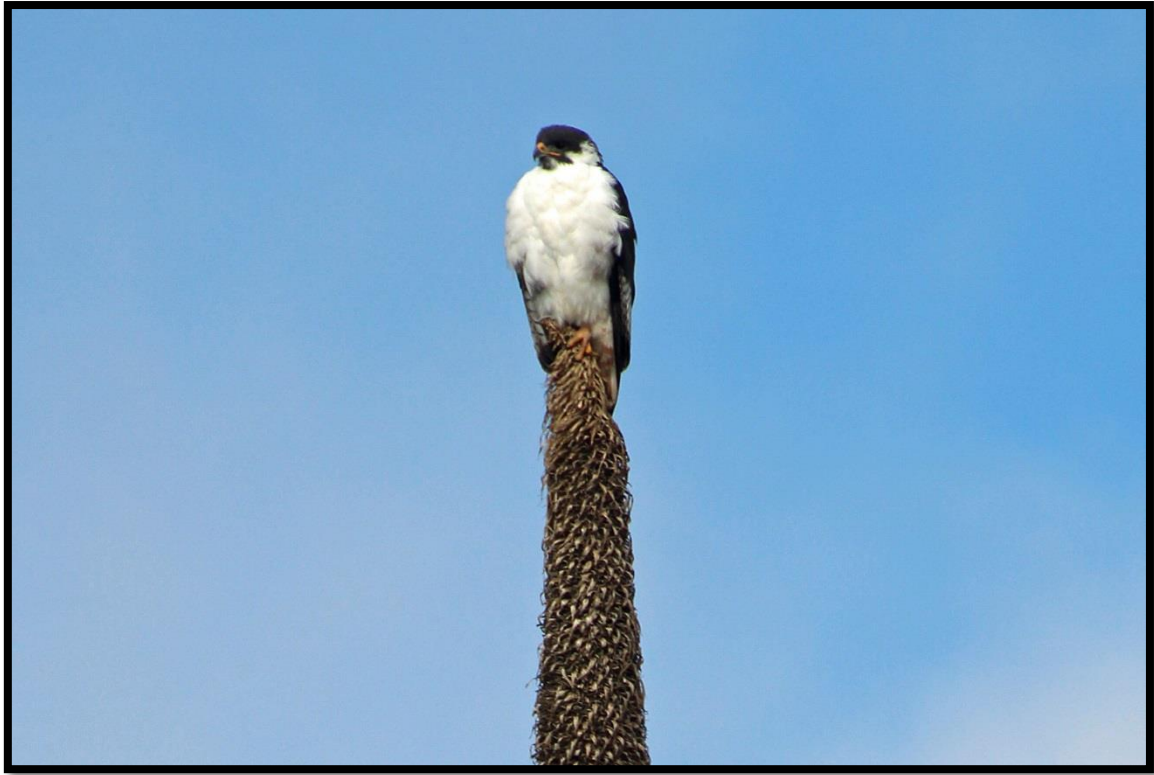


Day 6. The day dawned cloudy and cooler, expected as we were now at over 9000 feet. Around the hotel grounds were birds to be expected at altitude: Abyssinian Thrushes, Dusky Turtle Doves and both Streaky and Brown-rumped Seed eaters (endemic). On departure we headed up onto the Sanetti Plateau high in the Bale Mountains, reaching a (literally) breath-taking altitude of 13,400 feet. Here the habitat changed to Afro-alpine with picturesque pools and tall spikes of Giant Lobelia providing perches for Slender-billed Starlings and Augur Buzzards.





A whole range of new birds and mammals were to be found here plus closer views of yesterday's Rouget's Rails, Blue-winged Geese, and Wattled Ibises.





A summary of further highlights doesn't do justice to the area but it would include many Moorland Chats, a flock of Chestnut-naped Francolins, Groundscraper Thrushes, White-naped Pigeons (endemic), Spot-breasted Lapwings (endemic), Abyssinian Longclaw (endemic) and Black-headed Siskin (endemic).







Add to this commoner residents and migrants such as Red-throated Pipits, Thekla Larks, Golden Eagle and Red-billed Chough and it was a busy morning. A couple of lung-busting walks were made for closer views of 2 Wattled Cranes and, best of all, 2 Ethiopian Wolves that allowed reasonably close approach. They were completely engrossed in their hunting forays for the rodents that were scurrying all over the place, which we were later informed were Blick's Grass Rat. A privilege to see this endangered animal in its natural setting, there are probably only a couple of hundred left in the Bale Mountains. Other mammals on the plateau were Giant Mole Rat and two Klipspringers.







We had lunch back at Dinsho Lodge then a better look at the African Wood Owl with Mountain Nyala and Warthogs in attendance. An afternoon birding session around the lodge was productive with Dusky Turtle Doves,



Brown Woodland Warbler, White-backed Black Tit (endemic), Abyssinian Catbirds (endemic), Ruppell's Robin Chat and this Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher (endemic) plus a pair of Mountain Nyala.



With that it was back for a second night at the Wabe Shebelle Hotel.

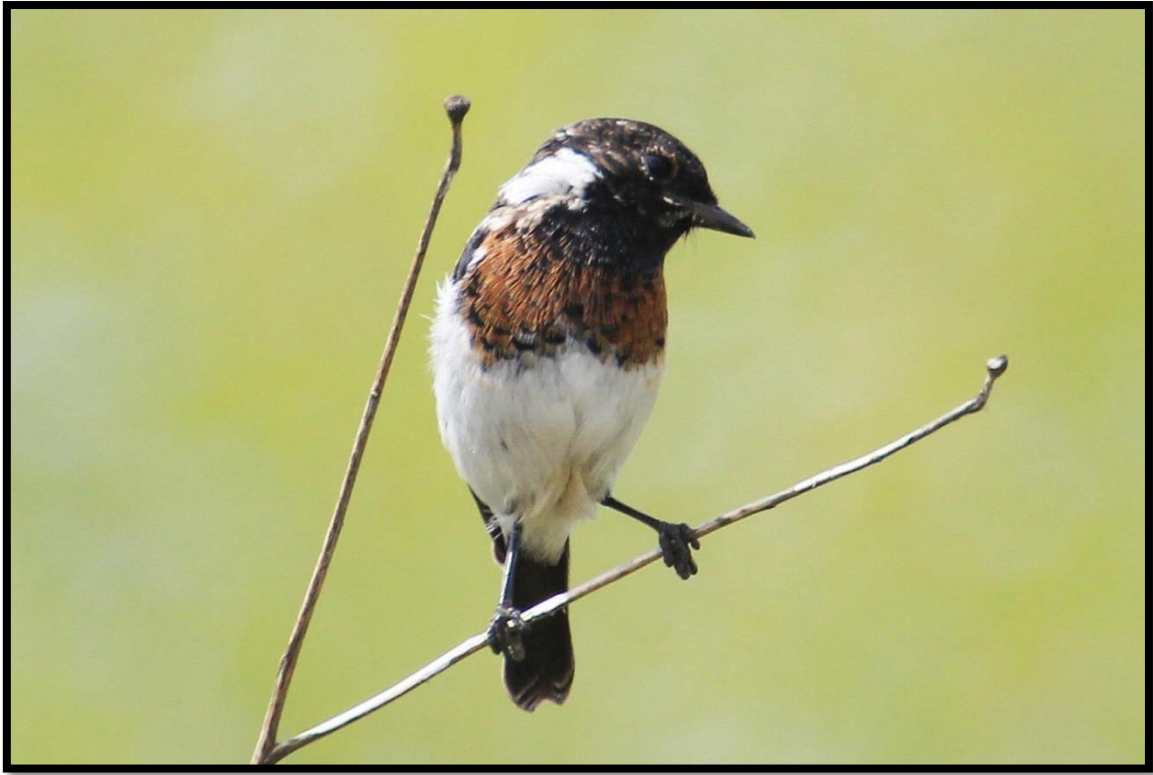
Day 7. Before departure there was time to catch up with a Cinnamon Bracken Warbler in the hotel grounds that I missed yesterday. Then, on the Goba outskirts, both Thick-billed Raven and Somali Crow (endemics) feeding on a roadside carcass.



Today we were heading to Lake Awassa but, as always, with plenty of roadside stops. The first of these was for a delightful flock of about 20 displaying Red-collared Widowbirds then further down the Gessya Valley we paused at a couple of owl stake-outs. Here the local children are encouraged to preserve the owls as assets rather than chucking stones at them. Firstly a scramble down a rocky cliff path found us face to face with Abyssinian Owl then just a little further on a superb Cape Eagle Owl was glaring back at us.



At lower elevations we passed Red-breasted Wheatears, a few Erlanger's Larks (endemic) and the distinctive highland race of African Stonechat.



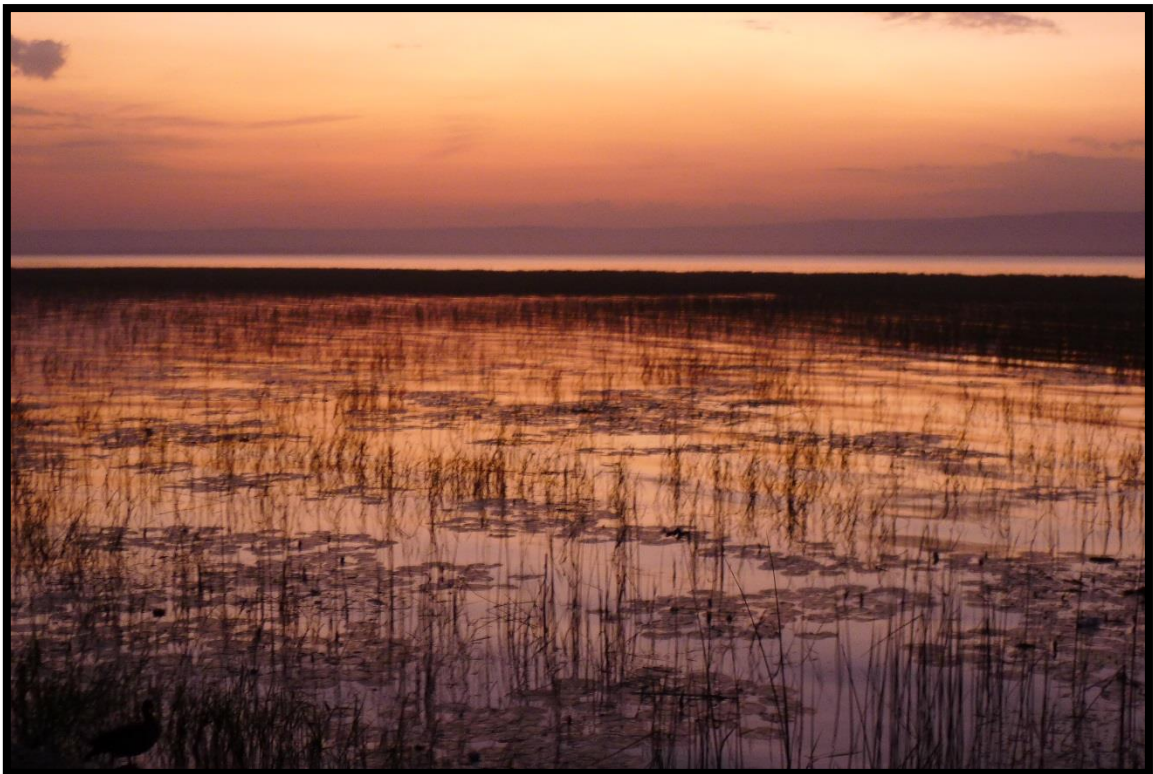
Our next stop was to Wondo Genet for lunch. It is no longer possible to easily walk to the forested areas and a succession of locals were carrying bundles of firewood down the track as we walked uphill. New birds here included Tambourine Dove, Blue-spotted Wood-dove, Green-backed Honeyguide, Little Rock Thrush, Black Saw-wings, a couple of White-winged Cliff Chats (endemic), Long-crested Eagle, and, best of all, an Abyssinian Ground Thrush skulking in typical *Zoothera* fashion.



One more surprise lay in wait as we passed the recently split Abyssinian Black Wheatear (endemic) on the way to our hotel.



On arrival at the United African Hotel on the shores of Lake Awassa there was just time for an evening stroll to the lakeside and later, during a power cut, a spot-lighting session, which produced 2 European Scops-Owls.



Day 8. The weather was again hot and sunny as we picked up where we left off with an extended pre-breakfast walk around the hotel gardens then along the shores of Lake Awassa. The lake provided many opportunities to photograph more common birds although the Black Crake, African Reed Warbler and African Pygmy Goose were a bit special.



The shoreline fringe provided cover for Bruce's Green Pigeon, Grosbeak Weavers, Blue-headed Coucal, Nubian Woodpecker and a superb pair of displaying White-browed Robin-chats.



It was here that we found our only White-rumped Babblers (a near endemic with a range just extending into Sudan). Whilst in the hotel grounds we found Spotted Creeper, Red-throated Wryneck and 3 Double-toothed Barbets (count the teeth!) as we were watched over by a Mantled Guereza.





After a late breakfast we transferred to another point on the shoreline of Lake Awassa which was notable for the sheer numbers and variety of birds present but soon we were heading north with the now customary stops along the way. Firstly a dead horse attracted about 60 Ruppell's Vultures with Hooded and a Lappet-faced Vulture in attendance.



Next another stop at Abiata Shalla N.P. but this time exploring its areas of Acacia savanna. Somali Ostriches have been here for over 40 years and breed in the park, remnants of an introduced population originating from ostrich farming in the area and dubiously tickable.



Other birds seen here were Bearded Woodpecker, Rufous Chatterers and a pair of Von der Decken's Hornbills. Whilst on the mammals front we noted both Grant's Gazelles and the Bright's Gazelle subspecies.

Another stop and another chance to sample the local food - and perhaps another draught beer at the excellent Nazareth Hotel, Ziway.



Then a quick look over the fish market, which failed to produce a Lesser Jacana but gave us our only Black Heron. It was then a longish drive, punctuated by a second stop at Koka Bridge and back to dusty, noisy Addis Ababa and its traffic jams. We spent our last night at Hotel Ghion.

Day 9. This was our last birding day and, in the time available, we could not do justice to the extensive and very birdy hotel grounds. After breakfast we met Daniel, our new guide for the day and headed north over the Sululta Plain. As this was at about 8500 feet we found typical altitudinal birds like White-winged Cliff-chat (endemic) and more White-collared Pigeons (endemic).





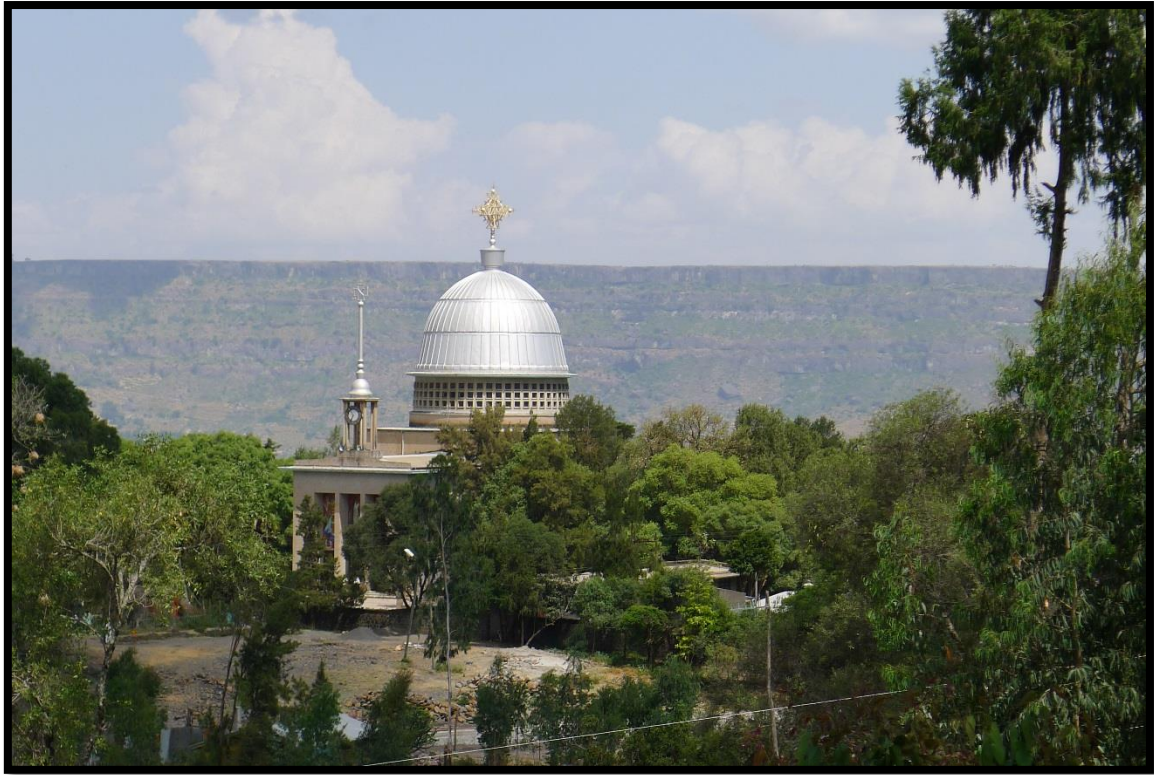
Further stops gave us a raptor fest with a superb Tawny Eagle posing and a more distant Greater Spotted Eagle being harassed by Pied Crows.





Local knowledge came to the fore at the next stop where we found a family party of no less than 8 Ruppell's Black Chats (endemic) before we reached our final destination, the monastery at Debre Libanos.





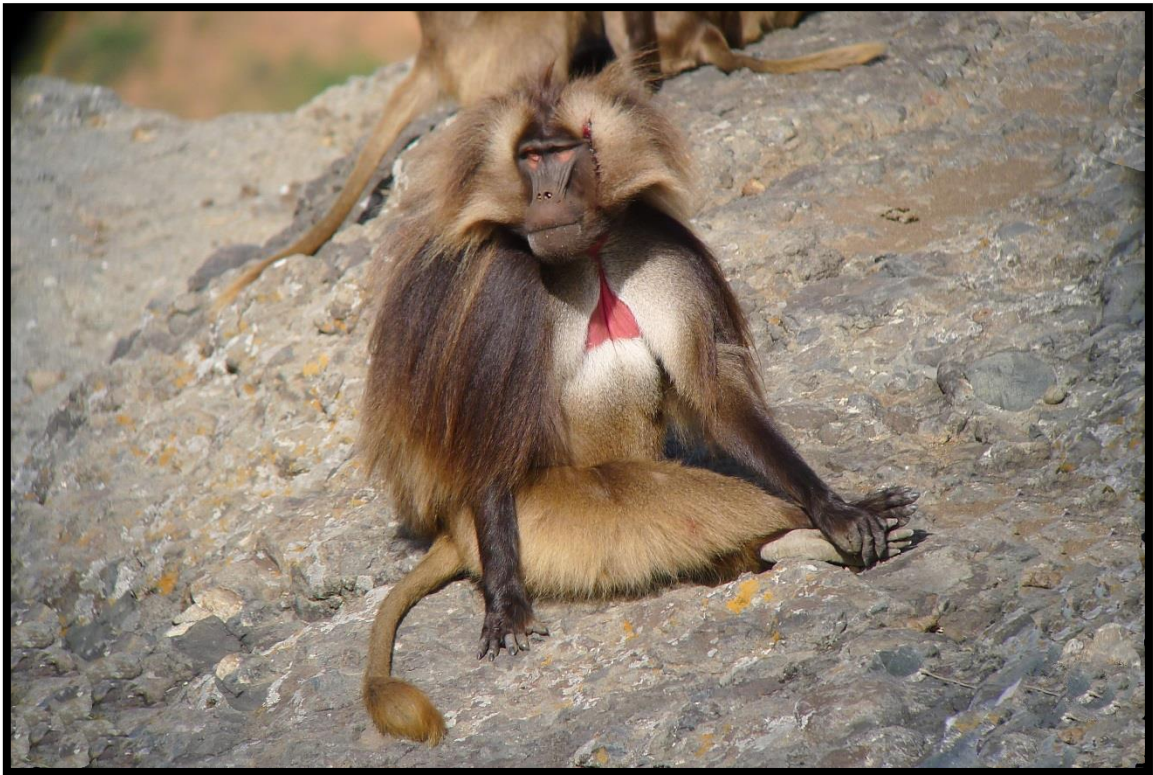
There was a diverse bunch at Debre Libanos with our birding party mixing with stall holders selling tourist tat, pilgrims, worshippers and a noisy funeral that was taking place nearby. A short walk behind the monastery gave us more White-cheeked Turacos and our only Abyssinian Woodpecker (endemic) of the trip, I take responsibility for this rather poor shot.



We then transferred to the Ethio-German Park Hotel for a picnic lunch overlooking the spectacular Jemma Valley. Bones were placed out below and before long we were being treated to wonderful, close views of Lammergeier.



Our last venture was a walk to the historic Portuguese Bridge where we saw White-billed Starlings (our last endemic of the trip) and a troupe of Gelada Baboons, the male looking a little battle-scarred.



We drove back to Addis Ababa in time for a little tourist shopping but the main attraction in downtown Addis was the huge Black Kite roost. Swirling kettles of birds all over the place, which must have totalled 2-3,000. After returning to Hotel Ghion for a shower and change of clothes we were transported to a pizza restaurant where they were suffering a power cut. Bizarrely they managed to produce a dozen excellent pizzas by the light of a single mobile phone. Eventually, after some more beers round a log fire, we were transferred to the airport for our overnight flight.

Day 10. Another uneventful flight without any delays and we landed at Heathrow at 06.45. Car pick up at Purple Parking went smoothly and all that remained was the motorway journey north.

In summary, this was an action packed trip and well worth the money. Perhaps the hotel infrastructure is not quite up to Kenya safari lodge standards but you will have to travel a long way to find a friendlier bunch of people than the Ethiopians.





John Rayner - Jan 2015