

My girlfriend, Joanne, and I visited Gambia with Hidden Gambia Tours (www.hiddengambia.com) between 26th November and 3rd December 2011 for a week's holiday. We chose Gambia and Hidden Gambia in particular as it offered the opportunity to travel up the Gambia River and watch a variety of wildlife, not just birds, which unfortunately Jo isn't particularly interested in.

The trip consisted of two days on the coast, followed by three days travelling up and down river, and two further days on the coast. Hidden Gambia organised all the accommodation and provided a number of options. Prior to travelling up river, we stayed at Safari Lodge (no longer offered), which it transpired was close to Kotu Creek. On our return to the coast, we stayed at Footsteps Eco Lodge. Whilst up river, we stayed at the Bird Safari Camp, which is located on an island in the middle of the river.

November 26th

We flew from Manchester Airport to Gambia with Thomas Cook airlines, which I would not recommend. The seats were extremely uncomfortable, no leg room and like most budget airlines no entertainment or complementary food or drinks despite it being a six hour flight.

We were met at Banjul Airport by Hidden Gambia and transported to the accommodation, Safari Lodge. Hidden Gambia can also arrange to exchange currency and at the time offered a much more preferential rate than the currency exchanges in Manchester Airport, which Jo found out to her cost!

November 27th

Safari Lodge was a simple hostel surrounded by palm trees and other vegetation as well as being located in easy walking distance to close to the beach. However, within 30 metres of the front door we 'met' our first 'friends'!

On the walk to the beach and on the beach itself we were constantly bombarded with hawkers trying to sell anything and everything from fruit to fishing trips, to massages! They generally started by asking your name and where you were from, adding in that they weren't trying to sell you anything. However, within five minutes they would be asking if you would like to visit the local craft market or see their boat! The only way to avoid them was to sit in front of one of the bars, which were no-go areas. Once you explained that you were interested they did generally leave you alone, only for the next one to appear.

As this was our first trip Africa, I wasn't particularly familiar with the birds, so the easy day spent at the lodge and beach gave me the chance to observe some of the commoner species including:

Pied Crow, Paradise Sunbird, Long-tailed Glossy Starling, Western-grey Plantain-eater, Yellow-billed Black Kite, African Palm Swift, Speckled Pigeon, Shikra, Red-billed Firefinch, Common Bulbul, Senegal Parrot, Cordonbleu, African Mourning Dove, Black-necked and Village Weavers, Bronze Mannikin, Senegal Coucal, Lavender Waxbill, Hooded Vulture, Wire-tailed Swallow, Laughing Dove, Reef Heron, Grey-headed and House Sparrows plus Grey-headed Gull.



Western Plantain Eater



Laughing Dove



Pied Crow



Hooded Vulture



Bronze Mannikin



Cordonbleu

Several of the species listed fed on the scrap that the kitchen staff put out at the back of the lodge. By regularly checking this area I was also able to see *Grey Woodpecker* and *Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher*.

November 28th

We arranged, via Hidden Gambia, to visit the Abuko Reserve with a bird guide. I genuinely thought that we had booked a half day, taking into account Jo's love of birds, but we ended up with a full day and a severely annoyed girlfriend, albeit one with several cool birds added to her 'world list'.

The reserve consists of degraded forest and some pools, which reportedly hold Nile Crocodiles. As well as birds, Red Colobus and Green Vervet Monkeys can be seen plus Sun Squirrel and Monitor Lizards. There are some enclosures

in the centre of the reserve which previously held a Lion (since died) as well as hyenas, which reportedly have been captures in Gambia.

Amazingly, the reserve is located in a relatively built up area with a busy, main road adjacent to it.

The birds included:

African Thrush (bit like a blackbird), Ahanta Francolin, Black-headed Heron, Palm-nut Vulture, Blue-breasted and African Pygmy Kingfishers, Little Greenbul, Snowy-crowned Robin-chat, Common Wattleye, Beautiful and Splendid Sunbirds, Blue-spotted and Vinaceous Doves, Violet and Green Turaco (although both were extremely difficult to see), Fanti Saw-wings (a type of swallow) and Little Green Bee-eaters.



Yellow-billed Black Kite



Little Green Bee-eater



Green Vervet Monkey



Hyena



Red Patas Monkey

We then moved onto the Abuko Rice Fields across the road and cross-crossed through these on paths no wider than a standard ruler! Additional birds included:

Western Red-billed Hornbill, Grey Kestrel, Brown Babbler, Hamerkop, Striated Heron, Black and African Spotted Crakes, the latter being a lifer for the guide, African Jacana with the long spindly toes and Giant Kingfisher.



African Jacana

Next stop was Kotu Creek, which we discovered was only several hundred metres from our hostel when we had lunch at the stay restaurant as the previous day! Kotu Creek is also a great place to pick-up a bird guide if you decide to visit Gambia independently as they can usually be found at the information point, however, caution is advised as you may not end up with an experienced guide.

The creek held numerous waders, which British birders will be familiar with including *Redshank, Greenshank, Grey Plover, Whimbrel and Ringed Plover*. The highlights were:

Long-tailed Cormorant, Namaqua Dove, Wattled Plover, Pied Kingfisher, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Yellow-billed Shrike, Tawny-flanked Prinia, White-faced whistling Duck and Black Egret, complete with 'fishing umbrella'.



White-faced Whistling Duck and Black Egret



Western Red-billed Hornbill

The remainder of the afternoon was spent at Brufut Woodlands, a dry area of woodland and savannah. The star bird was a *Lesser Honeyguide* at the feeding station by the entrance gate. Additional species included:

Grey-headed Bristlebird, Blackcap Babbler, African Paradise Flycatcher, Black-crowned Tchagra, Northern Red Bishop, Pin-tailed Whydah, Orange-cheeked waxbill, Red-winged Warbler, Fine-spotted Woodpecker, African Grey Hornbill, Double-spurred Francolin and Back-shouldered Kite.



Lesser Honeyguide



Blackcap Babblers



Brown Babbler

November 29th

We were picked up from Safari Lodge and transported with the other members of the trip to Bintang on the Gambia River for stage one of the trip; the saltwater river. Whilst using the facilities, I looked up through the open plan roof into the mangroves and was surprised to see several bats just hanging there. These turned out to be Dwarf Epauletted Fruit bats.

Amazingly, the trip is made in a solar powered boat with lunch and refreshments including the local beer, Julbrew, which features a Woodland Kingfisher on the label. A fine beer it is to!

So as we serenely travelled up stream, the guests were treated to such birds as: *Pink-backed and Great White Pelicans, Royal Tern, African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed and Wool-necked Storks, Lesser Flamingo, White-throated Bee-eaters, Red-cheeked Swallows and Abyssinian Rollers*. The star bird was undoubtedly the two *Goliath Herons* stood near the quayside, the only two of the trip. One further surprise was the *Senegal Thicknees* sat on the jetty at the other end!



Goliath Heron



White-backed Pelican



Senegal Thicknee



Exclamatory Paradise Whydah



Collared Pratincoles

We then returned to a minibus and made further ground over-land to our next destinations, the BaoBolong and Kaur Wetlands, home to the *Egyptian Plover*. Except that the Plovers were out when we arrived! So there I was facing the possibility of missing out on THE target bird.

However, the road journey, including stops at the wetlands did not disappoint with: *Exclamatory Paradise Whydah's*, complete with tail (absolutely stunning birds), hundreds of *Collared Pratincoles*, *Dark-chanting Goshawk*, *Martial Eagle*, *Grasshopper Buzzards*, *African Darter*. The other significant incident that occurred was the pack of toilet rolls that came loose from the roof of the minibus and rolled down the road. Fortunately another driver picked them up, caught up with the minibus and returned them.

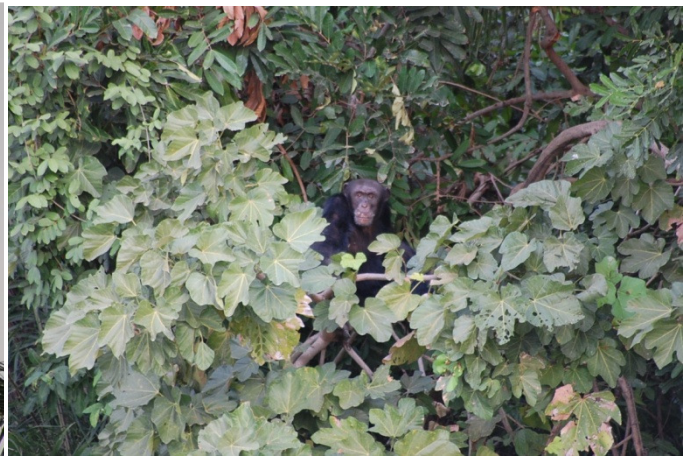
We soon arrived at the departure point, Kuntaur Jetty, for the second stage of the river journey, the freshwater section. Almost immediately after departing, I spotted a group of *Northern Carmine Bee-eaters*, stunningly coloured bright red and another target bird, so at least that one was in the bag!

Pied, Woodland (of Julbrew fame) and Blue-breasted Kingfishers were seen regularly, as well as *Red-necked Falcon, African Harrier Hawk, Western-banded Snake Eagle, White-backed Vulture, Broad-billed Rollers, Spur-winged Goose, Hadada Ibis, Bruce's Green Pigeon* and *Bearded Barbet*.

Mammals included Hippo, Green Vervet and Red Colobus Monkeys plus Chimpanzee.



Palm-nut Vulture



Chimpanzee



Hippo



Pied Kingfisher

The boat delivered us all the way to the Bird Safari Camp with the latter part of the journey made under cover of darkness.

November 30th

Hidden Gambia offer a range of trips from Bird Safari Camp, including local birding and cultural exertions, or you can just lie back in the hammocks! In addition, there is an early morning bird walk each day. Birding highlights included:

Stone Partridge, Northern Puffback, Red-cheeked Bee-eater (more on these later) Village Indigobird, Yellow-backed Weaver, Black-rumped Waxbill, Wahlberg's Eagle, Cardinal Woodpecker (reportedly tough to see), Red-shouldered Cuckoo Shrike, Yellow-throated Leaflove, White-crowned Robin-chat, Grey and Green-backed Camaropteras and Grey-headed Bush Shrike.



Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrike



Abyssinian Roller

Following breakfast I went on a trip to Bansang Quarry, where there is a colony of *Red-cheeked Bee-eaters*, providing amazing views of these stunning birds. The quarry is a largely disused sand quarry and home to a variety of species including: *Mosque Swallow*, *Mottled Spinetail*, *Rufous-chested Swallow*, *Black Woodhoopoe*, *Chesnut-backed Sparrow-lark*, *Cinnamon-breasted Rock Bunting*, *Yellow-fronted Canary* and *Northern Crombec*, plus a range of raptors.



Red-cheeked Bee-eater

That afternoon, there was a river cruise, heading downstream and then returning back to Bird Safari Camp, complete with refreshments! Not only did this provide an opportunity to see birds but other river wildlife and the trip did not disappoint with Hippo, Nile Monitor Lizard, Sun Squirrel, Red Colobus and Red Patis Monkeys plus Western Baboon.



Western Baboons



Red Patas Monkeys

Whilst the birds included *Black Woodhoope*, *Senegal Thicknee*, *Intermediate Egret*, *Western-banded Snake Eagle*, *Red-necked Falcon*, *Long-crested Eagle*, *Spur-winged Goose*, *Fork-tailed Drongo*, and *Greater Blue-eyed and Purple Glossy Starlings*.

Upon returning to Bird Safari Camp, a small group of headed out to look for nightjars as well as a Yellow-winged bay roosting in a dead tree. Whilst waiting, several *Four-banded Sandgrouse* flew across our view before a *Long-tailed Nightjar* put in an appearance, followed by several more. Finally, under the cover of darkness, the real prize, a male *Standard-winged Nightjar*. However, views were tricky as it flitted between low lying bushes in the growing gloom in comparison to the *Long-tailed Nightjars* which flew in-between us!



Yellow-winged Bat

December 1st

Unfortunately we had to head back to the coast today, meaning that we had only spent one day and two nights at the camp. This was a consequence of deciding to travel to Gambia on the weekend rather than during the week as there are limited departures days, Tuesday's and Thursday's 9at the time of visiting) to the camp and vice versa. We sailed up river on a Tuesday, whereas the guest who had travelled up river the previous Thursday had stopped off on route at Tendabar for a couple of night before continuing to Bird Safari Camp.

I also missed an *African Fish Eagle* which was reportedly sat in the trees opposite the accommodation huts on the other side of the river in the early morning and unfortunately we didn't connect with one throughout the entire trip.

However, I didn't miss the *Swamp Flycatchers* that entertained us at the jetty whilst we waited for the boat to depart. But the boat didn't start to cruise down stream, instead it motored over to the local town, where we disembarked, squeezed into a minibus and set off! On the outward journey there had only been six guests on the minibus, but this time there was ten or eleven, with the resulting luggage causing the minibus roof collapsing inwards slightly.



Swamp Flycatcher

We did stop at Wasu, where there is an ancient stone circle and provided chance to catch up with a few more species including: *Maribou Stork*, *Red-billed Quela*, *Cutthroat*, *Little Green Bee-eater*, *Violet Barbet*, *Namaqua Dove*, *Yellow-fronted Canary* and *Buffalo Weaver*, plus *Northern Carmine Bee-eaters*, just after setting off from the stone circle. We were also given a guided tour of the circles and allowed to explore them.

We also stopped at both Pantang Swamp and Bao Balong, the former yielding my main target of *Egyptian Plover* down to about six meters and adjacent to the roadside. Other species included *Malachite Kingfisher*, *Pygmy Goose* and *Purple Swampphen*. The latter site held a Gambian rarity in *Saddlebilled Stork*.



Egyptian Plover with Spur-winged Plovers



Saddle-billed Stork

Eventually we reached the estuarine section of the river where we re-joined the boat and passed on news of the stork to the party heading up river. The return journey held many of the same species as the outward journey but *Blue-cheeked Bee-eater* and *Gull-billed Terns* were nice additions, as were the *Bottlenose Dolphins* that swam alongside the boat.

Once back at Bintang, we were all dropped off at various hotels etc, with Jo and I, along with another English birding couple who were on the return journey, staying at Footsteps Eco Lodge. The Lodge is located much further down the Gambian coast and is virtually undeveloped save for the odd guesthouse.

December 2nd & 3rd

As with most areas we had visited, there was a mixture of habitats plus a deserted beach. Each day, we would walk down and sunbath and see between six to ten people, and usually people who were staying at Footsteps.

A farmer would walk his cattle down the beach and a few boats would fish offshore. There were also two locals who bought beer from the owner of Footsteps, carried it down to beach in a cooler, and sat in the shade of their beach hut, constructed from washed up timber waiting for trade. Each morning they would come over, say hello and let us know that they were selling drinks and that was it, no hard sell! So we would usually spend half an hour with them and drink a beer or two.

Occasionally I would lift my optics to check out a *Piapiac*, *Blue-bellied Roller* or *Arctic Skua* chasing *Grey-headed Gulls*.

Footsteps itself had a freshwater pool which attracted a wide variety of bird species including several finch and weaver species, *Fanti Saw-wing*, *Swallow* swooping down to drink then rest on the eaves of the shelter, *Pygmy Kingfisher*, *Square-tailed Drongo*, *Scarlet-breasted Sunbird*, *Senegal Coucal* and *Rufous-crowned Roller*. I also heard, but couldn't find, an *African Scops Owl*. The English birding couple had arranged a guide through Hidden Gambia and spent a few more days birding and picked up species such as a *Senegal Batis* and a couple of owl species at day time roosts.



Orange-cheeked Waxbill



Blue-spotted Wood Dove with Bronze Manikins and Village Weaver

Iain Johnson

March 2013