



THE BIRDS OF GHANA

November 2017



NOVEMBER 1, 2017

WWW.BIRDPHOTOGRAPHY-KENLOGAN.CO.ZA

Ken Logan

I have never fancied West Africa as a birding destination despite the quality of the birds found there.



A lousy climate and serious third world grot have always put me off. However a visit was necessary if you want to see all the bird families of the world, and if you want to see a Picathartes and Egyptian Plover you have to choose between Cameroon and Ghana. I chose Ghana- it is English speaking; there was a good local tour company- Ashanti (who by the way I thought were excellent), there was less camping, and I thought being an ex British colony it might just be a little less third world than the rest of West Africa.

Boy did I get that last bit wrong. It was the worse place I have visited in Africa and I have done Zambia, Uganda, Ethiopia, Morocco, Kenya and Tanzania amongst others. There were only three good things about Ghana- the Birds, Ashanti (who did amazingly well, transport and accommodation wise given the circumstances), and the beer which was cold, tasty and inexpensive and came in large 500ml bottles.

It was a successful trip birding wise- nearly 400 birds seen and over a hundred new birds on the list and most importantly, the White-necked Rockfowl and Egyptian Plover were both seen well and photographed less well. I found the photography particularly difficult on this trip, my eyes aren't improving with age (there is an understatement) and forest birding and photography are never easy and the Upper Guinea rain forests proved to be no exception.

The party (4 Brits, 3 American girls and me) met up at the Errata Hotel in Accra and who should I bump into at breakfast but Dave Hoddinott from Rockjumper- The birding world is a small place!

The trip did not get off to too auspicious a start- Our first stop at Winniba lagoon for some shorebirds produced nothing- the water levels were way too high so it was on to the Winniba grasslands for an hour of savanna birding before lunch- Lots of Southern African birds -Short-winged, Singing and Red-faced Cisticus, Yellow-mantled Widows and my first new bird- Yellow-crowned Gonolek.



Lunch was taken at Cape Coast right next door to the castle overlooking the beach before heading on to Jukwa and the Rainforest lodge where we were to spend the next 3 nights. We did lots of night birding around the forest fringes looking for Frasers and Akun Eagle Owls and a variety of night jars all of which was spectacularly unsuccessful. We found Plain nightjar in the middle of a track and that was that. I think many of these sites are over-taped with calls being played several times a week in season! Some late afternoon birding gave us the very special Long-tailed hawk!

Our introduction to rain forest birding could not have been better, with a visit to the canopy walk in Kakum forest. Seven platforms and long 50 metre stretches on the rope walkways between platforms made for challenging times when you are lugging cameras and scopes around. If you suffer from acrophobia you would not have survived the day! But the birding was simply excellent with lots of new species- 4 hornbills- Dwarf Black, Piping, African Pied, and Brown-cheeked. Plenty of Sunbirds, Buff-throated, Superb, Little Green, Tiny, Johanna's, and Blue-throated Brown, Blue Cuckoo-shrike, Sharpe's Apalis, Violet-backed Hyliota- they just kept coming- Starlings- tinkerbirds- forest weavers, flycatchers, Wood-hoopoes and right at the end of the day nice views of Yellow-billed Turaco having started the day with Guinea Turaco.. We left with flocks of White-throated Bee-



eaters flitting through the canopy. There were lots of Greenbuls too – not one of my favourite families.

We tried another, more open section of Kakum in the morning-Antwikwaa which produced more of the dreaded Greenbuls- Slender-billed, Spotted, Swamp Palm, and Little. Nice views of Black and high flying Rosy Bee-eaters, Buff-spotted Woodpecker, Grey Kestrel , Naked faced and Viillot’s Barbets, Senegal and Blue-headed Coucals and more, before driving an hour to the Twifo river for Rock

Pratincole and distant views of a solitary White-throated Blue Swallow. We had more forest fringe birding in the afternoon (Gynare) and early morning (Abrafo) before heading further west to Brenu Akyinam for more Savanna birding in the afternoon. This proved to be a good stop with African and Eurasian Hobbies showing well and after much searching an obliging Marsh Tchagra was found.

The next day would bring camping at Ankasa up on the Ivory Coast border.

As the nearest suitable accommodation is over 2 hours drive from Ankasa, Ashanti have established a permanent camp there. The tents are protected by a sheet metal car port type structure and the dining room is also in a permanent structure. The loos and showers were 5 minutes away down a long flight of steps- but were the normal flushing variety so at least we were spared the long drops despite it being a bit of mission to get there in the middle of the night. We arrived late afternoon after a couple of birding stops for Orange Weaver (very range restricted in Ghana) and Reichenow’s and Mangrove Sunbird- two new birds of me. Frasers and Akun Eagle Owl still proved elusive at night but we were fortunate enough to find a Fraser’s one morning along the river bank.



The big bird for me here was Hartlaub’s Duck and despite visiting three forest pools on 4 different occasions we had no luck- they just were not around. Neither did we hear or see the Nkulengu Rail- so that was another big miss. However the hot and humid forest birding did produce Red-thighed Sparrowhawk, Blue-headed Wood Dove, Sabine’s and Cassin’s Spinetails, a Blue-breasted and Shining Blue Kingfisher (one of the Brits was a kingfisher fanatic so he had a big smile on his face.) We found Shining Drongo -another newie for me, more Greenbuls which I will conveniently ignore, Dusky-Blue and Cassin’s Flycatchers, Forest Robin (an incredibly difficult bird to track down), White-tailed Alethe, three different Malimbés and a good looking Western Bluebill and Black-bellied Seedcracker. Oh and I should not forget to mention both Kemp’s and Grey’s Longbill although the views were not great.



We had glimpses of Lowes and Lesser spot-nosed monkey , a fire footed rope squirrel, and Lord Derbys Anomalure put in a brief appearance early one morning near the loos which most people missed. Mammals are not common in these forests. So after a late afternoon, a full day and another morning at Ankasa and having successfully survived the camping we headed back to the Rainforest lodge at Jukwe before heading north to the Picathartes site.

Ashanti have done much good work in persuading the local population to help preserve the nesting sites- only a few years ago the locals were eating these birds but now with a local primary school being built and visitors paying an entrance fee to the forest, the future prospects for the White-necked Rockfowl or *Picathartes* are much brighter. It took 40 minutes to walk from the village to the site in the heat of the early afternoon sun. The birds are unpredictable in the time of their return to their nests and while we arrived at 3.00pm hoping for an early return in daylight it was only at dusk after 5.00pm that the first of 7 birds returned. We were seated 30 metres away so good bino views were had, but there were only a couple of windows through the trees and scrub where if the bird paused for a couple seconds you could get a shot.



We left just before six to stumble our way down the steep slope in the dark but even the heavens opening (we were all soaking in seconds) didn't dampen our spirits at seeing what everyone agreed was the bird of the trip.

The next day we would be leaving the forests behind and spending a full day driving north to Mole National Park After some very ordinary shots at Ankasa I was hoping savanna birding would bring better photography than the forests had



It is a full days' drive from Jukwa to Mole- Ghana's premier National Park. As you travel north you see the religious face of Ghana changing with many more mosques apparent. Some would describe Ghana as a god forsaken place but it certainly is not godless. Religion hits you in the face where ever you go. Huge billboards with their popstar-like reverends and pastors dressed in their fancy white suits promote so many different evangelical, pentecostal, and apolistic brands of Christianity it leaves you dizzy. Truck windscreens are

plastered with verses from the scriptures. The back of buses inform you – the Lord is your shepherd and even businesses delight in naming their enterprises after the Lord- how about the "God is Great butchery" and one I particularly liked-"My hands are blessed hairdressing saloon" and all this amongst the most desperate poverty, filth and grime you are likely to find anywhere.

Two of the American girls were leaving the tour today- work pressures back home- so our 20 seater bus now had even more space for the ongoing tour participants.

Mole is described as savanna birding so it came as a surprise to find that it was actually broad-leaved woodland with trees 4-5 metres tall and the bush almost dense in places. We stayed at the Mole Motel- inside the Park which is perched on a hill overlooking a small wetland where the elephants were supposed to come down to drink. They say there are 600-800 elephants – we didn't find a single one. The lions are shot out and



we saw a couple of Bushbuck , a few Kob, some Olive baboons and Patas monkeys so thank heavens for the birds.

We ventured out to a disused airstrip on the edge of the park several times- in a vain search for White-throated Francolin- we found Double-spurred Spurfowl and Stone Partridge instead and had our most successful night birding of the trip finding Standard-winged and Long-tailed Nightjars and a Greyish Eagle Owl. We also had a Pearlie, an African Scops and heard a Northern White-faced but I was not overly interested in those.



Mole was hot with temperatures close to 40 degrees during the day and with my aircon only blowing hot air, sleep was impossible in my room where it never fell below 32 degrees at any time of the day or night. Vultures were in short supply – mainly Hooded with the occasional White-backed and the odd Bateleur. Of more interest were Grasshopper Buzzard of which we saw many- a Red-thighed Sparrowhawk which was quite special and great views of African Cuckoo-hawk just outside the park and plenty of Shikra.



We ventured down to wetland below the motel to find Oriole Warbler, Black-billed Wood Dove, Western Plantain-eater, Red-throated Bee-eater, Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, Bearded Barbet, Senegal Parrot, Senegal Batis and the usual variety of Heron, Egrets and some very confiding Painted Snipe. In the afternoon we chased two very special birds and enjoyed great views of Sun Lark and Forbes Plover. The beer went down well that night!

We had more new birds and better looks at others on our second day- African Blue Flycatcher, White-shouldered Black Tit, Melodious Warbler, Rufous Cisticola, White-crowned Robin Chat, Pygmy and Beautiful Sunbirds, Long-tailed Glossy Starlings and Exclamatory and Togo Paradise Whydahs amongst others. The afternoon was devoted to finding White-fronted Black Chat, poor views of Moustached Grass-warbler and visiting the Red-throated Bee-eaters nesting colony. We had another long day of driving the next day but spent time up to 9.00am for a final passing blow at the airstrip which gave us Striped Kingfisher, Brown-backed Woodpecker, Senegal Eremomela, Brown-rumped Bunting, Lavender Waxbill, and more Bush Petronias. Then we were off to the Tongo Hills.

It was another long drive from Mole across to the Tongo Hills- a collection of isolated inselbergs making for a very scenic stop. Here the target birds were Rock-loving Cisticola- which to my delight I found has been split from Lazy Cistic, - Goslings Bunting- another split from Rock Bunting and the eagerly sought Fox Kestrel, which obliged by flying right above us. We overnighted in Bolgatanga and then set off for the White Volta River on the borders of Burkino Faso and Togo for an appointment with the Egyptian Plover. We were treated to some good birding along the way with White-billed Buffalo weaver, Chestnut-bellied Starling



and our first Piapiac of the trip. We picked up West African Swallow a recent split from Red-chested, before arriving at the banks of the river.

We were told Egyptian Plover is quite a confiding bird and if the river levels were low we would get quite close. Well the river was not that low and the birds were on a sand bank in the middle of the river, so it became immediately apparent that that stunning close range shot was not going to be on and to make matters worse we were looking directly into the sun.

We were extremely fortunate when the birds took off and flew up river giving us a relatively close fly-by and a couple of shots worth keeping. The Egyptian Plover is a plucky little bird-only half the size of the Spur-winged Plovers which invaded their sandbank but they showed no fear in chasing them off.



We spend an hour on the river bank watching Northern Carmine and Little Bee-eaters. We had an obliging African Golden Oriole and even found a Wood Warbler in the same tree, before making our way back to Bolgatanga through the heat of the day stopping only for a Rufous-rumped Lark on the wire.



Our late afternoon excursion was out to Tona dam although we spent little time at the water edge, but ventured into the dry scrub beyond the dam wall. Here another Sun Lark was found and a large flock of Bruce's Green-Pigeon. But the real target was Four-banded Sandgrouse which we flushed several times before getting reasonable views. I got all excited about Black-faced Quailfinch until I realised it was simply a renamed African Quailfinch- You also need to remember Zebra Waxbill is our Orange-breasted and Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike is also our Orange-breasted. But then you know what I think about our bird naming

conventions!

So mission achieved-the beer was well deserved that night as I thought about seeing my seventh and eighth remaining bird families of the world. Only six to go now – three planned for 2018 and three for 2019 as I still have to travel across half the continents of the world to find them. Next year will be devoted to the Hylocitrea in Sulawesi, the Noisy Scrub-bird in SW Australia and the Magellanic Plover in Argentina. I hope you will follow my travels to find them.

The next day we were heading south again- and picked up our first Violet Turaco of the trip along the road before making a short stop at Bobiri Butterfly reserve which was fairly disappointing but we did pick up Dwarf Red-billed Hornbill and Forest Wood Hoopoe and a very confiding Red-chested Goshawk. Then we hit the usual Accra traffic congestion just after lunch. It took us two hours to fight our way through before heading on to Sakumona Lagoon.



Here the usual collection of Sandpipers, Herons and Egrets were on show but a juvenile Little Gull caused a lot of discussion before everyone was comfortable with the ID.

Our final morning before our late evening flights was spent two hours out of town in the Shai Hills. Again a fairly quiet day with several Southern African birds on show (it is always good to see some excitement when a Yellow-throated Longclaw pitches up) but we did get our best views of Red-necked Buzzard and spend a lot of time tracking down White-crowned Cliff-Chat now split from Mocking Cliff-Chat.

So- not a place I would ever wish to visit again- that was my first and last visit to West Africa but many thanks to Ashanti and their guides and my fellow British and American colleagues who didn't let the climate or the food wear them down. We remained a good spirited bunch to the end.

