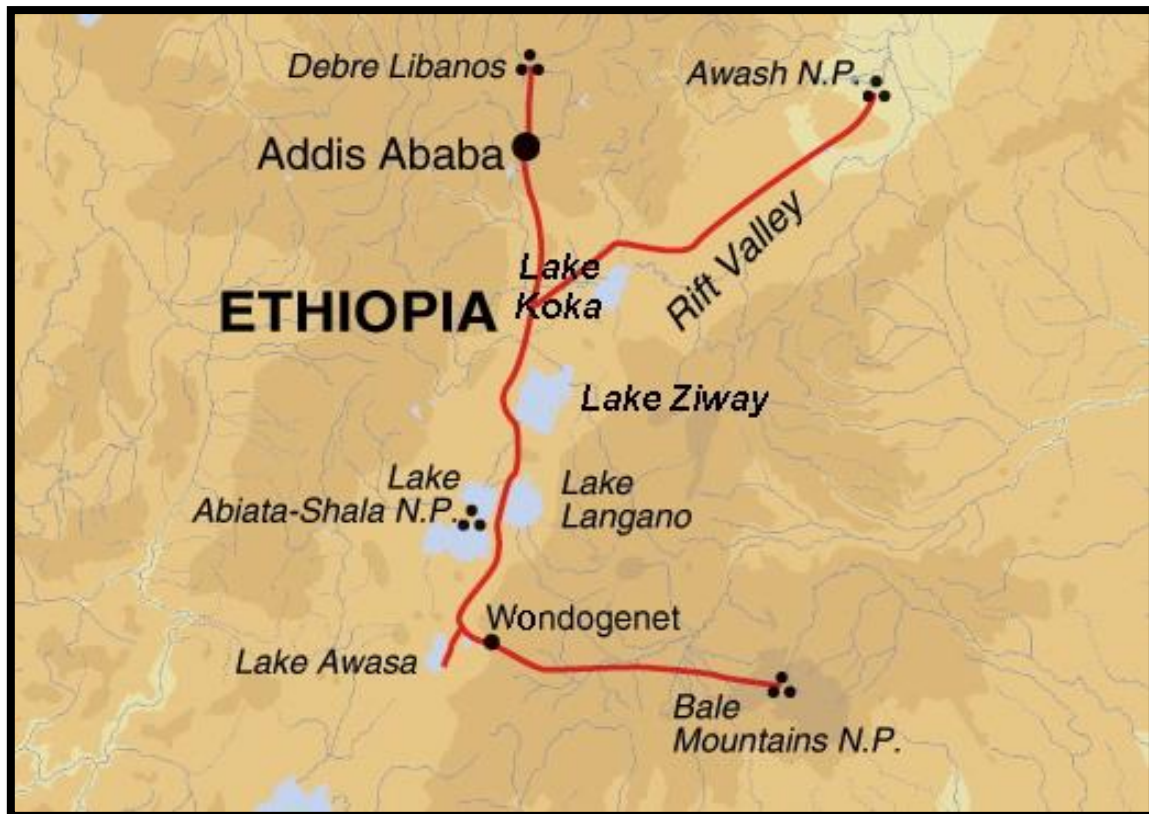


ETHIOPIA Nov 2014



By John Rayner

Ethiopia is a beautiful but unusual country. Not least because it has its own calendar with the year divided into 13 months and its own time with a 24 hour clock starting at 06.00. Thus I joined a 10 day the Ethiopian Endemics Naturetrek tour on 7th November 2014 (or, according to the Ethiopian calendar, 28th Tekemr 2007). Taking out travelling time this actually gave us 8 full days in the field as we attempted to see as many endemic species as the rather crammed itinerary allowed. We travelled to Awash National Park, various locations along the Rift Valley (including Lake Langano, Wondo Genet, Lake Awassa and Abiata Shalla National Park), Bale Mountains to the east, and Debre Libanos to the north of Addis Ababa. Thus we travelled in excess of 1000 miles.



The weather was hot and sunny in general with, as expected, some cloud and cooler temperatures at altitude. Food was of somewhat variable quality. The grilled fish was always good and local dishes of spicy dips with injera were worth trying and made a change from the ubiquitous spaghetti with tomato sauce.

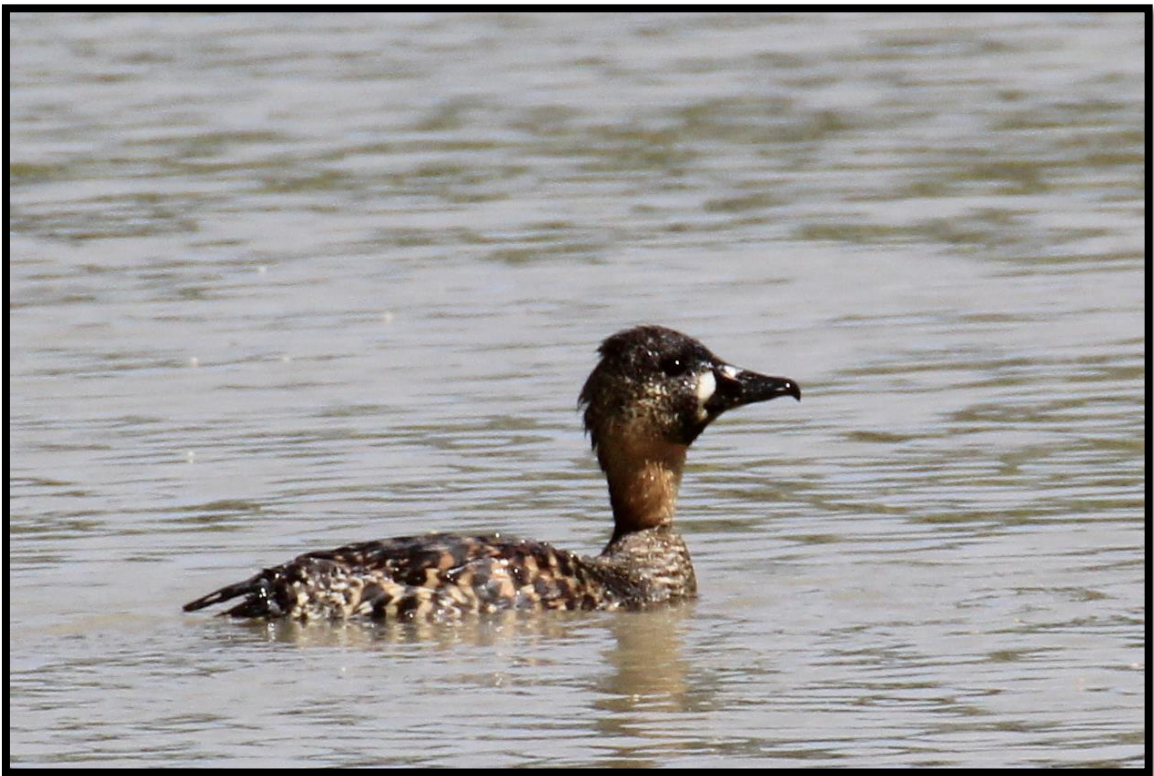
Books used were “Birds of the Horn of Africa” (Redman, Stevenson & Fanshawe) and “Where to Watch Birds in Ethiopia” (Spottiswoode, Gabremichael & Francis).

The trip was led by the excellent Abiy Dagny and, as the tour title suggests, the focus was on the endemic birds of the area. But we saw so much more than that! I personally saw a massive 335 bird species (and missed a further 12). There were also many mammal highlights e.g. Ethiopian Wolf, Giant Mole Rat, Salt’s Dikdik, Beisa Oryx, Mountain Nyala and Gelada Baboon. What follows is not a complete list but rather an indication of what this wonderful country has to offer. Note, ‘endemic’ in this report refers to birds endemic to the Horn of Africa region and not specifically endemic to Ethiopia.

Some of my own photographic contributions are included but I am indebted to Neil Osborne, Fred Wake and, especially, John Tromans, who kindly provided many of the bird photographs that enhance this report.

Day 1. Following an uneventful overnight Ethiopian Airlines flight of approximately 8 hours arrival at Addis Ababa airport was chaotic.

Day 2. After queuing for immigration, visas and baggage we changed approximately 100 dollars into birr at the airport bank. We were already at considerable altitude as Addis Ababa is the 5th highest capital in the world at over 7,700 feet. First birds as we left the airport were Dusky Turtle Doves, Common Fiscal Shrike, Baglafecht Weavers and the first of hundreds, no, thousands, of both Black and Yellow-billed Kites (after studying the colour of the first few Kite's bills I stopped looking). First stop was the nearby Crown Hotel for ablutions and breakfast, bird additions here were Taccaze Sunbird, Speckled Mousebird and African Dusky Flycatcher - a mere taster of what lay ahead and soon we were on the road to Awash N.P. via Debre Zeit. A stop at Lake Chelek gave us our first true taste of African birding with many waterfowl including Red-knobbed Coots, Yellow-billed Ducks, White-faced Whistling Ducks, Spur-winged Goose and this African White-backed Duck.



Next, a lunch stop at Safari Lodge, Nazrat had a Greyish Eagle Owl peering down at us as we ate. Nearby a pair of Grey-headed Woodpeckers foraged, our first Horn of Africa endemic.



Now we were on the main road to Djibouti and another stop at Lake Beseka found us viewing Three-banded Plovers, Kittlitz's Plovers and Nile Crocodiles. The approach to Awash Falls Hotel at dusk developed into a night drive with,

firstly, White-faced Scops-Owl framing a spectacular sunset, then Slender-tailed Nightjar and White-tailed Mongoose in the headlights.



Although a travelling day we had managed plenty of birding and amassed a total of 75 species.

Day 3. Alarms set for 05.45 and my day started with an adult Pallid Harrier over the accommodation and a showy Grey-headed Bush-Shrike calling loudly just by the door. The dining area afforded a superb view of the falls but we were quickly breakfasted and ready to explore Awash National Park.



The first of three game drives started with a couple of diminutive Salt's Dikdiks, then both birds and mammals came thick and fast.



Far too many birds to mention but the highlights for me were Madagascar Bee-eaters perched on roadside wires, Yellow-breasted Barbet, Green-winged Pytilia, Rosy-patch Bush-shrike, Buff-crested Bustard, Straw-tailed Wydah, White-browed Scrub-robin, Ashy Cisticola, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-larks and Kori Bustards. Plus these White-headed Buffalo Weavers and a superb Heuglin's Courser.



Mammals were represented by Olive Baboons, Sommering's Gazelles and many Beisa Oryx.



Back to the Awash Falls Hotel for lunch then a second drive, this time to the campsite area. Here we found Black-billed Barbets, Ruppell's Starlings, Senegal Thick-knees, Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Marico Sunbird and Grey-headed Batis amongst many more.

Back to the lodge area yet again, this time to pick up an armed ranger for the evening drive, we were not sure if this was for our protection against animals, or bandits, or both. In "Where to Watch Birds in Ethiopia" mention is made that, at the time of writing (c2010), banditry was a considerable concern in the northern section of the park. Probably we were not close to this area and we strolled far from our vehicle across grassland without problems. We failed to find Arabian Bustard but were pleased with a pair of Hartlaub's Bustards, our third bustard species of the day.



As dusk fell we slowly drove back whilst spotlighting. This gave us 6 Scrub Hares, 5 Bat-eared Foxes, another Greyish Eagle-owl, more Hueglin's Coursers,

and a Plain Nightjar that thought itself so well camouflaged that it just refused to move off the road.



Day 4. A pre-breakfast walk to the water tank area produced Village Indigobird, Northern Crombec and African Grey Hornbills. After breakfast at 06.30 we departed Awash N.P. for the longish drive of 320k to Bishingari Lodge on the shores of Lake Langano. Fortunately the journey was punctuated, as usual, with many birding stops. Firstly, to Lake Beseka and the surrounding lava fields where we found the expected specialities. This was a great area, with wetlands holding many waders, herons, raptors etc. Surrounding trees and bushes had colourful Shining Sunbirds and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters.



The lava fields themselves allowed the opportunity to look in detail at the scalloped under tail coverts of the less-than-colourful, but range restricted, Sombre Rock Chat thus allowing separation from the nearby Blackstarts. This was another Horn of Africa endemic so it got quite a bit of attention.



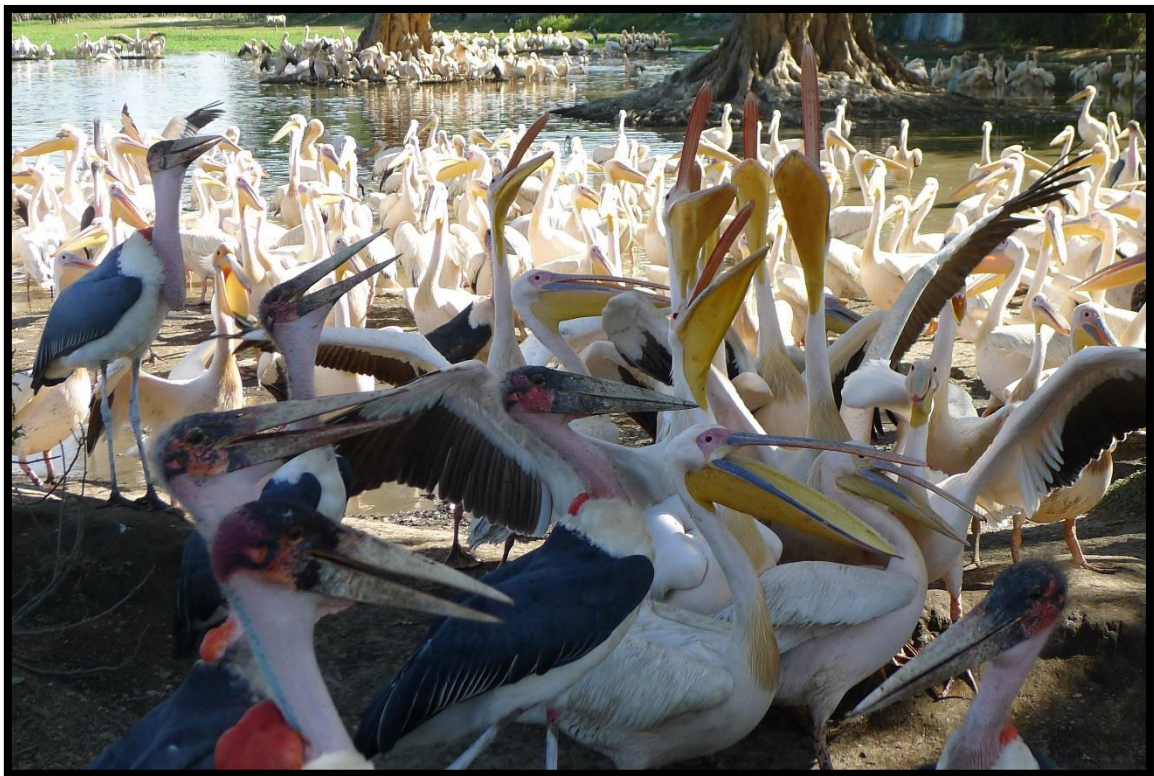


As we now headed south down the Rift Valley it was surprising how fertile the lands were with rolling fields of crops tended by many small farmsteads. A new railway was being constructed under supervision of the Chinese and they had already built many splendid expressways - no doubt some political pay back required further down the line.



There were many short stops en route for the likes of Crowned Plovers and Abyssinian Ground Hornbills then a longer stop at Koka Lake for Goliath Heron,

Black-crowned Cranes, Ethiopian Swallow, plus an assortment of kingfishers, waders, raptors, the latter including African Marsh Harrier. Lunch was at the excellent Bethlehem Hotel, Ziway where we discovered our only source of draught beer, then a short walk to the spectacle at Lake Ziway fish market. Here were mixed flocks of White Pelicans, Hamerkops, Sacred Ibises and Marabou Storks numbering in the hundreds. Also, Reed Cormorants, African Darters and Spur-winged Plovers vied for attention with Malachite, Grey-headed and Pied Kingfishers.





From Ziway the next stop southbound was the large reserve of Abiata Shalla N.P. Here the spectacle on the shallow, brackish Lake Abiata involved 1000s of Flamingos, with Lessers outnumbering Greater's about 5:1. Migrants included large flocks of Common Cranes, Ruffs and Pied Avocets numbered in hundreds. Passerines were represented, amongst others, by our only Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Superb Starlings and Northern White-crowned Shrikes.



Just 40k further on we arrived on the shores of Lake Langano at the excellent Bishingari Lodge where our luggage was transported to our isolated cabins by pony and cart.

Day 5. The day started early with some more excellent Ethiopian coffee then the usual pre-breakfast excursion. Although we hadn't walked more than 100m from the restaurant to near the lakeside beach, this session was superb. Almost the first birds were two of our sought after endemics, Banded Barbet and Yellow-fronted Parrots. Then what a parade: Grey-backed Fiscal-shrike, Hemprich's Hornbill, Ethiopian Cisticola (endemic) , White-browed Coucal headed the show plus the array of water birds on and over the lake – magic!





Unfortunately I chose this morning to be ill and clutched a toilet roll for the next few hours (well, days actually!). Nevertheless what followed was the best birding of the trip as bird after bird, tick after tick, kept rolling on. A short list would comprise Silvery-cheeked Hornbills, Black-billed Wood-hoopoe, Black-

headed Batis, Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrike, Buff-bellied Warbler, Red-faced Crombec, Ethiopian Boubou , Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike, Abyssinian Oriole (endemic), Scaly-throated Honeyguide, White-cheeked Babblers, Black Scimitarbill, Grey Kestrel, Lemon Dove and Red-fronted Barbet - there were many more birds than this, I simply can't list them all. The pick of the photos were Scaly Francolin and Crested Francolin,





A small flock of Blue-breasted Bee-eaters put on a show,



Black-winged Lovebirds (endemic), White-cheeked Turacos (endemic) were next to fall,



Followed by a posing Klaas's Cuckoo and a Lemon Dove at a drinking pool.



With that our luggage was collected and, reluctantly, we left Bishingari Lodge, what a place and what a location... and I never did get to use all the facilities!!



But we had not finished yet as on the way out we found White-winged Black Tits, a couple of Verreaux's Eagle-owls and a Golden Jackal.



This was another day with quite a bit of travelling but that is the price to pay if you want to cover a variety of habitats in a short space of time. Lunch, therefore, was taken at the Rift Valley Hotel in Shashamene, a town said to be a Rastafarian stronghold, though I saw none. What we did see as we ate were the many Thick-billed Ravens (endemic) that were hanging around for scraps. There followed a 200k drive east into the Bale (pronounced Bal-eh) Mountains. As we gained elevation the habitat and the bird life changed. We were now seeing Montane White-eyes and Slender-billed Starlings, also our first Rouget's Rails, Blue-winged Geese and Wattled Ibises (three more endemics). One more surprise awaited at Dinsho Lodge where we found a well-concealed, roosting African Wood Owl. New mammals were Warthog and Mountain Nyala. On arrival at our lodgings, The Wabe Shebelle Hotel in Goba, I was still feeling rather rough, skipped evening meal and slept straight through till morning.