



Ghana Trip Report, 27 December 2010 - 3 January 2011

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Dates: 27 December - 3 January 2010 (8 days)

Areas visited: Accra, savanna habitats at the Shai Hills, the wetlands of Sakumono Lagoon, and lowland tropical rainforest at Kakum National Park, Kakum Canopy Walkway, Bobiri Butterfly Sanctuary and the Atewa Hills reserve.

Total number of bird species recorded: 279 species (of which 13 heard-only).

Highlight Bird Species: Yellow-headed Picathartes, Fire-bellied Woodpecker, Little Green Woodpecker, Brown-cheeked Hornbill, Black Bee-eater, Rosy Bee-eater, Blue-headed Bee-eater, Blue Cuckooshrike, Brown Nightjar, Long-tailed Hawk, African Piculet, Black Dwarf Hornbill, Latham's Forest Francolin, Tessmann's Flycatcher, Copper-tailed Starling, Chocolate-backed Kingfisher.

Highlight mammal species: The flying squirrel Pel's Anomalure, the strange and primitive primate, Potto, Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey, Lowe's Monkey and the very rare Olive Colobus.

Detailed Trip report:

The aims of our short, bird-filled, one-week tour of Ghana were to see Yellow-headed Picathartes, one of Africa's most spectacular and sought-after birds, and to sample the rich forest avifauna of the Upper Guinea Endemic Bird Area. In all respects the tour was a resounding success. Logistics ran very smoothly, accommodation and transport were comfortable, and the birds played along well. We enjoyed sightings of **Yellow-headed Picathartes** on two consecutive days, with our second visit producing longer and clearer views. Besides this we had the opportunity to bird from the famous Kakum Canopy Walkway, which did not disappoint, and to visit several other sites within easy reach of the country's capital city, Accra. These included savanna habitats at the Shai Hills, the wetlands of Sakumono Lagoon, and lowland tropical rainforest at Kakum National Park (accessed from Antwikwaa, Aboabo and near the park headquarters), Bobiri Butterfly Sanctuary and the Atewa Hills reserve. In more detail, the trip went something like this...

Tour participants arrived in drips and drabs from various parts of the globe, with bad weather in Europe delaying one of our flights for 24 hours. While our spacious, comfortable, air conditioned bus made several trips between the airport and our conveniently-situated hotel, the early arrivals enjoyed a first gentle stroll near the hotel. **Yellow-billed Shrike** perched on the garden fence, a bright **Common/Yellow-crowned Gonolek** called from its exposed perch and a male **Splendid Sunbird** fed on some flowers, getting the trip off to a colourful start. **Green Woodhoopoe** nested in the roof of our hotel and cackled back and forth between its feeding grounds and complaining chicks.

Our first real birding was enjoyed at the nearby Shai Hills, where we picked out **Senegal Batis** and **Senegal Eremomela** in the early morning light. As the day warmed up bird activity did too, with the rich savannas providing more than enough to keep us occupied for a few hours: **Viellott's Barbet** and its larger cousin, **Double-toothed Barbet**, were cooperative, sitting up for prolonged scope views, as were both **Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird** and **Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird**. **Rufous-crowned Roller** and the very smart **Blue-bellied Roller** also played along nicely, although the striking **Oriole Warbler** remained well hidden. Other goodies notched up included a visiting **Melodious Warbler**, **Northern Black Flycatcher**, migratory **Woodchat Shrike** and **Booted Eagle**, a trio of **Red-necked Buzzard**, **Long-crested Eagle**, smart **Grey Kestrel**, **Stone Partridge**, including one calling from an exposed, bare branch, **Black-billed Wood Dove** drinking at a roadside pool, shrieking **Senegal Parrot**, striking **Violet Turaco**, **Western Grey Plantain-Eater**, **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, **Yellow-throated Longclaw**, male **White-crowned Cliff Chat**, bulky **Croaking Cisticola**, **Northern Crombec**, **Northern Puffback**, strange-headed **Purple Glossy Starling** and fiery **Bar-breasted Firefinch**.

From here we continued on towards Kakum, with a short stop at Sakumono Lagoon, where throngs of water-bird held our attention as long as we were there. Herons were well represented by **Great Egret**, **Intermediate Egret**, **Little Egret**, **Black Heron** and **Western Reef Heron**. Large numbers of **Collared Pratincole** were resting on the mud flats among thousands of waders that included **Senegal Thick-knee**, **Spur-winged Lapwing**, **African Wattled Lapwing**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Whimbrel**, **Common Redshank**, **Marsh Sandpiper** and impressive numbers of more common Palaearctic species.

Our patience was tested as we moved on westwards through Accra's traffic, although a large roost of **Straw-coloured Fruit Bat** provided some excitement. Unfortunately we only had time for a short stop (seeing **Piapiac** beside the road) on our journey towards Kakum. The most impressive feature of the birdlife on this stretch was the healthy numbers of **Hooded Vulture** around every town and village.

Kakum National Park was our main focus area for birding on the tour, and we enjoyed two-and-a-half days in the area, during which we notched up an impressive species list. We kicked off proceedings with a stint on the fabulous Canopy Walkway, where **Black-casqued Hornbill** and **White-crested Hornbill** welcomed us in the morning, and **Brown Nightjar** and **Brown-cheeked Hornbill** bade us farewell in the evening. Bird activity was high for much of the morning, with more than 50 species seen over the course of our stay. Dominant groups included trios of localised woodpeckers (**Little Green Woodpecker**, their striking **Fire-bellied Woodpecker** and **Melancholy/Gabon Woodpecker**) and pretty nigritas (**Chestnut-breasted Nigrita**, **Grey-headed Nigrita**, **White-breasted Nigrita**), quartets of bright forest weavers (**Preuss's Golden-backed Weaver**, **Yellow-mantled Weaver**, **Red-headed Malimbe**, **Red-vented Malimbe**) and noisy barbets (**Speckled Tinkerbird**, **Red-rumped Tinkerbird**, **Hairy-breasted Barbet**, **Yellow-billed Barbet**), and a quintet of bulbuls (**Plain Greenbul**, **Slender-billed Greenbul**, **Golden Greenbul**, **Honeyguide Greenbul**, **Swamp Palm Bulbul**). **Yellow-billed Turaco**, **Black-winged Oriole**, **Splendid Glossy Starling** and **Forest Chestnut-winged Starling** gorged themselves on an abundance of fruit, whereas mixed flocks of small insectivores carefully gleaned the outer canopy of larger trees. The latter group included **Cassin's Honeybird**, excitable **Chestnut-capped Flycatcher**, tiny **Tit-Hylia**, **Black-capped Apalis**, localised **Sharpe's Apalis**, **Rufous-crowned Eremomela**, desirable **Violet-backed Hyloti**, little-seen **Little Grey Flycatcher** (expertly spotted by Jonas) and **Little Green Sunbird**, species for which we enjoyed better views than one becomes accustomed to, without the neck ache associated with craning to see birds in the canopy. Other highlights were **Sabine's Puffback**, **Grey Longbill**, a group of smart **Red-billed Helmetshrike** (seen on more than five occasions during the trip), bright **Blue Cuckooshrike**, **Velvet-mantled Drongo**, **Yellowbill**, **White-headed Woodhoopoe** and some fly-over **Rosy Bee-eaters**.

Mammals were well represented at Kakum: during daylight hours were watched a mixed group of **Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey**, **Lowe's Monkey** and very rare **Olive Colobus** feeding near the Canopy Walkway, and after dark we enjoyed prolonged views of the spectacular flying squirrel **Pel's Anomalure** and the strange and primitive primate, **Potto**.

During the rest of our stay at Kakum we spent the bulk of our time birding along roads that cut through secondary forest. Raptors were reasonably well represented, with a single **African Cuckoo Hawk**, several **European Honey Buzzard**, **Palm-nut Vulture**, perched **Red-chested Goshawk** and lone **Long-tailed Hawk** seen. Joining them in the skies were several aerial-feeding insectivores that included **Sabine's Spinetail**, **Bates's Swift** and more **Rosy Bee-eaters**, **Black Bee-eater** and **White-throated Bee-eater** gave much better perched views, as did **Western Bronze-naped Pigeon**, **Blue-throated Roller**, the scarce **Black Dwarf Hornbill**, **Naked-faced Barbet**, **Bristle-nosed Barbet**, **Yellow-throated Tinkerbird**, **Yellow-spotted Barbet**, popular **African Piculet**, **African Emerald Cuckoo** and gabonensis subspecies of **Black Cuckoo**.

Denser habitat was slower to bird, but we picked out **Black-throated Coucal** from within a thicket, enjoyed excellent views of the skulky **Kemp's Longbill** on our third or fourth attempt, and had **Yellow-browed Camaroptera** and **Olive-green Camaroptera** sitting out on the edge of their thickets. **Maxwell's Black Weaver**, **Little Grey Greenbul**, **Red-tailed Greenbul**, two sightings of **West African Batis** and prolonged scope views of **Finsch's Flycatcher Thrush** were all noteworthy. The two groups perhaps best represented were flycatchers and sunbirds, the first group including the swallow-like **Ussher's Flycatcher** seen hunting from exposed branches above the canopy, **Fraser's Forest Flycatcher**, **Grey-throated Tit-Flycatcher**, a pair of loudly-singing **Tessmann's Flycatcher** and **Dusky-blue Flycatcher**. Sunbirds including **Fraser's Sunbird**, **Olive-bellied Sunbird**, **Johanna's Sunbird**, **Superb Sunbird**, **Green Sunbird**, and best of all, several sightings of the unusual **Buff-throated Sunbird**. Three of the least cooperative species were **Ahanta's Francolin** which called nearby but refused to show, **Blue-headed Wood Dove** that was seen only in flight, and **Red-fronted Parrot** that refused to land.

By contrast, birding in the forest under-storey was slow and frustrating, although we were rewarded with prolonged views of a displaying male **Rufous-sided Broadbill**, several sightings of **White-throated Greenbul** and **Icterine Greenbul**, and good looks at **Western Forest Robin** for some of our group. Surrounding the forest we were met by a different suite of species, including bustling colonies of **Preuss's Cliff Swallow**, **Village Weaver** and **Vieillot's Black Weaver**. Areas with tall grass held **Singing Cisticola**, and along the Pra River we found **White-throated Blue Swallow** and the rufous-naped form of **Rock Pratincole**.

From Kakum we continued inland to look for the main bird of the trip, Yellow-headed Picathartes. Given how important the bird is to most people, we dedicated two full afternoons to this species, which turned out to be an excellent choice. On the first evening a bird came in but was probably disturbed by fidgety local guides, meaning only half of the group enjoyed views of the bird before it faded back into the forest. On the second day, however, better crowd control meant that everyone who made the effort to return a second time enjoyed spectacular and prolonged views of **Yellow-headed Picathartes**. Whew! And hooray!

Between our two afternoon visits to the picathartes cave we took the time to bird some nearby forests, where several other goodies were added to the list. **Black Spinetail** was seen well overhead alongside **Cassin's Spinetail**, **Willcocks's Honeyguide** perched for scope views, **Simple Leaflove** fed near the forest edge, **Yellow-whiskered Greenbul** emerged from its dense tangles, **Red-chested Owlet** called from its exposed perch, **Western Bearded Greenbul** showed off its yellow beard, **Olivaceous Flycatcher** was seen and heard calling, albeit briefly, and **Red-tailed Bristlebill**, **Western Nicator**, **Whistling Cisticola** and **Narrow-tailed Starling** were all spotted. After dark a pair of **Long-tailed Nightjar** sat in the road, giving excellent views in the headlights.

Our next destination was the birdy Bobiri Butterfly Sanctuary not far from Kumasi. During the early morning we watched birds from a forest clearing where many species could be seen clearly feeding in and calling from the tops of some large emergent forest trees. Highlights here were a perched, singing **Forest Woodhoopoe**, **Maxwell's Black Weaver** and **Red-fronted Parrot**. Overhead we watched **Afep Pigeon** and **African Grey Parrot**. In the forest itself we tracked down a thicket-loving **Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher**, a pair of **Purple-throated Cuckooshrike**, the tiny **Lemon-bellied Crombec**, **African Shrike Flycatcher**, noisy **Dusky Tit** feeding recently fledged young, a bright male **Tiny Sunbird**, **Western Black-headed Oriole** and **Crested Malimbe**. We also had our best looks at **Copper-tailed Glossy Starling** of the trip, being able to study their plumage in detail. Finally, before hopping in the vehicles we managed to spot a **Western Least Honeyguide** on its canopy call-perch.

Our final destination of the trip was the Atewa Hills reserve, an area of very productive mid-altitude forests two hours from Accra. Unfortunately the track leading up into the hills was overgrown and impassable by car, which meant we had a long walk ahead of us to reach the better forest higher up. The farmbrush area leading up to the reserve was very productive, however, and the avifauna dominated by flocks of colourful seed-eating birds such as **Orange-cheeked Waxbill**, **African/Blue-billed Firefinch** and **Black-and-white Mannikin**, and a single juvenile male **Western Bluebill** that showed very well. We also enjoyed excellent perched views of **African Hobby** here.

Most of the time, however, was spent in the reserve, where **Puvel's Illadopsis** put in a brief appearance in the half-light. Under-storey birds were quite vocal, although elusive. **Green-tailed Bristlebill** and **White-tailed Alethe** showed briefly for the quicker members of the group, but **Blackcap Illadopsis** and **Brown Illadopsis** were heard only. However, some fantastic and tricky birds were seen over the course of our final morning, including a male **Latham's Forest Francolin** stalking through the leaf litter, a perched **Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo** that we walked away from, a bright male **Narina's Trogon**, **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher** perched in the top of a tall, open tree (the nest with three eggs found by Holger), several pairs of colourful **Blue-headed Bee-eater**, a local speciality, a dazzling, though bullet-like **Red-cheeked Wattle-eye**, which after much persistence everyone eventually saw perched, noisy **Shining Drongo** and several scarce **Maxwell's Black Weaver**. From here it was a short drive back to Accra where we went our separate ways.