

Birding Africa 2016 Tour Summary

Angola in Comfort!

By Michael Mills

The first ever all-hotel-accommodated bird tour of Angola was an incredible success, and brought a level of comfort that we could not even imagine a few years ago. For all 17 nights of the trip we enjoyed good accommodation and food, in quality well above the expectations of each and every participant. It was a pleasure returning to clean, comfortable hotel rooms each night, with running water on tap; quite a change from our earlier trips where camping in dusty and windy conditions was the order of the day. Thanks also to our excellent ground agents we enjoyed comfortable air-condition transport throughout and were spared the usual hassle with police. And all this extra comfort came without compromising on the birds. Certainly, Angola can no longer be regarded as a “hard core” birding destination.

We fared exceptionally well on the birds, enjoying good views of all of Angola’s endemic species and a whole host of other goodies among the 535 species logged. The charts were topped by a fantastic crowing male **Swierstra’s Francolin** at Tundavala that gave prolonged views right out in the open and approached me within one metre! Angola’s striking national bird, **Red-crested Turaco**, was John’s 8000th bird and several people’s final member of the family, and was voted number two of the trip. Some great looks at **Braun’s Bushshrike** put this bright endemic at number three, and the attractive **White-headed Robin-Chat** near Kalandula came in fourth. A long walk for exceptional views of a pair of **Margaret’s Batis** at Mount Moco put this rare species at fifth. The charismatic **Angola Cave Chat** at Tundavala was voted number six, followed by a trio of **Rüppell’s Korhaan** in the coastal deserts of Namibe at seven. The localised endemics **Gabela Helmetshrike** and **Gabela Bushshrike** came in at eight and nine, and incredible views of **Brazza’s Martin** at its nest, the first confirmed breeding record for Angola, rounded out the top ten.

There were many other great birds seen too. We started birding at the mudflats and arid palm savannas of Mussulo Bay, where **Royal Tern** was found among the hundreds of other waterbirds, and **Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush**, **Desert Cisticola** and **Bubbling Cisticola** in the surrounding habitat. Next we visited mangroves near the Kwanza River mouth, where we quickly located **Mangrove Sunbird**, a surprise **Long-legged Pipit** in some nearby grasslands, and **Red-headed Finch**. Moving on through Kissama National Park, we paused for roadside views of the *elegans* race of **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill**, before arriving at Muxima. Dense thickets and dry baobab forests in this area are home to an impressive array of endemics, and we did well to find several **Grey-striped Francolin** on the ground, one flock of lovely **Gabela Helmetshrike**, two different **Monteiro’s Bushshrike**, hundreds of non-breeding-plumaged **Golden-backed Bishops**, our first **Red-backed Mousebird** and **Hartert’s Camaroptera**, and three **White-fronted Wattle-eye**. Non-endemics seen included **Forest Scrub Robin**, **Pale-olive Greenbul**, **Olive Bee-eater**, **Mottled Spinetail**, **Böhm’s Spinetail**, **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**, **Black-faced Canary**, **Swamp Boubou**, **Carmelite Sunbird**, **Purple-banded Sunbird** and **Angola Batis**, among a diversity of other savanna and woodland species. *Southern Talapoin* was the mammal highlight from this area.

Continuing south, the Benguela area was our next major focus, with species characteristic of the Namibian escarpment found here, many of them easier to see in Angola than Namibia. A couple of **Hartlaub’s Spurfowl** called from some granite outcrops and we managed to draw one male in for close views. **Rüppell’s Parrot** and **White-tailed Shrike** were also prominent, with

other dry country birds including **Cape Penduline Tit**, **Pririt Batis**, **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater**, **Damara Red-billed Hornbill**, **Verreaux's Eagle** and **Kalahari Scrub Robin**, before we made the uneventful drive to Lubango.

In the Lubango area we birded two rather different habitats, separated by the spectacular southern escarpment. At Tundavala at the top of the escarpment, montane grasslands and shrublands, and remnant patches of Afromontane forest produced some of the best birding of the trip in impressive surrounds. **Swierstra's Francolin** was certainly the most spectacular find, and we all enjoyed incredible views of this, the least numerous Angolan endemic, as we have done on every one of our previous comprehensive Angola tours. Rocky areas were home to **Rockrunner**, and striking **Angola Cave Chat**, alongside **Miombo Rock Thrush** and **Short-toed Rock Thrush**, and after dark, **Freckled Nightjar**. Other goodies included three endemics, namely **Angola Waxbill**, **Angola Slaty Flycatcher** and **Ludwig's Sunbird**, some **Temminck's Coursers** in the burned grasslands, and **Bocage's Akalat** and **Oustalet's Sunbird** in some gallery forest. Overhead **Bradfield's Swift** was common. On our second full day we descended the escarpment at Leba Pass, running a transect across the ever-drier landscape towards the coast. Our first stop in some dry woodlands took some time to produce our main target, the localised **Cinderella Waxbill**, eventually tracked down in a flowering tree where admired at length. But there were lots of other great birds as we walked in search of our main quarry, including a pair of the *benguellensis* race of **Meves's Starling** (now split by BirdLife!), some smart *afra* **Red-necked Spurfowl**, **Monteiro's Hornbill**, **Bare-cheeked Babbler**, **Hartlaub's Babbler**, **Bennett's Woodpecker**, **Damara Red-billed Hornbill** and **Rosy-faced Lovebird**. Further towards the coast the habitat became drier and sparser, and here we found our first **Benguela Long-billed Lark**, although the most popular finds were a trio of **Rüppell's Korhaan** and lone **Ludwig's Bustard**. Other species in the sparse coastal deserts included **Karoo Chat**, **Chat Flycatcher**, **Double-banded Courser**, **Sabota Lark**, **Dusky Sunbird**, **Pale-winged Starling**, **Grey-backed Cisticola**, **Stark's Lark** and **Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark**.

Turning northwards and moving on to the Mount Moco region, we travelled through largely-transformed landscapes between the towns of Lubango and Huambo, although did find **Rufous-bellied Heron**, **Wood Pipit**, **Red-throated Cliff Swallow** and **Sharp-tailed Starling** en route. The Mt Moco area holds a diverse array of habitats; most of the area is blanketed in miombo woodland, unfortunately quite degraded now by clearing for agriculture and charcoal production, although significant areas of montane grassland can also be found and the region is criss-crossed by numerous rivers and associated dambo grasslands. At the mountain itself we found three groups of highly cryptic **Finsch's Francolin**, which frustrated us by being invisible, although one bird approached very close and gave some exceptional views. A male, female and recently-fledged **Black-chinned Weaver** were seen near the nest, the first sign of it breeding at Mount Moco. **Huambo Cisticola** (Angola's newest endemic, and previously erroneously treated as Rock-loving Cisticola), was fairly conspicuous at the forest edge. Several **Oustalet's Sunbird** were found in the *Protea* scrublands. Point-blank views of **Margaret's Batis** were enjoyed after a long hike. And other noteworthy additions were **Angola Lark**, our first **Fülleborn's Longclaw**, **Black-backed Barbet**, **Fan-tailed Grassbird**, **Spotted Creeper**, **Schalow's Turaco**, **Mountain Wheatear** (endemic, *nigricauda* subspecies), **Horus Swift**, **Dusky Twinspot**, **Black-throated Wattle-eye**, **Black-collared Bulbul** and **Salvadori's Eremomela**. Miombo woodlands proved hard going, as all the more accessible patches are now quite transformed, but we did find some of our main targets such as **Rufous-bellied Tit**, **Miombo Wren-Warbler**, a pale-phase **Ayres's Hawk-Eagle**, curious *affinis* form of **Brubru**, **Red-capped Crombec**, **Miombo Scrub Robin** and the snazzy **Black-necked Eremomela**. The biggest surprise was a single **Miombo Pied Barbet**, a country tick for me! However, the best birds were to be found around the various dambos, and included several male and female **Bocage's Sunbird** that showed well, **Marsh Widowbird** in non-breeding-plumage but still obvious, several **Locust Finch** that were studied on the ground in the scope, some bright male **Bocage's Weavers** at close range, **Blue-breasted Bee-eater**, **Chirping Cisticola**, at least two pairs of **Black-and-rufous Swallow** attending their nests, and, best of all, incredible views of the scarce **Brazza's Martin** around its nest, the first breeding record of this scarce species for Angola.

And so it was on to Kumbira, one of the country's premier birding destinations that is sadly now under siege from slash-and-burn agriculture. Along the way we found a mixed flock of **Mottled Swift** and African Black Swift types, the latter possibly being **Fernado Po Swift**.

A little bit of strategizing meant that **Falkenstein's Greenbul** was our first target, all to make sure that the desirable **Red-crested Turaco** was John's 8000th species. That night, expensive wine flowed! The following day we entered Kumbira proper, our first stop producing some excellent views of **Pulitzer's Longbill** feeding in some dry tangles. Nearby **Gorgeous Bushshrike** showed well, and **Yellow-throated Nicator** and **Lowland Masked Apalis** were found. **Gabela Akalat** was not too hard to locate, but almost all of the best habitat for **Gabela Bushshrike** had recently been cleared, so it took a good couple of hours before we managed to locate a pair, which with a little bit of persuasion showed for all. Other favourites at Kumbira were a delightful **Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye**, **Elliot's Woodpecker**, **African Broadbill**, **Many-coloured Bushshrike**, the curious local form of **Southern Hylota**, **Dusky Tit** and **Petit's Cuckooshrike**.

From Kumbira we continued our journey north to Angola's most famous waterfalls at Kalandula. North of the falls is an area of well-developed woodland and fairly extensive gallery forests. This area is made famous by the highly localised **White-headed Robin-Chat**, which favours the densest areas of swamp forest. We followed its repetitive song into the forest, and with perseverance were all rewarded with good views. This habitat was shared by a range of other species, including **Brown-headed Apalis**, **Ross's Turaco**, **Grey-winged Robin-Chat**, **Bannerman's Sunbird**, **Cabanis's Greenbul** and **Bates's Sunbird**. Tall grassland at the edge of the forest held a lovely male **Marsh Tchagra**. And the surrounding woodlands were home to three desirable species, namely **Pale-billed Hornbill**, **Anchieta's Barbet**, and **Anchieta's Sunbird**.

Finally we moved on to the northern scarp forests, where one remaining endemic awaited us. Surprisingly, our very first stop turned up a pair of bright and beautiful **Braun's Bushshrike**, although they were rather skulking and some of the party had to wait until our second birding stop, the next day, for good views. Although most of the forests in this region have now been logged, fairly good areas of secondary forest remain and a wide range of Congo Basin species can be found, including many frugivores. **Piping Hornbill** and **African Pied Hornbill** were common, and **Black-casqued Hornbill** was also seen. **Red-fronted Parrot** was admired in the scope. Barbets included **Naked-faced Barbet**, **Bristle-nosed Barbet**, **Hairy-breasted Barbet**, **Yellow-billed Barbet**, **Speckled Tinkerbird** and **Red-rumped Tinkerbird**. **Great Blue Turaco** was joined by **Guinea Turaco** and **Red-crested Turaco**. And superb views of **Narrow-tailed Starling** and **Chestnut-winged Starling** were also had. And a wide range of other forest birds was also seen, of which **Yellow-throated Cuckoo** (only the third record for Angola) was certainly the rarest. More widespread species included **Yellow-mantled Weaver**, **Yellow-browed Camaroptera**, **Rufous-crowned Eremomela**, **Banded Prinia**, **Yellow Longbill**, **Honeyguide Greenbul**, **Velvet-mantled Drongo**, **Black-winged Oriole**, **Purple-throated Cuckooshrike**, **Pink-footed Puffback**, **Chestnut Wattle-eye**, **Brown-eared Woodpecker**, **Buff-spotted Woodpecker**, **Cassin's Honeybird**, **Blue Malkoha** and **Afep Pigeon**. Fantastic views of **Orange-tufted Sunbird** were enjoyed at the forest edge.

Returning back to Luanda for the final night of the trip, we paused at Panguila Lake where **Purple Swamphen** and **Allen's Gallinule** were seen distantly, and **Slender-billed Weaver** nearby, before enjoying some four-star luxury for the final night at the trip. The next morning we finished off at the sea front, where we studied the large brown swifts around the buildings on the foreshore, pondering what they might be.