



GABON, SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

August-September 2004

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SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE: 31 AUGUST TO 7 SEPTEMBER 2004

Libreville International Airport: Air São Tomé e Príncipe's 12-seater plane cast an appropriate air of adventure and exploration as we boarded our flight. After an hour of low cruising the big blue broke, as first small offshore islets and then the gently-sloping volcanic dome of São Tomé came into view. Greeted by a tropical sunset we transferred straight to our comfortable hotel in São Tomé town, where we dreamt of what the coming days would have in stall.

First up were the highlands of São Tomé. Only after grabbing a dozen piping-hot pastries and a shot of rich São Toméan coffee at the next-door bakery were we prepared for the narrow, windy road to Bom Successo. Our first stop in some overgrown farmland produced a group of paddle-winged **São Tomé Spinetail**. Other species seen here included **São Tomé Prinia**, **Príncipe Seed-eater** and **Newton's Sunbird**. But the best birds lay ahead, where the forest was less disturbed, so we soon continued. Arriving at Bom Successo we immediately met with our guide and headed off on the trail to Lago (Lake) Amelia, but not before pausing to watch a pair of handsome **São Tomé Speirops** constructing their delicate nest. Snaking our way through a mixture of cultivated lands and relict forest patchlets produced a string of endemics: **São Tomé Weaver**, **Paradise Flycatcher**, **Oriole** and **White-eye** and **Gulf of Guinea Thrush**. By late morning we reached the picturesque crater lake, situated in lichen-festooned highland forests. The small shelter kept us dry despite light drizzle. Over our picnic lunch we watched a **São Tomé Olive Pigeon** as it sat calmly, its bright yellow bill and deep maroon back showing clearly. Then it was back to Bom Successo and São Tomé town.

Next on the agenda - the forgotten island of Príncipe that lies some 150 km to the north-east. With overnight packs in hand we again boarded the 12-seater plane. On the short drive from the airport to Santa Antonio town, along another avenue that meandered through overgrown farmland, we managed to tick off most of the islands endemics without stopping. But better views were desired, so we wasted no time in heading off into the surrounding forest, this time on foot. Bright **Príncipe Golden Weaver** was the first endemic the bite the dust, followed shortly by **Dohrn's Thrush Babbler**, its clear, musical notes betraying it whereabouts. Large **Príncipe Starlings** were noisy and conspicuous, less so the vivid **Príncipe Kingfisher**. A single **Príncipe Drongo** hunted insects with the usual enthusiasm. Last to be found were the sleek **Speirops** and **Sunbird**. Now all that was left was to soak up some of the islands easygoing atmosphere before returning to São Tomé, for a taste of the southern lowlands. After two hours of weaving along the ever-twisting coastal road, past secluded, palm-lined beaches, forest-clad sea-cliffs and crumbling, overgrown coffee estates, we reached the Rio Io Grande. From here we hiked for two hours to reach

undisturbed forest. Constant drizzle made the path slippery, but our spirits were kept high by our first **Giant Weavers** and a fine pair of **São Tomé Scops Owl** perched at eye level, among some fine forest tangles. By midday we had reached our camp site, home for the next two nights. Over the next day-and-a-half we explored the area around the camp and a steep ridge above the Rio Io Grande. The nearby stream produced a peculiar **São Tomé Short-tail**, chameleon-walking across a bare branch, and excited pairs of **Giant Sunbird** chasing each other through mossy branches. Searching a flat swampy area soon rewarded us with two pairs of **Dwarf Olive Ibis**, which flew up and landed in the mid-storey, where they posed long enough for all to enjoy views through the telescopes.

It was then time to make our way back to São Tomé town and back to Gabon. But not before tracking down **São Tomé Kingfisher** along one of the fresh forest streams en route, and rounding the trip off with a detour to the northern savannas to find a **São Tomé Bronze-naped Pigeon** sunning itself atop a tall tree.

GABON: 8 TO 24 SEPTEMBER 2004

Our Gabon tour kicked off at the countries showcase wildlife park, Lope, a vast area savannas, rivers and, most notably, forests. Located some 300km east of Libreville, we covered the drive with numerous stops, not all planned. A flat tyre gave us only just enough time to find our first **Swamp Palm Bulbuls** and **Black-and-white Flycatchers** before the ever-ready Jean Pierre had the show on the road again. Whilst awaiting the arrival of fuel in N'djole (it never did arrive) we notched up **Rock** and **Grey Pratincole**, **African Skimmer**, **Orange Weaver**, **Superb Sunbird** and **Black-headed Waxbill**.

Our first morning in the field was spent in and around Lope, which kicked-started our checklist with a bewildering array of species. Some memorable highlights include a pair of alarmed **Forbes' Plover** piping at us from some recently burnt grassland, a **White-browed Forest Flycatcher** hunting above a tranquil forest stream, **Pectoral-patch Cisticola** performing death-defying acrobatics over the grasslands, a **Broad-tailed Warbler** clinging to the grass tops, and many shimmering **Blue-breasted Bee-eaters** to light up the roadside. **Lyre-tailed Honeyguide** displayed far above the forest canopy, out of sight, as **Fiery-breasted Bush-Shrike** hooted from the nearby thickets.

From Lope Hotel we headed to Mikongo, a satellite camp set well inside the rainforest. Our first afternoon walk produced three spectacular hornbills - **Black-casqued**, **Red-billed Dwarf** and **White-crested** all posed for prolonged scope views. A **Grey-headed Broadbill** whirred away in display but escaped our gaze, while a dainty **Forest Robin** sang its pretty jumble of notes from the forest floor. More subtle (some may say challenging) were a plethora of greenbuls. In time we found **Red-tailed**, **White-bearded**, **Honeyguide**, **Golden**, **Icterine**, **Sjostedt's... Eastern Bearded**, **Slender-billed**, **Ansorge's**, **Little**, **Yellow-whiskered** and **Cameroon Sombre** (whew..). Perhaps a touch more exciting were a bold pair of **Cassin's Malimbe**, **Narina Trogon**, excited parties of **Chestnut-capped Flycatcher**, **Rufous Flycatcher Thrush**, ever-noisy **Shining Drongos**, a tuneful **Western Black-headed Oriole**, **Yellow-crested**, **Brown-eared** and **Buff-spotted Woodpecker** and a party of ever-skulking **Black-faced Rufous Warbler**. None of these, however, could rival the pair of **Forest Francolin** that scurried back and forth for repeated views or a ridiculously confiding **Black Guineafowl**, that approached to within 5 m of some of the group. Those who waited for **Red-headed Picathartes** were almost rewarded, as a single bird visited briefly but was seen only by our guide.

Before returning to Lope Hotel we spent a couple of hours of relaxed birding from inside the well-lit camp clearing. Brilliant **Black Bee-eater** sallied from the treetops, joined by a shrieking **Blue-throated Roller**, **Chocolate-backed** and **Blue-breasted Kingfisher**, the unusual **Forest Flycatcher** and shimmering **Johannas' Sunbird**. **African Grey Parrot** shrieked loudly as they passed overhead, while **Cassin's** and **Sabine's Spinetail** were less boisterous. In the dense tangles, **Fiery-breasted Bush-shrike** was a welcome sighting.

On return to Lope we were received by a pair of **Violet-tailed Sunbird**. Nearby, a roadside ramble rewarded with a pair of little-known **Verreaux's Batis**, shrieking **Bristle-nosed** and popping **Hairy-breasted Barbets** and the diminutive **Yellow-browed Camaroptera**. Our visit to Lope was suitably concluded with a dazzling **Rufous-sided Broadbill**, buzzing away like a clock-work toy in the dense undergrowth.

After three profitable days of forest-focussed birding, everyone looked forward to the

clear, sunny skies of the Bateke Plateau's grasslands and woodlands. Select stops broke the long drive. Most memorable were a pair of **Senegal Lapwing**, hundreds of **Red-throated Cliff Swallows** milling around a bridge, a pair of glittering **White-throated Blue Swallows**, bold **Great Blue** and **Green Turacos**, a **Chestnut-breasted Negrofinch** bobbing in display, and a pair of **Black-headed Bee-eaters**.

Our first morning at Lekoni was dark and grey, as a heavy electrical storm brought driving rain. Fortunately it soon passed and although we lost a little birding time the rest of the day was cool, keeping birds active. We had hardly left town when the first **Congo Moor Chats** were spotted among the more common **Sooty Chats**, followed shortly by a rare **Black-chinned Weaver** and handsome **Black-collared Neolestes** (or Bulbul) in some low shrub. The rolling green hills were abuzz with Cisticolas, Larks and Pipits, including **Malbrant's Lark** (a split from Rufous-naped), the yet to be described 'Teke' **Cisticola**, **Dambo Cisticola** and the diminutive **Short-tailed Pipit**. Perhaps more popular were **Black-bellied** and **Barrow's Bustard**, **Fawn-breasted Waxbill**, **Black-throated Seed-eater**, **Yellow-mantled** and **Marsh Widows**, **Temminck's Courser** and **Bateleur**. **Finch's Francolin** and **Black-rumped Buttonquail** were more skulking.

In the more wooded areas our species list grew rapidly, with noteworthy birds such as **Red-throated Wryneck**, an impressive **Double-toothed Barbet**, **Cabanis' Bunting**, **Perrin's Bush-shrike**, **White-winged Black Tit**, the very unusual local race of **Grey Penduline Tit** (surely a potential split), **Yellow-bellied Hyliota**, **Salavdori's Eremomela**, **Petit's Cuckoo-shrike** and **Dark Chanting Goshawk**. After dark we found **Long-tailed**, **Swamp** and **Fiery-necked Nightjars**.

Having been informed of fallen trees blocking the road to Makokou, we decided to make a pre-dawn start to ensure we would arrive at our next destination in good time. The Ivindo River basin holds the most diverse tropical lowland rainforest for birds on the African continent. As we made our way along narrow roads winding through lush, tall forests, we gained our first tastes of what we could expect. A flock of ridiculously coloured **Gabon Helmetshrike**, **Square-tailed Sawwing**, a scarce **Thick-billed Cuckoo**, **Cassin's** and **Ayres' Hawk** and **African Crowned Eagles** made the trip memorable. But the best was yet to come.

The Ipassa Research Station lies just a couple of kilometres from Makokou town, overlooking the languid Ivindo River. From within the grounds we found **Black-shouldered Puffback**, **Brown Illadopsis**, **Sooty Boubou**, **Tiny Sunbird**, **Brown-crowned Eremomela**, **Yellow-billed Barbet** and the scarce **Preuss' Golden-backed Weaver**. Birding the impenetrable under-storey was hard work, but rewards included striking **Yellow-bellied** and **White-spotted Wattle-eye**, a noisy **Yellow-billed Turaco** and **Blue-headed Wood Dove**. Also recorded were **Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo**, **Bare-cheeked Trogon** and **Grey** and **Yellow Longbills**. Overhead, the deep honks of **White-thighed Hornbill** kept us regularly peering skywards. In contrast, roadside birding was highly productive, with spectacular views of **Black-bellied Seed-cracker**, a single **Olive Ibis** calling as it passed almost over our heads, **Blue Cuckooshrike** and all four *Chrysococcyx* cuckoos (**Klaas'**, **Emerald**, **Diederik**), with a male **Yellow-throated** bouncing excitedly in display capping it all off. Also recorded were **Black-necked Wattle-eye**, **African Piculet**, **Gabon Coucal** and **White-spotted Flufftail**. An unforgettable sunset and night trip produced **Bates' Nightjar**, **Vermiculated Fishing Owl** and **Spot-breasted Ibis**, and numerous booming **Nkulengu Rail**.

Nearby, we spent a day birding along a quiet forest road. The morning kicked off spectacularly with a flock of **Plumed Guineafowl** that approached within a couple of metres. This was followed by **Rachel's** and **Crested Malimbe**, **Pale-fronted Negrofinch**, **Bates' Sunbird**, **Dusky Tit**, **Violet-backed Hyliota**, **Afep Pigeon**, **Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk**, **Purple-throated Cuckooshrike**, **Sabine's Puffback**, **Chestnut Wattle-eye**, **Yellow-spotted Barbet** and **Speckled** and **Yellow-throated Tinkerbird**. As if this weren't enough, the day was suitably concluded with Africa's most secretive raptor, a **Congo Serpent Eagle** sitting quietly below the forest canopy, where it was spotted by Walter.

For the final stint of the trip we returned to Libreville and flew southwards to Gamba, where we spent four days exploring the mosaic of rivers, forests and grasslands of this legendary area. It was difficult just to leave the grounds of our lodge, as **Red-headed Bluebill** and **Black-bellied Seedcracker** hopped between the huts, occasionally joined by **Loanga Weaver** and **Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush**, and **Emerald-spotted** and **Blue-spotted Wood Doves** for comparison. Also of interest was the unusually red rubriventris race of **Common Waxbill**, endemic to coastal Gabon and Congo. Adjacent thickets held **Swamp Boubou**, **Reichenbach's** and **Carmelite Sunbird**. Overhead, a

Bat Hawk hunted against a sunset sky, but was eclipsed by the continuous buzz of **Rosy Bee-eater** and **African River Martin**. A stone's throw from our lodge, on a patch of bare coastal sand, set back from the beach, bee-eaters and martins came to rest. Large, restless flocks, numbering hundreds, creating vivid splashes of colour. In their bills, many carried twigs and shells, used at items for courtship rituals as they hopped across the baking sands. Unforgettable!

We made several forays by boat, following the network waterways where we spotted **Mouse-brown Sunbird**, a dashing male **Hartlaub's Duck**, aptly-named **Shining Blue Kingfishers**, several **African Finfoot** and **White-backed Night Heron**. Along the shore, flocks of terns came to roost, among a delicate pair of **Damaras**, presumably on their way southwards to the desert-coasts of Namibia.

In nearby grasslands, small flocks of **Black-chinned Quailfinch** fed in the track, while flocks of **Grey-rumped Swallow** fluttered overhead. On the forest margin, we found at least three pairs of large, sluggish, grass-green **Black-headed Bee-eater**, one pair with a nest hole in the grasslands. The forest edge proved also a good spot for watching raptors, with the spectacular **Long-tailed Hawk** and **African Cuckoo Hawk** being spotted. Deeper in the forest, we added **Red-tailed Ant Thrush**, **Green-backed Woodpecker**, **Least Honeyguide** and **Red-fronted Parrot**.

Mammal highlights here included views of Lowland Gorillas on the road in front of us, and extended views of Forest Elephant, bringing to an end a most memorable trip.