



Birding Africa

The Africa Specialists

Zambia

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Tour participants

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Birding Africa Leader

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This two-week tour was tailored to sample the best of Zambia in the time available. Highlights in the Mwinilunga region, in the far north-west, included Marsh Widowbird, Dambo Cisticola, Laura's Woodland Warbler, Locustfinch, Bannerman's Sunbird, Black-rumped Buttonquail, Rosy-breasted Longclaw, and the striking and highly local Black-collared Bulbul and Grimwood's Longclaw. En route to Mutinondo Wilderness we notched up Brown-headed Apalis, Red-throated Cliff Swallow, and the scarce Black-necked Eremomela, Bamboo Warbler and Margaret's Batis, and at our destination found Stripe-breasted Seed-eater, Anchieta's Sunbird, Grey-olive Greenbul and Bar-winged Weaver. Heading south, the Zambezi Valley produced Livingstone's Flycatcher, Red-throated Twinspot and Collared Palm Trush. Finally, the Nkanga Conservation Area yielded Parasitic Weaver/Cuckoo Finch, Racket-tailed Roller and the country's only true endemic, Chaplin's Barbet. On return to Lusaka we notched up two swamp specialists, Luapula Cisticola and Coppery-tailed Coucal.

DAY 1: DRIVE TO CHINGOLA

An early morning arrival at Lusaka's International Airport gave us enough time to make good progress on our way west. It took a little over 7 hours to reach Chingola, with a lengthy lunch stop in Kitwe. The highlight of the drive was a perched Lanner Falcon, but we arrived in time for a short excursion to some nearby Miombo woodlands, which produced several good birds, including Orange-winged Pytilia, our first Stripe-breasted Seedeater, Yellow-bellied Hylia and Trilling Cisticola.

DAY 2: DRIVE TO HILLWOOD

A brief stint of pre-breakfast birding around our accommodation revealed Schalow's Turaco (not a bad garden bird!), Miombo Blue-eared Starling and Black-throated Wattle-eye. But we were soon on our way west. A short birding stop after about an hour produced Miombo Pied Barbet and Broad-billed Roller. We were slowed by a puncture and a roadside Dickonson's Kestrel, but reached our destination in good time to settle into our comfortable accommodation for a 4-night stay.

DAYS 3-5: HILLWOOD, CHITUNTA PLAINS AND THE JIMBE DRAINAGE

Nchila Lodge is nestled on the edge of a patch of Mushitu forest, adjacent to Miombo woodland and overlooking a grassy plain. With all these habitats at hand, we decided to give our legs a much-needed stretch and bird the area on foot. Our breakfast was distracted by an African Broadbill displaying nearby, and Cabanis's Greenbul and Red-capped Robin-Chat. After breakfast we headed to a good patch of Mushitu Forest, en route flushing Black-rumped Buttonquail and Fulleborn's Longclaw as we strode purposefully across the plains. On the Mushitu edge we found the diminutive Bates's Sunbird, a flock of Afep Pigeon sunning themselves on the treetops and several Laura's Woodland Warbler. Deeper in the Mushitu was Rufous Flycatcher Thrush and overhead soared a Western Banded Snake Eagle, whereas the adjacent Miombo held Woodland Pipit and Pale Wren-warbler. Back on the grassy plains we tracked down a very musical Angola Lark, pausing on our way for views of the rather dashing Dambo Cisticola (at least by Cisticola standards!), Wing-snapping Cisticola, striking breeding-plumage Marsh Widowbird and flocks Fawn-breasted Waxbill. In the afternoon we visited the Source of the (not so mighty yet) Zambezi, spotting Sooty Chat and

dainty White-tailed Blue Flycatcher as we went. The Mushitu Forest itself held Buff-throated Apalis and Western Bronze-naped Pigeon. Our return trip was rewarded with African Moustached Warbler and Whistling Cisticola skulking in a bed of bracken.

Early on our second morning we found ourselves donning our rubber boots, before heading out across the Chitunta plains and dambo. The plains were abuzz with activity, with various cisticolas, pipits and larks vying for our attention. But we were not to be distracted, as we strode towards the habitat of Grimwood's Longclaw. Scarcely had we arrived and our target flew from across the stream, landing nearby, its sparkling throat catching the morning light. Unfortunately the views were short-lived as the bird disappeared into the grass and failed to emerge. We continued in a large loop, first following the river and then returning on drier land. Highlights of the walk included Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Short-tailed Pipit, Rosy-throated Longclaw (wow!), Stout Cisticola, Tinkling Cisticola and Chirping Cisticola (just 3 of the 11 cisticola we saw on this walk!), Hartlaub's Babbler, Black-chinned Quailfinch, Red-backed Mannikin and Cabanis's Bunting. On our return to the vehicle we decided to give our Grimwood's friend another shot. Across the stream a pair hovered tantalizingly before dropping into the grass and out of sight. Fortunately two young lads sat across the water, and were all to pleased (and I'm sure also a tad amused) to herd the birds in our direction. Our strategy paid off, and we were soon watching a stunning pair of Grimwood's through the scopes! After rewarding the young lads for their efforts we returned to Nchila, where our afternoon outing produced the much-desired Black-collared Bulbul.

Our final day in the Mwinilunga area was spent near the Congo-Angola border, in the Jimbe drainage. Unfortunately we had chosen a drizzly day for our outing, and everything seemed quiet and in hiding. However, the beautiful scenery more than made up for the slow birding (at a rate of a bird an hour!), and we at least managed to lay our eyes on Brown-eared Woodpecker and Dark-backed Weaver. On return we stopped off at the Zambezi Rapids, where after considerable searching we were rewarded with a smart Forbes's Plover.

DAY 6: RETURN TO CHINGOLA

A short spell of birding at Nchila was successful in producing Grey-winged Robin-Chat, Narina Trogon and several Locustfinch, but we were soon on our way. Various stops along the drive proved highly productive, as we managed to see Red-throated Cliff Swallow, Black-tailed Grey Waxbill, Brown-headed Apalis, White-chinned Prinia and, best of all, the poorly-known Bamboo Warbler, which, incredibly, sang from its (fairly) exposed perch for almost 5 minutes!

DAY 7: ON TO MUTINONDO

Having dipped on our main target, Margaret's Batis, in the Jimbe drainage, a minor detour was in order. At 8 am we found ourselves standing on the edge of a large Mushitu forest, the explosive call of Evergreen Forest Warbler ringing through our ears. We managed to penetrate the dense forest wall and entered the more pristine forest, which proved to be very swampy and rather difficult to navigate. Bocage's Akalat sang nearby, and soon we had the first of several firmly in our view. But the distant call of our target soon has us on the move again. Frustratingly a stream blocked our way, so we backtracked and tried a different approach. We managed to get closer, but the stream was still in our way and the birds ignored our attempts to draw them closer. Then they went quiet and we were left stranded, wandering where they had gone. After a very lengthy 30 minutes they started to call again, but rather distantly. We fought our way through tangles and swamp for almost half an hour, but somehow the calls always stayed ahead of us. Frustrated again, we stopped, almost ready to give up. We just could not pinpoint the calls! At least not until Jenny spotted a small black-and-white bird way up in the forest canopy. The scope swung in its direction, and soon we had a pair of Margaret's Batis in our view. Hoorah! After prolonged views of this scarce species we briefly turned our attention to a pair of Black-fronted Bush-Shrike, before commencing our long journey northwards. We pushed on, stopping only for a brief lunch break with an excited party of Black-collared Eremomela, plus Miombo Scrub-Robin and Green-capped Eremomela. As we reached the entrance road to Mutinondo, the sun was setting.

DAYS 8-9: MUTINONDO WILDERNESS

Mutinondo Wilderness is a real treat. The scenic beauty of the area more than made our trip worthwhile, but the birding too was spectacular. Most of the area is covered in Miombo woodland, and we enjoyed long walks through this habitat. A large mixed flock foraging near camp produced numerous goodies, including Red-capped Crombec, Miombo Tit, Rufous-bellied Tit, Collared Flycatcher, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Souza's Shrike, Retz's Helmetshrike and Black-eared Seedeater. However, our two favourite Miombo species were just slightly further from camp. Carefully scanning among the old man's beard lichens we spotted a trio and a pair of Bar-winged Weaver, and managed to follow them for at least half an hour as they carefully investigated every nook and cranny for insects. Just having had our fill an Anchieta's Sunbird sang nearby, and we

Violet-backed Sunbird, Coqui Francolin, a group of 7 Shelley's Francolin, Southern Hylia, Long-tailed/Tabora Cisticola, Thick-billed Cuckoo and Pale-billed Hornbill (heard only). After dark we saw the bulky Spotted Eagle Owl and diminutive African Scops Owl.

Other habitats in the area include gallery forest and streams, rocky granite outcrops and grassy dambos. The stream below camp produced brief views of African Finfoot and Half-collared Kingfisher, and the flanking forest held Grey-olive Greenbul, Ross's Turaco and several Black-backed Barbet. Grassy plains were home to Broad-tailed Warbler and Pale-crowned Cisticola, and after dark,

A final outing into the Miombo woodlands turned up a very large mixed foraging flock, with great overhead views of Bennett's Woodpecker, Spotted Creeper and Grey Penduline Tit, and rather distant views of a displaying Brown-backed Honeybird. On our return trip to Lusaka we paused at some wetlands to spot Little Bittern, Allen's Gallinule and two localised swamp specialists, Coppery-tailed Coucal and Luapula Cisticola, the latter carrying nesting material. A fine way to end a very memorable birding trip. With the longest drive of the trip ahead of us, we made an early start and kept on the move. A

short stop at the Forest Inn produced several birds, although nothing new. We were relieved to arrive in Siavonga and settle into our lake-side accommodation.

DAY 11: ZAMBEZI VALLEY

Much of the Zambezi Valley is cloaked in fairly unproductive Mopane woodlands. However, gallery forests and thickets are home to several species of interest. On our first morning we found ourselves stalking down on of these dry river courses. Swallow-tailed Bee-eater joined Little Bee-eater in hawking insects from the forested banks. Shortly, however, the strange croaks of an African Pitta came from a nearby thicket! One, two, three croaks and it stopped. We waited patiently, but nothing. This pattern repeated itself several times with at least 4 different individuals during our visit. Regrettably the rains 10 days previously had done enough to bring the birds in, but the lack of rain ever since meant they'd lost their enthusiasm for displaying. Quite unlike the birds I had seen a year previously along the Angolan escarpment, which simply refused to stop. However, there were many other sought-after species to keep us entertained and we were soon watching a small party of lively Livingstone's Flycatcher twittering from the adjacent thickets. To this we added a striking Collared Palm Thrush feeding out in the open, a trio of Red-throated Twinspot hopping quietly on the forest floor, Eastern Nicator which sang enthusiastically, emerging from its cover for great views, and Purple Indigobird singing from a tall Faidherbia tree while its host, Jameson's Firefinch, fed in the grassy undergrowth. Flying low overhead were both Bohm's Spinetail and Mottled Spinetail. Out in a recently cleared field a flock of Abdim's Stork strode methodically in search of food. Noisy flocks of Meve's Starling flew to and fro. A Hooded Vulture sat atop a tall tree. A flock of Crested Guineafowl put in a brief appearance. And after dark we spotted Bronze-winged Courser along a narrow, sandy track.

DAY 12: TO NKANGA

After one last return visit to Zambezi thickets, we hit the road for Choma and Nkanga River Conservation Area, some 5 hours to the west. The drive was fairly uneventful, but we arrived in time for a late afternoon outing in search of Zambia's only endemic, Chaplin's Barbet. As we drove along Red-necked Spurfowl scurried from the roadside. Our first stop produced only a perched Black-chested Snake Eagle, but we were soon watching a pair of Chaplin's Barbet sunning themselves in their roost tree. Through the scope we studied their plumage in detail before heading to a nearby dam for sunset. The reedbeds were abuzz with activity, with thousands of Cuckoo Finch coming into roost. Eventually we managed to spot a male perched in the reeds, and several females. Also at the dam we found Little Bittern and several duck and wader species before heading back for a hearty dinner.

DAY 13: NKANGA

With our main target in the bag, we had plenty of time to explore the rest of the area. An early morning outing produced a perched African Cuckoo Hawk and Narina Trogon, but the heavens soon opened, sending us back home for an early breakfast. The rain persisted through most of the morning, but stopped at around 11, and we returned to the Miombo woodlands, this time successfully finding Racket-tailed Roller performing its strange display flight, and a pair of Arnot's Chat. At a farm dam we found a juvenile Saddle-billed Stork stalking through its shallow waters. The afternoon was spent around several more wetlands, where we found White-backed Duck, Hottentot Teal and a single Lesser Jacana. A bulky Black Sparrowhawk flew past. To wrap things off, our spotlighting session produced a stunning trio of Three-banded Coursers and a perched African Wood Owl.

DAY 14: RETURN TO LUSAKA

A final outing into the Miombo woodlands turned up a very large mixed foraging flock, with great views of Bennett's Woodpecker, Spotted Creeper and Grey Penduline Tit, and rather distant views of a displaying Brown-backed Honeybird. On our return trip to Lusaka we paused at some wetlands to spot Little Bittern, Allen's Gallinule and two localised swamp specialists, Coppery-tailed Coucal and Luapula Cisticola, the latter carrying nesting material. A fine way to end a very memorable birding trip!