Birding In Angola

LAND OF THE BAOBAB

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I spent 18 days birding in Angola with Rockjumper. It was my first trip without Stephanie in many a long year and I really missed not having her by my side helping me get on to all those difficult forest birds with my long lens.



Angola is typical third world black Africa with rural poverty as bad as anywhere in Africa but it remains a scenically attractive country with many hills and amazingly spectacular large granite outcrops. It is the land of the baobab with a baobab forest in the north containing thousands of baobab trees. Unfortunately, the rest of their forests are largely gone. Just a small gully of afro montane forest left on Mount Moco containing a handful of endemics clinging on for grim death. We birded remnant patches of Miombo in Central Angola and moved from small rain forest patch to the next a couple of kilometers away in many places in the north.

Ninety percent of the forests are gone. There has been heavy hard wood logging over the last 10 years and rural agriculture – banana and cassava plantations, sweet potatoes and paw paws have taken over many of the wooded areas of yester year. There is no real conservation in Angola and I fear for the survival of so many species in the years to come.



We flew into Luanda on the truly awful TAAG airline, (they cancelled my flight on both the way out and the way back), and then flew down to Lubango in the south, just a couple of hundred kilometers from the Northern Nambian border. We would then make our way back north over the next 18 days in our extended Landcruiser traversing the length of Angola to a hundred kilometers south of the DRC border close to the equator.

Despite the lack of great habitat, the birding was good. We saw nearly 500 species and I managed 51 lifers – I was surprised at the number of birds I had seen previously in Uganda or Ghana. There were 15 endemics available to us and we saw 13. Swierstra's Spurfowl is always tricky to find and despite hearing it call on several occasions the bird never came close enough to see. The one surprising dip was Angola Waxbill. This bird is relatively common and we looked for it every day in south and central Angola and just never made contact. Such is birding!

The photography was relatively difficult as most forest photography is but I was pleased to add another five birds to be found in Southern Africa to my list. Angola Cave Chat, Damara Red-billed Hornbill, West African Crested Tern, Sharp-tailed Starling, and Yellow-bellied Hyliota.

We were up at 4.30 most mornings, on the road by 5.30 with both breakfast and lunch in the field, only returning to our, better than expected, accommodation by sunset. Supper was at 7.00 leaving you about an hour to recharge batteries and try to get on the unreliable internet to organize the rest of your life.



On day one we headed off to the Tundavala Escarpment- after checking off our first endemic – Red-backed Mousebird in the hotel grounds. It was a day of dramatic scenery with huge cliffs dropping over 1000 meters to the coastal plains below. We explored the high-altitude grasslands and patches of afro montane forest finding

Angola Cave Chat (what a great way to start the trip), Angola Slaty Flycatcher, Rockrunner, Ludwig's Double-collared, and Oustalet's Sunbirds, Schalow's Turaco, Bubbling Cisticola, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, and Black-collared Bulbul.



Day two saw us descending the escarpment to the Namib desert's gravel plains. Here we found many birds I had already seen in Northern Namibia. Ludwig's Bustard, Ruppell's Korhaan, Hartlaub's Spurfowl, Bohm's and Mottled Spinetails, Bradfield's Swift, Augur Buzzard, Monteiro's Hornbill, Acacia Pied Barbet, many White-tailed Shrikes, the Benguela sub-species of Karoo Long-billed Lark, Pale-winged Starling, Dusky Sunbird, Pririt Batis and many others. We missed Cinderella Waxbill- phew- seen it in Namibia. No lifers today.

Day three was a travel day from Lubango to Benguela on the Atlantic coast but we had time for some afternoon birding which gave me shots of Damara Red-billed Hornbill, Swamp Boubou, Angola Batis, Northen Fiscal, and Carp's Tit. A great roadside stop near a dambo gave us Red-throated Cliff Swallow, Angola Swallow as well as Wire-tailed and White-throated swallows. We also found Hartlaub's Babbler and Angola White-eye.



Leaving Benguela and heading inland again towards Mount Moco we stopped at some salt pans and Flamingo ponds to add to our water bird count. Late afternoon saw us in the foothills of Mount Moco, Angola's largest mountain- not that high though- under three thousand meters.

We birded the odd patch of Miombo finding a very obliging Red-necked Buzzard which gave us great photo opportunities. Other good birds were Miombo Wren-warbler and Miombo Scrub-Robin and Anchieta's Sunbird.

The next day was devoted to Mount Moco, a good two-hour drive from our lodge at Alto Hama. We traversed different habitats on our way to the village at the foot of the mountain where we asked the Chief's permission to climb the 700/800 meter trail to the patch of Afro-montane forest nestled in a gully. Leaving thevillage we were lucky to spot a pair of Dusky Twinspots in the grasslands alongside the trail. Before entering the forest patch we found Grey Apalis, African Yellow Warbler, Bocage's and Bronze Sunbirds and Black-chinned Weaver.

The forest itself was quiet with only Bocage's Akalat, Black-throated Wattle-eye, and Pale-throated and Cabanis's Greenbuls showing reasonably well. We found Angola Lark and Huambo Cisticola back at village and Shikra, Black-necked Eremomela and Ovambo Sparrowhawk back in the Miombo.

We devoted two days to Mount Moco in the vain hope of finding Swierstra's Spurfowl. It was heard calling again but a long way off. We had Black-bellied Bustard and a Dark Chanting Goshawk on the drive up to the village. The only new bird in the forest was a Margaret's Batis for the lucky few who saw it. So, a second trip was not really worth the effort of the slog up the mountain. On the way back we stopped a river crossing where good views of Fullerborn's Longclaw and Bocage's Sunbird were had.





Day eight was another drive day heading north west back towards the coast and Kumbira forest near Gabela.

We had several stops along the way in small pieces of productive scarp forest. Here we had our first views and only photograph of the Red-crested Turaco, a mega must see for birders to Angola. Our first and only Yellow-bellied Hyliota turned up here along with Moustached Grass Warbler, Green-capped Eremomela and our only Black-and-Rufous Swallow.

We again devoted two days to Kumbira as there were a number of endemics to find here.

Palm-nut Vulture was common here and remained so in the forests to the north. It surprised me thinking how localized it is back in South Africa. However, there were many clumps of Raffia Palm.

The three Bushshrikes, Monteiro's, Gorgeous and Gabela were difficult to see. We got all three, not great views but after long periods of playing the calls good enough to ID. Other good birds were Pink-footed Puffback, Yellow-bellied and White-fronted Wattle-eyes, Dusky Tit, Yellow-throated Nicator, Pullitzer's Longbill, Gabela Akalat, Superb Sunbird, and Hartert's Cameroptera, plus the incredibly difficult Forest Scrub-Robin. One of the shyest birds imaginable.



Here we ended our stay in Central Angola leaving behind a nice colony of Vieillot's Black Weavers in the grounds of our accommodation.

Our journey to the north of Angola started the way many other days had started, with a long drive reaching our destination Cambondo forest in the late afternoon. As usual we had a couple of stops along the way. Cambande dam produced our first African Fish Eagle- not a common bird in Angola, our only Wooly-necked Stork, and more Palm-nut Vultures.

The forest gave us our first Piping Hornbill, our only Olive Bee-eater, Speckled Tinkerbird, and the rather drab looking Hairy-breasted Barbet. We started running into birds not yet seen on the trip but unfortunately seen elsewhere. Yellow-crested Woodpecker, Red-fronted Parrot and Purple-throated Cuckooshrike were next, and then a couple of lifers, the two Paradise Flycatchers, Rufous-vented and Bates plus the two Hylias, Tit and Green. The photography success rate was dismally low that day but I did manage shots of White-bibbed Swallow and Marsh Widowbird on the drive back to the lodge.

The following day we birded Tombingo Forest early in the morning before heading on to Kinjila and doing our only bit of sightseeing on the trip with a quick detour to the Calandula Falls- the second widest in Africa after Victoria Falls but still quite impressive.



Tombingo Forest gave us our first Gabon Coucal, and incredibly shy and retiring bird. We were lucky to find a pair that flew quickly into deeper habitat giving us brief but adequate views. More Piping Hornbills and our first Congo Pied Hornbill were seen along with good views of Black-backed Barbet.



Yellow Longbill and Rufous-crowned Eremomela were added to the list along with Blue-throated Brown, Bates and Superb Sunbirds.

From Tombingo we headed towards Kinjila where we were to spend a full day. Here a very special bird awaited us, the very localized and much sought after, White-headed Robin-Chat, rediscovered after no sightings in 40 years. Another shy bird which requires patience and perseverance but we did get to see it well in a small patch of gallery forest as it ran along branches in mid canopy.

The majority of the forest here was Miombo woodland. We found the attractive Anchieta's Barbet and I got shots of a long-awaited Sharp-tailed Starling along with Narrow-tailed and Splendid Starlings. Sharpe's Drongo was a new bird along with White-winged Black Tit. Other good birds were Brown-headed Apalis, Grey-winged Robin-Chat and Pale-fronted Nigrita.

From Kinjila we headed to the furthermost northern part of the trip- the town of Uige and Damengola Forest.

Another special bird awaited us here, the attractive endemic Braun's Bushshrike- another recently rediscovered species, a bird very few others have seen being extremely localized. We had great views of this bird as it flew right past us on several occasions in response to the call, but always disappeared deep into the vegetation. I didn't get a shot. Other new good birds included Guinea Turaco, Gabon Coucal again, Blue Malkoha, our only Thick-billed Cuckoo, Black-casqued Hornbill, Blue-throated Roller, Black Bee-eater, Naked -faced Barbet, Red-rumped Tinkerbird, Petit's Cuckooshrike,



Velvet-mantled Drongo, Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher, Honeyguide Greenbul, and Chestnut-winged Starling.

We also had great views of a White-collared Oliveback which had taken over a weaver's nest. This was a new species for the country in 2011 and a major range extension.

After a final visit to Damengola, it was time to head back south again to the Kissama National Park which protects 70 kilometers of coastline south of Luanda. Damengola gave us Great Blue Turaco and another Blue Malkoha plus Eastern Yellow-billed Barbet, Cassin's Honeybird, Green-backed Woodpecker, Swamp Palm Bubul, and Crested and Red-headed Malimbe's before hitting the road south.

En route we stopped at the Dande bridge which gave us our first Forest Swallow before heading south to our rather splendid accommodation at Mangais Golf Resort.



Our last full day was spent exploring Kissama Forest and the Quissana National Park. We had already spent several hours in a couple of places looking for Grey-striped Spurfowl another endemic and in Quissana we were finally lucky when a pair crossed the track in front of us. We also found a small flock of Western Crested Guineafowl. But the big target here amongst the many baobabs was our final endemic- Gabela Helmetshrike. They are quite call responsive and we soon called in a flock of a

dozen birds which gave us great views. The final surprise of the day was getting distant views of an Egyptian Plover on the river bridge near the Mangais Golf estate. This estate is an interesting place. It is very up market yet practically deserted of golfers or anyone else for that matter as we were the only people staying there. I don't see how the place can be profitable.



A late afternoon walk gave me my last lifer – a long-legged Pipit plus a very obliging Rufous-tailed palm Thrush

And so it was time to return to Luanda but not before spending the morning birding along the estuary of the Cuanza River looking for West African Crested Tern. They took some time finding but we eventually got some shots and I could return to Luanda a happy man.

Our flight home had been cancelled and our guide and I had to spend the night in Luanda which gave us the opportunity to relive some of the many exciting birds of Angola

