



Birding Africa

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Birding Africa 2013 Ethiopia Tour

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Birding above the Jemma Valley, Ethiopia

Tour Summary:

Our jam-packed 14-day Ethiopia tour successfully located all the Ethiopian and Eritrean endemics and racked up a total of over 515 bird species.

We started off with White-collared Pigeon, Brown-rumped Seedeater, Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher and Wattled Ibis in our Addis hotel garden, before a short detour to Gefersa reservoir produced the hoped-for Abyssinian Longclaw, plus Blue-winged Goose, Red-breasted Wheatear, Erlanger's Lark and Ethiopian Siskin. Swinging north of Addis the Sululta plains added Ethiopian Cisticola but we pressed on to Debre Libanos to see White-backed Black Tit, White-cheeked Turaco, Little Rock Thrush, Rueppell's Black Chat, White-winged Cliff Chat, Erckel's Francolin, Red-throated Wryneck and Gelada Baboon. Next on the cards was the Jemma Valley which delivered Harwood's Francolin, Verreaux's Eagle, White-rumped Babbler, Ethiopian Boubou, Fox Kestrel, White-billed Starling, Abyssinian Wheatear, Red-billed Pytilia, Black-winged Lovebird, Green-backed Eremomela and White-throated Seedeater, before we headed east to Debre Birhan. From here a short side trip to Gemassa Gedel yielded the localised Ankober Serin.

Descending into the lowlands for the first time, new birds came thick and fast. We paused for Boran Cisticola, Half-collared Kingfisher and Yellow-throated Seedeater at Melka Ghebdu before bouncing our way to the Beseka lava fields where Sombre Rock Chat surrendered quickly. The Awash area added a wide range of grassland and thornbush species, including Arabian Bustard, Hartlaub's Bustard, Abdim's Stork, Striolated Bunting, Grey-headed Batis, Gillet's Lark, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Dusky Nightjar, perched Barbary Falcon, Somali Ostrich, Straw-tailed Whydah and Red-winged Lark.

We then continued south through the rift valley to Wondo Genet, with a lunch stop at Lake Ziway including African Pygmy Goose and Lesser Jacana (and probably some spaghetti with tomato sauce). At Wondo Genet we enjoyed prolonged views of Scaly Francolin, Abyssinian Woodpecker, Thick-billed Raven, Banded Barbet, Narina Trogon, Ethiopian Oriole, Abyssinian Ground Thrush and Yellow-fronted Parrot, before wending our way into the Bale Mountains, where Spot-breasted Lapwing and Abyssinian (Long-eared) Owl welcomed us.



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Prince Ruspoli's Turaco

In the Bale Mountains Ethiopian Wolf stole the show, with more than 20 animals seen, but Abyssinian Catbird, Ayres's Hawk Eagle, Crowned Eagle, Saker Falcon, Moorland Francolin, Rouget's Rail and Chestnut-naped Francolin kept us admiring birds too. Returning back to the lowlands, we stopped for Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and Abyssinian Ground Hornbill en route to Negelle, where Sidamo Lark, Donaldson-Smith's Nightjar, Three-banded Courser, Golden-breasted Starling, Somali Short-toed Lark and Salvadori's Seedeater showed well. Continuing on to Yavello via the Dawa River and Soda plains, we enjoyed a day full of good birds, with White-winged Dove, Black-bellied Sunbird, breeding plumage Juba Weaver, Yellow-vented Eremomela, Pringle's Puffback, Red-naped Bushshrike, Northern Grosbeak-Canary, Somali Courser, White-tailed Swallow and Stresemann's Bushcrow among the most memorable ones. Finally we turned back north, returning to Addis via Lake Awassa with White-backed Duck, Lake Langano with Greyish Eagle Owl, and Gibe Gorge with Egyptian Plover, Foxy Cisticola, Clapperton's Francolin, Abyssinian Waxbill and Black-faced Firefinch.

The detailed day-by-day trip report:

With everyone arriving well in time for the start of the tour we had the luxury of a few hours of gentle, introductory birding around the Ghion Hotel grounds. Here **Brown-rumped Seedeater** fed alongside **Streaky Seedeater** and **African Citril**, **Tacazze Sunbird** and **Montane White-eye** fed on the numerous flowering plants, **Dusky Turtle Dove** and **Baglafaft Weaver** were conspicuous, **Abyssinian Thrush** hopped on the lawn, **Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher** sat quietly in the mid-storey, **White-collared Pigeon** drank by the river, **Brown Parisoma** crept around the canopy of a flat-topped *Acacia* tree, **African Harrier-Hawk** and **Wahlberg's Eagle** joined the vultures and kites overhead, **Wattled Ibis** fed on the lawns, **Rueppell's Robin-Chat** hugged the thickets and a pair of hunting **Black Sparrowhawk** passed by quickly.

We then struck out on our big loop through southern Ethiopia, with a first stop for the sometimes-tricky **Abyssinian Longclaw**, which showed very well in the end. We also notched up our first **Blue-winged Goose**, **Red-breasted Wheatear**, **Red-throated Pipit**, **Thekla Lark**, **Ethiopian Siskin**, **Erlanger's Lark** and **Black-winged Lapwing**. Stopping en route at the Solulta Plains failed to turn up Spot-breasted Lapwing, although **Ethiopian Cisticola** and more **Abyssinian Longclaw** were of interest before we enjoyed a sit-down lunch nearby. A few more stops along the way turned up **Lappet-faced Vulture** feeding at the roadside and **Common Crane** in the agricultural fields.



White-cheeked Turaco

Arriving at Debre Libanos we turned our attention first to the forests around the monastery, where **Little Rock Thrush**, **White-backed Black Tit**, **Brown Woodland Warbler**, **White-cheeked Turaco**, a pair of **Ayres's Hawk Eagle** and **Banded Barbet** obliged for most of the group. Along the road to our accommodation we stopped to admire a troop of Gelada Baboon and dumpy **Rueppell's Black Chat**, before spending the last part of the afternoon down at the Portuguese Bridge, where we saw **Erckel's Francolin** very well, **White-winged Cliff Chat** fed alongside **Mocking Cliff Chat** and other noteworthy species included **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Red-throated Wryneck**.

Early the next morning we departed for the Jemma Valley, arriving just as the sun was peeking over the horizon. More **Erckel's Francolin** were quickly found from our vantage point and after a few minutes a couple of **Harwood's Francolin** were spotted and the scopes trained on them for some good looks. Continuing down into the valley we paused for roadside views of **White-billed Starling**, **White-rumped Babbler**, **Hemprich's Hornbill**, **Abyssinian Wheatear**, **Speckle-fronted Weaver** and **Verreaux's Eagle**. Then a short stroll along a small river was very productive and turned up some excellent sightings of our main target, **Red-billed Pytilia**, along with **Crimson-rumped Waxbill**, **Ethiopian Boubou**, **Blue-breasted Bee-eater**, **African Silverbill** and **Green-backed Eremomela**. A little further along the road we spent some time around a spring where **White-throated Seedeater** gave excellent views although failed to impress too much with its drab plumage and **Abyssinian White-eye**, **Black-winged Lovebird** and **Black-billed Barbet** were watched feeding in a large fig tree.

All too soon time had come to depart for Debre Birhan and as we wound our way back out of the valley we stopped for some close-up views of a pair of **Fox Kestrel** perched at the roadside. Several hours later we bounced back on to the tar road at Debre Birhan where a detour and traffic jam as a result of road works frustrated and delayed our arrival at the serin spot, shrouded in dense mist. Soon we could hear Ankober Serin calling somewhere nearby but the mist remained making viewing conditions very trying, so when I was called back to the car I was pleased to find

everyone enjoying great views of a pair of **Ankober Serin** feeding just a few metres away! With Ankober Serin on our lists and a new woollen hat on my head, we headed back to Debre Birhan for the night.

A slightly later start the next morning saw us heading down another gravel road, this time past Ankober and on to Melka Ghebdu, with **Bare-faced Go-away-bird** along the way. Bird activity was high when we arrived and we quickly located **Boran Cisticola** next to the road, although Yellow-throated Seedeater played hard to get and we failed to find the birds we could hear. Down at the river itself **Yellow-breasted Barbet**, breeding plumage **Rueppell's Weaver**, non-breeding **Chestnut Weaver**, **Eastern Plantain-eater**, **Black Scrub Robin**, **Half-collared Kingfisher**, **African Pygmy Kingfisher** and **Yellow-throated Seedeater** (at last!) obliged. From Melka Ghebdu we made our way cross country to Awash, passing in our sturdy four-by-fours through some great landscapes and seeing along the way **Shining Sunbird**, our first **White-headed Buffalo Weaver**, **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver**, **Gillet's Lark**, **Spotted Thick-knee**, **Egyptian Vulture**, **Abyssinian Roller**, **Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark**, **Abdim's Stork**, **African Collared Dove**, **Black-billed Woodhoopoe**, **Northern Carmine Bee-eater**, **Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird**, **Northern Crombec**, **Eastern Grey Woodpecker**, **Pygmy Falcon** (the only one of the trip) and **Buff-crested Bustard**.

Our time in the Awash area was split between the national park, the Bilen/Ali Dege area and the Beseka lava flow. Two short visits to the lava flow produced excellent sightings of **Blackstart**, **Sombre Rock Chat** and **Striolated Bunting**, with **Bristle-crowned Starling** and **Western Reef Heron** thrown in for good measure. The Bilen area produced many thornveld birds, including **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse**, perched **Barbary Falcon**, **Red-fronted Warbler**, **Somali Bunting**, **Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Lark**, **Nile Valley Sunbird**, **Mouse-coloured Penduline Tit**, **Grey-headed Batis** and **Martial Eagle**, whereas the Ali Dege plains turned up four **Arabian Bustard** after a prolonged search, several **Somali Ostrich**, **Black-headed Lapwing** and surprise flock of **White-crowned Starling**.



Rosy-patched Bush Shrike

From Awash we continued our journey south through the rift valley, stopping off at Lake Ziway for lunch. While waiting for our meal to be prepared we slipped down to the nearby lakeshore where impressive number of ducks, waders and other waterbirds were in attendance. Highlights here were a couple of **Lesser Jacana**, **Little Ringed Plover**, a pair of **African Pygmy Goose** and **Hottentot Teal**, but we were soon back at the table enjoying our meal and then driving on to Wondo Genet.

In the national park itself we enjoyed great views of **White-bellied Bustard**, a displaying **Kori Bustard**, a very cunning **Hartlaub's Bustard**, **Great Spotted Cuckoo**, **Somali Fiscal**, a day roosting **African Scops Owl**, **Ashy Cisticola**, **Grey Wren-Warbler**, **Red-winged Lark**, a male **Harlequin Quail**, **Black Stork**, **Goliath Heron**, some smart **Scissor-tailed Kites** circling overhead and later perched, a breeding plumage **Straw-tailed Whydah**, **Singing Bush Lark**, **Purple Granadier**, **Black-faced Waxbill** inspecting a disused weaver's nest, a pair of **Rosy-patched Bush Shrike** that gave a spectacular display, a male **Menetries's Warbler** and **Yellow-necked Spurfowl**. After dark a short night drive turned up a pair of **Dusky Nightjar** on the road and a single **Slender-tailed Nightjar**. Mammals were also well represented and included **Gerenuk**, **Salt's Dikdik**, **Soemmering's Gazelle** and **Lesser Kudu**.



African Pygmy Goose

Our short stay at Wondo Genet produced all the most important birds we hoped to see, the two main ones being a smart female **Abyssinian Woodpecker** which allowed us to study her through the scope as long as we wished and several pairs of obliging **Yellow-fronted Parrot** which seemed to get closer and closer. A good list of other forest species also clung to the last remaining forest patches (if they can even be called that), and we enjoyed some good looks at **Lemon Dove**, **Black Sawwing**, **Tambourine Dove**, **Abyssinian Ground Thrush**, **Scaly Francolin**, **African Firefinch**, **Spotted Creeper**, **Double-toothed Barbet**, **Ethiopian Oriole**, **Grey Cuckooshrike**, **Sharpe's Starling**, **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird**, **Green-backed Honeybird**, **Silvery-cheeked Hornbill**, **Banded Barbet**, **Narina Trogon**, a roosting **Verreaux's Eagle-Owl** and our first **Thick-billed Raven**.



Narina Trogon

From Wondo Genet we climbed back into the highlands, this time visiting the Bale Mountains in the south-eastern highlands. A lunch stop near a stream produced good numbers of **African Quailfinch** but we pressed on to the known stake-out for Cape Eagle-Owl. Carefully scanning the cliffs failed to turn up anything, but the local villagers said they knew where it was and lead us off to a nearby area of trees along the low cliffs. There it was, sitting in a tree! But unfortunately it was not the desired owl, but instead **Abyssinian (Long-eared) Owl** – in fact three of them – which we knew had already been located by our guide at Dinsho. Anyhow, there seemed to be no other owls around so we continued.



Spot-breasted Lapwing

A flock of 12 **Spot-breasted Lapwing** showed well in the lovely afternoon light, the only ones of the trip. A short distance further **Rouget's Rail** showed well. At Dinsho we were quickly shown a roosting **African Wood Owl**, but declined the half-hour slog to see another Abyssinian (Long-eared) Owl, enjoying instead relaxed views Mountain Nyala and Melenick's Bushbuck around the park headquarters. Abyssinian Catbird called nearby, but couldn't be coaxed into view so we called it a day and headed for Goba.

The rest of our time in the Bale Mountains was focussed on the Sanetti Plateau and Hareenna Forest, although we hatched a plan for one of our drivers to return to the Cape Eagle-Owl spot and call us if it was there. Apparently it was! So this called for a return visit. As we were led to the same area as the previous day my heart began to sink, but we were brought below a different tree where a seemingly larger owl was roosting. Unfortunately it was difficult to get good views, fuelling a debate as to its identity, but in the end sanity prevailed and we confirmed that we'd been led back to see another **Abyssinian (Long-eared) Owl**! To add insult to injury a pair of **Bearded Vulture** passed low over our heads while our eyes were fixed on the owl, and we only managed to see them once they'd flown a long way off.



Anyhow, the Bale Mountains produced many other memorable highlights (the non-owl not being one of them). Driving up to the Sanetti Plateau, numerous **Chestnut-naped Francolin** and **Rouget's Rail** scurried from the roadside. And we paused to find **Brown (Bale) Parisoma**. Our drives across the Sanetti Plateau turned up more than 20 Ethiopian Wolves (this figure probably including some double-counting) which we spent some time admiring.

Ethiopian Wolf

One of the lakes held a pair of **Ruddy Shelduck** and nearby we spotted a pair of **Moorland Francolin** near the road, well outnumbered by the hundreds of **Moorland Chat**. A single **Red-billed Chough** was seen plus a pair of **Golden Eagle** and we had great looks at a hunting **Saker Falcon**. Dropping down the other side of the plateau into Harena Forest was very productive with roadside **Yellow-bellied Waxbill**, **Yellow-crowned Canary**, **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler**, **African Olive Pigeon** and, best of all, **Abyssinian Catbird**. Overhead we spotted a displaying **Mountain Buzzard** and soaring **Crowned Eagle**. Both **Red-chested Cuckoo** and **African Emerald Cuckoo** were scoped. **Abyssinian Crimsonwing** skulked in the undergrowth, but did emerge to give some good perched views. An **African Hill Babbler** was coaxed from a thicket. And some sizeable flocks of **Slender-billed Starling** were feeding in fruiting trees.

From Harena we continued to the southern lowlands at Negelle. Numerous short roadside stops kept adding to our list with **Red-and-yellow Barbet** perched atop a tall termite mound, five **Abyssinian Ground Hornbill** striding through the savanna, **Masked Shrike**, **Northern Brownbul**, **Eastern Chanting Goshawk**, **Red-faced Crombec**, **Abyssinian White-eye**, **Shelley's Starling**, **Spotted Palm Thrush** and **Red-headed Weaver** all featuring at one time or another. However, all these species paled in comparison with the fantastic pair of **Prince Ruspoli's Turaco** that put on a great show for us, first sitting up nicely for the scopes and then flying back and forth across the road.

At sunrise the next morning we found ourselves out on the open Liben plains, the song of **Somali Short-toed Lark** filling the air. After a quick bush breakfast we fanned out to walk across the plains. Just as we were getting onto our first Somali Short-toed Lark calls rang out for **Sidamo Lark**. We slowly worked our way closer, until we enjoyed clear views of one of Africa's rarest birds, taking turns to admire its finely-marked plumage in the scope. After a few minutes it flew a hundred yards, so we decided to leave it in peace and turn our attention to other birds. The air was filled with hovering kestrels, mostly **Common Kestrel** but including a few **Lesser Kestrel** among them. **Somali Crow** was conspicuous too although finding some of the smaller species such as **Ethiopian Swallow**, **Pectoral-patch Cisticola**, **Shelley's Sparrow** and **Somali Short-toed Lark** required more focus.

On our way to a nearby site we spotted several **Temminck's Courser** next to the road. At our destination we were quickly rewarded with a pair of singing **Salvadori's Seedeater** that allowed close approach. Also present here were **Red-headed Weaver**, **Somali Tit** and a variety of other bush birds. With our main targets now bagged we returned to town for lunch and siesta, and only headed out in the late afternoon for some relaxed bush birding. Here the highlights included several **Bare-eyed Thrush**, a **Foxy Lark** and several fantastic **Golden-breasted Starling**. However, the main rewards were after dark, as we enjoyed close-up views of both **Three-banded Courser** and a perched **Donaldson Smith's Nightjar**.

Salvadori's Seedeater



Time had come for the “biggest” day of the trip, the long and very birdy drive to Yavello via the Dawa River. We made an early start and were soon rewarded along the way with **Montane Nightjar** in full song, perched on top of a tree. Shortly after sunrise we arrived at our first destination, with **White-winged Collared Dove** calling as the car stopped. Soon we had the bird firmly in our sights and after enjoying some good looks returned to the car for a quick breakfast. After breakfast we tracked a nice pair of **Grey-headed Bushshrike**, **Pygmy Batis**, **Hunter’s Sunbird** and the localised **Black-bellied Sunbird** (a full plumage male and female) before heading on to the Dawa River before it got too hot. Here we were immediately greeted by **Pale Prinia** and **Yellow-vented Eremomela** in the arid bush, but we soon turned our attention to the riverside vegetation where we hoped to find a certain weaver. It was already getting quite warm and activity was beginning to die down, and just as our hopes were beginning to fade I heard a weaver churring away in a thicket. It was a **Juba Weaver** and a male in full breeding plumage! I radioed through to the group and a few anxious minutes passed while I waited for everyone to join me, especially since the male weaver had flown across the river and only some drab females remained. Fortunately, just as everyone arrived another male appeared, showing well. By now it was hot and the car a long way off so we walked back at a sensible pace, pausing to admire a **Barred Warbler** in the thicket along the way. Before continuing on to Soda a quick stop near the river turned up the hoped-for **Pringle’s Puffback** and **Red-naped Bushshrike**.

Several hours later, with stops along the way for lunch, drinks and some new birds in the form of entertaining flocks of **Vulturine Guineafowl**, rather drab **Somali Crombec** (thanks Steve!), **Banded Parisoma** and **Northern Grosbeak-Canary**. Activity was just starting to pick up on the plains and we were soon enjoying our first of many **White-tailed Swallow**, giving excellent fly-by views. Next we spotted a group of **Short-tailed Lark** and closed in on them for good looks, and we finally found a good mixed flock of **Wattled Starling**, **White-crowned Starling** and the sought-after **Stresemann’s Bushcrow** (I’d already been warned that my career was ruined if we dipped it!), which we took our time to get to know. With my career back on track we continued on our way, pausing at the road for a large flock of seedeaters, composed mostly of **Black-capped Social Weaver** and **Grey-capped Social Weaver**, with smaller numbers of **Shelley’s Sparrow** and a single breeding-plumage **Chestnut Sparrow** added to the mix. Our final success on the plains was a small group of very confiding **Somali Courser** right by the roadside, well spotted by Simon, before we reached the tar road and swung back north. By now the sun was fast approaching the western horizon so we were disappointed to discover that the main tar road north had been churned up for road reconstruction for most of the way to Yavello, forcing us to drive on a slow and bumpy detour. Needless to say, we were pleased to arrive at our comfortable lodge on the outskirts of Yavello.



Vulturine Guineafowl



Stresemann’s Bushcrow (Ethiopian Bushcrow)

With a long day behind us but a lengthy drive to Awassa ahead we decided for a more relaxed start and kicked off the day with some casual birding around our accommodation, where more **Stresemann's Bushcrow** were seen and other species included **Grey Kestrel**, **Shikra** and our best views yet of **Red-bellied Parrot**. After breakfast we continued north along the main road to Awassa, pausing in Yavello town to look at a breeding colony of **Speke's Weaver** and a short distance out of town found **Black Cuckooshrike** and **Red-capped Robin-Chat**. It was Valentine's Day and we arrived in Awassa to find our hotel grounds decorated with bunches of red balloons and a garden-restaurant scene to bring a tear to the sentimental eye. Being birders though we quickly escaped to the nearby lakeshore where we enjoyed views of **White-backed Duck** and **Dark-capped Yellow Warbler** before the sun set. The rest of our time at Awassa turned up a good selection of more widespread waterbirds, but the next real birds of note were **Greyish Eagle-Owl** and **Bearded Woodpecker** at Lake Langano which enlivened an otherwise uninteresting drive to Welliso, where our comfortable lodge put us in pole position for an early assault on Gibe Gorge on the last day of our trip. With 500 species already on our trip list, Gibe didn't disappoint, and we added almost 20 new species, including some highly sought-after ones. Our first stop immediately produced **White-throated Seedeater**, plus **Foxy Cisticola**, at least two pairs of **Gambaga Flycatcher**, **Pale Flycatcher** and **Moustached Grass Warbler**. Making our way down the pass we came to a screeching halt for two flocks of **Yellow-throated Sandgrouse** and enjoyed some good views of **Clapperton's Francolin**. The final focus of our birding was along the river itself.

Large flocks of seed-eating birds were drinking and feeding along the river and over the course of the morning we found **Bar-breasted Firefinch** and smart **Black-faced Firefinch** and our final special of the trip, **Abyssinian Waxbill**.

Waterbirds along the river included **Black Crowned Crane**, several **Senegal Thick-knee**, **African Wattled Lapwing** and, best of all, a single **Egyptian Plover**, which allowed close approach and was almost the last new bird of the trip, spoiled only by a single **Lesser Blue-eared Starling**.



Egyptian Plover

All that was left now was a relaxed lunch back at our lodge, the drive back to Addis and cleaning out of a coffee shop of most of its supplies. No doubt the quality of coffee in the UK spiked a day later...

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