

## Colourful Birds in the Gambia - by Chris Kling

The Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa. It is so small in fact that when I tried to find it on Google Maps, the computer showed me a map of Senegal. It took me a moment to realise that The Gambia is completely surrounded by Senegal except for the bit where the river meets the Atlantic Ocean. The country is just a thin strip of land 320km long, on either side of the River Gambia and is only about 25-30km wide north to south for most of its length.

The country is flat and its biggest hill is only 53m high. The climb up to the Cow and Calf from Ilkley is higher. All of The Gambia was originally covered by various types and densities of wooded grassland but crop planting, grazing animals and the need for firewood has meant much of the woodland has been cleared. However, many isolated large trees and pockets of woodland do still remain and these are magnets for the birds. The River Gambia influences most of the countries' habitats and is also used extensively for irrigation. Mangrove swamps occur along the tidal length of the river with salt marshes and then freshwater wetlands behind them.

I booked a 10 day trip with Naturetrek in November 2013. This time of year is a particularly good time for birding in The Gambia as the resident species are boosted by European migrants heading south for the winter. Some stay and overwinter whilst others feed up for a few days before heading further south. Whimbrel are very common and we saw hundreds whereas Curlew are quite rare and we only saw two. Other common migrants included Redstarts, Whitethroats, Willow Warbler and Swallows but enough of these familiar birds, it was the West African species that were the stars of the trip.



Our guide, Mamadou Warry Jallow, met us on the first evening at the Bakoto Hotel. We had a quick wander along the road outside the hotel where the locals wondered why we were admiring the Laughing Doves (their equivalent of our Collared Doves), and then Mamadou explained our trip itinerary in more detail. We would spend a couple of days birding around the capital Banjul, before heading inland following the River Gambia. We would be stopping at two camps along the river visiting a wide variety of habitats before returning to Banjul for two more days at the coast.

The birding around Bakoto Hotel itself was excellent. It overlooked a small, tidal creek and some mangrove swamp where Senegal Thick-knees, Spur-winged Lapwing and Pied Kingfishers were common. Behind the creek were some rice fields where there were Little Bee-eaters and Blue-breasted Rollers. Further back was a sewage works which was a bit pongy but we did see some Black Winged Stilt and three types of starling with spectacular iridescent plumage. Two of them looked pretty much the same but Mamadou could pick out the clinching ID features with ease. I couldn't tell the difference between the Purple Glossy Starling's yellow eyes and the Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling's orange eyes at 50m so I stuck with the Long-tailed Glossy Starling which conveniently had a long tail.

On the first two days, we visited the Abuko Nature Reserve, Farasuto Forest and Tanji Beach and Bird Reserve with many other frequent stops along the roads to view the species spotted by our guide as we were driving along. Every telegraph wire seemed to have Rollers or Bee-eaters perched on it. The forested areas had various woodland kingfishers with Hornbills and Turacos in the canopies. Wetland pools attracted herons, egrets and the odd-looking Hamerkop which has a crest that makes its head look a bit like a hammer, hence its German name 'hammer-head'. Sunbirds flitted about in many hedgerow bushes and one of my favourites, the Red Bishop (photo) was a common sight displaying from the tops of high grass stalks.

The Farasuto Forest Community Nature Reserve is a remnant of dense, wet, evergreen jungle which is now surrounded on three sides by farmland and by the River Gambia to the north. This type of habitat is now rare in The Gambia and the residents of the local village Kuloro know the importance of the forest. In the last few years, they have adopted a management plan to survey the reserve and are developing plans to conserve the habitat for the benefit of the wildlife and local community. The nature reserve only covers about 4 hectares but is extremely important for some forest only dwelling species. The dense vegetation and continuous tree canopy cover means that it is dark within the forest and visibility is reduced to a few metres. We heard far more

than we saw but we did see one of the forest specialists, the Little Greenbul.

On the third day we headed inland where the country becomes drier and much, much hotter. Mamadou was in charge of the cool box (sometimes using it as a seat because the van was not air conditioned) and dished out bottles of Sprite and Fanta as we went. His position at the front of the minibus gave him a good vantage point to pick out birds as we travelled. Specks high up in the sky almost always turned out to be raptors and during the trip, we saw 29 raptor species with Bateleur, Martial Eagle and White-headed Vulture being the highlights.

We stopped overnight at Tendaba Camp located on the southern shore of the River Gambia. The hotels away from the coast were a little basic and the bathrooms seemed to have the option of either a working light bulb or a water supply to shower but not both. The food however was excellent and included a lot of fish. European tourists pick daintily at a whole fish leaving

the head, spine and tail neatly on the plate. The Gambians on the other hand won't waste any food and start at the tail, eat bones and all leaving nothing but a few bits of skull.



Day four was spent travelling to Georgetown, our furthest point inland and about 250km from the coast. The Gambia has two main roads running parallel on the north and south sides of the river. There are also many bridges and causeways crossing the numerous streams and some quite big tributary rivers feeding the main river. The causeways were excellent view points for scanning the wetlands for birds and also meant we didn't need to bother straying too far from the van in the heat. They are also the most likely areas to find the classic Gambian bird that everyone wants to see. The Egyptian Plover (photo) can prove elusive as it dodges around the rocks on the shore line but our group had no problems and we saw some at a couple of locations.

Our few days around Georgetown started with a boat trip on the River Gambia to get close views of the river birds like the African Darter, Grey Headed Kingfisher and the Swamp Flycatcher which is one of the few birds we saw that was genuinely drab. An Oriole Warbler seen flitting through the mangroves was much more colourful. We also saw a family party of hippos,

a crocodile, a huge water monitor lizard and a snake which had swam a kilometre from one side of the river to the other and wasn't too pleased to have us lot in the way taking photos.

Back at Georgetown, Mamadou's local knowledge took us straight to a roosting Verreaux's Eagle-owl. It was asleep so we could see its unusual pink eyelids. We explored many habitats around Georgetown seeing new birds at every new site. The dryer scrub terrain suited one of our target birds, the Carmine Bee-eater (photo) and we found a tree full with a few Red-throated Bee-eaters nearby for added value.

We stopped again at Tendaba Camp on our return journey and took another boat trip this time across the river and deep into the mangrove swamp creeks. Herons, egrets, storks and pelicans were our intended birds and in total we saw 16 different species including the massive Goliath Heron (photo) which looked really odd balanced on the highest branch of a dead tree.



Our last few days back at Banjul allowed us to explore the coastal area again trying for some of the birds we missed. Mamadou did forget to bring his binoculars on one day so we had a brief detour back to his house to fetch them and he just happened to have two roosting White Faced Owls in his garden. I think he forgot his bins on purpose and was just showing off.