

## COMPREHENSIVE CAMEROON 2011

Report by Michael Mills

This year's comprehensive Cameroon tour was a resounding success in all respects. We recorded an impressive 589 species in just 21 days, including Red-headed Picathartes, Arabian Bustard, Quail-Plover, Golden Nightjar and all Cameroon Mountains Endemics except for Mount Cameroon Francolin. In addition, the quality of sightings enjoyed of the most important birds was superior to that of my previous tours, perhaps reaching its pinnacle with my best ever views of Mount Kupe Bushshrike – three birds chasing each other along a bare branch just 10 m away from us and for several minutes – a Fraser's Eagle Owl that sat in the spotlight beam for ages, and prolonged, day time views of Golden Nightjar. Finally, the trip logistics were certainly smoother than during any of my previous six Cameroon trips, with no flight delays, drivers always on time and uncharacteristically few of the general hassles expected in Cameroon.

Top 10 birds of the trip as voted for by participants and myself were:

1. Red-headed Picathartes: perhaps as many as eight birds watched around their nesting rocks for more than half an hour
2. Mount Kupe Bushshrike: three birds chasing each other around a bare branch, no more than 10 m away
3. Golden Nightjar: day time views of a male sitting in the shade of a bush, filling the scope view
4. Quail-Plover: prolonged views of one bird on the ground, very close by
5. Fraser's Eagle Owl: a single bird watched for minutes in the spotlight beam, sitting right out in the open
6. Egyptian Plover: two birds very close on the shores of the Benoue River
7. Standard-winged Nightjar: a mesmerizing male displaying around us in the spotlight beam and seen on the ground at close quarters
8. Bannerman's Turaco: great views of several of these rare and beautiful endemics
9. White-spotted Flufftail: great looks for everyone of a bird skulking through the undergrowth
10. Shelley's Oliveback: point blank looks of several of these tiny beauties

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

After a characteristically chaotic arrival the previous evening at Douala's International Airport, we made an early start on the drive towards the Bamenda Highlands. Our very comfortable Toyota Landcruisers made light work of the journey, and provided a very comfortable ride throughout our time in the south. En route we stopped to admire our first **Preuss's Cliff Swallows** breeding under a roadside bridge, a **Greater Swamp Warbler** at its nest, **Cassin's Flycatcher** along a small stream, a roadside-perched **Grey Kestrel**, and in-flight **Booted Eagle** and **Red-necked Buzzard**. We broke the long drive with a prolonged lunch stop, and then headed for some remnant patches of forest near Bamenda town in the early afternoon. Immediately we found a bright **Yellow-breasted Boubou**, our first Cameroons Mountains endemic, with another, **Banded Wattle-eye**, following shortly on its heels. Over the rest of the afternoon we enjoyed several other noteworthy

sightings: an incredibly confiding **Bangwa Forest Warbler**, several local **Bannerman's Weaver**, some very smart **Black-collared Apalis**, a **Greyish Eagle-Owl** with fluffy chick (curtesy of excellent spotting by Rob), **Mackinnon's Shrike**, **Blue-breasted Bee-eater**, **Cameroon Montane Greenbul** and **Western Mountain Greenbul** (the names of which created much confusion), **Brown-backed/Chubb's Cisticola**, **African/Ruwenzori Hill-Babbler** and **Dybowski's Twinspot**.

The following day we explored some of the larger remaining forest patches of the Bamenda highlands. The ever-popular **Bannerman's Turaco** didn't put up too much of a fight, and we were also treated to great views of these highly threatened and localized beauties. A noisy group of **White-headed Wood Hoopoe**, confiding **Western Green Tinkerbird**, unexpected **Black-throated Apalis** and comparatively dowdy **Grey Apalis** were among the other highlights. Out in the grasslands we quickly tracked down both **Cameroon Pipit** (split from African Pipit) and **Bannerman's Pipit** (split from Long-billed Pipit), both giving their respective displays/songs, plus **Pectoral-patch Cisticola** and some very dark **African Black Swift**, which made us wonder about Fernando Po Swift. Another patch of forest in the Bamenda highlands produced our first **Cameroon Olive Greenbul** of the trip, plus **Little Oliveback**, **White-bellied Tit**, **Green Longtail** and heard-only **Bamenda Apalis**. In Bamenda town itself, a cliff watching session was very productive, as we found **Peregrine Falcon**, a pair of **White-crowned Cliff Chat** and several of the localized **Neumann's Starling**.

From Bamenda we made our way to the endemic rich Kupe-Bakossi area, pausing en route to notch up **Yellow-billed Duck**, **Winding Cisticola**, **European Honey Buzzard** and **African Wattled Lapwing**. The various forest trails both at Mount Kupe and in the Bakossi Mountains were hard work, but did not disappoint. We did extremely well on our main targets, the Cameroons Mountain Endemics. **Black-capped Woodland Warbler** was the first to fall, followed shortly by a very secretive **Alexander's Akalat** which we finally managed to coax into view for everyone, then the first of many large, noisy **Grey-headed Greenbul** and the first of at least five sightings of unusual **White-throated Mountain Babbler**. We also enjoyed our first **Cameroon Sunbird** and some excellent views of **Ursula's Sunbird**. The last three to surrender, all in a matter of a few hours, were **Green-breasted Bushshrike**, **Mount Kupe Bushshrike** and **White-tailed Warbler**. **Green-breasted Bushshrike** had been teasing us already for two days, and most of the group missed out on a pair that came in right overhead the day before, so it was with some relief that we spotted a distant one of these big brutes and got it in the scope for everyone to see before it disappeared. **Mount Kupe Bushshrike** certainly was more co-operative when it finally showed up, and we enjoyed a spectacle of three birds chasing each other along a bare branch, right before our eyes. Certainly the best sighting of the trip! And **White-tailed Warbler**, which we had heard on several occasions, finally decided to come and inspect some calls, flitting back and forth in a path-side thicket several minutes and excitedly flicking its short, little tail.

Although our focus was very much on the endemics, we also found a great number of other specials and more widespread species. At night we enjoyed excellent views of **Fraser's Eagle Owl**, several smart **Bar-tailed Trogon** showed well, an **African Piculet** sat still in good light near its nest hole (much to Gerry's delight), a bright **Fiery-breasted Bushshrike** called from its concealed treetop perch, a dumpy male **Grey-headed Broadbill** fluffed its white back feathers and performed its popular display, **Black-necked Wattle-eye** was seen well, a **Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye** was found nesting right next to the forest trail, **Forest Swallow** was watched in flight and seen perched, a male **Southern Hyliota** put in a brief appearance, a bright **Crossley's Ground Thrush** sang from its exposed perch, a cute **Yellow-footed Flycatcher** was seen at close quarters, a pair of **Preuss's Weaver** with young watched feeding in a large tree, a small group of **Tit**

**Hylia** was expertly picked out by Mike, and a pair of **Orange-tufted Sunbird** were watched at length feeding on some flowering trees. The list of other species is too long to mention, but included **Tullberg's Woodpecker**, **Red-chested Goshawk**, **Lizard Buzzard**, **Guinea/Green Turaco**, **Yellow-billed Turaco**, **Yellowbill/Green Malkoha**, **Red-chested Cuckoo**, **Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo** and **Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo** (heard), **Black Bee-eater** (poor flight views), **White-throated Bee-eater**, **Naked-faced Barbet**, **Red-rumped Tinkerbird**, **Yellow-spotted Barbet**, **Double-toothed Barbet**, **Cassin's Honeybird**, **Western Least Honeyguide**, **Elliot's Woodpecker**, **Gabon Woodpecker**, **Yellow-crested Woodpecker**, **African Shrike-Flycatcher**, **Black-and-white Shrike-Flycatcher**, **West African Batis**, **Bocage's Bushshrike**, **Pink-footed Puffback**, **Red-eyed Puffback**, **Mountain Sooty Boubou**, **Luehder's Bushshrike**, **Petit's Cuckooshrike**, **Black-winged Oriole**, **Bates's Paradise Flycatcher**, **Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher**, **Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher**, **Honeyguide Greenbul**, **Green Hylia**, **Fan-tailed Grassbird/Broad-tailed Warbler**, **Chattering Cisticola**, **Banded Prinia**, **Lowland Masked Apalis**, **Black-capped Apalis**, **Buff-throated Apalis**, **Black-faced Rufous Warbler**, **Rufous-crowned Eremomela**, **Yellow Longbill**, **Forest White-eye**, **Forest Chestnut-winged Starling**, **White-tailed Ant Thrush**, **Brown-chested Alethe**, **White-bellied Robin-Chat**, **Dusky-blue Flycatcher**, **Sooty Flycatcher**, **Fraser's Sunbird**, **Tiny Sunbird**, **Olive-bellied Sunbird**, **Green-throated Sunbird**, **Superb Sunbird**, **Pale-fronted Nigrita**, **Western Bluebill**, **Mountain Wagtail** and **Magpie Mannikin**.

To conclude our highlands segment of tour, our final task was to hike some of the way up West Africa's highest mountain, Mount Cameroon. En route to Buea a **European Roller** sat on the roadside wires, although most eyes were shut and missed this local rarity. Right at the bottom of the mountain we were treated to our first views of **Mountain Sawwing**, also seen perched later. The walk up Mount Cameroon proceeded at a very good pace. We kept on the move on our walk up, stopping only to admire a few select birds such as **Oriole Finch** (several birds, including some smart males), **Red-faced Crimsonwing** (two separate sightings), a small flock of overflying **Cameroon Olive Pigeon**, an uncharacteristically co-operative **Evergreen Forest Warbler**, **African Hill-Babbler**, **White-bellied Crested Flycatcher**, **Waller's Starling**, **Narrow-tailed Starling**, **Mountain Robin-Chat**, **Black-billed Weaver** and **Thick-billed Seedeater**. The highlight, however, was several sightings of the very smart and confiding **Shelley's Oliveback**. Above 1900 m we kept our eyes peeled for speirops, and soon found a large flowering tree where we watched at least ten **Mount Cameroon Speirops** at length. It was a good thing that we managed to get up to speirops altitude early on, as a heavy missed rolled in and reduced our visibility soon after our sighting, forcing us down to lower altitudes. The walk down was rather uneventful, although we managed to flush three **Red-chested Flufftail** near the bottom.

After more than a week of cool highlands birding it was time to try our luck in the arid north of the country. An on-time flight deposited us at a hot and dry Maroua. We paused in town for lunch, where **Subalpine Warbler**, **Grey Woodpecker** and **Vieillot's Barbet** keep us entertained, before heading for Mora. En route, rocky hillsides held flocks of **Lavender Waxbill** and **Rock Firefinch** and a pair of **Stone Partridge**, but eventually the heat drove us back to our air conditioned minibus. A little further north we scoured the arid plains for Quail-Plover, but our attempts were quickly thwarted by the incredible **Golden Nightjar**. The first bird we flushed held our attention for at least half an hour as we enjoyed close up views of this desert beauty sitting on the ground. A **Yellow-bellied Eremomela** nested nearby, the nest holding three young. Soon after returning our attention to the Quail-Plover hunt we flushed another two **Golden Nightjars**, but this time we remained

focused on our search for our main target. However, all too quickly the sun set and the sky darkened, although we did enjoy views of **Swallow-tailed Kite, White-bellied Bustard, Black-headed Lapwing, Abyssinian Roller, Red-pate Cisticola, Chestnut-bellied Starling, Rufous Bush Chat, Black Scrub Robin, Speckle-fronted Weaver**, and best of all, a trio of **Cricket Warbler** before the light faded entirely.

Waza was drier than I had ever seen, with not a drop of water in any of the pools along the main road outside the park. And some of the regular park pools empty too. This meant there were few waterbirds compared to previous years, and much smaller numbers of doves and other granivores. Still, we notched up a good list of birds during our stay, the highlight being two meetings with **Arabian Bustard**, the first an excellent sighting of a bird near one of the waterholes and the second of a bird in flight in the later afternoon. It required some focus to track down **Sennar Penduline Tit**, but we eventually had great views of a single bird, also spotting **River Prinia** as we searched for it. Other noteworthy species at Waza were **Clapperton's Francolin**, a large flock of **Black Crowned Crane** and larger mixed flock of **White Stork** and **African Openbill, Marabou Stork**, a lone **Secretarybird, Short-toed Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Grasshopper Buzzard, Spotted Thick-knee, Eurasian Wryneck, Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Masked Shrike, Northern Crombec, Northern Long-tailed Starling, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Northern Ant-eating Chat, Egyptian Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Rueppell's Vulture, Long-tailed Nightjar** and **Green Bee-eater**.

Our southward journey to Benoue was interrupted by several strategic stops. The first of these was most important, and this time we had **Quail-Plover** firmly in our scopes within half an hour. We also snatched our first looks at **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver** and last looks at **Cricket Warbler** before returning to the rocky hillsides to the south, where the missing **Rock-loving Cisticola** was soon located. Further south still we found **White-billed Buffalo Weaver**, our first **Senegal Eremomela**, flocks of **Northern Carmine Bee-eater, White-rumped Seedeater**, a very elegant pair of **Egyptian Plover, Senegal Thick-knee, Red-throated Pipit** and **Crested Lark**, which reminded us of our proximity to the Palaeartic, and great views of **Black-faced Quail-Finch** and **West African Swallow**. Our final stop en route to Benoue turned up a flock of about 10 rarely seen **Chad/Reichenow's Firefinch**, after a long, hot walk. In the area we also found **Dorst's Cisticola, Red-winged Warbler, Double-spurred Francolin**, our first of five **Grey-headed Oliveback, Singing Cisticola, White-fronted Black Chat, Brown Snake Eagle, Fox Kestrel, Giant Kingfisher, White-shouldered Black Tit, Purple Glossy Starling, Heuglin's Wheatear, Gambaga Flycatcher** and **Cabanis's Bunting**.

The drive into Benoue was rather hot and quiet, with only **Abyssinian Ground Hornbill** of note seen en route, although the camp itself provided some excellent birds around sunset. First a **Grey Kestrel** and later a pair of **Bat Hawk** were watched hunting bats low overhead (with great approval from Michael Frost), and once it was properly dark we spotlighted an immature **Pel's Fishing Owl** along the river, where it sat for scope views for at least 20 minutes and delayed dinner. Along the river we also found **White-backed Night Heron**, although it was a bit too distant to fully appreciate and flew before everyone could study it in the scope.

During daylight hours a large array of bird species entertained us at Benoue. In the gallery forest **Adamawa Turtle Dove** was a highlight, with a supporting cast of **White-crowned Robin-Chat, Violet Turaco, White-crested Turaco**, a scarce **West African Seedeater**, a pair of dazzling **Yellow-winged Pytilia, Black-headed Gonolek, Bar-breasted Firefinch, Black-bellied Firefinch**, more **Grey-headed Olivebacks**, brief views of **Oriole Warbler**, a confiding **Western Banded Snake Eagle, Blackcap Babbler, Western Violet-**

**backed Sunbird, Black-headed Weaver** (in non-breeding dress) and **Red-winged Grey Warbler**. More **Egyptian Plovers** and **White-headed Lapwing** foraged along the sandy shores. In the woodlands we worked hard to find our main quarry, **White-throated Francolin**. Unfortunately we flushed one bird before it could be seen properly on the ground, but a second bird decided the sneak away on foot rather than take to the wing, giving excellent views before disappearing into the nearby grass. We also found the smart **Blue-bellied Roller**, tail-twitching **Rufous Cisticola**, **Black-faced Firefinch**, some very confident **Stone Partridge**, a pair of **White-headed Vulture** circling overhead, **Bruce's Green Pigeon**, **Black-billed Wood Dove**, **Bearded Barbet**, **Greater Honeyguide**, **Fine-spotted Woodpecker**, **Senegal Batis**, **Tropical Boubou**, **Yellow-bellied Hyliota** and **Spotted Creeper**.

Moving further south towards Ngaoundere we stopped for **Lesser Blue-eared Starling** en route and paused at Lake Dang, where an unexpected rain storm delayed our birding. Once the rain had abated we enjoyed views of **Marsh Widowbird**, **Marsh Tchagra**, **Purple Swamphen**, **Whiskered Tern**, **Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat** and even **African Rail**, although only a lucky couple managed to spot **Lesser Jacana** in flight, before it dropped back into the tall swamp vegetation.

Ngaoundaba Ranch was superb as usual, although being utilized by a road construction company meant we had to stay in Ngaoundere with extra early starts to get there in time. Before dawn we enjoyed close-up views of both **Standard-winged Nightjar**, with a single male dancing around in the spotlight, and a **Black-shouldered Nightjar**. The rain the day before seemed to liven up the birds, and the gallery forest was full of song at dawn. We quickly tracked down a pair of desirable **Spotted Thrush-Babbler**, followed shortly by the secretive **Grey-winged Robin-Chat**, a very co-operative trio of **Bamenda Apalis**, **Willcocks's Honeyguide** (also seen at its song perch), **Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike**, **Square-tailed Drongo** and much wanted **Oriole Warbler/Moho** (a bogey bird for Peter, finally seen). A little more perseverance also produced **White-spotted Flufftail** for the whole group, **Leaflove**, **Scaly Francolin**, a diminutive **Red-headed Lovebird** with its whole head in a fig fruit, **Ross's Turaco**, more **White-crested Turacos**, **Blue-breasted Kingfisher**, **Lesser Honeyguide** and the stunning pair of **Dyboski's Twinspot** and **Brown Twinspot**, both showing exceptionally well.

The surrounding woodlands were very productive too. Highlights here were sightings of **Gambaga Flycatcher**, a singing male **Brown-rumped Bunting**, **Brown-backed Woodpecker**, the local **White-collared Starling**, **Bronze-tailed Starling**, **Whistling Cisticola**, **Western Black-headed Batis**, **Grey-headed Bushshrike**, **White-breasted Cuckooshrike**, **Western Grey Plantain-Eater**, **Broad-billed Roller**, a noisy band of **Piapiac**, **Black Scimitarbill**, **Green-backed Woodpecker**, **White-crested Helmetshrike**, **Orange-breasted Bushshrike** and **Yellow-billed Shrike**. Four **Sun Lark** were eventually spotted in some of the more open areas, as was **Orange-breasted Waxbill** in some tall grass. At the crater lake, **African Rail** fed in the open for everyone to admire through the scopes, and African Clawless Otter splashed about noisily.

All that remained in the north of Cameroon was to return to Garoua for our flight south to Yaounde, a random stop at the roadside en route producing prolonged views of the scarce **Yellow Penduline Tit** feeding on some *Acacia* flowers and then preening in the scope.

Back in the humid lowlands of southern Cameroon our main task was to find **Red-headed Picathartes**, a big bird with an even bigger reputation. Our first attempt drew a blank, but the second produced a show that few could forget, with perhaps as many as eight birds watched at length near their breeding caves. There seemed to be picathartes everywhere we looked, and after everyone was satisfied that they had studied the

inns and outs of Picathartes behaviour and plumage variation we snuck away quietly to leave these remarkable birds in peace, and to focus on some general lowland birding.

Highlights of the few days of birding included a plethora of greenbuls, among them **Sjostedt's Honeyguide Greenbul**, **Western Bearded Greenbul**, **Xavier's Greenbul**, **Swamp Palm Bulbul**, **Simple Greenbul**, **Golden Greenbul**, **Spotted Greenbul**, **Red-tailed Bristlebill**, **Yellow-lored Bristlebill** and **Icterine Greenbul**. Hornbills were also a feature of the birding, with numerous **Pied Hornbill** and **Piping Hornbill**, and good numbers of both **Black-casqued Hornbill** and **White-thighed Hornbill**. We also enjoyed close up views of **Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill** (thanks to Julian!) on two occasions, and a lucky few managed to spot a reclusive **White-crested Hornbill**, which teased us for ages by calling from its well-concealed perch. Other big and bright birds included many **African Grey Parrot** and the rather common **Great Blue Turaco**. Forest raptors were well represented, with **Ayres's Hawk Eagle** (a white-headed bird) and **Cassin's Hawk Eagle** both giving excellent flight views, and sightings of **Palm-nut Vulture** and **Black Sparrowhawk**. **Long-tailed Hawk** was rather more frustrating, a young bird calling incessantly from a concealed perch and the flushing seconds after we spotted it, giving only brief flight views for a lucky few. The numerous large rivers that drain the region were also a focus of our attention, and here we found **Orange Weaver** and **Slender-billed Weaver** breeding in some riverside vegetation, **Rock Pratincole** with young, **Grey Pratincole**, **White-fronted Plover** and **African Skimmer** along some sandbars, **Bates's Swift** drinking water, **White-throated Blue Swallow** and **Brown/Mangrove Sunbird**. Once again we notched up too long a list of species to mention, but some of the highlights were **Blue-headed Coucal**, **Mottled Spinetail**, **Cassin's Spinetail**, **Sabine's Spinetail**, **Blue-throated Roller**, **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher**, **African Dwarf Kingfisher**, **Speckled Tinkerbird**, **Yellow-throated Tinkerbird**, **Western Black-headed Oriole**, **Shining Drongo**, **Rufous-vented Paradise Flycatcher**, **Forest Swallow**, **Chestnut-capped Flycatcher**, **White-chinned Prinia**, **Yellow-browed Camaroptera**, **Grey Longbill**, **Green Crombec**, **Lemon-bellied Crombec**, **Violet-backed Hylia**, **Fire-crested Alethe**, **Rufous Flycatcher Thrush**, **Green Sunbird**, **Bates's Sunbird**, **Reichenbach's Sunbird**, a female **Johanna's Sunbird**, **Crested Malimbe**, **Blue-billed/Gray's Malimbe**, a very close sighting of **Chestnut-breasted Nigrita**, prolonged scope views of **Black-bellied Seedcracker**, **Long-legged Pipit**, **Blue Cuckooshrike** and **Fraser's Forest Flycatcher**. Our last new bird of the trip was the rather unimpressive **Little Stint**, although we did make our final stop at the duck pond to enjoy some last views of **Hartlaub's Duck** before boarding our plane and heading for cooler climates.