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## Gabon

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Tour Report by Michael Mills

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With vast swathes of intact forest, a relatively good road and hotel infrastructure and some excellent protected areas, Gabon must rank among Africa's top lowland rainforest destinations. Unfortunately high costs, unreliable flight timetables and unpredictable politics have made it difficult to run set-departure tours to this fabulous country, and so it was a welcome return to the Birding Africa calendar in 2012. A fairly standard bird tour circuit has developed for Gabon with trips run during the middle of the dry season. The three regular sites visited are the forest-grassland mosaics of La Lope National Park, grasslands and woodlands of the Lekoni area in the far south-east of the country, and the rich Ivindo Basin forests around Makokou. We visited these sites during our stay too.

However, Birding Africa's tours differ in two ways. Firstly, we run our tours at the beginning of the rainy season, the reason being to catch the fabulous African River Martins on their breeding grounds, otherwise only seen drifting high overhead as dark shadows (or missed entirely). Watching a busy colony of 1000+ river martins squabbling and tossing sand from their burrows is a spectacle not to be missed. The second is that we include a visit to the Loango coastal complex on our itinerary, where these fabulous birds breed alongside Rosy Bee-eater and large mammals.

In summary, we enjoyed some great wildlife spectacles and rarely-seen mammals. Highlights included Grey Pratincole and Bates's Swift on the way to La Lope, Dja River Warbler, Forbes's Plover and Bates's Nightjar at La Lope, Congo Moor Chat, Dambo Cisticola, Black-collared Bulbul, Finsch's Francolin, Black-chinned Weaver, Short-tailed Pipit, Black-backed Barbet and Angola Batis at Lekoni, Yellow-throated Cuckoo, Gabon Batis and Gabon Helmetshrike en route to Makokou, White-spotted Wattle-eye, Black Guinea fowl, Plumed Guinea fowl, Spot-breasted Ibis, Brown Nightjar, Bare-cheeked Trogon, Long-tailed Hawk, Gosling's Apalis, Rachel's Malimbe, Red-crowned Malimbe and Woodhouse's Antpecker in the Makokou area, and White-crested Tiger Heron, Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk, Black-headed Bee-eater, Rosy Bee-eater, Violet-tailed

Sunbird, Loango Weaver, Thick-billed Cuckoo, Black-chinned Quail Finch and African River Martin at Loango. We also notched up a healthy list of mammals, including Mandrill, Western Gorilla, Forest Buffalo, Forest Elephant, Sitatunga, Bushbuck, Potto, Moustached Money, Crowned Monkey, Red River Hog, Red-capped Mangabey, Hippopotamus and Putty-nosed Monkey. And the top reptile was the rarely seen Slender-snouted Crocodile.

So it was with this in stall that we gathered in Libreville (a spot of pre-tour birding near our hotel for the early arrivals having turned up Rufous-vented Paradise Flycatcher, Chattering Cisticola and a pair of Red-headed Lovebirds inspecting a possible nest chamber). Early on the first morning we escaped through the traffic of the capital city and onto the little-used roads of the country. Our first stop turned up a stunning male Carmelite Sunbird, our first but brief views of Cassin's Malimbe and a lovely Johanna's Sunbird, but we pushed on to Ndjole on the Ogoue River. Here, along a sandbar in the river, we found a pair of White-crowned Lapwing, many Rock Pratincole and a few much-desired and graceful Grey Pratincole, while Mottled Spinetail spun low overhead and Orange Weaver was busy in the riverside thickets. Further along the road to La Lope National Park we notched up Bates's Swift, which seemed to be nesting below a bridge, presumably in some vacated swallow nests, and enjoyed excellent views of Lowland Sooty Boubou in a roadside thicket.

Arriving at La Lope we immediately focussed our attention on the gallery forests and grasslands surrounding our comfortable hotel. Highlights along the river included White-browed Forest Flycatcher, Velvet-mantled Drongo and Reichenbach's Sunbird, but our main target, Violet-tailed Sunbird, escaped us for now. The grasslands held Long-legged Pipit, a flock of 14 Forbes's Plover, some very relaxed Swamp Nightjars, Blue-breasted Bee-eater and Croaking Cisticola. Red-chested Swallow with young was in evidence, and we enjoyed perched views of them in the scope.

However, the main quest of our visit to La Lope was to track down the rare and localised Dja River Warbler, for which we entered the national park itself. Our progress was slowed by a mixture of grassland and forest birds and confused (and compulsory) local guides, but as we went we spotted Senegal Lapwing, Grey Parrot, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Whistling Cisticola, Fan-tailed Grassbird, Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill, Piping Hornbill, Blackcap Illadopsis, which showed incredibly well, and Compact Weaver. Eventually we found ourselves on the edge of a now-dry swamp. Fantastic views of Western Bluebill and Black-bellied Seedcracker made us wait a little, but soon we had Dja River Warbler firmly in our sights, which first displayed for us and then sat on the edge of a thicket before finally melting back into its dense tangles and displaying more characteristic behaviour. With the main bird in the bag we turned our attention to a nearby forest patch where Fiery-breasted Bushshrike had been calling. The bird was typically shy, but with some persistence most of the group obtained reasonable views. We then saw Shining Drongo nearby and on our way back to the vehicle had great flight views of a juvenile Cassin's Hawk Eagle. The final bird here worthy of mention is Bates's Nightjar, for which we made a special nocturnal excursion. Initially it gave us the run around and was always calling distantly, but our persistence paid off and we located a calling bird perched in a tree on the edge of the forest, and everyone enjoyed excellent views.

Our next port of call was the grasslands, woodlands and forest patches of the Bateke Plateau near Lekoni. With the long drive to Franceville ahead of us, we had one last (unsuccessful) attempt for Violet-tailed Sunbird before heading south-east. The journey to Franceville was interrupted several times, first by some difficult police officials. While our drivers sorted out "the problem" we took the opportunity to notch up Red-eyed Puffback, White-chinned Prinia and Luhder's Bushshrike. Further along the road a perched Congo Serpent Eagle was flushed and flew across the road and

into some nearby forest, bringing the vehicles to a screeching halt, although disappointingly we couldn't relocate it. Another stop turned up our only Pale-fronted Nigrita of the trip, a lovely pair of perched Shining-blue Kingfisher which posed in the scopes, and hundreds of Red-throated Cliff Swallow milling around the bridges.

The area surrounding Lekoni is the most accessible for a couple of localised grassland birds, most importantly Congo Moor Chat and Black-chinned Weaver, and it was to these two species that we first turned our attention. Before even arriving at Lekoni we'd spotted our first moor chats, and during our time there we had numerous opportunities to study these fantastic birds in detail. On our way to the weaver spot we found a lovely Black-collared Bulbul near the road. Where we stopped to admire it we also had good flight views of a pair of Black-backed Barbets, and some of the group managed to lay eyes on a calling Gorgeous/Perrin's Bushshrike. The weavers themselves were quite obliging, and as we approached the area where I had previously found them nesting we immediately spotted a pair perched in a tree. Although they initially disappeared quite quickly, we spent some time in the area looking at the likes of Short-tailed Pipit, Tinkling Cisticola, 'Teke' Cisticola and Western Black-headed Batis, and later enjoyed some excellent views of the weavers perched up in a large tree.

During the rest of our stay at Lekoni we notched up a good list of species. In the open grasslands we added Sooty Chat, a single Dambo Cisticola that was watched at length while foraging, many Pectoral-patch Cisticola, (Malbrant's) Rufous-naped Lark, Red-necked Buzzard, Flappet Lark, White-bellied Bustard, Black-bellied Bustard, a single Locust Finch (which unfortunately was no more than a black spec by the time the group got on to it), Fawn-breasted Waxbill, Yellow-mantled Widowbird, Black-throated Seedeater/Canary, and good numbers of Temminck's Courser to our list. Lightly wooded areas turned up a pair of Salvadori's Eremomela and proper miombo woodland was home to Western Violet-backed Sunbird, Yellow-bellied Hylota, smart little Red-capped Crombec, Rattling Cisticola, White-fronted Bee-eater, Golden-tailed Woodpecker (very rare in Gabon and a bit of a surprise), Red-throated Wryneck, White-winged Black Tit and some very co-operative Grey Penduline-Tits. Also of interest is that I may have heard Singing Cisticola, but we were distracted by trying to find Grey Penduline-Tit, so I forgot to follow up. Finsch's Francolin was quite tricky to see, but we had three opportunities to see them in flight, while Horus Swift was easy to see at the Red Canyon. And the final habitat - forest patches - was home to Double-toothed Barbet, African Broadbill (heard only), a very excited pair of Angola Batis, Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo, Perrin's Bushshrike, Many-coloured Bushshrike (which seemed to be invisible), Bocage's Bushshrike and after dark, Fiery-necked Nightjar, which perched in a tree on the forest edge.

Finding ourselves in the south-eastern corner of the country we now had another long drive ahead of us to reach the Makokou area in the north-east, so we set off early once again from Franceville, but only after we'd finally found fuel (Gabon seemed to be experiencing a bit of a fuel shortage). The long drive to Makokou turned up some excellent birds, the first of which was a trio of Gabon Helmetshrike. While admiring them through the scopes we also managed some excellent views of a perched Western Bronze-naped Pigeon. Further along the road we found a singing male Verreaux's/Gabon Batis, which also stayed long enough to be admired in the scope, a very excited male Yellow-throated Cuckoo, a Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat that refused to budge from its hideout, and a Yellow-necked Greenbul which was persuaded to show well. Near Makokou itself an adult and juvenile Bat Hawk gave excellent flight views an hour before sunset and we found our first White-throated Blue Swallow, which elicited a rather fanciful comparison from one of the group with Bonelli's Eagle (not seen on this trip)!

With lots of tricky and exciting forest birds to be found, we were pleased to be in the Ivindo Basin, where we were to explore the famous Ipassa Reserve and nearby areas. Initially we focussed our

attention on the forest under-storey at Ipassa. The first morning was overcast and wet, and birding got off to a slow start, in terms of number of species. However, one of the very first birds seen was Black Guineafowl! The birds called for a while from nearby before finally appearing at the trailside where we obtained superb views, and then proceeded to cross the trail a couple of times, some birds even crossing between us! Then a Lyre-tailed Honeyguide displayed nearby, but the canopy blocked our views and once we'd found a suitable clearing through which to peer upwards, the bird had stopped. Not long afterwards we were back on the main track, and this time a group of more than 20 Plumed Guineafowl were preening and dust bathing in a sunny patch. We kept our distance and spend ages studying the birds through the scope, enjoying excellent views of their spotty plumage and wobbly wattles. Soon afterwards we heard Latham's Forest Francolin in the distance, and although we managed to get closer, we never got close enough to give us a chance of spotting them. By this time the bird flocks had started moving, with several target birds in the vicinity. We picked off Sjostedt's Honeyguide Greenbul, a lovely male Bare-cheeked Trogon, Eastern Bearded Greenbul, Grey Longbill, White-bearded Greenbul and Blue-headed Wood Dove. Other highlights here were two excellent sightings of Rachel's Malimbe, some exceptionally good looks at Bates's Sunbird, my best ever views of a pair of White-spotted Wattle-eye, which uncharacteristically were feeding in the mid-storey, several Tiny Sunbird, White-crested Hornbill, Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill, African Piculet, Buff-spotted Woodpecker, Gabon Coucal (heard only), Gabon Woodpecker, Rufous-sided Broadbill in display, Fraser's Sunbird, Chestnut-winged Starling, Purple-headed Starling, Chestnut-capped Flycatcher, Yellow Longbill, Woodhouse's Antpecker (seen twice), Swamp Palm Bulbul, Yellow-lored Bristlebill, Red-tailed Bristlebill, Square-tailed Sawwing, great looks at Yellow-throated Nicator, Bates's Paradise Flycatcher, Sabine's Puffback, White-thighed Hornbill and Yellow-browed Camaroptera.

Our trip further afield was very successful too, and immediately upon arrival we came across a large foraging flock with Dusky Tit, Violet-backed Hylota, Yellow-mantled Weaver and Gabon Woodpecker. Further along the road we saw more Black-headed Waxbills, enjoyed great looks at Cassin's Malimbe, and notched up Red-headed Malimbe, more Woodhouse's Antpeckers, Fraser's Forest Flycatcher, some very confident Blue Cuckooshrike, a smart pair of Purple-throated Cuckooshrike, Rufous-crowned Eremomela, a perched pair of Afep Pigeon, perched Blue-throated Roller, prolonged views of Black Dwarf Hornbill, Hairy-breasted Barbet, Green-backed Woodpecker, African Shrike Flycatcher, Black-and-white Shrike Flycatcher, a pair of West African Batis, another Fiery-breasted Bushshrike, Golden Greenbul, Banded Prinia and Black-capped Apalis. Three stand out birds, however, are worthy of special mention. The first was a pair of Red-crowned Malimbe that were first spotted in some roadside tangles but disappeared before everyone could get on to them. We waited patiently and careful observation led to the discovery of their nest. We spent at least 20 minutes watching both the male and female come and go, with both birds perching on the nest and allowing detailed study. Second, Gosling's Apalis, a very localised species that we had heard several times before and had glimpsed once or twice. At our very last attempt we manage to call in a pair of very responsive birds that allowed us some great looks. And finally, on our way back, we spotted a striking adult Long-tailed Hawk perched next to the road, which sat for a couple of minutes for everyone to admire.

Besides all the day-time activity, we also made a special night-time excursion up one of the forested rivers, setting off before sunset. Along the river banks we found our first Cassin's Flycatcher, some noisy Leafloves, and in the late evening enjoyed a large gathering of spinetails, mostly Cassin's Spinetail, but with some Sabine's Spinetails and a single Black Spinetail, the latter unfortunately proving too swift. After sunset, however, the real action started. First we had several Spot-breasted Ibis circling noisily overhead and eventually landing in a riverside tree near us, then we tracked down both Brown Nightjar and Bates's Nightjar for excellent flight and perched views,

and later we spotlighted a roosting Hartlaub's Duck down to a few metres. The only frustration was Vermiculated Fishing Owl, which called very close by but remained hidden, but all-in-all it was a fantastic outing!

Finally it was time to move on again, this time to the coastal grasslands and forest of Loango National Park. We made the long drive back to Libreville, before taking our flight to Port Gentil, and then by combination of boats (adding African Finfoot, Pink-backed Pelican and our first Rosy Bee-eaters to the list) and cars to our lodge. The afternoon approach to the lodge was amazing. One of our first stops produced Black-headed Bee-eater, which seemed to be nesting nearby, but vanished quite quickly. We returned later for prolonged views. Overhead large numbers of Rosy Bee-eaters coloured the sky and adorned bare trees, although our first looks at African River Martin were not too exciting, as they drifted high up against the pale sky. The yells of 'stop, stop!', brought us to a rapid halt, as across the grasslands was moving a family of Western Gorilla, with colossal silverback, two mothers carrying babies and at least two other animals. They seemed to be in no hurry, and took their time to move across the clearing into the next forest patch, allowing some fantastic looks. What luck!

Once installed at our very comfortable lodge we planned our visit with our guide and lodge manager, to make sure we got the most out of our stay. First we turned our attention to the grasslands, where the main target was to watch African River Martins at their breeding colony. En route we found Swamp Boubou, Grey-rumped Swallow and Banded Martin. Arriving at the colony, a milling mass of black birds could be seen on the bare white sands. As we approached cautiously, more and more detail was revealed. First the red bills, then the reddish legs and eyes, all set against the velvety black plumage. We estimated that there were about one thousand birds, wheeling around, flying nearby to fetch grass with which to line their nests, quarrelling open-billed with neighbours, vigorously and carelessly tossing sand, and quivering their wings to impress their mates. A very unusual spectacle and the closest I could come to a comparison was watching a penguin colony in full swing!

Eventually we dragged ourselves away, first pausing to watch a small Rosy Bee-eater colony nearby, then for more views of Black-headed Bee-eater, a pair of Forbes's Plovers with tiny chick, Senegal Lapwing, Water Thick-knee, and later for excellent, on-the-ground looks at Black-chinned Quailfinch. Another highlight in the grasslands was two unexpected sightings of Black Coucal. Mammals were a feature too with many Forest Buffalo, Forest Elephant, a single female Sitatunga, and best of all, a big herd of Red River Hog, watched while enjoying lunch. After lunch we made two beach stops, which turned up large numbers of terns and several Palaeartic waders, including many Black Tern, Royal Tern, African Skimmer and about 20 Damara Tern in full breeding plumage.

The second area of focus was densely forested waterways. A special boat trip was organised, and as we drifted down the tranquil river, we enjoyed more looks at Hartlaub's Duck, Goliath Heron, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, numerous Cassin's Flycatcher and White-throated Blue Swallow, and Western Osprey. A Thick-billed Cuckoo flew across the river, giving good flight views, and then perched nearby and called, although stayed just out of view. White-bellied Kingfisher darted to and fro, but never perched in view. A lovely Pel's Fishing Owl was spotted in the riverside forest and was seen brilliantly. A couple of pairs of Violet-tailed Sunbird continued to tease us before we finally found a male out in the full sun, dazzling us with its intense colours. And best of all, we found a skulking White-crested Tiger Heron, which although not confiding, flushed three times for us and allowed everyone to get views.

Finally, it was time to return to Libreville. The return journey was not without event, and turned up our best views of Black-headed Bee-eater, a real bonus in the form of two Chestnut-flanked Sparrowhawk, which flew low over the road giving good flight views, Slender-billed Weaver, Western Bluebill, a surprise Arctic Skua flying over one of the large lagoons and, at the very last opportunity, several Loango Weaver, first a single male, then a pair, and finally a female feeding a fledgling.