him if it would scare the crocs to which he replied no, it will attract them but at least you won't drown.

However it was now too late to turn back with us eventually entering the mangrove.

Numerous Kingfishers were once again seen, however the hoped for Pel's Owl remained elusive. The following birds were amongst those seen

- Pink-backed pelican
- Yellow-billed Stork
- Black Heron
- African Sacred Ibis

- African Spoonbill

On our return to Tendaba we set out for Georgetown where I bought 2 Caramel chock ices to cool down.

We the crossed the river by the Senegambia Bridge when we saw the only Osprey of the tour.

Eventually we arrived at the site for one of the star birds of the trip and the encounter with 2 crocs, the crocodile bird AKA

- Egyptian Plover 2 birds seen.

By this time I was almost passing out the temperature by now must have been 40. The photos of the Plovers were decidedly bad but I was now beyond caring.

The next stop was for another star bird which I managed to get some half decent shots as we had procured some ice for the cooler box (and more Caramel chock ices) which meant that the water was now cold. I could have made coffee with the water earlier in the day it was that warm

- Red-throated Bee-eater

The next stop was at some ancient stone circles for a colony of another star bird, but alas some disturbance at the site meant that the Northern carmine Bee-eaters were not present.

We managed to hustle our way onto a chaotic ferry across the river to arrive at Georgetown where we stayed overnight.

Upon arriving the hostess advised me that she wanted a white man at which point I had to tell her that I now require a 24hr notice for such activities so she was out of luck.

After yet another cold shower (nothing to do with the indecent proposal, it was the only option) we had our evening meal (the food generally was good) a few cold beers and a good night's sleep. After I locked the door!



A tiny boat



A big river



Red-throated Bee-eaters

15th November

Success with the Bee-eaters and another raptor added to the list

After bidding our host farewell we decided to have another try for the Carmine Bee-eaters on the way stopping to add to our list

- Abyssinian Roller (too many to count)
- Rufous-crowned Roller
- Lanner
- Double-spurred Francolin
- Northern Anteater-chat
- Beudouin's Snake Eagle (raptor 20 of the trip)
- Gabar Goshawk
- Grey Kestrel
- Dark Chanting Goshawk
- Exclamatory Wydah, then finally
- Northern Carmine Bee-eater

This meant that we had now seen all of the 8 possible Bee-eaters

- Red-throated
- Little
- Swallow-tailed
- White-throated
- African Green
- Blue-cheeked
- European
- Northern Carmine

All of the African Rollers

- Abyssinian
- Rufous Crowned
- Blue-bellied
- Broad-billed

All of the available 8 Kingfishers

- Malachite
- African Pygmy
- Grey-headed
- Woodland
- Blue-breasted
- Striped
- Giant
- Pied

As well as 20 species of raptor with day 5 not even over yet

Further birds added included

- Scarlet-chested Sunbird
- Greater and Lesser Blue-eared Starling
- Buffalo Weaver
- Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weaver.

Over-night and another cold shower at Kudang.



Carmine Bee-eater



Gabar Goshawk

16th November Day 6

Squeaky bum time, skid marks and taxis Gambian style

Day 6 started well, but more of the end later.

- Grey Hornbill
- Red-billed Hornbill
- Senegal Coucal
- Singing Cisticola
- Gonolek
- White-billed Buffalow Weaver
- Griffon Vulture (the only one of the trip brought the raptor count to 21)

That was before the driver dropped the bombshell as we were driving back to the coast, he was pressing the brake pedal to the floor but nothing was happening.

He did buy some brake fluid but nothing changed, with still 2 1/2 hour drive ahead things did get interesting, but nothing deterred our intrepid driver. Not even cars suddenly stopping ahead he just swerved around, drove off-road for a few hundred yards. When we finally arrived back at Serekunda

after negotiating the rush hour traffic, he had arranged for someone to meet him on the express way, where he exchanged the car for his 7 seater van, whose brakes worked!

Numerous raptors and Rollers were observed during the drive back to The Badala Beach hotel in Serekunda.

After a change of clothing I went down to Kotu Bridge on my own to do some last minute birding adding to the list

- Marsh Sandpiper
- White-faced Scops Owl.

I decided to treat myself to a meal outside the hotel tonight (almost the last supper)

A rather tasty steak, 3 large ones in fact, a beer and a couple of double Grey Goose vodka for the princely sum of £10 toasted the fact that I had managed to survive the day.



Red-billed Hornbill, Senegal Coucal, Gambian Taxi

17th November Day 7

Monkey business, A suicidal chicken, 5 minutes of magic birding and a hoot of a day

While sitting around the pool, not eating any breakfast the family troop of Green Vervet Monkeys visited the pool area from the small wood inside the hotel.

The last day started at the Golf course next to Kotu Bridge getting off to a good start

- 3 White-faced Scops owls
- Pearl-spotted Owl
- Giant Kingfisher
- Harrier Hawk
- Wire-tailed Swallow

It was now time to go to the coast for the first time on this trip.

The target was just one bird, probably not the most inspiring target but a new bird in any case.

The place in question was Tanji beach where the following were in evidence

- Caspian Tern
- Common Tern Royal Tern
- Little Tern
- Brown-headed Gull before the target bird was finally found
- Kelp Gull.

The beach at Tanji was chaotic as the tide had just come in, so had the fishing boats with the men unloading their catch for the women to bring to the beach.

On the beach were shelves of bamboo covered with leaves, which were in turn covered by salt to preserve the days catch.

There were also shelves containing trays which had smoldering charcoal on which fish were being barbequed. Now you would think that it would be foolhardy for a chicken to be wandering about at a barbeque but not at Tanji as they were everywhere running about underneath the barbequed fish. However they did seem to survive.



Chicken



Kelp Gull

Next stop Tujering Forrest, a coastal remnant forrest where the following birds were found

- Chestnut Bellied Forrest
- Yellow-billed Shrike
- Grey-backed Camaroptera
- Sudan Golden Sparrow
- Whistling Cisticola

It was now time to make another visit to Brufut Woods which is a wood owned by the local community whose main income is from tips given by visiting birders. We were taken to stakeouts for the following 2 birds

- Verreaux's eagle Owl the third owl for the day and 4th for the trip
- Long-tailed Nightjar

We then waiting by the cleared area with seating where there were a number of watering pools and bowls to see if any of the special birds of the forrest came to drink.

The first visit had been in the morning whereas this visit was in the late afternoon, the birds were thirsty by this time which was when the magic 5 minutes happened

- Stone Partridge
- Pygmy Kingfisher finally lingered
- Blue-breasted Kingfisher came to bathe
- Green Turaco
- Yellow-throated Leaflove
- Oriole Warbler

I missed the Grey-headed Bristlebill unfortunately



Green Turaco



Oriole Warbler

Next stop was back to Kotu Bridge for the driver to have an update on his car repair, whilst there the following 3 birds became the last 3 that I noted

- White-crowned Robin Chat
- Western Grey Plantain-eater
- Grey Plover

It was then to the airport for the journey home where we required radar assistance to land at Manchester due to the fog. The car needing ice to be scraped off the windows with the drive home on the M56 needing to be navigate through thick fog and 30mph driving speeds.

Quite a difference from the blistering Gambian heat.

But at least I could have a warm shower with a breakfast to start the day.

All in all a great trip full of birds and, being Africa, always interesting and sometimes a bit scary.

I haven't completed a full count but it was around 200 birds with 30 being new.

Last time without a guide, apart from 2 occasions, we has 202 species.

Could have easily beaten that this time but I decided to target some specific species so we only visited the coast for 2 hours. We could have increased the number of Terns and waders significantly also some forrest birds found at the coast, but I chose to target specific species and linger a while photographing some of the birds.