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SENEGAL

Specialities of West Africa

TRIP REPORT



Savile's Bustard was one of the Sahel specialities seen on Limosa's first Senegal tour © Frank Lambert

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SENEGAL

Specialities of West Africa

15-28 January 2024

Leader: Frank Lambert

Local Guide: Abdou Lo (Carlos)

Introduction

Sandwiched between the mostly treeless landscape and sand dunes of the Sahara Desert and the lush, more humid forests of the Sudanian Savanna, is a region of 'Acacia savanna', known as the Sahel. Characterised by scattered thorny *Acacia* trees and sparse bushy vegetation and low herbage that is adapted to a hot, semi-arid climate and annual drought, this region supports an assemblage of birds that include a significant proportion of species that are confined to it.

The Sahel stretches across the southernmost part of North Africa, from northern Senegal and Mauritania on the Atlantic coast of Africa, eastwards to Eritrea and Sudan, bordering the Red Sea. Within the Sahel belt, the only stable country which it is considered safe to visit to search for these special birds, and with good infrastructure, is Senegal. Whilst much of this region has been severely degraded by centuries of overgrazing by domestic livestock, most of the bird species of particular interest survive in parts of northern Senegal, which was the focus for much of Limosa's first tour to this fascinating West African Country.



Some of the tour group in the Sahel of northwestern Senegal © Frank Lambert

Apart from the Sahelian endemics, the region is also very important for wintering Palearctic migrants, in particular waterbirds, as well as a variety of raptors, warblers, and other species

such as Woodchat Shrike, Eurasian Hoopoe, European Turtle Dove and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. These species add greatly to the lure of visiting Senegal, as does the relative ease of finding species such as the charismatic Egyptian Plover, White-backed Night Heron, White-crested Tiger Heron, West African Tern and other species that can often be tricky to see on most bird tours to Africa including Abyssinian Roller, Northern Carmine and Red-throated Bee-eaters and Adamawa Turtle Dove.



The stunning Abyssinian Roller was seen daily in Senegal © Frank Lambert

Not only was Limosa's first trip to Senegal a great success, thanks largely to ensuring that we had the best local guide and agent for birding in the country, but it also provided clients with incredible photographic opportunities. Many species that flush easily when approached on foot were found to be highly approachable in our comfortable tour minibus, and the sheer abundance of many species provided continuous photographic opportunities.

Of the key birds we were targeting on the tour, we saw and had excellent photographic opportunities of almost all, including African Finfoot, White-crested Tiger Heron, Lappet-faced Vulture, Beaudouin's Snake Eagle, Savile's Bustard, Quail-plover, Egyptian Plover, White-crowned Plover, West African Tern, Golden Nightjar, Adamawa Turtle Dove, Little Grey Woodpecker, West African Swallow, Atlas (Seebohm's) Wheatear, Cricket Warbler, the Saharan and Sahel forms of Great Grey Shrike, Sudan Golden Sparrow, 'Black-faced' Quailfinch and Sahel Paradise Wydah in its spectacular full breeding plumage.

In addition, we witnessed thousands of Scissor-tailed Kites coming to a roost in the Saloum Delta, visited a colony of Red-throated Bee-eaters at Wassadou, and got close to a truly spectacular Great White Pelican colony in Djoudj National Park.

Trip Diary

Sunday 15th January

Our mid-morning Iberia flight from Heathrow's Terminal 5 arrived in Dakar some twenty minutes late, where, after getting through immigration and customs, and withdrawing local currency from ATMs, we were met by our local guide and tour agent, Abdou Lo (who, whilst studying Spanish at University, took the name Carlos, which has stuck ever since). From the airport, it was only 30 minutes' drive in our comfortable minibus to our hotel in Thies, situated on the route north that we would be taking on our first full day.

Monday 16th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot.

Most of the group were up early, hoping to find a Greyish Eagle Owl that has regularly been observed around our hotel, but we had no success, and ate our breakfast just as it was getting light. With a long journey ahead of us, we left immediately following our breakfast, having seen a few birds around the hotel such as Blue-naped Mousebird, Red-cheeked Cordonbleu and our first of many Yellow-billed Kites, a numerous species in the environs of towns near the coast. Setting off at 7.30am, we headed north at a comfortable speed, knowing that our main target birds for this part of the tour lay some 5 hours' drive to the north.

Senegal is not a particularly attractive country, suffering from poverty, dilapidated buildings, and a serious rubbish problem, made more conspicuous by the sparse vegetation and vast, relatively flat open landscapes. Nevertheless, birds were everywhere, but with our schedule we knew that we had to keep heading north to get to our destination near the border with Mauritania in time to begin our search for the almost mythical Golden Nightjar.



Flocks of Sudan Golden Sparrows were numerous in northern Senegal © Frank Lambert



Chestnut-bellied Starling is ubiquitous in the dryer northern parts of Senegal © Frank Lambert

As we headed north, we soon began to appreciate which species were common, with several species of starlings and doves, Eurasian Hoopoes, Sudan Golden Sparrows and Western Red-billed Hornbills all being particularly numerous. Of course, we were able to stop occasionally, so as soon as we spotted vultures not far from the road we were out of the vehicle with our scopes. Whilst most countries are rapidly losing their vultures, and some species are severely threatened, Senegal still has a good vulture population, and we were able to get superb views of five species together, from the diminutive Hooded Vulture to the increasingly rare Lappet-faced Vulture. We also had the opportunity to compare three species of *Gyps* here: Ruppell's, Griffon and White-backed Vultures.

As we headed northwards, we stopped in an area sometimes frequented by Little Grey Woodpecker, a species that requires a special trip to the Sahel to see. Using playback, Abdou soon found this special species at close range, and not long afterwards we also found another of the Sahel specialities, the diminutive Sennar Penduline Tit. An excellent start!



Sennar Penduline Tit © Frank Lambert

During the day, despite relatively little birding, we had still accumulated a great list of birds, including migrants such as Western Bonelli's, Western Subalpine, Western Orphean and

Western Olivaceous Warblers, and Woodchat Shrikes, as well as birds that we would see regularly on our tour, such as Speckled Pigeon, Mourning Collared Dove, Vinaceous Dove, Laughing Dove, Namaqua Dove, Spur-winged Lapwing, Western Red-billed Hornbill, African Grey Woodpecker, Abyssinian Roller, Long-tailed Glossy Starling, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Beautiful and Pygmy Sunbirds, White-billed Buffalo Weaver and Red-billed Firefinch. We also encountered a few species that were hardly seen again, such as Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Striped Kingfisher and Little Weaver, and had our first views of several birds that we would only encounter in the north, such as Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Courser, African Green Bee-eater, Northern Anteater Chat and Black-crowned Sparrow Lark, with fantastic views of all these species.

We arrived in Podor mid-afternoon, and after checking into our hotel, headed out again after a short rest to start our search for Golden Nightjar, one of the main target species that attracts birders to Senegal. In the past few years, however, this species has become slightly more difficult to see because of land conversion in the area that birders usually visit, and each year this situation gets worse. After a frustrating afternoon searching an area of suitable habitat, we finally had our first views of Golden Nightjars just after dusk, when several were heard and seen briefly. Not everyone saw the birds on the ground, however, so we planned to revisit the area again the following evening.



Temminck's Courser near Podor. We found at least ten birds sheltering in the shade in a relatively small area © Frank Lambert

Tuesday 17th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot.

After a 7am breakfast, we left our hotel in Podor just after first light. We spent the entire day exploring areas within about an hour of the hotel, looking for some of the species that are confined to this part of Senegal, and at the same time enjoying a plethora of other birds. It was also a great opportunity to familiarise ourselves with some of the West Palearctic migrants that are common in this part of Africa, some of these being species that only rarely turn up in the UK, such as Western Orphean and Western Olivaceous Warblers.

It didn't take long to find our first target, Fulvous Babbler, a social species that forages on the ground, running to nearby clumps of vegetation when disturbed, and seems to prefer hiding within the safety of *Acacia* spines. One of the Sahel specialities that frequents *Acacia* trees is the attractive Cricket Warbler. This was also high on our list of species to find, but it took a lot longer to track some down. They are usually also quite a sociable species, and we encountered no less than seven in two areas.



Cricket Warbler was one of our main targets, most easily found hiding in the 'lethal' spines of Acacia trees © Frank Lambert

Whilst looking for these targets, there were many other birds to see, and we encountered species such as Green Wood Hoopoe, Western Black-eared Wheatear, at least five Short-toed Snake Eagles, numerous Black Scrub Robins. Sizeable flocks of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse passed high overhead, a species we had seen at close quarters on the ground on the first day.

Palearctic migrant passerines were regularly encountered during the day, and by paying particular attention to Woodchat Shrikes, we were able to distinguish two subspecies, nominate *senator* and West Mediterranean (Balearic) *badius*, which is a potential future split.



A beautiful male Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse in the shade. Good numbers were seen in the Podor area © Frank Lambert

Great Grey Shrikes were also quite common, and again we were able to see the common Sahel form, *leucopygos*, as well as 1-2 *elegans*, which breed in the Sahara. Prior to returning to the hotel for lunch and a rest during the hottest part of the day, we visited a swift colony on the banks of the Doué River, where we were able to compare Little Swifts with an isolated population of Horus Swifts that was discovered here very recently.

After our relaxing lunch and rest, we headed back to the field as the temperatures started to decrease. Despite the high temperatures, most birds were surprisingly active for much of the day, and it wasn't long before we were again watching plenty of species. We had excellent opportunities, for example, to learn to differentiate African Collared, African Mourning and Vinaceous Doves, all of which occur in the area.



Woodchat Shrike is a common visitor to Senegal, where we saw both the nominate and West Mediterranean forms © Frank Lambert



African Mourning Dove is an abundant species in Senegal © F. Lambert

During the afternoon we saw our first Eurasian Wrynecks, a nice bird to see at any time, as well as our only Tawny Pipit, and more importantly, our only Atlas (or Seebohm's) Wheatear of the trip. Atlas Wheatear, which as its' name suggests breeds in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa, is now usually recognised as a separate species to Northern Wheatear, and we were lucky enough to encounter a male.



This male Atlas Wheatear was seen in far northern Senegal -it's exact wintering range is poorly known © Frank Lambert

As the afternoon progressed, we searched a few areas in the hope of finding a roosting Golden Nightjar, but to no avail. We did, however, encounter many other species, most notably an African subspecies of Zitting Cisticola, *uropygialis*, which seemed to be different in appearance and behaviour to those in Europe, being a heavy-billed, stout-legged cisticola that feeds mainly on the ground.

As it started to get dark, we returned to areas where we had seen and heard Golden Nightjar the previous evening, and we soon found a calling bird that was eventually seen well by the entire group on the ground. The habitat frequented by Golden Nightjar in this area is rapidly disappearing, and whilst elated at getting views of perched birds as well as nice flight views, we were left wondering whether future tours would be so fortunate. Whilst searching for the

nightjars, we also saw at least eight Black-headed Lapwings that were feeding in the same area after dark and prolonged close views of a cute Pallid Fox.



Zitting Cisticolas in NW Senegal appear to be very different from other populations of this species group © Frank Lambert

Wednesday 18th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot.

This was our last morning in the Podor area, and after our 7am breakfast, we headed towards the town of Richard Toll to visit some birding sites in that area. One of our most interesting stops of the tour was a small area of dense hedges, where we found good numbers of Senegal Thick-knee, several Vieillot's Barbets, and an obliging Eurasian Wryneck. These species were, however, not the reason for visiting as we were able to enjoy fabulous views of a large, communal roost of Long-tailed Nightjars, numbering at least 15-20 birds. Nearby, Abdou then stumbled across a relatively rarely seen species, our third nightjar species in 24 hours – a stunningly camouflaged Standard-winged Nightjar.

Moving on from the roost, we passed an area where wintering Eurasian Stone-Curlews were gathering. Although we could not count them all, there were at least 80 birds scattered across a couple of hectares. Whilst not a new species for anyone in the group, we were all delighted to see such a large group of this striking species, particularly having just had the opportunity to closely examine good numbers of Spotted Thick-knees around the nightjar roost. We continued our journey towards our hotel, seeing a few firsts for the trip including Dark Chanting Goshawk, Black Stork, Black Heron, Little Bee-eater, and at least one *senegalensis* Hoopoe (out of at least 15 Hoopoes which were seen).



Some of the Long-tailed Nightjars found roosting in the shade of a dense hedge near Richard Toll © Frank Lambert



Our third nightjar species in 24 hours – a beautifully marked Standard-winged Nightjar © Frank Lambert

Reaching our very comfortable hotel in time for lunch, we had an opportunity to briefly check out birds in the extensive gardens before heading out for the afternoon. Here we found our first of many Double-spurred Spurfowl, Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Senegal Batis, Northern Crombec, African Grey Woodpecker, Village Indigobird, Western Olivaceous Warbler and Scarlet-chested Sunbird.



Senegal Thick-knees were common and relatively tame in areas visited during the first days of our tour © Frank Lambert

After lunch, we visited an area known as Tres Marigots, where the habitat is sadly now increasingly under threat from massive agricultural monocultures, which have squeezed out wildlife and made it more challenging to find some species. Nevertheless, after a relatively short search using our vehicle, we found one of the main targets for this trip, a true Sahelian endemic, Savile's Bustard.

Les Tres Marigots is an area named after three lakes with associated wetlands, and we encountered a good variety of waterbirds in the vicinity, including Black Heron, Black Stork, Great White Pelican, Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis and Common Snipe. Back at our hotel, we retired early in anticipation of our very early start the following morning.

Thursday 19th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot. Fairly strong winds.

Rising early, we had an excellent breakfast well before dawn and departed our hotel for Djoudj National Park, some 1.5 hours drive to the north. Arriving just outside the park not long after dawn, we were immediately rewarded with exceptional views of Allen's and African Purple Gallinules feeding alongside each other while hopping around on the floating vegetation of a small pond, as well as Black Crakes.

Next, we had lovely scope views of four Greater Painted Snipe that were hiding in plain sight, and always a pleasure to see. The skies were full of huge noisy flocks of White-faced Whistling Duck and numerous other waterfowl, along with flamingos, herons, egrets, cormorants, and pelicans. Every piece of open wetland we examined was teeming with birdlife, and the tall reeds harboured species such as African Reed Warbler, wintering Sedge Warblers and skulking Greater Swamp Warblers, detected primarily by their rather strange, frog-like vocalisations. We also found the locally common River Prinia, a cryptic species with disjunct small populations in wetlands just south of the Sahel.



Singing Bush Larks are easily overlooked when not vocalising due to their remarkable camouflage © Frank Lambert

Once the National Park opened, we drove into this famous bird sanctuary, where we spent most of the day. Djoudj is one of the most impressive freshwater wetlands in this part of Africa, supporting an estimated 1.5 million waterbirds during the northern winter, and has been declared a Ramsar Site and a UNESCO World Heritage Area. It comprises a large lake that is surrounded by smaller lakes, streams, ponds, and backwaters, and has huge areas of wetland vegetation such as extensive reed beds. Many of the wetland species here are northern migrants, which spend most of the winter in the safety of this protected area.

During the morning, we searched for one of Djoudj's most threatened species, the Arabian Bustard, now numbering only 2-3 pairs, and also visited some hides overlooking the vast lake, where the relatively strong winds had concentrated huge numbers of ducks and shorebirds in a relatively small area. Scanning with our scopes revealed large numbers of duck which we were all familiar with, but also at least three Marbled Duck, a species that winters here in small numbers and is not seen by every tour group. Among the many wintering Common Ringed Plovers on the shoreline, we also easily picked out a few Kittlitz's Plovers, which probably breed in this area. Altogether, we saw at least 23 species of wader, including our only Collared Pratincoles of the trip, along with our only African Spoonbill of the tour.

During the day, whilst searching for the bustards, we encountered species such as Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Great Grey Shrikes and up to 90 wary Black-crowned Cranes, as well as a male Montagu's and a male Pallid Harrier, and we were shown a group of seven Western Barn Owl nestlings, all apparently from one brood, in one of the observation hides. There were too many birds to look at!



A large brood of Western Barn Owls had taken over one of the observation posts in Djoudj National Park © Frank Lambert

One of the most impressive spectacles of the day was an unimaginable swarm of Sand Martins. During the morning, we had noticed very impressive groups of martins, numbering in the thousands, resting on areas of open mud. By the afternoon, after our lunch, the numbers had swollen to an estimated hundreds of thousands of individuals, so that everywhere one looked through binoculars there were swarms of them, rather like the dense swarms of gnats that one occasionally sees in temperate wetlands.

Djoudj is also a tourist attraction on account of its incredible colony of Great White Pelicans, which can be approached closely by boat. The experience is magical, attracting significant numbers of tourists who normally have little interest in nature. Hence, after lunch, we boarded a rather large, very stable boat, and headed down a wide waterway towards the pelican colony. African Fish Eagles and Ospreys were common in the area.



African Fish Eagles were common on route to the pelican colony, including some displaying birds © Frank Lambert

Chugging along at an easy pace, we were provided with many close views of a variety of larger waterbirds, such as Yellow-billed Storks, African Sacred Ibis, Black-crowned Night, Squacco, Grey and Purple Herons, Reed and White-breasted Cormorants, African Darters, Eurasian Spoonbills, Great, Little and Yellow-billed Egrets, and of course many pelicans, including small

numbers of Pink-backed. In the backwaters, we were able to see large groups of Fulvous Whistling Ducks, and we were also treated to the occasional graceful lines of both Lesser and Greater Flamingos.

As we approached the Great White Pelican colony, we could see neat flocks swirling in the sky, dropping down towards the ground from high, and there were an ever-increasing number on the waterways. Eventually, as we rounded the last corner, we were confronted with the incredible spectacle of thousands of pelicans jostling for space on a largely artificial island. Getting closer, the noise and smells emanating from the colony added greatly to the experience, one of several incredible bird spectacles we had come to witness in Senegal.



Large numbers of African Darter and Reed Cormorant lined the route to the pelican colony at Djoudj © Frank Lambert

Pelicans were everywhere, and seemingly used to boats so that they came very close. Birds in every plumage were seen, including in the rather spectacular breeding condition. Some were demonstrating their remarkable synchronized fishing, with all the birds dipping their heads simultaneously whilst swimming in formation.

After visiting the pelican breeding colony, we again searched areas where Arabian Bustards had been seen the previous afternoon, and even found fresh footprints of at least two birds, but the birds themselves remained hidden. With no higher ground from which to scan, it is easy to miss this rare and declining species despite its large size. Centuries of hunting have made this, and indeed most bustard species, very wary, and they are often able to slink away unnoticed and hide themselves in seemingly scant vegetation. We searched until dusk, after which we headed back in the dark to our hotel near St Louis.



Great White Pelicans jostling for space in the colony we visited in Djoudj National Park © Frank Lambert



Great White Pelicans surrounded our boat whilst visiting the breeding colony in Djoudj National Park © Frank Lambert

Friday 20th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot. Strong winds at times.

After a relaxed breakfast at 7am, we set off for a morning searching for waterbirds around the bustling city of St Louis. Visiting a sandy beach, with a backdrop of lines of traditional fishing schooners heading northwards just past the surf, we spent some time watching for West African Terns, which occasionally drop in here. Although none were seen, we did see a distant Arctic Skua, a new species for our local guide, Abdou. We moved on to other wetland

areas in the vicinity, finding our first Red-chested Swallows, some obliging Little Bee-eaters and getting close to very tame groups of Western Reef Egrets and other herons on route.

Birding from various vantage points around the estuary near St Louis, we were able to find hundreds of Slender-billed and Grey-headed Gulls, both common near the coast of Senegal, along with smaller numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a single immature Audouin's Gull. Pink-backed Pelicans were relatively common, along with large feeding flocks of cormorants and an assortment of wintering shorebirds, including Marsh Sandpipers, Curlew Sandpipers, Eurasian Oystercatchers, good numbers of Whimbrel and large numbers of Black-winged Stilts. Pied Kingfisher was also a very common bird in this area, and we had many sightings of both Caspian and Gull-billed Tern, as well as some Sandwich and Whiskered Terns.



Western Reef Herons are common in Senegal, with the dark morph outnumbering white individuals © Frank Lambert

Birding in the hotel garden at lunchtime, we found the first Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird of the trip and had repeat views of most of the species seen here previously, including Black-headed Weaver and Grey-backed Camaroptera. Wetlands and adjacent low herbage near Tres Marigots that we visited from mid-afternoon produced a Black-headed Heron, Black and Purple Herons, numerous African Purple Gallinules and African Jacanas, a couple of Allen's Gallinules and nice views of small groups of African Pygmy Goose. Good numbers of wintering Western Yellow Wagtails, including some 'Spanish' Yellow Wagtails among the many Blue-headed Yellow Wagtails, were also seen, plus a single River Prinia.

Back at the hotel, after finishing our dinner, we heard the distinctive long trill of Long-tailed Nightjar, not dissimilar to that of European Nightjar, and some of us resolved to search for nightbirds the following morning.

Saturday 21st January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot.

An hour prior to dawn, Frank was out looking for nightbirds, other clients having decided to 'sleep in', which they later regretted after a calling White-faced Owl showed itself ten minutes before breakfast. The Long-tailed Nightjar was also seen, sitting only 50m from our rooms.

After breakfast we headed towards an area frequented by one of the main draws of Senegal, the enigmatic Quail-plover. Soon, we reached an area close to a main road which was quite different to surrounding areas, with scattered bushes and distinctive areas of short, dry brown herbage, as well as an abundance of Locusts. One of the first birds we saw in this area was an obliging Desert Cisticola.

We were now in the habitat where we hoped to find Quail-plover, and so we slowly walked across the area in a short line, spaced about 5-10m apart. We all thought that it would take some time to find this shy species, but incredibly, within perhaps five minutes, we flushed one. For anyone who thinks the Quail-plover should belong with the rather similar looking buttonquails, as it is presently treated, and who is familiar with the latter, our first views would have immediately removed any doubt that we were dealing with an entirely different creature. Indeed, the IOC list notes that: *Relationships of Quail-plover uncertain; possibly related to coursers*. This also seems like unlikely guesswork.

The flight is remarkable. Firstly, it is very fast, so quick in fact that it would be possible to miss this small bird entirely. Secondly, Quail-plover seems to fly effortlessly in an undulating arc, with wings fully closed most of the time, and when opened briefly, displaying the distinctive black and white pattern of the flight feathers. Once it plummets to the ground, Quail-plover invariably moves immediately, not necessarily very far, but then its superb camouflage makes it almost invisible if it stays still, which it often does until approached too closely.



One of the main reasons for birders to visit Senegal is to experience the wonderful, enigmatic Quail-plover © Frank Lambert

Needless to say, it took the group another 30-40 minutes to finally pin one of these immaculately patterned birds down. When they do move, Quail-plovers do something that is very similar to the buttonquails, with the body swaying backwards and forwards in an exaggerated manner whilst moving the legs in a kind of slow-motion walk. Although this behaviour is no doubt designed to reduce the chance of detection, perhaps mimicking vegetation moving in the wind, this is when it is most likely for an observer to see the bird. Without doubt, this strange creature was the bird of the trip for most of the participants.

Mission accomplished, we headed on. During our drive we saw a phenomenal number of vultures and had plenty of time to enjoy these ancient-looking birds. As with our drive north, we saw five species, but this time in larger numbers, with at least 75 individuals seen well. Among these was, again, the huge Lappet-faced Vulture, dominating the other birds at a recently dead but unidentified animal close to the road, and looking enormous alongside Hooded Vultures, even though the latter are similar in length and wingspan to a Tawny Eagle.



The massive-billed Lappet-faced Vulture alongside a Griffon Vulture and several Hooded Vultures © Frank Lambert

We arrived at our hotel in Kaolack, overlooking the Saloum River, just in time to enjoy some views of Slender-billed Gulls and a variety of herons before darkness fell.

Sunday 22nd January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot.

Just after our 7am breakfast, some of the group saw around six Lesser Kestrels whilst scanning the river, these being one of the species that roost down river in fairly large numbers. Leaving our hotel at 7.30am, we continued our journey eastwards along the busy main highway towards Tambacounda. We were now well within the transition zone between the dry Sahel and the wetter Gambian forests to the south. We stopped a few times to look at raptors, picking up some species that we had not encountered previously such as Gabar Goshawk,

Wahlberg's Eagle, Brown Snake Eagle and Beaudouin's Snake Eagle, one of the birds that had been a target for most of the trip members.

The avifauna was changing, and we started to regularly see species that would be commoner during the remainder of the trip, such as Western Grey Plantain Eater, Black-billed Wood Dove, Senegal Parrot, and Double-spurred Francolin. Another key bird that we encountered on the journey was Sahel Paradise Whydah, a low-density species that parasitises Green-winged Pytilia, and is hence confined to areas where this finch breeds. Two impressive full-tailed males, often interacting with each other, were pursued in the environs of a village, as they chased each other in flight and moved restlessly between distant perches. A Singing Cisticola, one of only two seen on the trip, was also seen well during a brief roadside stop, as well as our first Piacpiacs, an unusual, long-tailed crow that often balances on the back of livestock like a starling or oxpecker.



Beaudouin's Snake Eagle eyeing us up on the way to Tambacounda © Frank Lambert

After checking in to our new hotel, in Tambacounda, we headed to the real destination of the day, *Campement de Wassadou*, on the Gambia River. On the short drive down a dirt track from the main road, we saw our first Yellow-billed Shrikes and Helmeted Guineafowls. Shortly after arriving at Wassadou, we boarded a rather wobbly boat and headed upriver. We spent the next 1.5 hours enjoying close views of some greatly anticipated species.

After passing groups of Black-crowned Night Herons and snatching views of White-crowned Robin Chats skulking on the riverbank, we crossed the river to a grassy island, where, to our delight, an Egyptian Plover fed on the shore, seemingly oblivious to our presence. This is one of those birds that sparks the imagination and certainly lives up to expectations, especially when it is feeding less than five metres away. Having had our fill of this bird, we headed on, knowing that we would see more the next morning.

Next, we had our first views of African Finfoot, another legendary bird, followed by superb views of another amazing waterbird, the strange looking, White-crowned Plover.

Above the river and a little further downstream on the higher mud banks were the numerous dense clusters of nest holes belonging to yet another much-wanted bird, Red-bearded Bee-

eater. At this time of day, in the late afternoon, at least a hundred birds had gathered close to the nests, giving us fabulous views of this attractive species. A few Adamawa Turtle Doves, a species now difficult to see outside Senegambia, frequented one of the islands that we passed, giving us some nice views, and we also saw several Swamp Flycatchers, African Pied Wagtail and some Black-rumped Waxbills. Nearby, we had good views of a perched Grey Falcon, and an immature African Harrier-hawk hunted for prey on the muddy bank. Hadada Ibis and Hamerkops fed along the river edge, and in the water three Hippos were keeping an eye on us from a safe distance. Or was it the other way round?



Our first Egyptian Plover at Wassadou, feeding within a few metres of our boat on the Gambia River © Frank Lambert

As darkness began to fall, we headed back to the floating wooden jetty and drove back to Tambacounda for a relaxing dinner.

Monday 23rd January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot.

We set out early, reaching Wassadou in time for breakfast at dawn, and early enough to spotlight a Northern White-faced Owl in the camp. Waiting for our boat, we had nice views of West African Colobus Monkeys. After some brief birding around the camp, we again donned our life jackets and, having boarded the slightly wobbly boat, headed out for another enjoyable, relaxing river 'cruise', observed suspiciously by a large party of Guinea Baboons.

At this time of day there were many birds vocalising, and we glimpsed groups of skittish Brown and Blackcap Babblers in the bushes. Today, kingfishers were very much in evidence, and during the morning we had close encounters with Malachite, Grey-headed, Blue-breasted, Giant and Pied Kingfishers. Our main target for the morning, however, was the beautifully marked White-backed Night Heron. Fortunately, our boatman knew this species well, and within a fairly short time found one hiding close to the water in some dense shrubs. This individual was much shyer than this species is at some other locations, slowly moving off as we tried to get better views. Nevertheless, we all had brief but good close views, something that not all visiting birding groups experience.



Our boat trips at Wassadou gave us stunning views of five species of kingfisher including Blue-breasted Kingfisher © Frank Lambert

As with the previous evening, we were able to enjoy close encounters with most of the same birds, and with better light those with cameras could take better pictures than on our previous trip. On this boat trip, we saw at least four Egyptian Plovers and three African Finfoots, and a group of eight African Wattled Lapwings. We also saw our first Shikra of the trip, a Beaudouin's Snake Eagle overhead, and an adult African Harrier-hawk, and a Brown-throated Wattle-eye put in a brief appearance. Good numbers of Northern Carmine Bee-eaters were hunting above the camp and river as we left the boat and there were two African Hawk Eagles overhead. After the boat trip, we had the optional of a siesta during the heat of the day. Of course, most of us continued to look for birds rather than rest!



The long, dangling wattles of White-crowned Plover give this beautiful shorebird a rather weird appearance © Frank Lambert

The camp itself provided good opportunities to get close to various species of dove, Long-tailed Starlings, Green Wood-hoopoes, as well as various smaller finches, such as the ubiquitous Red-billed Firefinch, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu and Village Indigobird. We also saw our first Senegal Eremomela, a species that we later saw daily, a nice Melodious Warbler and our only European Turtle Dove of the trip.



The noisy, highly sociable Long-tailed Glossy Starling was encountered on every day of the tour. © Frank Lambert

Another starling we saw well here, which was new for the tour, was the very distinctive Purple Glossy Starling. Walking and driving up the track to the main road produced good views of birds such as Red-necked Falcon, Senegal Batis, Piacpiac, Double-spurred Spurfowl, Cardinal Woodpecker, African Paradise Flycatcher, Western Violet-backed Sunbird and Yellow-billed Shrikes, with an African Hobby seen by several people. However, the star bird of our walk was the beautiful White ('Long-crested') Helmetshrike, a large group of which kept coming back to inspect us in response to playback.



The beady-eyed, brightly coloured Purple Glossy Starling was seen very well around the Wassadou Camp © Frank Lambert



Groups of Double-spurred Spurfowl were commonly seen during the second half of our Senegal tour. © Frank Lambert

Before we returned to our hotel, we made some roadside stops, during which we saw many Senegal Parrots, Broad-billed Roller and Red-necked Falcon.

Tuesday 24th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot. Dusty haze

During the morning, we headed to our next destination, the Saloum Delta near Abdou Lo's hometown of Toubakouta. On route, we saw Lesser Blue-eared Starlings as well as a few raptors, including Western Snake Eagle and Gabar Goshawk. We also stopped in an area where Verreaux's Eagle Owl is known to roost. The Verreaux's Eagle Owl was found after a short search, roosting at the very top of one of one of the tall trees that dotted the landscape.

After a relaxing lunch at our hotel, we looked for birds in the extensive gardens before heading further afield. In the afternoon, we visited a site adjacent to a small wetland for some general birding where we found species such as Black Crake, African Green Pigeon, White-crowned Robin-chat, Fine-spotted Woodpecker, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Northern Yellow White-eye, Blue-cheeked and Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, Greater Honeyguide, Bronze Mannikin, and, after dark, had good scope views of some Double-banded Sandgrouse that we torch-lighted as they came to drink in a small pool near the wetland.



Fine-spotted Woodpecker was seen well near Toubakouta © F rank Lambert

Wednesday 25th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot. Dusty haze

Prior to dawn, we spent half an hour looking for Greyish Eagle Owl. The eagle owl was calling some way from the hotel, and we made our way down to the edge of the mangroves adjacent to the hotel, where the owl was seen very well sitting on the drier mud near the hotel jetty.

During the morning, we visited several sites in the vicinity of Sangako Forest. Here, we saw a few new species for the trip including Bruce's Green Pigeon, Pallid Swift, African Golden Oriole, Western House Martin, Northern Puffback, African Thrush, Lavender Waxbill, as well as both Red-necked and Lanner Falcons. During the middle of the day, we explored the hotel gardens where we had excellent views of many birds, including spectacular male Pygmy and Beautiful Sunbirds, along with an assortment of other passerines, including Yellow-fronted Canary.



Beautiful Sunbird was one of the many birds seen at close range in the hotel gardens at Tambakouta © F rank Lambert

Senegal Parrots were common around the hotel, and the only Lizard Buzzard of the trip was found perched in the taller trees around our cabins.



Senegal Parrot was commonly seen during the second half of our Senegal tour © Frank Lambert

After lunch, as it was getting cooler, we took a boat into the Saloum Delta to search for the special birds that frequent this area. Here we encountered our first Palm-nut Vultures, White-fronted Plovers, Striated Herons, several impressive Goliath Herons, and Mangrove Sunbird, which was one of the main targets in this area.

Our main target, however, was the elusive White-crested Tiger Heron. We searched for this by cruising slowly along the edges of mangroves, especially along the many smaller side channels in the estuary, with everyone concentrating on peering into the dark recesses close to the water where this notoriously shy bird is typically seen stalking its prey. Along the way, we had close encounters with a number of waterbirds, as well as a remarkably tame Marsh Mongoose that was hunting for crabs in the soft, muddy holes that peppered the banks bordering the mangroves. Eventually, we spotted one – perched less than a metre above the water within the forest of roots of Red Mangrove trees.



This White-crested Tiger Heron gave fantastic views as it hunted within the aerial roots of Red Mangroves © Frank Lambert

The Tiger Heron quickly walked off, giving brief but close views. After some fifteen minutes, we returned to the same area and found what was almost certainly a second individual, this one more obliging. Strangely, as with many elusive species that rely on camouflage and stealth to avoid detection, when we approached quietly with the engine off, it was unexpectedly tame, focusing on catching its next meal rather than the birders in our boat.



Long treated as a subspecies of Royal Tern, this very obliging West African Crested Tern refused to fly © Frank Lambert

Very satisfied with our experience, we headed back out into the estuary and focused on the gulls and terns perched on the recently exposed mud. Here, we soon picked out our target among the Slender-billed and Grey-headed Gulls, and the Caspian, Gull-billed and Sandwich Terns: a single West African Crested Tern. As we got closer, the gulls and terns started to take off, until finally, and miraculously, the only bird that remained on the mud was the one we most wanted to see. This West African Crested Tern was reluctant to fly and only left when we were less than ten metres from it.

This had been a very satisfying and enjoyable afternoon's birding, but we still had more to look for. We now focused on another key target, the 'Black-faced' Quailfinch, a likely future split. Quailfinches anywhere are hard to see well, but the area we visited was clearly an important feeding area for this species because we found numerous individuals. Most were impossible to spot before they flew, but over time and by walking cautiously, we all managed to get excellent views of this well-camouflaged species on the ground. Black-headed Heron, Purple Roller, European and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Pin-tailed Wydah and 'African' Zitting were among the birds also seen in this area.

Thursday 26th January

Mainly sunny, dry, very hot. Dusty haze

After a relaxing breakfast, we birded on the outskirts of Toubakouta, where two perched Lanner Falcons and close Lavender Waxbills were two of the highlights.

We also had good views of a few birds that had so far eluded us, including Mottled Spinetail. During the late morning, we visited Sipo Island, where Yellow Penduline Tit can be found but the only birds of note that we encountered were two pairs of Four-banded Sandgrouse which were nice to observe in the daytime.



The 'Black-faced' Quailfinches in Senegal are quite different to those found south and east of the Congo Basin © Frank Lambert

After lunch, and a siesta, we drove towards Kaolack and shuttled the group across a narrow stretch of the Kaolack River to Kousmar Island. Here, we stood quietly in the shadow of some large bushes, eagerly awaiting what is undoubtedly one of the highlights of any tour to Senegal, as this is where thousands of Scissor-tailed Kites come to roost every night. Not long after arriving, we noticed the kites, circling very high above the island, and then suddenly they all starting to descend in ever narrower circles towards the taller trees where they roost. It was an awesome spectacle to see so many of these beautiful raptors dropping into the trees nearby, where the first thing they all did was to preen for a prolonged period, and occasionally move from one delicate perch to another.



The only time we got our feet wet during the trip was when we shuttled across to Kousmar Island © Frank Lambert

During the wet season, the kites disperse widely across the Sahel, where they breed, so this spectacle can only be experienced during the dry season. We spent at least an hour watching them coming in, in a seemingly never-ending stream, before we had to leave to ensure we could cross the river in daylight.



Scissor-tailed Kites preening just after arriving at one of the roost trees on Kousmar Island © Frank Lambert

As we left, a group of some sixty Lesser Kestrels was also seen over the island, and whilst waiting on the mud for the boat, several Grey Kestrels, Western Marsh and Montagu's Harriers were spotted heading towards the island. Clearly this is an important roost site for a variety of other raptors as well as the kites and kestrels.



A good number of Scissor-tailed Kites alighted in lower trees close to our hiding place © Frank Lambert

Back at the hotel, we celebrated our memorable close encounter with one of Africa's most attractive raptors.

Friday 27th January

Mainly sunny, dry, hot. Dusty haze

It was our last day in Senegal, and we spent the morning searching various areas near Toubakouta for one of our missing targets, Yellow Penduline Tit, a tiny species that can easily be missed. After visiting several sites, we eventually found one that responded to playback and gave us excellent but rather brief views before disappearing again into extensive *Acacia* thickets. A Lesser Honeyguide, and a pair of Black Scimitar-bills, the only ones seen on our trip, also put in an appearance, and some of the group had brief views of a Long-crested Eagle.

During our trip we had seen relatively few hirundine species, but on our last day we saw both Mosque Swallows and at least five 'West African' Swallows, the latter being a resident in this part of Africa and closely related to the more northerly distributed Red-rumped Swallow which reaches Senegal in small numbers. West African Swallow, however, has not yet been recognised as a full species by everyone.

We also saw a gathering of thousands of Western House Martins, perhaps congregating prior to starting their journey northwards to greet the northern spring in their European breeding grounds. It was heartwarming to see so many together because this is one of many European breeding species that is in steep decline, and is increasingly difficult to find in any numbers, even in rural areas.

After lunch at the hotel, and some final birding in the grounds, we headed for the airport in Dakar. Although we hardly stopped, we continued to see now familiar scenes of congregations of waterbirds in every wetland we passed, Abyssinian Rollers perched atop bushes and wires, and a continuous stream of doves and starlings passing our windows as they fed close to the road.

One stop we did make, however, was to scope up the gigantic nest of a Lappet-faced Vulture, complete with its occupant. This was a very fitting end to the trip, a reminder that in this part of Africa, many birds still thrive despite the vagaries of climate change, overgrazing, 'modernisation' of agriculture, and the slow but steady clearance of their natural habitats.

At the airport, we said our goodbyes and boarded our flights back home. Tomorrow we would be in another reality, perhaps wondering where our next birding trip would take us, but certain we would all miss the great birding that we had experienced during our very successful Senegal tour.

Frank Lambert

February 2024