

The Gambia 25/01/2011 - 2/02/2011 - by Phil Hill

Myself, Martin Bevan, Rob Gaze, Mike Hogan and Martin Bell, having been to Europe for the last two years decided to try Africa this year and booked a weeks birding holiday to The Gambia via Thomas Cook staying at the Mansea Hotel in Kololi and flying from Birmingham Airport . Martin Bell was the only one to have visited The Gambia before and that was 20 years ago.

The cost was £405 - extras included airport car park £20, Yellow Fever Vaccination £50 and Malarone tablets from £35 to £49.

We also hired a guide before we left, Junkung Jadama known to everyone as JJ (he has a very informative website) initially for 4 days but in the end for 5.5 days.

The flight out took 6.5 hours (the return 6 hours) arriving about 4 o'clock in the afternoon and the first bird seen getting of the plane at Banjul airport was a Black Kite. The airport was quite busy as a Gatwick flight had arrived just before us so getting through customs took a while. However we were soon on the bus for the half hour drive to the hotel where Blue-bellied Rollers, Speckled Pigeon, Laughing Doves, Piapaic, House Sparrows, Hooded Vulture and the very common Pied Crows were observed.

As we turned off the main road to the track down to the hotel we had our first experience of the laid back nature of the people. The bus had to drive over a football pitch to get to the track but there was a game going on, no problem we just drove down the right wing inside the linesman and no one batted an eyelid.

We checked into the hotel quickly where JJ was waiting for us to work out an itinerary for the trip. We then took a quick walk to the beach and around the hotel gardens where Broad-billed Rollers x 9, Fine Spotted Woodpecker, Spur-winged Plover, Senegal Coucal, Common Bulbul, African Palm Swift, Cattle Egret and some flyover Hammerkops were found.

26/01/2011.

We had arranged with JJ to do some local walks around the Kotu Bridge, Creek, Golf Course, Casino Track, Sewage Works area on the first day and JJ arrived at 7.45 as arranged with his driver Bully Bully. The drive across town was quick and we were soon on Kotu Bridge and the birding began in earnest. It was amazing, the large number of birds and nearly all of them ticks for 4 of us. Senegal Thick-knees, Wattled Plovers, Striated Heron, Pied Kingfisher, Malachite Kingfisher, Blue-breasted Kingfisher, the ubiquitous Village Weaver, Splendid Sunbird, Common Wattle-eye, Long-tailed Cormorant, Bronze Mannikin, Caspian Tern, the very colourful Yellow-crowned Gonolek, African Thrush, Long-tailed Glossy Starling, 2 Red-necked Falcon (we to see at least two more later on that day), Western Reef Heron, Mourning Dove, Red-eyed Dove, Western Grey Plantain Eater, Grey-headed Gull, Yellow-billed Shrike, Wire-tailed Swallow, Black Egret as well as lots of European migrants.

We then moved on to walk around the Creek and the Casino Track but first JJ had a nice surprise for us a White-faced Scops Owl roosting in a tree next to the road. On the walk the birds just kept appearing including Beautiful Sunbird, Ringed-necked Parakeet, Black-headed Heron, Northern Black Flycatcher, Red-bellied Flycatcher, African Paradise Flycatcher, 4 Oriole Warblers together (JJ got quite excited saying he had only ever seen 2 together before), Lizard Buzzard, Red-billed Firefinch, Buffalo Weaver, African Jacana, White-faced Whistling Duck, Green Wood Hoopoe, Red-billed Hornbill, Vinaceous Dove, Northern Crombec, Red-chested Swallow, Blue-cheeked Cordon Bleu, Shikra, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Little Bee-eater, Purple Glossy Starling, Black-billed Wood Dove, Green-backed Camaroptera, Grey-headed Sparrow, Rufous-crowned Roller and Grey Kestrel.

We then stopped for lunch at a restaurant called Kunti Kinti on the beach where we stayed

for a few hours enjoying a very good meal and a few refreshing drinks. JJ then rejoined us at 3.30 to walk around the Sewage works and Golf course. The Sewage Works were quite disappointing, as only one of the four pools was full and another was being filled at the time. However some good new birds were found including Little Swift, Intermediate Heron, Sacred Ibis as well as lots of other herons, Bee-eaters and Hirundines and the more common birds.

It was then back to Kotu Bridge to cross over the mud to get to the Golf Course. Halfway across the mud Mike picked out 5 Black-headed Plover in between some reeds on the mud. The course itself give us lots more new birds and ticks including our first Bearded Barbets of the trip, Variable Sunbird, Northern Red Bishop, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Black-capped Babbler, Senegal Parrot, Double-spurred Francolin, Fork-tailed Drongo and then on the way back Martin Bell found our first Grey-headed Kingfisher.

It was then back to the hotel for a quick look around the garden where the local goat took a fancy to Mike's rear end. Luckily for Mike the goat was tethered but gave the rest of us a good laugh.

27/01/2011

Bully picked us up at 7.30 and we made our way to Lamin Rice Fields picking up JJ on the way.

This was a only a quick walk but turned up some cracking birds including our first Giant Kingfishers and Grey Hornbill but the highlight was JJ finding a male Painted Snipe in the reeds. There was some panic for the next few minutes because not everyone could get on it. I found it and Martin Bell said he had found it in his scope - he hadn't he had found another male sitting close by. Eventually everyone got on the original bird which proceeded to walk back and forth across a small pool totally in the open for a few minutes. We were ecstatic this being one of our most wanted species. But it hadn't ended, on the other side of the pool JJ found another four Painted Snipe but unfortunately we could only get onto one more each.

We then walked down the road to Abuko trying to avoid the large ants which could give a nasty bite on the ankles and legs.

Abuko itself although turning up some real good ticks was a little disappointing, one of the main pools was largely overgrown and one of the hides had collapsed.

The birds seemed to congregate in certain areas of the reserve either low in the undergrowth or with other species high in the canopy. In one small area near the main hide we found Little Greenbul, Grey-headed Bristlebill, Snowy-crowned Robin Chat, Orange-cheeked Waxbill, Lavender Waxbill and Black-necked Weaver foraging low under some bushes. From the hide itself we found our first Palm Nut Vulture sitting on a nest, Green Turaco, Violet Turaco, African Pied Hornbill and our first Osprey flying past. Further along the path JJ found another target species roosting in a bush a White-backed Night-heron, not that far from us but very difficult to see. We then found a canopy feeding flock including Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Collared Sunbird, Yellow-fronted Apalis and our first Swallow-tailed Bee-eater. Another bird very difficult to see JJ found low in the undergrowth the stunning Western Bluebill.

It was then on to Lamin Lodge for lunch where on the boardwalk entrance some of us saw a Mouse Brown Sunbird at a very close distance. Lunch was eaten on the top floor of the lodge overlooking the mangroves and river where Marsh Harriers, Sandwich and Gull-billed Terns kept us occupied.

After a few hours break we then walked around the surrounding areas, new birds found were a perched Crested Eagle, Lanner, Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starling, Brown Babbler. Other birds included Zitting Cisticola and Black-shouldered Kite.

It was then back to the hotel via the football pitch again but after beating the left back we were fooled by the linesman calling us offside.

28/01/2011

Today we had arranged with JJ to take us to Tendaba where we would stay at the Safari Camp there with some stops on the way.

The first stop turned out to be Faresatu Forest a small but very good reserve where we picked up amongst others Mottled Spinetail, Black-rumped Waxbills, African Harrier Hawk, Green Crombec and Leaflove. Also Giant Kingfishers, Senegal Thick Knees, Violet Turaco and another roosting White-backed Night Heron. On the bank of one of the pools was our first Nile Crocodile.

It was then on to Pirang where from near the car park we had our first views of Pink-backed and Great White Pelicans. The shrimp farm itself was not being used that year so we had to walk a good few miles to find some water but boy was it worth it, Caspian Terns by the score with some Lesser Crested Terns amongst them, Slender-billed Gulls, Little Terns. Lots of waders including Marsh Sandpipers, Little Stints by the dozen, Black-winged Stilts, Dunlin, Kentish Plover, Curlew Sandpiper and best of all a Kittlitz's Plover. JJ then found 5 Yellow-billed Stork sitting in a tree at the far end of the lake. Hirundines overhead included Rufous-chested Swallow, House Martin and Red-rumped Swallow. On the walk back an Avocet was a surprise and new ticks included Quailfinch, Crested Larks, Marsh Harrier, Subalpine Warbler, Northern Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike and Willow Warbler.

On the road up to Tendaba frequent stops found us new birds like Grasshopper Buzzard, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Abyssinian Roller, Namaqua Dove and Oxpecker. However the best was yet to come when Martin Bevan and myself shouted for the car to stop as there were some large birds in a field some distance in front. As the car slowed the birds showed themselves to be a family party of 6 Abyssinian Ground Hornbills. JJ was totally ecstatic saying he had never seen or heard of such a large group as this. A truly awesome sight.

When we got to Tendaba we quickly booked into our rooms and headed straight to the river where we got into a boat for a trip around the mangroves hoping for Goliath Heron and with fingers crossed, Finfoot. Unfortunately neither appeared but African Darter, Woolly-necked Stork, White-throated Bee-eater, Lesser Blue-eared Glossy Starling were some compensation. Mouse Brown Sunbird showed for those who missed it earlier and our third White-backed Night Heron was observed in a mangrove. Everybody but me also saw a Clawless Otter.

The day was still not over as JJ took us back onto the road into Tendaba to look for Nightjars. He said Long-tailed Nightjars were the most likely and Standard-winged a long shot. However the first birds to show were female Standard-winged Nightjars, then Bully the driver shouted that some birds were flying close to him further down the road. We rushed down but unfortunately only Rob Gaze and myself got onto the bird a male Standard-winged with its trailing tails making it look like two birds flying above each other.

Five very hungry birders (not eaten since breakfast) then went back to the camp for a fantastic supper of Bush Pig, Chicken, Fish, Vegetable Casserole, Potatoes or Rice.

29/01/2011

Another early start with a nice breakfast of omelettes and a short drive to Tendaba Airfield and some local fields which turned out to be one of the best days of the trip.

Fist up at the airfield were Bruce's Green Pigeon, Spur-winged Geese flying over, Green Pigeon and some Double-spurred Francolin which Mike and myself had missed at the golf course.

We then walked across some nearby fields where the birds came thick and fast Pygmy Sunbird, Bush Petronia, Yellow-fronted Canary, then Rob found a small party of Temminck's Coursers. JJ found two Striped Kingfisher perched on top of a distant tree, a

distant Black Wood Hoopoe was also observed in a distant tree, European Bee-eaters flew over and two Viellot's Barbets perched quite close. A flock of Guinea Fowl took off and a Spotted Thick Knee was flushed and then observed on the ground. Finally a Gabor Goshawk was seen flying in and we had good views as it walked along the field.

The next stop was Kiang West Forest Park.

On the way in a Hoopoe flew up in front of the car which was a pleasant surprise. A walk across the park found lots of new birds including Green-backed Eremomela, African Golden Oriole, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Brown-rumped Bunting, Rufous Cisticola, Black-crowned Tchagra, White-shouldered Black Tit, Bru Bru, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weaver, Beaudouin's Snake Eagle, White-crested Helmet Shrike, White-backed Vulture and Martin Bevan found another target bird a Bateleur.

Next stop was Kampanti Rice fields for a short but profitable stop. Here we found Black Crakes, Brown Snake Eagle, Yellow-throated Leaflove and Pied Winged Swallow.

The last stop was near the Faraba-Bantu Track where JJ knew of a roosting tree for another sought after bird the Brown-necked Parrot and true to form there were four birds perched at the top of the tree.

30/01/2011

Today JJ was unavailable in the morning so we arranged for Bully to pick us up at 7.30 and take us to Tanji for a morning's birding by ourselves.

Tanji woods we found quite difficult because most of the birds were of the skulking type, we did however find a Singing Cisticola, Fanti Saw Wing, Melodious Warbler, Grey Woodpecker, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Viellot's Barbet, Little Bee-eater, Variable Sunbird, Mottled Spinetail, Wattle Eye and that well known phenomenon the singing bush otherwise known as a Nightingale. We then travelled the short distance to Tanji village to observe the roosting gulls and terns and for a spot of sea watching.

On the beach new birds found were Royal Terns, Kelp Gulls and Village Indigobird, also lots of the other terns and Slender Billed Gulls were present. Offshore was Pelican Island where we could see the two types of Pelicans, White-breasted Cormorants and loads of Ospreys flying towards the mainland. Seawatching was productive with Arctic and Pomarine Skuas showing quite well.

We then went back to the hotel for a lunch before meeting JJ later for a trip to Faraba-Bantu Bush Track.

This turned out to be another terrific few hours birding. JJ first stopped at a local village to find a local guide who took us to a roosting tree of two Greyish Eagle Owls, the female being very difficult to see the male being much more obliging. We then walked along the track for awhile where JJ found two of another target bird Martial Eagle and then found another. Three Martial Eagles in about 15 mins, amazing. Other birds found were European Bee-eater, White-crested Helmet Shrikes, Pied Flycatcher.

Then a drive down another rough road to the middle of nowhere but birds seemed to like it. Found here were Black-winged Bishop, Mosque Swallow, African Hawk Eagle, Little Weaver and our only Montagu's Harrier.

We drove back to the hotel and went across the road to a small bar which we had found to be reasonable and with decent food. Sitting outside at the rear we were relaxing when I saw a large crab of about 8 inches long walking along a concrete path. Martin Bell, Mike and myself went over to take a closer look. Martin decided to pick it up and the crab very smartly and quickly got hold of his finger. Mike was trying to pull the crab off, I was of no use what so ever as I was bent over double laughing. Rob Gaze said he couldn't stop laughing at me laughing at Martin. Finally Claudia as the crab became known was removed and Martin sat down to take all the ribbing he so richly deserved.

31/01/2011

Our last full day JJ said he would take us out near the Senegal border to a few good sites he knew.

The first site was called Tuejering Woods which once again turned out some great new birds including Cardinal Woodpecker, Brown-backed Woodpecker, Martin Bevan found a pair of Senegal Batis, Copper Sunbird, Lesser Honeyguide, White-fronted Blackchat, Whistling Cisticola, African Hobby and Klass's Cuckoo. Other birds were Striped Kingfishers, African Golden Oriole, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Fine Spotted Woodpecker, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weaver, Senegal Parrot and Beautiful and Variable Sunbird. Next stop was Kartong was a great habitat comprising of a few lakes. Only one new bird here Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling but other good birds included Purple Heron, White-headed Whistling Ducks, Snipe, Jacanas, Black Crake, Quail Finch, Reed Warbler, Palm Nut Vulture, Black Egret and right at the end of the walk two Purple Swamp Hens.

Another drive to a place JJ said he had only found recently Stala Birding and Fishing Adventure Camp. We turned off the road down a rough and dusty track through some trees to some small shacks on the river bank. JJ informed us he had booked us some lunch here. As we had arrived on time food was served within ten minutes. The food was butterfish, various vegetables and rice and the presentation would have shamed some restaurants and to top it all it was delicious and also very reasonable. After the meal and the boat trip not for another 1.5 hours we decided to take a little walk by ourselves while the staff and JJ relaxed in the shade. We walked down to the shoreline so we could scan the waders and gulls on the opposite bank (Senegal). Nothing new so we went further down the bank and started scanning there and Martin Bell found two White-fronted Plover. Then Mike found a bird flying towards us, one we hoped to see but didn't dare believe we would a African Fish Eagle. We wondered back to tell JJ and there was lots of high fives for everyone.

The boat trip then turned up another Fish Eagle perched on a tree, African Spoonbill and two Goliath Herons, the second one giving us stunning views of its enormous size. Also one tree had at least 24 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters in it.

JJ had one more surprise for us on the way home. He suddenly told Bully to pull in at the side of the road and proceeded to call a Pearl-spotted Owlet in, a bird we had struggled to find all week.

We then drove back to the hotel and said goodbye to JJ (Bully was taking us to Brufut Woods for our last morning).

01/02/2011

Our last morning saw us out of the hotel at 7 o'clock for the short drive to Brufut Woods. We soon had our first new bird which was another we had really struggled with all week Blue-spotted Wood Dove (there were dozens at Brufut), then another in Pin-tailed Wydah. We then tried to locate a local guide to help with two special birds on our want list. As we waited another guide with a visitor showed us another White-faced Scops Owl and some Yellow White-eyes flew into the same tree.

We then found a guide called Habba who said he could help. A few yards up the track he found another White-faced Scops Owl, a Violet Turaco, Grey-headed Bristlebill. Then he found the first target bird a Verreaux Eagle Owl roosting out in the open, unfortunately not for long as Pied Crows were mobbing it. He then proceeded to take us to the next roosting site for our second target bird the Long-tailed Nightjar. And there on the forest floor were the male and female Nightjars superbly camouflaged in the leaf litter. He then found us two more ticks to finish - Stone Partridge which only some of us could locate and then a bird we thought we had missed for the trip, another target bird, a pair of Four-banded Sandgrouse.

Overall a most enjoyable trip with a thoroughly recommended guide in JJ who was always on time, pleasant, and his sight, hearing and concentration are second to none. Bully his driver is also recommended, a very helpful person who seems to know everyone. We ended up with a trip list of around 262 birds (not everyone getting on to every bird) also a few birds heard but not seen.

Also seen were Green Vervet Monkey, Patis Monkey, Red Colobus Monkey, Western Baboon, Bushbuck, Western Clawless Otter, Crawshay's Hare, Gambian Fruit Bat, Gambian Sun Squirrel, Striped Ground Squirrel, Nile Monitor, Nile Crocodile, Agama Lizard, Brown-Flanked Skink, Durinal Dwarf Gecko, Olive Sand Snake and countless butterflies and moths.