



**Birding
Africa**
www.birdingafrica.com

Birding Africa 2013 Cameroon Tour

Report by Michael Mills, www.birdingafrica.com

Photographs by tour participant Rob Tizard.



(c) Rob Tizard www.birdingafrica.com

Trip summary: With rain on about two thirds of the days on this year's Cameroon tour the weather quite different from what we've become accustomed to and it seemed as though birds in the southern forests were less responsive, perhaps having commenced breeding earlier. Add to this the fact that our participants were banned from travelling to the Far North Province (Waza National Park and Mora) by their respective governments due to a recent tourist-kidnapping, and the result was a rather atypical trip. Despite this we felt safe throughout and did exceptionally well with the birds, seeing among the more than 550 species all the hoped-for families of our family hunters and almost all Cameroon Mountains Endemics. We started in the Bamenda Highlands where

noteworthy birds included perched **Cameroon Olive Pigeon**, a family of **Banded Wattle-eye**, **Bannerman's Turaco** and **Bangwa Forest Warbler**, plus **Yellow-breasted Boubou**, fantastic views of **Grey-chested Babbler** (a new family for all participants), **Cameroon (Montane) Greenbul**, **Cameroon Sunbird**, **Western (Mountain) Greenbul**, **Mountain Robin-Chat**, **Red-faced Crimsonwing** and **Oriole Finch**. Then in the Kupe/Bakossi area successes included several noisy flocks of the charismatic **White-throated Mountain Babbler**, fantastic views of **Green-breasted Bushshrike**, repeat views of the often-missed **White-tailed Warbler**, **Grey-headed Greenbul**, **Crossley's Ground Thrush** (actually seen!), **Alexander's Akalat** (sometimes treated as a subspecies of **Bocage's Akalat**), **Yellow-footed Flycatcher**, **Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye**, **Black-necked Wattle-eye**, **Chestnut-capped Flycatcher**, **Green Hylia**, **Southern Hyliota**, **Cameroon Olive Greenbul**, excellent views of a male **Buff-spotted Flufftail** on its call perch at night, **Tit Hylia**, **Woodhouse's Antpecker**, **Grey-headed Broadbill** and **Rufous-sided Broadbill** displaying side-by-side, **Forest Swallow** and **Ursula's Sunbird**. Our final destination in the southern highlands was Mount Cameroon where **Little Oliveback**, **Brown-chested Alethe**, **Mount Cameroon Speirops**, amazing views of a male **Red-chested Flufftail**, **Mountain Saw-wing** and **Evergreen Forest Warbler** were among the most memorable sightings. A quick visit to the Sanaga River before flying north produced **Grey Pratincole**, **Carmelite Sunbird**, **Reichenbach's Sunbird**, **Hartlaub's Duck**, **Rufous-vented Paradise Flycatcher** and a surprise pair of **Egyptian Plover** that allowed close approach. The Garoua area allowed us to catch up with some species missed by not going to Waza and Mora, such as **Yellow-crowned Gonolek** and **Rock-loving Cisticola** and added to our lists **Dorst's Cisticola**, **Yellow Penduline Tit** and **Fox Kestrel**. In the Poli area we were pleased to find the seldom-seen **Chad Firefinch**, the only **Dybowski's Twinspots** of the trip, **Fox Kestrel** and our first and most cooperative **Grey-headed Olivebacks**. Then at Benoue we found **Oriole Warbler**, **Bat Hawk**, **White-throated Francolin**, **White-crested Turaco**, **Red-winged Grey Warbler**, **Violet Turaco**, **Abyssinian Ground Hornbill**, **Senegal Thick-knee**, **Pel's Fishing Owl** during the day and a superb herd of **Lord Derby's Eland**! The good birding continued at Ngaoundaba Ranch where highlights included **Spotted Thrush Babbler**, **Bamenda Apalis**, mesmerising **Standard-winged Nightjar** in display, **Brown Twinspot**, **Yellow-winged Pytilia**, **Blue-bellied Roller**, **Gambaga Flycatcher** and **Brown-rumped Bunting**. The final section of the trip took us to Campo Ma'an in the southern



lowlands, with **Gabon Batis**, **White-spotted Wattle-eye** and **Bates's Swift** seen well en route. At Campo the undoubted highlight was watching **Red-headed Rockfowl** around their breeding caves, but other noteworthy species included **Sjostedt's Greenbul**, unbeatable views of **Forest Robin** and a singing male **Yellow-throated Cuckoo**. The last new bird of the trip was the shimmering **Violet-tailed Sunbird**!



The top ten birds of the trip as voted for were:

- 10 A herd of majestic **Lord Derby's Eland** at Benoue, **Cameroon Montane Greenbul** (thanks Rob!) and a male **Buff-spotted Flufftail** watched in the spotlight beam on its call perch at Nyasoso.
- 9 The duo of **Rufous-sided Broadbill** and **Grey-headed Broadbill** watching displaying from the same place at Mount Kupe!
- 8 Wonderful views of **Green-breasted Bushshrike** in the Bakossi Mountains.
- 7 Unbeatable, on-the-ground views of a male **Red-chested Flufftail** at Mount Cameroon.
- 6 Great day-time views of **Pel's Fishing Owl** at Benoue.
- 5 Several flocks of characterful **White-throated Mountain Babbler** in the Bakossi Mountains.
- 4 Point-blank views of the usually-invisible **Grey-chested Babbler** in the Bamenda Highlands, a new family for everyone!
- 3 A mesmerising display around us by **Standard-winged Nightjar** at Ngaoundaba Ranch.
- 2 A graceful pair of **Egyptian Plover**, very surprisingly first seen at the Sanaga River where admired at point-blank range and seen again at Benoue.
- 1 The desirable **Red-headed Picathartes** seen at their breeding caves in Campo Ma'an.



(c) Rob Tizard www.birdingafrica.com

As has now become custom our tour kicked off with the transect from Douala to the Bamenda highlands, passing initially through degraded lowland forests and then alongside the forested peaks of Mount Kupe and the Menanguba Mountains before finally climbing up into the heavily populated highlands of the Bamenda area. En route we paused for lunch with **Singing Cisticola**, **African Grey Woodpecker**, **Yellow-billed Duck**, a surprise **Common Nightingale** and the resident *kumboensis* subspecies of **Red-rumped Swallow**, but the best birds of day

1 were at Bamenda town itself where we spotted our first **Fox Kestrel** and **White-crowned Cliff Chat** and the only **Neumann's Starlings** of the trip.

Early the next morning we watched **Cabanis's Bunting** in the gardens of our well-situated lodge before climbing up to Ijum Ridge, seeing **Double-spurred Francolin** and **African Firefinch** en route. Our first stop in forest immediately produced one of the trickiest endemics, **Banded Wattle-eye**, with a male, female and juvenile bird showing well. During the course of the day we worked the ridge-top forests and surrounding grasslands. The striking and Critically Endangered **Bannerman's Turaco** took some persuasion to show but when it finally did we all enjoyed great views. **Bangwa Forest Warbler** was easier than normal and sat up and sang for us all. **Western (Mountain) Greenbul** was common and easy to see and we also saw our first **Cameroon (Montane) Greenbuls**. Other forest birds included bright **Yellow-breasted Boubou**, a surprise female **Petit's Cuckooshrike** (unusual at this altitude), thicket-loving **Red-faced Crimsonwing**,



(c) Rob Tizard www.birdingafrica.com



Elliot's Woodpecker, snappy **Black-collared Apalis**, dark-headed **Ruwenzori Hill Babbler**, localised **Bannerman's Weaver**, **Thick-billed Seedeater** and lovely **Oriole Finch**. The trickiest bird of the day, however, was the scarce **Cameroon Olive Pigeon**; after flushed views of at least two birds we were relieved to see one perched long enough for everyone to study it in the scope. Overhead we spotted soaring **Red-necked Buzzard** and **Lanner Falcon** and a couple of **Mottled Swift** among the many **Common**

Swifts. In more open areas we enjoyed good looks at **Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat** and **Dark-capped Yellow Warbler**, and nearby found **Cameroon Pipit** (usually treated as a subspecies of **African Pipit**) and **Bannerman's Pipit** (usually treated as a subspecies of **Long-billed Pipit**) in their respective habitats.

It was now time to move on to the other highland areas, but not before a quick visit to Lake Awing. Here we found a pair of **Blue-breasted Bee-eater** at the forest edge, our first **Mountain Robin-Chat** and **Cameroon Sunbird** showed well, **Greyish Eagle-Owl** was seen in the distance and, best of all, an incredibly confiding **Grey-chested Babbler** was a new family for everyone!

Arriving that evening at Nyasoso was made memorable by the mother of all storms bidding us welcome as we drove up a 'river' from Loum. We acclimatised to the forest trails and local birds with a relatively easy day up Mount Kupe and later returned for more time in this species-rich forest where the new birds just kept coming. Thereafter we turned our attention to the Bakossi Mountains. The Cameroon Mountains Endemics were our main focus. We fared well, easily seeing many noisy groups of **Grey-headed Greenbul** often in the company of **White-throated Mountain Babbler**, surely the region's most charismatic endemic, and several **Green Longtail** and **Black-capped Woodland Warbler**. **White-tailed Warbler** was surprisingly easy this year, and we enjoyed at least three excellent encounters seeing both the distinctive males and females. **Urusla's Sunbird** also played along nicely and provided two prolonged, eye-level views in some flowering bushes. **Cameroon Olive Greenbul** was more challenging but gave us a couple of opportunities to see it. But best of all we were spoiled by two excellent encounters with **Green-breasted Bushshrike**.

Among the other regional specialities, **Grey-headed Broadbill** surprised us by displaying alongside its cousin, the more widespread **Rufous-sided Broadbill**, giving us ample opportunity to compare the two species. **Black-necked Wattle-eye** was watched at eye-level. **Crossley's Ground Thrush** was persuaded into view after much effort. And **Alexander's Akalat** (usually lumped with **Bocage's Akalat**) showed well. We also notched up a long list of other highlights such as: a mother and chick **Scaly Francolin** sitting in the track for all to admire, **Cassin's Hawk-Eagle**



perched and in display, **Buff-spotted Flufftail** on its song perch watched in length in the spotlight beam, **Guinea Turaco** and **Yellow-billed Turaco**, a nice male **Bar-tailed Trogon**, striking **Black Bee-eater**, an uncharacteristically cooperative **Yellow-billed Barbet**, diminutive **African Piculet**, active **Gabon Woodpecker**, **Tullberg's Woodpecker**, dazzling **Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye**, brief views of **Fiery-breasted Bushshrike**, **Bocage's Bushshrike**, **Pink-footed Puffback**, **Red-eyed Puffback**, **Mountain Sooty Boubou**, a surprise **Western (Green) Tinkerbird**, rare in this region, **Grey Cuckooshrike**, **Black-winged Oriole**, **Shining Drongo**, **Bates's Paradise Flycatcher**, **Western Nicator**, **Swamp Palm Bulbul**, **Chestnut-capped Flycatcher**, **Green Hylia**, great looks at **Tit Hylia**, **Fan-tailed Grassbird** for some, three sightings of **Forest Swallow**, **Chattering Cisticola**, **Banded Prinia**, **Black-capped Apalis**, **Black-throated Apalis**, **Rufous-crowned Eremomela**, **Black-faced Rufous Warbler**, amazingly good views of **Blackcap Illadopsis**, **Forest White-eye**, **Southern Hylia**, **White-tailed Ant-Thrush**, **Cassin's Flycatcher**, cute **Yellow-footed Flycatcher**, **Tiny Sunbird**, **Preuss's Weaver**, **Brown-capped Weaver**, popular **Woodhouse's Antpecker**, **Pale-fronted Nigrita**, **Chestnut-breasted Nigrita** and **Western Bluebill**.

To complete our sweep through the highland areas we made our final assault on Mount Cameroon, the highest peak in West Africa. Early on our walk we spotted **Red-chested Goshawk** displaying in the distance but we kept on the move to make sure we reached the speirops zone before the mists settled in. Colourful **Yellow-breasted Boubou** enlivened the walk, excitable **White-bellied Crested Flycatcher** flitted about actively, **(Cameroon) Evergreen Forest Warbler** showed exceptionally well, several pale-headed **African Hill Babbler** were seen, bright **Black-necked Weavers** were watched in the dense tangles and **Brown-chested Alethe** and **Mountain Robin-Chat** sat in the path for us to admire at length. The undoubted highlight of the walk up, however, was the small numbers of **Shelley's Oliveback** seen at close range. As we neared the upper treeline our first **Mountain Saw-wings** flitted by, but our attention was soon averted to a small flock of **Mount Cameroon Speirops** feeding right beside the track. Pleased with our haul we enjoyed



our picnic lunch and then started the long walk down, pausing to look at **Thick-billed Honeyguide**, **Red-faced Crimsonwing** and **Cameroon (Montane) Greenbul** on the way. Reaching the more open areas at the bottom we fairly quickly managed to hear **Red-chested Flufftail** calling. On our first attempt at seeing it only some of the group managed to glimpse the bird moving across a gap, perhaps partly due to the distraction caused by more **Mountain Saw-**

wings feeding nearby. However, our second attempt was immeasurably more successful as everyone clamped eyes on a striking male **Red-chested Flufftail** no more than ten metres away that stayed in the open for some time. And with that it was back to the vehicles and off to Douala.

Before flying north we had time for a morning outing to the Sanaga River. Our first stop was at the duck pond, where we enjoyed a couple of **Hartlaub's Duck** and watched a lovely male **Carmelite Sunbird** anting (a peculiar behaviour of wiping ants through its feathers). At the Sanaga River scanning the sandbanks produced **White-crowned Lapwing** that we persuaded to join us on the road, a healthy flock of **African Skimmer** and several **Grey Pratincole**. A male **Orange Weaver** displayed near us in the riverside thickets. And then one of the biggest surprises of the trip materialised as Rob spotted an **Egyptian Plover** in a roadside pool, a short while later joined by a second bird. They were clearly used to people passing by and allowed us to admire them at close range. Before the temperatures soared too high we tore ourselves away and headed for some nearby forests where we enjoyed good looks at **Rufous-vented Paradise Flycatcher**, a **Yellow-browed Camaroptera** sang in the scope with its blue, inflated air sacks clearly visible, a lone **Chestnut-winged Starling** flew overhead and a couple of **Reichenbach's Sunbird** were seen well. Then, with a late night flight to the north ahead of us we decided to return for a relaxed afternoon in Douala, as we had an early start the next morning.

With The Far North Province severed from our itinerary we took the opportunity to explore the area north of Garoua in hope of finding some of the species that we'd have no chance of seeing elsewhere on our circuit. Our first stop near a rocky hillside was quite birdy, large fig trees along its base holding several noisy **Rose-ringed Parakeet**, shrieking pairs of **Senegal Parrot** and a trio of bold barbets, **White-headed Barbet**, **Bearded Barbet** and **Viillot's Barbet**. More open areas held our first **Abyssinian Roller**, a welcome party of **Yellow Penduline Tit**, **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weaver** and a singing **Red-pate Cisticola**. On the rocks themselves we enjoyed looks at **White-crowned Cliff Chat** (rather distant), **Stone Partridge** and **Rock-loving Cisticola**. A little

later a walk along a wide, almost-dry river turned up some amazing views of a circling **Ayres's Hawk-Eagle** (not usually seen this far north), several **Little Ringed Plover**, some drinking **White-throated Seedeater** and a bright **Northern Carmine Bee-eater**. An area of thickets turned up good views of **Yellow-crowned Gonolek** before we headed back to Garoua for a late lunch and siesta, where **Piapiac** frequented the garden. In the late afternoon a walk along the Benoue river added several migrant warblers to the list, plus small flocks of **Black-faced Quailfinch**, some low-flying **Collared Pratincoles**, **Senegal Thick-knee**, **Crested Lark**, hoped-for **West African Swallow** and **African Pipit**.

Early the next morning we made our way down the main road towards Benoue National Park, before veering off towards Poli, an area that has now become famous in which to see the highly localised **Chad Firefinch**. On arrival we wasted no time in heading for some gallery thickets where we immediately connected with our main target. Unfortunately they disappeared into some tall grass, but after repositioning ourselves we could watch several males and females **Chad Firefinch** moving back and forth between the bushes, giving great views. From the same spot we managed to draw in a large number of sunbirds and saw **Blue-breasted Kingfisher** plus two stunners in the form of **Grey-headed Oliveback**, of which a pair posed in the scope while preening, and a lovely pair of **Dybowski's Twinspot**. We then started our journey towards Benoue, pausing first to admire a small group of **Black-faced Firefinch** and a perched **Grey Kestrel**, and later a couple of **Heuglin's Wheater**. The clear skies were great for spotting large birds and on our route we found a flock of circling **Abdim's Stork**, perched **Dark Chanting Goshawk** and **Grasshopper Buzzard** and a very close **Fox Kestrel**.

We arrived at our tranquil riverside-camp in Benoue well in time for some evening birding, having seen **Double-spurred Francolin** and **Red-throated Bee-eater** en route. Everyone was impressed with the great number of birds right on our doorstep, including large numbers of seedeaters. Non-breeding **Black-headed Weavers** were accompanied by more colourful **Black-bellied Firefinch**



and **Bar-breasted Firefinch**. Sunbirds were also in evidence, and included **Pygmy Sunbird**, **Beautiful Sunbird**, **Variable Sunbird** and **Western Violet-backed Sunbird**. A couple of insectivores added to the mix such as **Grey-rumped Swallow** flitting up and down the river, **Senegal Batis** and a busy group of **Senegal Eremomela**. However, it was the frugivores that were most appreciated and included the trio of **Western Grey Plain-tain-eater**, **White-crested Turaco** and **Violet Turaco**. Just after sunset the sought-after **Bathawk** put in an appearance in front of camp, making a great end to the day.

The rest of our time at Benoue was divided between riverside habitats and dry broad-leafed woodlands. First we turned our attention to the riverside habitats. The denser, taller gallery forest produced the best birds. Highlights here included a lovely pair of **Oriole Warbler**, some busy parties of **Red-winged Grey Warbler**, skulking **Blackcap Babbler** that showed for everyone, **Black-billed Wood Dove**, two separate sightings of calling **Adamawa Turtle Dove** and, best of all, a lovely **Pel's Fishing Owl** perched on an open branch. Along the river banks we found **Swamp Flycatcher**, some bright **Black-headed Gonoleks** and a small group of **Heuglin's Masked Weaver**, some males still almost in full breeding plumage. Along the river were some

active **Egyptian Plovers** and more **White-crowned Lapwings**. After dark a small flock of **Four-banded Sandgrouse** came in to drink, a pair of **Standard-winged Nightjar** dazzled us briefly and a surprise female **Pennant-winged Nightjar** showed well. By comparison the woodlands were quiet and unproductive, although we did enjoy good looks at **Fine-spotted Woodpecker** and see a single **Brown-backed Woodpecker**, **Moustached Grass Warbler**, several well-showing **Rufous Cisticola**, **Red-winged Warbler** and **Yellow-bellied Hyliota**. The undoubted highlight was two pairs of **White-throated Francolin**, which allowed great views, and a herd of majestic **Lord Derby's Eland** right next to the track and a first on a Birding Africa tour (and perhaps any birding tour to Cameroon).

Then it was on to Ngaoundaba Ranch via Lake Dang which produced a perched pair of **African Hobby** and several non-breeding **Marsh Widowbird**.



Ngaoundaba's cooler weather was very welcome after Benoue and spurred us on to explore the ranch's gallery forests and woodlands, which turned up a long list of desirable birds. Right on top of the list were good views of **Spotted Thrush Babbler**, two excellent sightings of the localised **Bamenda Apalis**, a pair of **White-spotted Flufftail** that gave prolonged views (the third species of flufftail seen by everyone!), a singing **Long-tailed Nightjar** on top of a tree, a pair of bright **Ross's Turaco**, the performance of the trip by a displaying **Standard-winged Nightjar**, displaying **Blue-bellied Roller**, close-up views of **Sun Lark**, satisfying views of **Red-tailed Leaflove**, several **White-collared Starling**, some lovely **Yellow-winged Pytilia** that posed for the scope and a very showy **Brown-rumped Bunting**. Other species included a surprise **Red-thighed Sparrowhawk**, which was seen flying back and forth and may have had a nest nearby, great views of **African Scops Owl**, good looks at **Black-shouldered Nightjar**, **Black Scimitarbill**, **Double-toothed Barbet**, **Willcock's Honeyguide**, **Western Black-headed Batis**, **Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike**, **White-breasted Cuckooshrike**, **Yellow-billed Shrike**, **Square-tailed Drongo**, **White-shouldered Black Tit**, **Whistling Cisticola**, **Bronze-tailed Starling**, **Grey-winged Robin-Chat**, the uncommon **Gambaga Flycatcher**, **Splendid Starling**, **Copper Sunbird**, a single scoped **Red-winged Pytilia** that unfortunately disappeared before everyone could see it, **Brown Twinspot** and some non-breeding **Cameroon Indigobird** that sang and mimicked **Black-bellied Firefinch**.

Heading back to Garoua, we made several stops along the way, the first along the Adamawa Escarpment where **Western Banded Snake Eagle** was watched in display, good numbers of **Lesser Blue-eared Starling** were conspicuous and we successfully tracked down **White-bellied Tit**. At lunch we saw two **Lesser Spotted Eagles** soaring overhead and as we neared Garoua we found **Green Bee-eater**, another group of **Yellow Penduline Tit** and **Dorst's Cisticola**.



It was finally time to head back to the humid south, with a late night flight from Garoua depositing us in the capitol city Yaounde. We enjoyed a late breakfast before heading out towards Kribi. A roadside stop not far from Yaounde produced excellent views of the scarce **Verreaux's (Gabon) Batis** - both the male and grey-chest-banded female were seen - and close-up views of **Buff-throated Apalis**. Further along the way we paused to admire **Rock Pratincole** along a river, flocks of **Grey Parrot**, noisy **White-thighed Hornbill** and **Black-casqued Wattled Hornbill** and a small flock of **Bates's Swift** flying low over the road. From Kribi we continued south to Campo Ma'am. Roadside forest was quite productive, so it took us a while to reach our final destination. A male **Sabine's Puffback** was scoped in the canopy, a pair of **White-spotted Wattle-eye** was, by normal standards, easy to see, **Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill** perched nearby, **Square-tailed Saw-wing** flitted along the roadsides, **Lemon-bellied Crombec** was scoped where it called from the canopy and a bright, male **Cassin's Malimbe** crept through some creepers.

At Campo our main focus was, of course, to see the desirable **Red-headed Rockfowl**. After a short and easy walk through some dense rainforest we arrived at some large rocks in the forest, where the mud nests had clearly seen some recent repair work. One bird was there when we arrived but slipped away without any of the group seeing it, so we settled down to wait, loud thunder echoing through the cave as a rain storm passed nearby. After a lengthy period two rockfowl appeared and there were some tense moments that passed as people battled to get on to them, but they slowly made their way closer and over more than half an hour we enjoyed some excellent views of them bounding about across boulders and creepers, their bright blue-and-red bald heads shimmering in the fading light. One bird also approached from behind and hissed loudly at us, but slipped away again before we could see it.



With the main bird well seen we could now focus on some more general birding. Initially we worked the roadside. Several **Sjostedt's (Honeyguide) Greenbul** were coaxed into view for superb looks, a bright male **Yellow-throated Cuckoo** sat up for the scope and a pair of **Yellow-crested Woodpecker** were watched in a roadside tree, although **Blue Cuckooshrike** and **Fraser's Forest Flycatcher** only gave flight views and **Gabon Coucal** skulked in the roadside thicket and was not

much more than a dark shadow. Venturing into the forest under-storey we enjoyed close-up views of **Icterine Greenbul**, **Xavier's Greenbul**, reasonable looks at **Yellow-lored Bristlebill** and **Blue-billed Malimbe** and unbeatable views of a lovely **Forest Robin**. By now it was time to make our way back towards Douala, although several stops en route (including an overnight stay at a comfortable beach resort) produced excellent views of **White-bibbed Swallow**, point-blank views of **Bates's Sunbird** (even the black tail could be seen), some dowdy **Long-legged Pipits** and as the last new bird of the trip four stunning **Violet-tailed Sunbird** around some flowers, a species hardly ever seen on tour in Cameroon.