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Trip Report:

CAMEROON 2009 with Birding Africa www.birdingafrica.com

Report by tour leader Michael Mills with contributions by participants Hemme Batjes, Andy Bunting, Simon Colenutt, Andy Deighton, Martin Kennewell, Ian Merrill, Jonathan Newman, Per-Anders Ovin, Volkert van der Willigen and Barry Wright. All photographs shown were taken by participants Ian Merrill and Andrew Bunting.

Introduction (by Michael Mills)

This year's Cameroon tour was notable for terrific spotting by the tour participants, making my job far easier than I am accustomed to. This gave us extra time to enjoy superb sightings of birds, and enabled us to record a very impressive 590 species of bird in only 21 days, without visiting Korup National Park. All possible Cameroon Mountains Endemics (excluding Mount Cameroon Francolin) were seen by all, although Mount Kupe Bush-Shrike was little more than a flash for most of the group and Ursula's Sunbird was seen well by only three of us.

Logistically, this trip went very smoothly, except for a 24-hour delay in our train trip, likely due to the Pope's visit to Yaounde. Fortunately the Bamenda highlands treated us very well, and we were able to recover the lost time to spend the better part of four days in the bird-rich Kupe/Bakossi Mountains.

Overall, participants were pleasantly surprised by the standards of accommodation and food. Campement du Buffle Noir has new management, and is vastly improved.

This year's trip report is a bit of an experiment, as I've invited participants to each contribute to the report, so please forgive the different writing styles...

In brief summary, our top 10 birds were:

1. Red-headed Picathartes
2. Brown-chested Lapwing
2. Quail Plover
4. Crossley's Ground-Thrush
5. Grey-headed Broadbill
6. Green-breasted Bush-Shrike
7. White-crested Turaco
7. Swallow-tailed Kite
7. Ursula's Sunbird
10. Little Oliveback
10. Arabian Bustard

Other noteworthy species were Mount Cameroon Speirops and Mountain Sawwing at Mount Cameroon, Vermiculated Fishing Owl, Rufous-sided Broadbill, Grey Pratincole, Hartlaub's Duck and Spotted Honeyguide at the Sanaga River, Four-banded Sandgrouse, White-bellied Bustard, Cricket Warbler, Sennar Penduline-Tit and River Prinia at Waza/Mora, Rock Firefinch and Jos Plateau Indigobird near Mora, Chad Firefinch and Emin's Shrike near Poli, Egyptian Plover, White-throated Francolin and Oriole Warbler at Benoue, Yellow-winged Pytilia, White-collared Starling and Spotted Thrush Babbler at Ngaoundaba Ranch, West African Batis and Forest Woodhoopoe near Yaounde, White-throated Blue Swallow at the Sanaga River, Bannerman's Turaco and Banded Wattle-eye in the Bamenda Highlands, and Mount Kupe Bush-Shrike, White-throated Mountain-Babbler, Alexander's Akalat, White-bellied Akalat and Tit-Hylia at Kupe/Bakossi.



Shelley's (Little) Oliveback © Ian Merrill

In more detail, the trip went something like this...

Our group arrived at Douala's International Airport on the evening of 6 March 2009. After wrestling our bags back from the "porters" (not a particularly pleasant start to the tour), we drove the short way into Douala town, to our base for the next few nights. Due to the lack of availability of internal flights to the north of the country, we first had two days to spend in the south. This time was dedicated to the endemic-rich highlands of Mount Cameroon, first, and then to the easily accessible Sanaga River.

Shortly after sunrise on our first day we found ourselves near Buea, the steep slopes of Mount Cameroon looming ahead. We wasted no time in getting going, finding **Western Bluebill** on the trail almost immediately. In the farmbrush we

notched up **Chattering Cisticola**, **Brown-backed** (Chubb's) **Cisticola** and **Banded Prinia** as we climbed towards the forest. Early on we also enjoyed our first, although not best, views of the near-endemic **Mountain Saw-wing**. Calls of the localised **Green Longtail** greeted us at the first patch of forest, and we were soon watching a pair feeding amongst the leaves. As we climbed, ever-mindful of our altitude and the main target for the day, Mount Cameroon Speirops, we paused regularly to catch our breath and views of **Western Green Tinkerbird**, **Western Mountain Greenbul**, **Black-winged Oriole**, **Yellow-billed Turaco**, **Naked-faced Barbet**, the dapper little **Mountain Robin-Chat**, **White-bellied Crested Flycatcher**, **African Hill Babbler**, **Northern Double-collared Sunbird**, bright and noisy **Yellow-breasted Boubou**, **Black-billed Weaver**, dazzling **Shelley's (Little) Oliveback** and much-wanted **Oriole Finch**. Eventually, after a long, sweaty slog we neared 2000 m altitude and started to watch out for **Mount Cameroon Speirops**, soon spotting a loose flock feeding near the trail. We spent almost an hour watching birds come and go, seeing also our first **Cameroon Sunbird**, close-up views of **Mountain Saw-wing**, and **Thick-billed Seedeater**. Well pleased with our efforts we descended slightly to have lunch, as the skies darkened and a rain-storm loomed. Fortunately it didn't last too long, and once the rain abated we continued the downward journey. The two highlights of the descent were a very obliging **Evergreen Forest Warbler** (after several attempts) and good views for all of the scarce endemic **Cameroon Montane Greenbul**. Tired, but satisfied we arrived back in Douala in the evening, to ponder what the next day would have in store.

Leaving the hotel before sunrise, our first stop was at a large shallow vegetated pool, surrounded by secondary forest. Positioned on a busy road, with trucks constantly thundering past, the location did not look promising but as soon as dawn broke the first pair of **Hartlaub's Duck** was picked up. Over the following hour, another ten or more flew in, giving fantastic views right beneath us. Tearing ourselves away, we moved to the Sanaga River where the large sand-banks teemed with birds. A flock of 150 **African Skimmers** were a highlight here, huddled together in a tight pack on the end of the biggest spit and occasionally scything up and down cleaving the water. Also present were a couple of dozen smart **Grey Pratincoles** and a few **White-headed Lapwing**. Small numbers of waders fed along the margins of the sand-bars, including **Greenshank**, **Green Sandpiper** and **White-fronted Plover**. Less expected was Simon's call of 'Pectoral Sandpiper!' and indeed a neatly-plumaged adult was soon scoped feeding amongst the **Little Stints**. A real shock and a first for Cameroon! A description has been submitted to the African Bird Club for publication. Other birds included a colony of vibrant **Orange Weavers** in reeds on the riverside and some **Yellow-throated Leafloves**.

By late morning it was time to concentrate on forest birding. Along the road, an **African Cuckoo-Hawk** perched up in a large baobab along with **Cassin's Malimbe** and **Purple-headed Starlings**. Moving into the forest, we soon located a stunning **Rufous-sided Broadbill** which sat high on a vine in the sub-canopy, along with **Rufous-crowned Eremomela** and both **Fraser's** and **Little Green Sunbirds**. A **Red-billed Dwarf**

Hornbill proved very responsive to tape, coming in strongly and showing well to all. Some bulky **White-thighed Hornbills** were an equal distraction, perching almost overhead and craning down at us through the leaves. A superb plain-faced young **Vermiculated Fishing Owl** was the second major surprise of the morning, flushing from alongside the trail to a perch. Unfortunately, not all of us were in the best position and this buffy-tinger beast moved on before everyone got on it.

In the open swampy areas, it was extremely hot although two **Reichenbach's Sunbirds** were welcome on the forest edge. **Spotted Honeyguide** responded well to playback, flying directly at us and almost scalping two of the group as it looped round and shot back the way it had come! Nearby, a **Willcock's Honeyguide** was more obliging, perching on a dead tree in full view and a **Yellow-crested Woodpecker** showed equally well.

A stop at some sparse fields was productive, with the target **Long-legged Pipit** located quickly on the path in front of us. Subtly distinctive, with a cold grey cast to the plumage. Also in this area were a party of **White-chinned Prinias**, calling and preening in a dense tangle of brush and much smarter than the guide suggests.

A second stop at the 'Duck Pond' on the way home seemed warranted and once again came up with the goods. This time, 22 **Hartlaub's Ducks** were counted. During the resulting photography, a raptor was noticed crossing the road close to the bus. When it landed, it was not the expected Harrier Hawk, but an adult **Congo Serpent Eagle**! Although the views were brief, it showed all the important features including the throat pattern and gular stripe before gliding back across the road and vanishing into the forest. An excellent end to a great day's birding.

With a good list of southern Cameroonian birds under our belt, we, slightly nervously it must be said, made our way to Douala's international airport for our flight to Maroua. Given previous track records of Cameroonian airlines, we expected the worst, but hoped for the best. In our favour a new airline was operating our flight. Fortunately all the nervousness was for no reason, and our flight took off perfectly on time and deposited us in a warm and windy Maroua by mid-morning. We took a short breather and brunch at a restaurant in town, before continuing northwards to Waza via Mora, where we spent the afternoon. The much-wanted Quail Plover was on everybody's mind, and we turned our attention to this species first. A long, hot walk was in order, and we were soon striding purposefully across the parched Sahelian landscape. This year we were let off easily, and within an hour of leaving the car we had **Quail Plover** firmly in our sights. However, the birds were quite skittish, and although we had superb views of at least two birds on the ground, the Paparazzi were not quite satisfied. Just as we were giving up, we flushed another, which landed right out in the open. As we slowly closed in on it, the frequency of shutter clicks became more frantic, culminating in almost continuous fire with the bird only three metres away before it flushed. We wandered back to the car, still somewhat gobsmacked by the views, picking up various other goodies as we went. A fine male **Montagu's Harrier**, **Black-headed Lapwing**, **Abyssinian Roller**, **Red-pate Cisticola** and **Chestnut-bellied Starling**. We were just about back at the vehicles when we spotted a very smart pair of **Cricket Warbler** in the low shrubbery, and some of the group flushed a trio of **White-bellied Bustard**, which we all saw well in flight. As the sun was setting we were nearing Waza, having seen **Grasshopper Buzzard**, **Booted Eagle**, **Yellow-crowned Gonolek** and **Yellow-billed Oxpecker** along the roadside. It was dark when we finally arrived, a Sand Fox welcoming us to Campement du Waza.

Our time at Waza was split equally between the National Park and the woodlands to the south of the village. Of greatest priority, however, was the desirable Arabian Bustard, to which we first turned our attention. Near the entrance to the reserve we found our only **Northern Ant-eater Chat**. The dry, open plains and waterholes of Waza National Park, where we hoped to find our main target, teemed with



birds. Waterholes were the focal point of most activity, with impressive numbers of ducks, waders, storks, herons, cranes, raptors, doves and finches in attendance. Over the day, we enjoyed close-up views of hundreds of **Black Crowned Crane** and **Garganey**, a flock of **Great White Pelican**, several **Saddle-billed Stork**, **Egyptian Vulture**, the hefty **Lappet-faced Vulture**, elegant **Pallid Harrier**, scurrying **Clapperton's Francolin**, large flocks of **European Turtle-Dove**, a single **Steppe Eagle** amongst the more numerous **Tawny Eagles**, **Short-toed Eagle**, a very fine and confiding **White-bellied Bustard**, flocks of **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse**, several smart little **Cut-throats**, a single, partial-plumage **Sahel Paradise Whydah** and a pair of **Four-banded Sandgrouse**. All these, however, were a sideshow to the two sightings of **Arabian Bustard**. Outside the park the main targets were **River Prinia** and **Sennar Penduline Tit**, both quickly seen with relative ease, eliciting muted celebrations on Ian's birthday. Other highlights included **Little Green Bee-eater**, **Four-banded Sandgrouse**, **Northern Carmine Bee-eater**, **Black Scimitarbill**, **Viellot's Barbet**, **West African (Red-rumped) Swallow** and **Rose-ringed Parakeet**. Mammals were well represented by Serval, Red-fronted Gazelle, Sahel Giraffe, some watched in the awkward act of drinking, Patas Monkey, Roan and African Wild Cat.

Having seen most of what we could have hoped for at Waza, we visited some rocky outcrops, to search for Rock Firefinch. As we neared the base of the rocks we immediately heard the calls of firefinches nearby, and soon we found ourselves surrounded by a large, loose flock of **Rock Firefinch**, including numerous red-backed males. Other goodies here were **White-crowned Cliff Chat**, **Rock-loving Cisticola**, **Stone Partridge** and a pair of **Lavender Waxbill**, all giving good views. The biggest find, however, was **Jos Plateau Indigobird**, the first record outside of Nigeria. Although the birds were not in breeding plumage, at least one, if not two birds, were singing, and mimicking both contact calls and songs of Rock Firefinch (article to be submitted to The Bulletin of the African Bird Club). Other stops on our journey to Garoua produced a perched, roadside **Fox Kestrel**, our first **Senegal Parrot**, **Senegal Eremomela** and **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver** of the trip, and the only sightings of **White-headed Barbet**, **Southern Grey Shrike** and **Grey-backed Fiscal**. At Garoua itself we found **Winding Cisticola**, **Crested Lark** and our first views of **Egyptian Plover**, fairly distant for those who decided to stay on land, but up close for the few that braved the Benoue River by boat.

Nigel Voaden's article in the latest issue of The Bulletin of the African Bird Club, regarding his re-discovery of Chad (Reichenow's) Firefinch in Cameroon, called for a detour to the Poli area. We enjoyed perched views of a **Red-necked Buzzard** before starting the demanding climb up the old mining track, some of the group seeing **Ortolan Bunting** (very rare in Cameroon) on their way, and everybody enjoying their first **Red-throated Bee-eater**. We paused to catch our breath at the old base camp, where **Grey-headed Oliveback** and **Red-winged Grey Warbler** were spotted, before continuing to the bottom of a small inselberg that Nigel had kindly pointed us to. Initially we could hear firefinches calling from the tall grass and obtained a few brief sightings, when Barry spotted a fine male **Chad Firefinch** perched in a small tree near the road. We spent at least half an hour following the large flock of seedeaters, obtaining great views of **Chad Firefinch**, and brief views of **Dybowski's Twinspot**. Here too Ian spotted the only **Streaky-headed (West African) Seedeater** of the trip before we started back down the hill, pausing to admire an **Adamawa Turtle Dove**. From here we headed in search of the rare **Emin's Shrike**, again compliments of Nigel Voaden. En route we found our first **Heuglin's Wheatear**. By the time we reached our target area, it was beginning to heat up rather rapidly. We started in a wide arc through some suitable looking habitat. **Black-faced Firefinch** and **Cabanis's Bunting** diverted our attention briefly, but we stuck to our guns, and just as our enthusiasm was running dry, Ian called out "**Emin's Shrike**"! We enjoyed some great views of a female before stumbling back to the car to rehydrate ourselves. As we continued to Benoue, we were





Egyptian Plover © Ian Merrill

slowed by a pair of **Temminck's Courser** in a bare field and a faulty starter motor. We eventually arrived at Campement du Buffle Noir after a long day on the road, quickly dumped the bags in our rooms and grabbed a well deserved ice cold drink. Just as some of us were relaxing Andy D stated reasonably calmly, 'there's two cats in the riverbed'. We quickly got the scopes on the distant shapes in the rapidly failing light but could just about make out the distinctive markings of a pair of Leopard. As a fitting finale to a great day we were just in time to spot **African Scops Owl** on the edge of camp before heading in for a much-deserved dinner.

The group assembled at dawn and wandered off on a short walk through the forest to the riverbed

below the camp, soon encountering a noisy group of elusive **Blackcap Babblers**, plus great views of **Black-bellied** and **Bar-breasted Firefinch** whilst overhead a pair of **Egyptian Geese** put in an appearance. Once at the river bed, new birds continued to be added with the much wanted and hoped for **Heuglin's Masked Weavers** feeding above the last remaining pools of water, and a very vocal **Golden-tailed Woodpecker** that showed well. Scanning further up the river whilst diligently searching for Plovers a distant pair of **Three-banded Plover** were found when suddenly an **Oriole Warbler** or Moho as they are sometimes known started calling and soon we were able to enjoy this cracking bird above the river for a while, whilst the sounds of a **Black-headed Gonolek** resounding across the valley was also brought into view. Walking back through the camp towards the sounds of distant Hippos we saw a **Grey Kestrel** overhead before arriving at an area of prime riverbed habitat complete with the much wanted 'again' **Egyptian Plover** that fortunately put on a great show literally a few metres from where we were standing and closer views for some that had chosen to remain land based at Garoua! This was surely going to be one of the birds of the trip, but we still had lots more birds to see on our travels!

Pleased with our pre breakfast amble we returned to camp but not before seeing the stunning and extremely vocal **White-crested** and **Violet Turacos**. As we made a bee line for some much wanted food a group of **Abdim's Storks** spiralled low overhead allowing superb views. Still, it was only 0930 and following breakfast the show continued with a drive and birding along the entrance road. A few attempts at White-throated Francolin drew a blank but despite the increasing heat and accompanying sweat bees we got great views eventually of a **Red-winged Warbler** in the canopy, a stunning **Red-necked Falcon** and, in a few magic moments, two **Spotted Creepers**, and four **Yellow-bellied Hylionas** showed extremely well in the trees, whilst **Rufous Cisticola** was a little more dowdy but none the less a welcome addition to the list and seen very well. After a few hours rest and again some great food, we were ready for the afternoon session, birding the road towards the Hippo pools. Could the afternoon be as good as the mornings birding bonanza, oh yes..... A brief stop along the road was followed by our driver pointing out some Coursers to the left of us which he said we had seen the day before, no not Temminck's but **Bronze-winged Courser**, a pair with chicks as the lead vehicle was radioed back from driving off. Incredible, a superb find and a much wanted bird right next to the track. The memory cards got a pounding yet gain as the cameras sprung into action. We finally reached the Hippo pools and many photos were taken of the assembled Hippos whilst a vocal **Western-banded Snake Eagle** refused to show nearby. A pair of **Egyptian Plover** and attendant young were permanently on view whilst an elusive **White-checked** (Grey-headed) **Oliveback** played hard to get in the riverine vegetation below us, and as darkness fell a **Pel's Fishing Owl** was heard distantly, another great day in the field ended with an Oribi spotlighted on the drive back.

From Benoue we made our way southwards to the fabulous Ngaoundaba Ranch, but not before spending some early-morning birding in Benoue's woodlands, until now only sampled during the hot, quiet afternoons. Our main target for the morning was the secretive **White-throated Francolin**, from which we had not yet heard a

peep. Fortunately we soon heard some birds calling not too far the road, and we hastily made our way towards them before they stopped calling, some of the group spotting **Blue-bellied Roller** as we made the dash. We had a fairly good idea of where they were, and carefully scanning quickly pinpointed their position about 100 m from us. They seemed reluctant to come closer, but we cautiously moved forward, managing to get within 20 m of a small covey of these fantastic birds. Further along the road we spotted **White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike**, and the little-known trio, **White-fronted Black Chat**, **Emin's Shrike** (yes, again!) and **Dorst's Cisticola** before reaching the main road.



White-throated Francolin © Ian Merrill

Next on the cards was Lake Dang, near Ngaondere town, but not before a prolonged lunch in town. Moving along the edge of the lake we scanned the water-lily beds and open water, where African Pygmy Goose and Yellow-billed Duck were spotted. Overhead a very distant soaring **Beaudouin's Snake Eagle** was spotted, being mobbed by an **African Hobby**, both of which appeared much lower during the afternoon, giving satisfactory views. Around the edge of the lake we found a confiding pair of **Sun Lark** that posed well for the Papparazzi, a snappy **Marsh Tchagra** and a non-breeding male **Marsh Widowbird** in the company of several females. We reached our accommodation, the Ngaundaba Ranch, after dark, with our sojourn off the entrance track resulting in close views of several female **Standard-winged Nightjars**. The lack of electricity and water at the ranch were soon remedied, and we settled in at this magnificently positioned and comfortable establishment. Situated at 1,360m on the Adamawa plateau, and overlooking a volcanic crater lake, it was formerly a hunting lodge, now being a working cattle ranch. With excellent habitat readily accessible on foot, and around the ranch itself, we looked forward to a relatively relaxing couple of days birding.

We took an early morning walk to the nearby gallery forest that still flourishes in the damper gulleys around the ranch. We soon coaxed out much prized **Spotted Thrush Babblers** into view, as well as cryptic **Leaf Loves**, **Grey-winged Robin-Chat**, **White-crested Turaco**, **Blackcap Babblers**, **Yellowbill**, and the surprisingly showy endemic **Bamenda Apalis**.

After a welcome 9:30 breakfast, we took a walk around the crater lake. The undisturbed islands provide a safe roosting area for large numbers of Starlings, and we saw **Purple, Splendid, Violet-backed, Bronzetailed, Wattled**, and the stunning **White-collared** here. The dry scrubby areas below the ranch proved excellent for Estrildid Finches, attracted by the drinking pools in the heat of the day. Good



Sun Lark © Ian Merrill

views were had of **Brown** and **Dybowski's Twin-spot**, **Yellow-winged Pytilia**, **Grey-headed Oliveback**, **Black-crowned Waxbill**, **Orange-cheeked Waxbill**, and **Bar-breasted**, **Black-faced** and **Black-bellied Firefinches**. After lunch and a siesta, we spent the late afternoon walking the drier areas of grassland and dry woodland. Highlights included a cracking singing male **Brown-rumped Bunting**, **Gambaga Flycatcher**, **Red-headed Lovebird**, **Green-backed Woodpecker**, **Plain-backed Pipit** and **Lesser Honeyguide**. Spotlighting after dark produced the only **Greyish Eagle Owl** of the trip, and more good views of female **Standard-winged Nightjars**, but had to wait until early the next morning for the males to show. As predicted by Michael, the visible moon had the desired effect on the male **Standard-winged Nightjars**, and they were located by their insect like song. Close views were had of these extraordinary birds, both on the deck and in flight in the torchlight. After dawn, we birded another area of gallery forest and dry woodland, eventually getting good views of **White-spotted Flufftail**, and also finding **Black-headed Batis**, **Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike**, **Tropical Boubou**, **Western Violet-backed** and **Splendid Sunbird**, and **Piapiac**. After lunch, we took a long walk in the areas of degraded habitat and burned agricultural land adjoining the ranch, with the specific aim of finding the hard to see **Brown-chested Lapwing**. Spirits were low after several hours with only **African Wattled Lapwing**, **Temminck's Courser**, **Yellow-billed** and **Woodchat Shrike**, **Common Fiscal**, **African Cuckoo**, **Black-faced Quailfinch**, **Baglafaecht Weaver**, **Black-winged Bishop**, and **African Hawk Eagle** to show for our efforts. With a large slice of Emin's Shrike déjà vu, as we completed the loop back to the starting point of our walk Andy B and Simon located a superb pair of **Brown-chested Lapwings**, causing the stragglers amongst us a nervous sprint to the spot. The pair, in pristine breeding plumage, were admired in detail as they fed in an open burnt area. Deservedly voted one of the best birds of the trip, they were particularly well received by IM, completing his quest to see every species in the *Vanellus* genus. After an early dinner, a spotlighting session in the ranch paddocks gave good views of the only **Black-shouldered Nightjar** of the trip.

Our final hours at Ngaoundaba were spent mostly birding alone, after an early morning walk through the woodlands as a group produced a rather drab female **Red-winged Pytilia** with a flock of a dozen **Yellow-winged Pytilia**. **Ross's Turaco** and **Grey-headed Oliveback** were seen by most of the group, while two fine raptors were seen by only the lucky, **Western Banded Snake Eagle** by Jonathan, and **Ovambo Sparrowhawk** spotted and photographed by Andy over the lodge. Apparently Martin managed to drag himself from his chair for some views of the latter before it soared out of view. And with that it was time to leave. We made our way back to town, and sipped soft drinks while our compartments were being secured. In the mean time, news of the Pope's visit to Yaounde filtered through to us, and we all pondered traffic chaos in Yaounde. In the evening we made our way to the train station. A short delay in boarding gave some time to spot **Bathawk**, and was followed by an announcement: the train was cancelled!! Speculation as to why was rife, and most of us favoured the Pope's visit, rather than a possible derailment, as the cause. Anyhow, there were no flights the next day there was nothing to do but find a hotel in town (done quickly and painlessly) and try again tomorrow. In the mean

time we were promised that the train would leave the following evening, and that we were guaranteed our places.

With a day to kill we decided to try birding the tall woodland of the Adamawa Escarpment, about an hour from town. A few hours here in the morning were quite productive, although our previous success meant there were few new species. Notable were **Adamawa Turtle Dove**, **Black Cuckoo** (all-black, *clamosus* subspecies), an agitated **White-bellied Tit**, **Red-headed Weaver**, **Lesser Blue-eared Starling**, **Dybowski's Twin-spot** and **Leaflove**. Once the morning warmed up, raptors started soaring, and in a matter of 10 minutes we had displaying **Crowned Eagle**, **Martial Eagle** and a pair of **African Hawk Eagles**! We spent a good while at a **Red-throated Bee-eater** colony on the way to town, where the Paparazzi managed to release some tension on the shutter buttons. A pair of **Fox Kestrel** also put on a good show, before it was back to down to the train station try again. Fortunately this time everything went



Fox Kestrel © Ian Merrill

smoothly, and we were well settled into our sleeper compartments before the train started to roll out the station at sunset.

Most of the group managed a good night's sleep as the train rolled south to Yaounde. Jonathan and Simon had excellent views of male **Standard-wing Nightjars** feeding by the lights of one of the train yards we passed through during the night. We arrived in Yaounde at 8.30am with only a slight incident which nearly saw Ian's trusted Nikon 4500 whacked from his grasp by a stick wielding 'entrepreneur' as he snapped some of Yaounde suburb life from his carriage window.

The focus of the next part of our trip would be the enigmatic and notoriously tricky Picathartes, also known as Red-headed Rockfowl. This bizarre cave-nesting endemic of the West African forests is known for unpredictability which only adds to birders' desire to try and find members of this little-known family. We eventually headed up into the forests in the afternoon, full of anticipation. A flurry of bird activity ensued with most of the species seen being new for the trip. **Grey-throated Barbet, Red-rumped Tinkerbird, Anson's Greenbul, Black-capped Apalis, West African Batis, Red-eyed Puffback, and Western Black-headed Oriole** were all seen. We headed up into the mountain towards the first possible nest site but this was dismissed as there was no obvious activity. The second site also appeared inactive, however due to a stomach bug Volkert opted to stay at this lower site which had proved to be successful on previous trips. The rest of the group ploughed on up the hill eventually reaching the highest nesting site, a cave, which contained three nests, although once again there was no obvious fresh activity. Here we sat quietly inside the cave and waited unfortunately in vain. It was a long walk back to the road where we were greeted by Volkert who had watched a **Red-headed Picathartes** for nearly 40 minutes! A decision was made. We had to give the Picathartes one more try the next day, even though the Pope had already stolen our first back-up day!

Next morning we headed back to the Picathartes site. Heavy overnight rain made our progress considerably more challenging but with a group effort which did involve us lifting a mini bus out of a collapsed bridge we made it to our starting point not too much behind schedule. A **Red-fronted Parrot** flew over calling while we waited for our local guide and a cracking **Yellow-billed Barbet** was also seen, although the rarest find of the morning was a pair of scarce **Forest Wood-Hoopoe**, well spotted by Martin. We eventually made it to the previous afternoon successful Picathartes site and our local guide immediately signalled the bird was present. However there was no practical or silent way for the group to see the bird before it was flushed. As the adrenalin subsided we contented ourselves with getting into a suitable viewing position behind some logs and waited. An **African Harrier Hawk** descended through the canopy and made a close pass of the inactive Picathartes mud cup nest. Some 40 minutes later the Picathartes bounded in making the first of two brief appearances which not all of the group saw. As the day drew on we decided to pull back from the area and birded close by giving the local sweat bees ample opportunity to drink their fill, while Michael, beyond the call of duty, headed back down

the mountain to bring up some food. Excellent views of **Brown-chested Alethe** were had by some feeding quietly along the edge of a stream. We headed back to the area of the previous night in the late afternoon. All the effort and concern over the past few days was quickly consigned to the history books as all of the group had outstanding views of one of the worlds most charismatic birds. The **Red-headed Picathartes** (surely calling it Grey-necked is an insult!) spent 15 minutes preening on branches 20 feet off the floor, visited its nest briefly and bound within 30 feet sitting on nearby rocks, before being joined by a second bird before heading off. Watched for 30 minutes we happily descended back down the mountain with a veritable spring in our steps only pausing for views of **Swamp Palm Bulbul, Honeyguide Greenbul, Superb Sunbird** and **Sabine's Puffback**. Celebratory beers were drunk !



Red-headed Picathartes © Ian Merrill

Now our focus turned to the highland specials of the Cameroon Mountains EBA, which we had sampled briefly on our first day at Mount Cameroon. En route to Bamenda we stopped briefly at the Sanaga River, where **Thick-billed Honeyguide**, **Rock Pratincole** and the smart **White-throated Blue Swallow** were found. Our first afternoon in the Bamenda highlands was very rewarding. Degraded forest patches were home to the snazzy **Black-collared Apalis**, **Cameroon Sunbird**, localised **Bannerman's Weaver**, a single male **Oriole Finch**, many skulking **Bangwa Forest Warbler** (not seen by everyone) and, best of all, a pair of very confiding **Banded Wattle-eye**. At the forest edge and adjacent grasslands we found **Blue-breasted Bee-eater**, **Pectoral-patch Cisticola** and (Bouvier's) **Orange-tufted Sunbird**. The next morning we bumped our way up to the Mount Oku forests, where we hoped to clinch the remaining Bamenda highlands specials before heading for Nyasoso. Early on we spotted a



Banded Wattle-eye © Ian Merrill

pair of **Brown-capped Weaver** and several pairs of **Red-faced Crimsonwing** along the roadside, but it was the calls of **Bannerman's Turaco** that first got our pulses racing. After much patience we had fine views of two of these bright-crested beauties. This was followed shortly by lengthy scope views of a perched **Cameroon Olive Pigeon**, one of the trickiest endemics. Next, we turned our attention to the grasslands where the split **Cameroon (African) Pipit** and **Bannerman's (Long-tailed Pipit) Pipit**, were found. Lastly, before heading back down we managed to find an obliging **Bangwa Forest Warbler**, which showed off its rich rufous breast and white throat to everyone. After leaving Mount Oku we head through an uninspiring lowland landscape of cultivation and regular sprawling towns. Late in the afternoon several high peaks appear on the flat horizon and as we approach they can be seen to be cloaked in a healthy cover of forest, in a land otherwise devoid of any natural vegetation. As we attempt top up with diesel at Loum the heavens open in a huge tropical downpour, lightning flashes and the garage pumps abruptly stop, as a power cut thwarts our tank-filling efforts; nothing is ever easy about travel in Cameroon! From Loum a dirt road snakes up into the hills, where 4WD is engaged for the hour-long journey to Nyasoso in the failing light.

Nyososso is a thriving little hill village, centred on the large secondary school at the foot of Mount Kupe. The bumpy road finally deposits us at Lucy's Guest House, where Lucy and her husband Jacob, a retired teacher from the local school, provide a typically warm welcome. Having read varying reports about the establishment we are delighted to find that our habitation for the next four nights consists of clean spacious bedrooms, comfortable communal living area, a couple of very welcome showers and even a sit-on toilet! When a delicious local meal is served and we are shown a fridge stocked with cold beer we conclude that previous reports were seriously flawed and this is quite possibly the finest accommodation in which we stay.

The following morning, at 05.30 a plate of delicious hot pancakes are deposited before eager recipients and doused in 'Nutella'. After washing down our superb breakfast with strong coffee we set off up the road towards the school with the imposing forested slopes of Mount Kupe rising steeply behind the grubby whitewashed classroom walls.

As we reach the first of the true forest a **Grey-headed Broadbill** mockingly calls close by, but refuses to respond to the tape. Our first new bird is therefore the **Blackcap Illadopsis** which, in contrast, performs magnificently and eventually settles down at head-height to sing from a remarkably exposed perch.

Moving steeply upwards through the fantastic damp montane forest we soon drop on a feeding flock moving slowly through the lichen-draped boughs and mossy trunks. Chunky **Grey-headed Greenbuls** cause early excitement but are soon eclipsed by a stunning group of **White-throated Mountain Babblers**, which move

from branch-to-branch like a band of animated arboreal Dippers! Seconds later a **Black-necked Wattle-eye** pops into view, creating one of those moments where one struggles to know which way to look next! Ascending further we locate a vocal pair of **Shining Drongos**, **Elliot's Woodpecker** and a smart little **Black-capped Woodland Warbler** which sings as it moves through the mid-story. The mid-day birding lull is enlightened by the arrival of our packed lunch, strapped to the back of a sweating porter, with tuna sarnies, boiled eggs and the inevitable Mambo Bars being well received by the hungry crowd.

Our bush-shrike and broadbill recordings continue to elicit no response and so we commence a slow decent down the slippery forested hillside. New birds include **Yellow-whiskered Greenbul** and **Yellow-footed Flycatcher**, before another fast-moving bird flock has the pulses racing with **Gabon Woodpecker**, **Forest White-eye** and a cracking little **Woodhouse's Antpecker** being seen in rapid succession. Today is BW's Birthday, so it is fitting that he is the finder of the bird-of-the-day, in the form of a gorgeous **Crossley's Ground-Thrush**. Not only very rare and localised, it is an absolutely dazzling *Zoothera* with glowing orange underparts, neat white covert-spots and a huge white half-crescent behind a dark eye.

The frenetic bird activity continues as we descend into the secondary growth and farm scrub, where **White-bellied Robin-Chat**, **Chestnut Wattle-eye**, **African Piculet**, **White-breasted Nigrita** and **Petit's Cuckoo-Shrike** are all noted. Another undoubted highlight comes in the form of a group of **Tit-Hylia**s feeding close to head-height, where these diminutive gems reveal neatly-streaked breast, banana-coloured belly and bright-yellow feet to full effect.

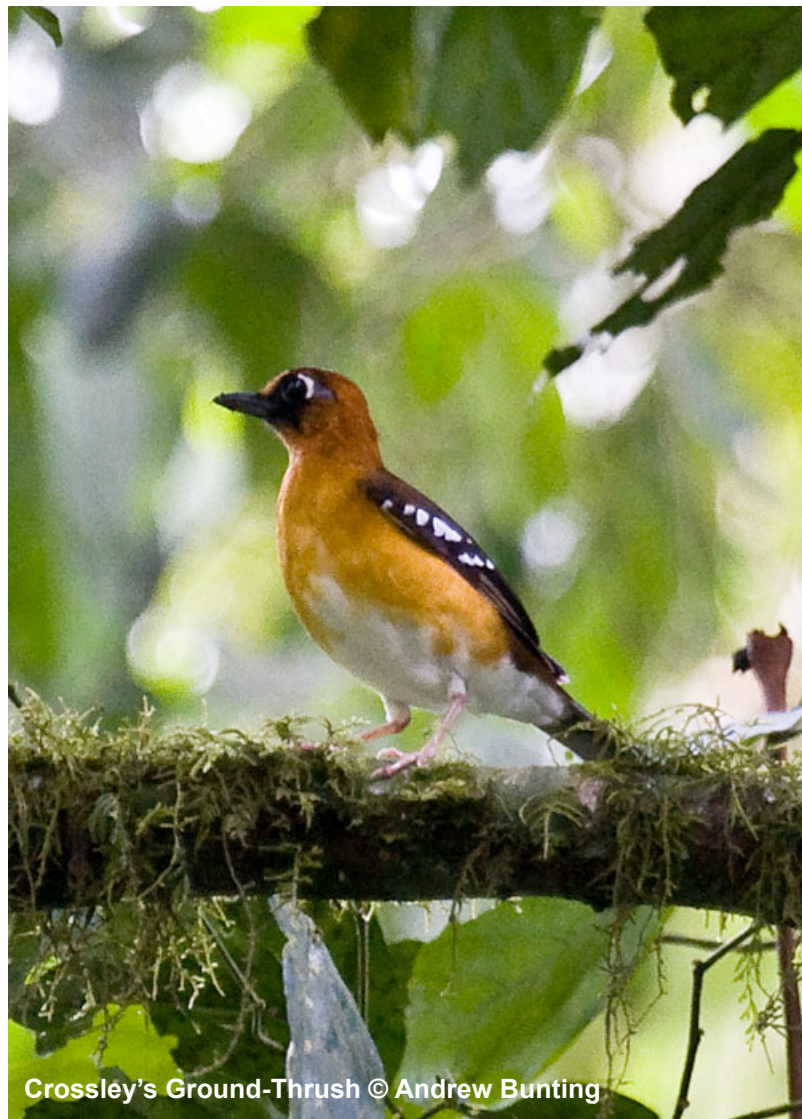
A pair of canopy-perching **Black Bee-eaters** and an elusive **Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo** are added to the list before the hordes of sweat bees have us beating a hasty downhill retreat. Mark Andrews' famous Mount Kupe Bush-Shrike mural on the school wall looks destined to be the final bird of the day until a cracking little **Pale-fronted Nigrita** appears on a bush-top to wrap up a magnificent day's birding.

Back at Lucy's the cold showers are bliss and the evening meal of fish, local vegetables and fried plantains is a culinary delight fit for any Birthday celebration.

The next morning, breakfast is regrettably too early for the pancake cook, then it's a drive to the Bakossi Mountains. The latter stages of the drive ascend steeply through secondary forest and past small villages, with 4WD being an essential. Typically, Cameroon is determined to make our progress a challenge right until the very end and the failure of the 4WD drive in one of the vehicles means that a shuttle service is deployed for the last few kilometres.

Relieved to finally arrive and keen to get to the forest, it is soon apparent that even this exercise is far from simple. It transpires that village politics have led to the suspension of the village Fon (the chief), with whom our original agreement to enter the community-owned forest has been made. The chief has done a runner with our gift of a crate of beer and we are faced with an angry group of villagers who we clearly need to pacify before being allowed to lift our bins.

Michael's powers of diplomacy are tested to their full, but eventually an agreement is reached and our group file into the darkness of a large hut for the performance of the Libation Ceremony, the symbolic offering of drink to 'the Gods of our Forefathers'. A crowd has gathered at the doorway and intrigued faces peer through the window openings to observe what must be the biggest event in the remote village for a very long time. Sitting in the rather damp and fusty easy chairs which edge the room, we watch as beer is poured into the communal cup and Michael



joins in a few words to evoke the Spirits. The glass of beer and a rather grubby Cola Nut is then passed from hand to hand, for us to slurp and chew at the appropriate moment.

And finally we can commence birding! With a small band of porters and guides in tow, all eager to earn a welcome slice of our Western affluence, we make our way first through farmland and then into the forest beyond. Almost immediately we find a pair of **White-tailed Warblers** making their way through the low understory, with a **Green Hylia** seen soon after. An **Alexander's Akalat** takes rather more coaxing from the dark mossy depths, but eventually emerges to sing from a low bough in full view.

A pair of **Cameroon Olive Greenbuls** are notable for their lack of any notable features, while the first bird party we encounter contains **Mountain Sooty Boubou**, **Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher**, **Dusky-blue Flycatcher**, **Black-necked Wattle-eye** (again) and **Grey Cuckoo-Shrike**. Making our way along a ridge-top, in the gently undulating forest, we spend some time chasing a **Bar-tailed Trogon** before the plaintive call of **Green-breasted Bush-Shrike** causes an instant change in our focus. Whistled imitations of the call slowly draw the bird towards us until he darts into the canopy high above, where his green and grey plumage make locating this sought-after endemic a considerable challenge.

We celebrate our achievement with a packed lunch, before continuing our quest for the remaining bush-shrike. **Tullberg's Woodpecker**. Typically it is at a mid-afternoon point, when all seems lost, that a response is finally heard in a distant gully. Crashing our way down towards the source of the call, our recording us used to lure the mythical bird towards us but just as it seems that he must emerge to check out the apparent intruder he slopes off into the green tangles. Close, but certainly no cigar this time.

Somewhat disheartened we set off back, pulling in **Lowland Masked Apalis**, **Black Bee-eater** and **Bocage's Bush-Shrike** as we go. We receive a jovial greeting back at the village and bird our way some distance back down the road, passing waving children and a **Green Turaco** as we go.

Upon our return to Lucy's a fine meal of fish, tomatoes, spaghetti and plantain awaits, though the **Buff-spotted Flufftail** which refuses to reveal itself, as it calls from a tree right beside the digs, reiterates the air of frustration which has dogged us all day.

Re-enacting the previous morning's journey to the Bakossi Mountains, but this time without the car problems or debates, we are in the forest not long after first light and back at our bush-shrike site via a vocal but fleeting **Grey-chested Illadopsis**. Again the grating calls of **Mount Kupe Bush-Shrike** are heard, soon after our arrival, and again we descend off piste, through the dense undergrowth in the quest for a glimpse this ultra-rare endemic. This time he responds more positively to the playback and eventually darts to a treetop directly overhead, where frantic scanning eventually provides half-decent views of one of the region's most sought-after specialities.

Continuing our walk through some fantastic damp forest, a distinctive rattling call soon has us leaving the trail again, but this time our quarry is infinitely more obliging. With patience we manage to position ourselves with a few metres of a displaying **Grey-headed Broadbill**, undoubtedly the most impressive *Smithornis*, sporting a white throat, broad rufous-orange breast-band and neatly streaked underparts. His display tactics are truly amazing, as he launches himself from his perch with white mantle and crown feathering exposed, to loop backwards whist emitting a rattled call of fierce intensity; our time in his company provides yet another trip highlight.

A little further down the same trail the whistle of another **Green-breasted Bush-Shrike** is pursued and soon we are enjoying some great views of a group of three of these brightly-coloured brutes, as the party chase through the branches vocalising loudly, presumably performing some kind of courtship ritual. Here we also marvel at a tiny frog found in the leaf litter, which displays an amazing black target marking on a white belly; he is later identified as Nkongsamba River Frog *Phrynobatrachus cricogaster*.

The remainder of the morning produces obliging **Hairy-breasted Barbet** and **White-bellied Robin-Chats**, another **White-tailed Warbler** and a **Yellow Longbill**. After we have eaten our packed lunch the skies begin to darken and banks of cloud roll in. Then it begins to rain. And rain. And rain. At times torrential and always persistent, we are treated to our first thorough Cameroonian soaking, eventually arriving back with squelching boots and sodden clothing, but remarkably all are still smiling after a very rewarding session in the forest.

We bid final farewells to our new friends in this fantastically remote and thankfully unspoilt corner of Africa and head downhill in steamy cars, to our final evening with Lucy and Jacob and their tremendous hospitality.

On our final day in Cameroon, the group was divided in opinion as what to do, so we split the group. A couple of die-hards slogged up Shrike Trail, while the rest decided for a more relaxed and birdy amble along Nature Trail. Over the school campus we watched a **Bat Hawk** hunting at first light, before going our ways. The Shrike Trailers had not a sniff of Mount Kupe Bush Shrike, although the hard climb was well rewarded with superb views of **Ursula's Sunbird** feeding on a flowering plant in the under-storey; a male showed off its orange pectoral tufts, and even the iridescent blue flecks on the forehead were visible. In the mean time the Nature Trailers racked up a fine list of species, including **Forest Swallow**, **Southern Hyliota**, **Luhder's Bush-Shrike**, **Preuss's Weaver** and **Western Bluebill**. At midday we met back at base for lunch, before returning to Douala for our final dinner and checklist, and taking an evening flight back to Paris.



Red-headed Picathartes © Andrew Bunting