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WINTER BIRDING IN MOZAMBIQUE AUGUST 2010



This was to be my third trip to Mozambique having been there way back in the early nineties as one of the first birding groups to visit after the end of the civil war and again a few years later.

This was the first time we were going as part of an organised tour- but it was a tour with a difference with all participants driving their own vehicle with the exception of a couple of girls who shared Etienne Marias's, our trip leader's vehicle. So it was

that five vehicles crossed the border to Mozambique and drove 150 kilometres north to meet up at Casa Lisa a lodge on the mouth of the Rio Incomati.

Our first day involved some travel- we were heading for Hyliota camp for a two night stay some 300 kilometres north situated in the Panda woodlands. However we had a couple of interesting stops along the way, checking the Limpopo floodplain for Collared Pratincole, Grey-rumped Swallow, Widowbirds, Longclaws and African Pygmy Goose. From there we passed Xai Xai before turning off into woodland for another 85 kilometres traversing Miombo, Sand Forest and Lebombo Ironwood Forest.



We birded all these habitats extensively the next day collecting an impressive list which included our main target- the Olive-headed Weaver along with Red-headed Weaver, White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike, Neergaard's Sunbird, the rare Mascarene Martin, Pale Batis, and Grey Penduline Tit.

Day three involved another long drive to Morrungulo but we had time to bird the Miombo woodland before reaching the main road looking for species we missed the day before.

Best birds were African Broadbill early in the morning just as we were departing, Bearded Scrub-



Robin, Pale flycatcher, Plain-backed Sunbird, more Olive-headed Weavers, and Retz's Helmet-Shrike.

Morrungulo is a dive resort right on the beach set amongst palm trees. Collared Palm-Thrush is common here and yet we missed it. It would wait until later in the trip.

Another long drive faced us the next day- nearly 400 kilometres to the Rio Save Game Reserve. Our first stop was under the grove of Baobabs, where you

can find both Bohm's and Mottled Spinetail. We were unlucky and only found Bohm's.

Then on to Vilanculos-the Olive(Madagascar) Bee-eaters are usually in the casuarinas along the beach road but not on the day we were there.

The next stop was Save Pan where we tried to turn every Squacco Heron into a Malagasy Pond-Heron with a spectacular lack of success. We did find African and Lesser Jacana around the pan edges, Racket-tailed Roller in the woodland, and Lemon-breasted Canary in the bush.



The early part of the trip involved many long drives and the next day was no exception- another 380 kilometres to the outskirts of Beira. Our motel was 14 k's from Beira centre so you can imagine our surprise to find Red-necked Falcon along the main road. Another surprise awaited us when we found a Bat Hawk busy nesting in a tree surrounded by huts, and people with their radios blaring not 50 metres off the main road.



The next day was filled with excitement- we were off to Rio Savanne for some great birding on the floodplain grasslands. The early morning saw the grasslands covered in mist- we could glimpse the Saddle-billed Storks and Rufous-bellied Herons as ghostly outlines in the fog.

Despite the weather we dived into the water filled marsh and took just to a few minutes to find our target bird of the morning – a pair of nesting Great Bittern ! An African Marsh Harrier floated past-the mist was starting to lift now- which was just as well as we flushed a Black-rumped Buttonquail. We found a Black-bellied Bustard hiding in a patch of longer grass while a Flappet Lark performed noisily above us. We checked out the little patch of forest just of the road and found Black-headed Apalis and Red-winged Warbler in the lower scrub. Back in the grasslands we held our line as we quartered the grasslands and were rewarded when we flushed a small party of Locust Finch. You can never see these birds on the ground as they flush when you are 20 metres away, making it impossible to get a sharp shot when you finally get your camera to focus. It was proving to be a great morning made even better when we flushed a Short-tailed Pipit.

You can never get them all and despite an intensive search we missed the Mangrove Kingfisher in the mangroves close to the parking area at the end of the road.

The next morning we were up early to head east down the long sand track through good Miombo





woodland to Chinizua for a night of camping near the Chinizua river. I have so far tended to ignore the raptors we saw on the trip as nearly all are readily available in South Africa but today was good raptor day with Martial, and Brown-snake Eagle, Bateleur, Lizard Buzzard and African Goshawk.

Talking of the river our intrepid leader decided it was safe to ford the shallow Chinizua River and camp on the sandy beach on the far side. The river proved to be no problem and his 4x4 churned along the beach for 50 metres . A Defender followed next following the same tracks and just made it with some difficulty. Not so the long wheel base Landcruiser bakkie. As the sand compacted, the water quickly filled the ruts left by

the two previous vehicles. It went down to its axles and we toiled for most of the afternoon to dig it free and eventually pull it out. The remaining two vehicles erred on the side of safety and decided to camp this side of the river. The birding was good finding Green-backed Woodpecker, Tiny Greenbul, and our star bird- the White-chested Alethe which perched on a stump just on the side of the track.

Other good birds included Short-winged Cisticola, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike, Black-winged Bishop, Woodward's Batis, and Black-eared Seedeater.

Leaving the sand forest behind after all too short a stay we headed for Mphingwe (Catapu) situated in Zambezi basin. We did plenty of birding en route finding African Barred Owlet, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Black and White Flycatcher, and Green Twinspot.



We had two full days of birding here in several different habitats. The Zambezi Floodplain at Caia gave us Tropical Boubou, White-crowned Lapwing and Moustached Grass-Warbler.

The sand forest near Coutada 12 produced East-Coast Akalat, African Broadbill, Eastern Nicator, Bearded Scrub-Robin, Livingstone's Flycatcher, Red-throated Twinspot, Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike and close to the main road, Orange-winged Pytilia.



All too soon we were on our way again heading for the Envirotrade camp at Nhambita. Here we would be taken in their Landcruiser game drive vehicle along the sixty kilometres of tar before turning on to the 4x4 track climbing up the base of Gorongosa Mountain for a further 16 kilometres. At the drop off point it was only a relatively short walk (3 kilometres) to the forest home of the Green-headed Oriole.

The walk to the forest through the grass and bracken was filled with birds. Burchall's Coucal were plentiful, Grey-rumped Swallows swooped over the grassland, Moustached Grass-Warblers sang from the bracken accompanied by Singing Cisticolas, Black-crowned and Anchieta's Tchagras.

The Green-headed Oriole was an interesting bird. It seemed to do a circuit returning every 20 minutes to a couple of favourite perches high in the canopy. Several people missed it first time around and only Stephanie missed it second time around.



Don't worry our guide said, we have plenty of time and you will get it next time which thankfully she did. You could watch the relief spreading across her face. We ticked off Stripe-cheeked Greenbul and Livingstone's Turaco before leaving the forest.



We searched hard for the Lesser Seedcracker on the way back down as it had been seen here just the previous week but with no success.

The next day was devoted to the Gorongosa National Park- a place I had never visited before. The game was fairly scarce, still not having really recovered from being shot out during the civil war but the birding was excellent, especially in the main camp where Collared Palm-Thrush and

Black and White Flycatcher were extremely common.

We were in the Envirotrade game viewer again and enjoyed a lovely drive down to the Pungwe river floodplain which holds vast numbers of waterbirds- Pelicans, Lapwings, Pratincoles, Skimmers, and the usual Herons, Storks, Ibis and Egrets and in the Palm savannah- Dickinson's Kestrel.

On returning to the main camp you can imagine our surprise when our vehicle was surrounded by police and plain-clothed detectives. After an hour of heavy discussion and negotiation we were told the vehicle was being confiscated as part of a court order related to some dispute Envirotrade had with an overseas aid organisation. With no way of returning to camp we eventually begged a lift from the camp manager when he left at the end of the day.

Having had our day in the park cut short the day before, we returned the next day to bird some of the more wooded areas.





We spent a very pleasant two hours driving around a park which was far more interesting than I thought possible for a war ravaged park in Mozambique. We found Ayres Hawk-Eagles, Brown-headed Parrots, Crowned Hornbill, White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike, and Red-necked Spurfowl.

Then it was time to leave- we had to cross the border today and head for Mutare and our final stop of the trip at Seldom Seen up in the Vumba mountains

Seldom Seen is always a great place to visit and with the legendary Peter now retired, his nephew Bulawesi took us through the local forest patch for the forest specials – Swynnerton’s Robin, African Goshawk, Livingstone’s Turaco, Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, Olive Bush-Shrike, Red-faced Crimsonwing and White-tailed Crested Flycatcher. Before setting off for Cecil Kop, Chirinda Apalis appeared in the garden.



Cecil Kop can offer the best of Miombo birding and in the late afternoon we found Cinnamon-breasted, Southern Black and Miombo Tits and Cabanis’s Bunting.

And so our trip drew to an end, with the long journey back to Johannesburg still to come. We popped into Leopard’s Rock for the Yellow-bellied Waxbill. The trip back home was uneventful with plenty of road blocks but no hassles of any kind.