

## **ITINERARY**

### **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> October**

Morning flight from Gatwick to Banjul. Transfer to Senegambia Hotel. Late afternoon birding in hotel gardens.

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> October**

Morning birding at the Casino Cycle Track, Kotu Ponds/Stream and Fajara Golf Course. Return to hotel at lunchtime. Late afternoon birding at Brufut Woods.

### **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October**

Morning birding in Abuko Forest. Lunch at Lamin Lodge. Late afternoon birding at Lamin and Abuko ricefields.

### **Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October**

Morning birding at Tanji on coast side of road and near lagoon. Return to hotel at lunchtime. Late afternoon birding at Camaloo Corner/Bund Road/Old Cape Road.

### **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> October**

Morning birding at Bonto ricefields, Pirang shrimp ponds and the Farara Banta Bush Track. Early afternoon break at Marakissa River Camp with mid-afternoon birding nearby.

### **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> October**

Morning birding at fields near Yundum and Yarambamba. Return to hotel at lunchtime. Late afternoon birding at Bijilo Forest Park.

### **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> October**

Morning birding at Tanji on both sides of road and along beach. Return to hotel at lunchtime. Late afternoon birding in hotel gardens.

### **Friday 28<sup>th</sup> October**

Morning birding in Abuko Forest. Return to hotel for early lunch then transfer to airport for afternoon flight to Gatwick.

## **DAILY DIARY**

### **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> October**

At Banjul we got on the bus somewhat later than expected, partly due to a slightly delayed flight and partly due to a somewhat haphazard system at baggage reclaim. The transfer to the hotel was mercifully quick, courtesy of the new road, so we were spared further jokes from our courier! We put our bags in our rooms and spent an hour or so walking round the hotel grounds, familiarising ourselves with several species including Bearded Barbet, Broad-billed Roller, Blackcap and Brown Babblers, Grey Woodpecker, Senegal Parrot, Western Grey Plantain-Eater, Red-billed and Grey Hornbills, Beautiful Sunbird, Yellow-billed Shrike, Speckled Pigeon and Piapiac. Little and Palm Swifts were noted overhead. We started to sort out Red-

eyed, Vinaceous and Laughing Doves and also studied the Long-tailed, Bronze-tailed and Purple Glossy Starlings carefully so that we were able to pick out two Greater Blue-eareds amongst them. It was a super start since the views of everything were so good. David organised a table outside so we could enjoy the Fruit Bats as we worked our way through the buffet.

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> October**

The number of new species on a trip to Gambia can be overwhelming in the wrong circumstances, so on our first morning we were careful to choose destinations where the birds would appear in the open at a sensible pace! At the start of a cycle track we admired the enormous White-billed Buffalo-Weaver nests while, soon after, two Black-shouldered Kites showed splendidly overhead. Several Blue-bellied Rollers showed magnificently both perched and in flight and we enjoyed our first Senegal Coucal. A variety of herons were on offer; in particular, on adjacent ponds we compared Great White and Intermediate Egrets whilst we also saw our first African Jacanas. Continuing on the path we found an incredibly confiding Woodland Kingfisher.

On reaching Kotu Ponds we found several waders including 20 Black-winged Stilts and several Spur-winged Plovers, and also spotted the Naturetrek group who had been on our flight! Along the nearby stream we found Wattled Plover and Little Bee-eater but it was getting hot so we headed for a brief stop at Fajara Golf Course where we were able to find several Black-headed Plovers and Green Wood Hoopoes while remaining in the shade of the trees.

As was to become our routine we returned to the hotel between 12.30 and 1 pm for a long break, with swimming/eating/sleeping the norm for most.

We headed out again late afternoon for Brufut, some open woodland. Birding was harder work than it had been in the morning with the vegetation higher than expected but we still found lots of good birds. Our only African Pygmy Kingfisher, Brown-backed Woodpeckers and Western Violet-backed Sunbirds showed all too briefly but other species showed well including Grey Kestrel, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatchers, a fine female Klaas's Cuckoo, a Lesser Blue-eared Glossy Starling and, eventually, our only African Pied Hornbill. But perhaps of more note was that this was our first venture down a dirt road through a village with its fascinating culture.

Dinner outside was enjoyed as always and some began to sample the delights of the local entertainment!

### **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October**

An unexpected roadside stop near the hotel produced a couple of Little Egrets and a few waders, then it was off to Abuko. This is perhaps the most famous bird spot in coastal Gambia. It is a small remnant forest with a wide range of sought-after species, and for us it had the added bonus of being shady! We were joined by a local guide and she knew exactly where to find our target birds and had very sharp ears. After the inevitable dispute over ticket stubs we set off for the short walk to the ponds. Our pace was slow and the birds appeared one-by-one. A Yellow-breasted Apalis called

overhead and was something of a neck-breaker, but two Blue-breasted and a single Malachite Kingfisher were more obliging. At the pond we bought a number of items at the new kiosk before settling down to enjoy a fine array of species. Several Black-headed Herons were noisy and showy; a Hamerkop fed quietly on the water's edge; a pair of African Jacanas had young; Violet Turacos showed stunningly in the nearby canopy. From the photographic hide we had super views of two Black Crakes which had been glimpsed earlier.

Eventually we set off again. Near the toilet block there was another flurry of birding activity with a pair of Snowy-crowned Robin-Chats, a Copper Sunbird, a Little Greenbul and several Black-necked Weavers. However, the birds here were (by Abuko standards) rather less than co-operative. Further on, we returned to top form. A Common (Scarlet-spectacled) Wattle-eye called evocatively and showed well, before we had point blank range views of no fewer than three Western Bluebills. A Green Hylia and a Green Vuraco took time but eventually gave themselves up, then we found two Verreaux's Eagle Owls roosting in their favoured spot. David tried to step up the pace (as we seemed to be covering such little distance) but was soon stopped by an unfamiliar sound which turned out to be a Grey-headed Bristlebill, another real gem which showed well to all.

After a drinks break at the animal orphanage with its monkeys and vultures, we returned via a different path. Birds were few and far between but one flock produced an African Golden Oriole and a Lesser Honeyguide before it was time to head off.

Lunch was taken at Lamin Lodge, overlooking an area of mangroves. Service was slow but we didn't mind as we had plenty of time before our scheduled late afternoon birding. Some Pink-backed Pelicans, lots of Pied Kingfishers, Ospreys, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and Gull-billed Terns came and went for those unable to leave their binoculars! Accompanied by several local boys we eventually set off for a short walk in the local ricefields. Birding here was excellent: Marsh Harrier, Black-shouldered Kite and African Harrier Hawk overhead, a fine perched Lizard Buzzard, our first views of Yellow-fronted Canary and, best of all, super views of Yellow-throated Longclaw. We were rather saddened to find that all the boys who gave us pieces of paper with 'their' names and addresses on them had the same details – presumably of someone with influence in the village.

On the way home we stopped briefly at Abuko ricefields. Here we found three Hamerkop, eight Senegal Thick-knees, four Woodland Kingfishers, a Splendid Sunbird and some distant Red-chested Swallows before being pleasantly delayed on the way back by a perched Pearl-spotted Owlet. It had been a long day but a splendidly varied one.

## **Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October**

The overnight rain meant we woke to cloudy skies and relatively cool conditions. Given the wet conditions, it was clearly a day for sticking to roads and not tracks and Tanji via the highway was our first stop. Birding in the open bushy area was highly productive for the most part, with 'scopes invaluable to look at perched birds including our first Viellot's Barbet, Northern Crombec, some Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters and (after some debate) a Northern Black Flycatcher. A Subalpine Warbler

was somewhat more elusive, and a calling Sulphur-breasted Bush-Shrike even more so, although several members of the group managed reasonable flight views. At the beach the cloud meant no heat haze which was a major bonus. Two Great White Pelicans flew past. Waders included Oystercatcher and Bar-tailed Godwit, together with good numbers of Sanderling and Turnstone, but the highlight was a superb adult White-fronted Plover which showed splendidly for ages. The terns, too, were much enjoyed: we were relatively familiar with Caspian, Little, Common and Sandwich so concentrated on distinguishing the Royals from Lesser Cresteds. Back in the bushes two Mottled Spinetails showed well overhead allowing us to separate them from Little Swifts.

After our usual hotel break we headed a short distance north. Camaloo Corner is a marshy area right by the road and this was a heron paradise with no fewer than eight species present. Instructive comparisons were possible between Great White and Intermediate Egrets, whilst there was also a large flock of White-bellied Whistling Ducks. But we had one major target here and we weren't disappointed, with at least five Yellow-crowned Bishops showing splendidly as soon as we arrived.

Bund Road had been given a big build-up – on some trips it had produced large numbers of waders, on others rarities. But this time we drew a complete blank. The tide was high so the birds were roosting on a lagoon on the opposite side of the road – and our attempts to get to the site via some unpleasant alleyways failed due to the high water levels, an injury to Wally's leg being the only event of note. We quickly left, only to find the bus misbehaving. Was it going to be one of those afternoons? Fortunately things were quickly sorted and we enjoyed a pleasant hour or so along Old Cape Road. Three Senegal Thick-knees were the pick of a good variety of waders, the roost of 30+ Caspian Terns impressive. But the highlight here was Abyssinian Roller – three beauties perched up superbly to put us in raptures. Along the road we found a pair of Yellow-backed Weavers, whilst as dusk fell we stumbled across three Plain-backed Pipits near the football pitch.

## **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> October**

Today we set off inland – our first port of call was Wally's 'secret' site near the village of Bonto. He was delighted that our target species, Yellow-shouldered Widowbird, appeared almost at once and we had super views of this spectacular bird. We also saw the first of three African Darters, our first Black-winged Red Bishops, several Pied-winged Swallows, our only Black-tailed Godwits and, finally, great looks at Fan-tailed Warbler.

We then went to Pirang Shrimp Ponds. The owner no longer allows access to the ponds themselves, but local birders have set up a hide overlooking the area and two keen-eyed young men were available to escort us to other vantage points. Disappointingly the Crowned Cranes failed to show, but there was plenty of compensation in the form of six Great White Pelicans, a Purple Heron, our only Black Egret, several White-faced Whistling Duck with young, a magnificent Palm-nut Vulture and two flying Brown-necked Parrots – not forgetting the singing African Cuckoo!

A quick stop in some nearby mangroves produced a fine perched Malachite Kingfisher, but the track was too muddy for the bus to use so we decided to go straight to the famous Farara Banta Bush Track. The rains meant that raptor numbers were down; nevertheless we saw Black-shouldered Kite, Dark Chanting Goshawk and Gabar Goshawk, as well as a flying Levaillant's Cuckoo and a Rufous-crowned Roller. But perhaps the most memorable bird here was the Mosque Swallow coming to drink in a puddle.

Our attempt at a quick exit was thwarted by a fine flock of small birds bathing in more puddles near the village, Black-rumped Waxbills being the highlight.

Lunch was to be taken at Marakissa River Camp. The six kilometre drive from the nearest village was bumpy along an appalling road and took 45 minutes, but the camp sounded good and the bird list for the area was enticing. Suffice to say that on arrival there was no food available. Sharp intake of breath for the leader and a full and frank exchange between Wally and the waitress. The group were remarkably relaxed about the situation – we were, after all, in darkest Africa and these things happen, so we had a drink or two and a siesta. Birds around the lake included our only Giant Kingfisher and a Hamerkop. We walked down various nearby tracks and had views of both wood-doves and two Double-spurred Francolins, but most target species were not playing ball and it seemed as if the journey had been wasted when suddenly a Long-crested Eagle hove into view and landed on top of a palm. It was admired for ages and voted *Bird of the Trip*. With morale restored we headed back to the Senegambia through more fascinating villages.

Double helpings at dinner were washed down with plenty of wine courtesy of *Gullivers!*

### **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> October**

Our first port of call today was an area of farmland with scattered trees near the village of Yundum. We strolled along various tracks, trying where possible to keep the sun behind us. Patience was required, but we had considerable success in the end. Singing and Whistling Cisticolas were seen well, their distinctive songs now learnt. A Black-crowned Tchagra sat near the top of a tree for ages, much to the astonishment of those who had previously chased this species in Morocco! A Striped Kingfisher called in the distance and eventually came close enough to allow good 'scope views. A mystery bird turned out to be a young Klaas's Cuckoo and showed well, whilst two Green-backed Eremomelas performed at point blank range as did a pair of Lavender Waxbills. A Lanner shot overhead, whilst another Dark Chanting Goshawk was located in a tree right next to the bus.

In a similar area nearby, by the village of Yarambamba, we were told politely to leave by a military man but not before we had enjoyed another Rufous-crowned Roller and a Subalpine Warbler. With things hotting up once again, some took to the bus, but those continuing on the other side of the road were rewarded with a pair of Beaudouin's Snake-Eagles, our only Melodious Warbler and a heard-only Diederik Cuckoo.

After our customary break we walked from the hotel to Bijilo Forest Park. At first it seemed birdless but as we started the coastal path two bee-eaters flew over and David exclaimed that one had white on the throat. Wally left the path and soon relocated not one, but seven White-throated Bee-eaters. This beautiful species is normally only seen well inland so we were extremely fortunate: a real bonus. A Palm-nut Vulture flew by to celebrate with us. Once back in the forest, things quietened down but we did manage to locate a pair of Snowy-crowned Robin-Chats before enjoying splendid views of a pair of Mohos at their nest by the entrance.

### **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> October**

Our departure was delayed slightly to enable some of the group to catch up with the Little Weaver in the trees by the taxi rank outside the hotel. We then travelled down the main road to Tanji, a perched Black Flycatcher by the roadside unfortunately disappearing before we could all see it.

At Tanji we spent a couple of hours investigating the area on the inland side of the main road. We had most success beyond the main area of trees where there was a vista over the mangroves. At least three perched Ospreys were soon trumped by a magnificent Western Banded Snake Eagle in a palm – we later saw it in flight. A family of Green Wood Hoopoes were well-photographed! We were nearly back at the road when there was a flurry of activity – two African Golden Orioles were colourful but well-hidden, but in trying to see these better David flushed four Green Pigeons which showed superbly for ages for everyone to enjoy.

We drove down to the coast, pausing to admire a party of Red-chested Swallows on the wires. On the beach it was fascinating to be able to watch the local fishermen in action and we were joined by another eager group of school children. Vultures on the beach gave incredibly close views; the Great White Pelicans on an offshore island were distant but perhaps equally impressive. Then we stopped to study the gulls, finding a number of Kelp Gulls among the Lesser Black-backs and one Black-headed with the Grey-headed. We walked up the beach with the sun behind us and a pleasant breeze kept us cool. The terns and waders again showed well, allowing Wendy to catch up on birds missed previously, whilst a White Wagtail was a trip first for most of us.

Those prepared to get hot spent half an hour back in the bushes on the seaward side of the road but whilst we had some good revision, for example of Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters and Viellot's Barbets, nothing new was located. This changed on the journey home when at last we managed to find our first Black Kite perched in a roadside tree!

We arrived back early at lunchtime allowing time for a good long rest as well as some shopping before we reconvened to walk around the garden – and it was actually cloudy and relatively cool! The pace was gentle – we had, after all, seen most of the birds so were able to simply enjoy them again. A Moho and a Woodland Kingfisher both showed well and we counted at least four White-crowned Robin-Chats vying with the Gonoleks for 'most colourful bird'. A Mosque Swallow overhead reminded us how big it was before, at the eleventh hour, we finally tracked down a Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird singing and showing well in the open: a result!

## Friday 28<sup>th</sup> October

After breakfast we set off as usual at 8 am knowing we had time for a couple of hours birding at Abuko, and we travelled via the main road to make the most of the time available. At first it seemed quieter than on our previous visit, and some Patas monkeys disappeared quickly, but as we neared the main pond, Wally spotted movement and after a while the bird showed well enough to be identified as a Buff-spotted Woodpecker, a highly elusive species. Excellent 'scope views were obtained. Nearby a Copper Sunbird showed briefly to some, whilst from the photographic hide a Lesser Honeyguide remained motionless for ages and a Moho's nest was discovered. An adult Collared Sunbird in adjacent treetops was accompanied by two juveniles but they didn't sit around long. One of the adult Western Bluebills showed splendidly again and was joined by a couple of youngsters. Several other species seen well on our first visit eventually showed well again before it was time to head back and say goodbye to Wally.

We arrived back at the Senegambia a little before 11 am and had time to finish packing and have a leisurely lunch before heading off in an extremely hot coach for the airport. The flight was delayed which meant we didn't arrive back till just after midnight – not an ideal end to the holiday, but no doubt once we got home we were able to reflect on a week of great birds, some fascinating 'people-watching' and a feeling that we had genuinely had a taste of Africa beyond the confines of our hotel.