

The Gambia

with James Lidster of Sunbird, Solomon Jallow and
Serling Bojang of *Habitat Africa Birdwatching*

11-18 December 2009

with a one-day birding adventure outside London led by
Frank Clark of Southeast Bird Tours
10 December 2009

Lynn Jackson, Bill and Naomi Murphy, Martin Selzer

On the tropical west coast of Africa is the tiny country of The Gambia. Slightly over 300 kilometers long and no more than 50 wide The Gambia is a favored haunt for birdwatchers from all over the world. This is because of its varied superb birding habitats, most of which are within a day's journey of comfortable coastal hotels.

The varied habitats of The Gambia include sandy beaches, coastal lagoons, mangrove forests, dry forests and most productive of all, the Abuko Nature Reserve which encompasses a mix of these habitats. All this made The Gambia a wonderfully enticing first introduction to Africa's avifauna. In The Gambia, I hoped to encounter bird families endemic to the African continent; such as colorful wood-hoopoes and turacos, alongside Palearctic migrants and other representatives of the African birding scene such as bee-eaters, hornbills and rollers. Along with all of this, Lynn and the Murphys and I welcomed another opportunity to go on a tour led by James Lidster.

The River Gambia is the lifeblood of the country and our trip was scheduled to include a two night up-river stay at a "*comfortable*" former hunting lodge to look for a broader range of species including Egyptian Plover and African Finfoot. Prior to the trip I had seen references to the Tendaba Lodge refer to it as rustic, primitive and primal. I had also seen it less eloquently referenced that it was an adventure getting there and that the facility was badly in need of repair and isolated. Regardless, even the harshest critics said that there were tons of birds to be seen en route and around the camp.

Prior to starting The Gambian trip, Bill, Naomi, Lynn and I arrived in London a day early to ensure there were no travel hassles before we met the group and caught the flight to Banjul. Since we would have a day, we decided to hit the ground running and go birding. While our friend Andy couldn't take us out birding this time we were fortunate to have Frank Clark be our guide in England this trip.

Ground arrangements in The Gambia were organized for Sunbird by Habitat Africa Birdwatching and our local guide Solomon Jallow.

09-Dec-09 - Today we departed Philadelphia for the UK on British Airways flight BA0066 with a scheduled departure of 18:55 and an arrival of 06:50 at London's Heathrow Airport on 10-Dec-09. We would be meeting Frank upon clearing customs in the main arrival area and start birding right away. Because we would only have the one day in England this visit we would be staying just outside of London in

Surrey and possibly the Essex areas to bird so we could be back at our hotel at Gatwick Airport at night.

I picked Lynn up at 15:00 and we headed to Pacifico Ford's Valet Service to leave my car before heading off to the airport to begin our trip to the UK and ultimately The Gambia. We were well ahead of rush hour traffic and were at the airport waiting to check-in well before anyone was there to check us in; however better to be waiting at the airport than sitting in traffic and then having to rush. Check-in was scheduled to begin at 16:20. Just ahead of us in line were Bill and Naomi. Our flight took off more or less on time and we landed at London's Heathrow on December 10th at 06:35 slightly ahead of schedule.

10-Dec-09 - We quickly moved through passport control and gathered our luggage. We met Frank and one of his partners Jeff from South East Bird Tours and were headed out of the car park by 07:45. We were headed to the Wraysbury Lakes or Gravel Pits and Staines Moor in Surrey. Our main target here was Smew and other wintering waterfowl. **Wraysbury Gravel Pits** are less than 3 miles from Heathrow Airport and near Staines Reservoir which may be familiar to people. Two other primary targets for the day were Fieldfare and Redwing. Frank had indicated that we should also have good chances for these at Wraysbury. In my previous birding adventures in the UK, I had never birded at Wraysbury or Staines and had not been over later than early November so this was my best chance ever for Smew. Therefore, I was looking forward to visiting a new site and possibly finally seeing a Smew.

Frank had initially indicated in our communications that he had a couple spots for Red Kite that we would visit in the afternoon. However, about two months before our arrival an immature Brown Shrike took up residence at Staines Moor on 11 October 2009. It was initially identified as an immature Red-backed Shrike but the identification was quickly sorted out. This visitor from Siberia became an added target species as long as it remained. Today would mark the 61st straight day it was seen since its discovery and the shrike had been seen daily since!

By 08:00 we were at Wraysbury and we would walk around these lakes for the next 2+ hours. It was a very nice area with several different lakes and a series of hedgerows and fields that we birded. Birds observed here included: Least and Great Crested Grebes, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Wigeon, Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Moorhen, European Coot, Common and Black-headed Gulls. In the hedgerows we found: Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Fieldfare and Redwing (two of our target birds for the day), Chiffchaff, Long-tail, Great and Blue Tits, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch. We also had several Jays, Magpies, and Carrion Crows. Woodpigeon and Rose-ringed Parakeets were ubiquitous.

After making a loop around the gravel pits, it was time to make a move to stop number two for the days, **Staines Moor** and one of the other major targets for the day, the Brown Shrike. As I mentioned earlier, this visitor from Asia had taken up residence on the Moor since 11-October-09. We made the short drive to the moor, donned the wellies that Frank had kindly borrowed from members of his family for us and started to walk in. Before reaching the shrike's preferred area of the moor, we came across a pair of Stonechat, another couple of Chiffchaff as well as a close-up Redwing. The path to the shrike was once a nice grass walkway common throughout the UK. However in the 60+ days since the shrike's discovery the constant traffic of twitchers and the heavy rainfall have reduced this walkway to a quagmire. Only a

few days earlier, portions of it were 6-inches underwater. Thank goodness for those wellies. We quickly made it to the shrike's preferred hedgerow, found not only about 15 other birders but found the bird. Yip, Yip!! We observed it for about 10 minutes and then headed back towards the cars. As we did a flock of Fieldfare descended on a nearby hedge and Bill noticed a Sparrowhawk perched. As soon as we all got on the Sparrowhawk, a Common Kestrel displaced it. Had we not witnessed the changing of the guard of the raptors, we were all sure some of the locals might have questioned the "Yanks" identification of the perched Kestrel. It was one of those very strange two bird situation. Shortly thereafter, we had two Common Buzzards to add to our grow raptor list. It was about 11:45 when we made it back to the cars. After returning home, Frank wrote me to tell me that the snowstorm of the weekend of December 18-19 not only mucked up travel for 100s if not 1000s including everyone on this Gambia tour but also appeared to signal the departure of the Brown Shrike.

All morning while we were birding, Jeff's beeper was constantly alerting him to birds being found all over the southeast that morning. It seemed amazing how many birders were out on a Thursday morning but maybe that's normal and I'm just jaded because I work Monday to Friday. Anyway, one of the reports was of a pair of Smew at Ruislip Lido. Now we had to make a decision. Either we try for the Smew at Ruislip or we go to Rainham as previously discussed. We most likely would not have time for both. The Smew were a long shot and Rainham would be more birding like we had done this morning. We decided to try for the Smew. We'd drive to Ruislip, have lunch there and hope for the best.



The drive to **Ruislip** took about an hour and we had the box lunch that Frank provided while standing around the car park at Ruislip. We then walked around the reservoir in hopes of finding the pair of Smew. Alas, we didn't find the Smew but we did find several Pied Wagtails and it did feel good to stretch our legs again, knowing that tomorrow would again be a travel day. Okay, I'm rationalizing not seeing a Smew and if we really wanted to see one we would have had to go to Dungeness as none had really settled in to the Surrey/Essex area just yet. But that was just not in the plans for today.

It was now 14:15 and we didn't have time to go to Rainham if we wanted to have any light when we got there so we decided to start back towards Gatwick. We would take a slight detour up the A40 towards **Marlow** to look for Red Kites. We found several groups of them soaring over the fields from the motorway and did pull off the motorway to observe them. While we were doing so we had a large flock of Meadow Pipits (75+), Golden Plover and Northern Lapwing settle into the farm fields around us. It was now about 15:45 beginning to get dark and chilly so we really did head straight to our hotel near Gatwick. We were all checked in by 16:45.

Thanks to an earlier series of communications between Bill and Naomi and Steve Rooke (managing Director of Sunbird and an old friend of theirs), he would be meeting us for dinner. Steve came to our hotel and then we all took a cab to a nearby pub, the "Ye Olde Six Bells" tavern. We had a very nice English pub dinner and visit with Steve. We were back at the Best Western Moat House Gatwick by 20:00. Night in London at the Best Western Gatwick Moat House.

11-Dec-09 - Today we headed to Banjul, Gambia on Monarch Air. This would be my first trip to anywhere in Africa and Lynn's first trip to West Africa. She had done a Philadelphia Zoo safari trip to Kenya years ago. Bill and Naomi have been to Africa several times including Kenya, Uganda, Morocco and South Africa. We met the group at the Gatwick Airport bright and early. There would be 10 of us in total on the tour plus James and Solomon. That would make for a good sized group. I recognized one other person from a previous tour and that was Mel, he had been on the Bulgaria tour with us.

Check-in desk opens South Terminal: 7.15am

AIRLINE: MONARCH AIRLINES

Recommended check-in time: 7:15am

Date	Airport	Terminal	Flight No	Departure	Arrival	Airport
11 December	Gatwick	South	MON 4514	9:15am	3.25pm	Banjul

We caught the 06:45 shuttle to the airport. While making our way through the South Terminal at Gatwick a friendly voice greeted the four of us, as James was also making his way to the Monarch Gate to check-in. We all got in line to check-in along with the other members of the tour. Some of them had already checked in and others were in line with us. Although Monarch was very carefully weighing checked bags, unless your carry-on bags were huge, it didn't seem to matter in spite of the warnings that there were strict restrictions on both carry-on and checked baggage. (5kg and 20 kg respectively). Once everything was checked in, it was on to security and by 08:00 it was time to grab some coffee and a croissant before waiting at the gate. We were all boarded and ready for a near on-time 09:15 departure when the Captain announces that two passengers decided that they weren't going to The

Gambia this day and therefore the ground crew would now have to remove their bags before the flight could take off. This took 45 minutes and finally at 10:00 we rolled away from the gate and took off.

At 16:30 we landed at Banjul International Airport, cleared passport control, retrieved our luggage and by 17:30 were checked into our room at the Kombo Beach Hotel. After having a minor electrical problem sorted out in our room, Lynn and I could settle in before meeting the group for dinner at 19:30. Night at Kombo Beach Hotel.

12-Dec-09 - Using the Kombo Beach Hotel as our base for a couple of days, we explored some of the Gambia's key birding sites at a relaxed pace.

Breakfast was at 06:45 with a 07:30 departure to the **Abuko National Reserve**. Abuko is top on any Gambian birding agenda. It contains an area of gallery forest a short distance from our hotel. Along the highway coming and going every morning and evening, we constantly had tons of birds. This included Shikra and Lizard Buzzards, Piapiac, Yellow-billed Shrikes, Blue-bellied Rollers, Western-Grey Plain-tain-Eaters, Red-billed and Grey Hornbills, Pied Crows and all the common doves and pigeons. The skies everywhere seemed to have Yellow-billed Kites and Hooded Vultures wherever one looked.



Green Vervet Monkey

We birded at Abuko from 08:00-11:50. Here we followed the well-marked forest paths to through the forest to a series of woodland pools. We found Hamerkop, Black-headed Herons, Giant and African Pygmy Kingfishers. We also found both Green and Violet Turacos. In fact, Abuko was the only site on the tour where we had a chance for Green Turaco and was the best spot for Violet Turaco. Other specialties at Abuko include Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Buff-spotted Woodpecker, Snowy-crowned Robin-chat, and Grey-headed Bristlebill. At the other end of the size scale there will be such little gems as Green-backed Eremomelas, Grey-backed Camaropteras, Northern Crombecs and Yellow-breasted Apalia to seek out. We actually got all these birds here except the Crombec.

At the **Darwin Field Station**, we watched what seemed like an endless string of Black-headed Herons fill a tree and then an almost equal number of Green Wood Hoopoes fill another tree. In the wet wooded areas nearby we had a pair of African Pygmy Kingfishers, Black-billed Wood Dove, both of the Paradise Flycatchers (very beautiful birds), a couple Wattle-eyes, Yellow-breasted Apalias, Grey-backed Camaropteras, Tawny-flanked Prinia, and Snowy-crowned Robin-chat. The Bristlebill took some work to get everyone on it but with some effort we succeeded. While working on the Western Bluebill, we also got Lavender and Orange-cheeked Waxbills. While walking the trails at Abuko we had Green Vervet and Red Colobus Monkeys.

At noon we headed to **Lamin Lodge** for lunch and from 12:30 to 14:00 we took a lunch break. The lodge is on a tributary of the Gambia River so while enjoying our buffet meal *el fresco*, we could bird as and enjoy the view.



After lunch we birded the area around the lodge and the **Lamin rice fields** from 14:00 to 17:00. In the wetlands around the lodge we had lots of long-legged waders such as Black Egret, Purple Heron, Hamerkop and Western Reef Heron. Shorebirds included: Senegal Thick-knee, Spur-winged and Wattled Lapwing, Redshank, and Common Sandpiper.

A couple of the real highlights of the afternoons birding were the first Bearded Barbets of the tour and a White-faced Scops Owl that Solomon found buried in a tangle of vegetation. There were also Red-chested and Wired-Tailed Swallows. Here there were also Speckled Pigeon, Red-eyed Doves, Vinaceous Doves and Namaqua Doves which ranged from very common to common depending on the day and habitat. They tended to get overlooked at times, except for their constant calling. We were back at the Kombo Beach at 17:40 in time for a shower before dinner. We met at 19:00 to do the day's checklist before dinner. Night at Kombo Beach Hotel.

13-Dec-09 – Breakfast was again at 06:45 with our scheduled departure at 07:30. Today we would be heading for **Tujering** for some more forest and grassland birding in the morning. In the afternoon we would be going to the Tanji Reserve. Tujering is about forty minutes from the hotel and about 08:10 we piled out of the bus and started birding. One of the first birds of the day was a very cooperative Double-spurred Francolin. It stayed perched up on a wall so we could all view its spurs and all. There was another spot just before lunch that was little more than a vacant lot that we "had to check out" because about 7-10 days earlier it had a couple of Bronze-winged Coursers. Well there were no coursers there this week but there was a female Standard-winged Nightjar, a couple Four-banded Sandgrouse and about a dozen White Helmetshrikes. The Helmetshrikes would end up being one of my favorite birds of the trip and reminded me of jays from the tropics with their antics and spiky crests.

In between we walked a sparsely wooded field and managed to scare up a lot of really good birds. Over the course of a couple hours this morning we rustled up Singing and Whistling Cisticolas, Red-winged Warbler (or Prinia), Senegal Eremomela, Senegal Batis, Eurasian Wryneck, Lanner Falcon, Palm-nut Vulture, African Harrier-Hawk, Variable Sunbird, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver, Diedrick's Cuckoo and Brown-Backed Woodpecker. We were out walking at Tujering for approximately 3 ½ hours. Unfortunately during the morning, Solomon was overtaken by an attack of malaria and by the time we were ready to make a move towards our lunch spot was feeling incredibly poorly and was visibly ill. He made a

couple of phone calls and lined up a back –up guide for the afternoon and also must have made plans for the rest of the week. I didn't catch the name of our guide for the afternoon and for the rest of the week we ended up having his number one guide Sering Bojang. Sering turned out to be a first class birder as well as a first class personality. We were most fortunate to get him and by the end of the week Solomon was feeling better and rejoined us for the last day of birding.

Lunch was from 12:30 to 14:00 at **Anna's Sand Plover Inn**. Besides being a very nice café right on a small tributary of the main river with some excellent food, we also had some excellent birding right there as we relaxed and enjoyed our food and beverages. Pied Kingfishers were all around on the nearby docks and boats. Caspian and Gull-billed terns were fishing out over the river. A pair of Yellow-crowned Gonolek was amongst the mangroves as we walked in. An Abyssinian Roller perched nicely for photographs on the pilings and Common Sandpipers and Common Redshank fed along the mangrove roots. After lunch we walked to the waters edges to check out the roosting gull and tern flock. The gulls were mostly Grey-headed and Slender-billed along with single Lesser-black Backed and Audouin's. The terns consisted of Royal, Caspian, Gull-Billed and Sandwich. Shorebirds along this stretch of beach included Grey and Ringed Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Whimbrel, Sanderling, Eurasian Oystercatcher and Bar-tailed Godwit.

As we made it back to the bus we had 2 or 3 Malachite Kingfishers. With the Striped Kingfisher we had earlier in the day at Tujering, we now had 5 species for the trip. We were now headed to **Tanji** where we would spend the afternoon. We arrived there at 14:45 and would end up walking around here for a little over 2 hours. Some of the highlights from our afternoon included a rather cooperative Goliath Heron, Fanti Saw-wing Swallows, and a small flock of African Green Pigeons. We had a few Crested Larks and two subspecies of Yellow Wagtail. Alternatively, we had two species of Yellow Wagtail depending on whose taxonomy definition you follow. We definitive had a full breeding plumage Spanish Yellow Wagtail (*iberia*) and a non-breeding plumage Western Yellow Wagtail (*flava*). This may not even be an exclusively Dutch Ornithology thing although I'm pretty sure they have already split these birds too. We also had Brown and Black-capped Babblers here and two species of birds that people (including myself) did not necessarily see very well.

The first troublesome fellow was a Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike. This guy circled around us and never really perched out in the open for very long before disappearing. Its initial perch was probably its best spot to have seen it. I was lucky on this guy although it did later pop up very briefly on the swallow roost tree. The second difficult species was a group of 2-3 Yellow-throated Leafloves (and I thought South American bird names were unique). These birds worked the tree tops of the one clump of trees that had dense foliage. I barely saw the motion and never saw these at all. Neither of these species was very easy to see.

At 17:00 we were back on the bus heading for home and by 17:30 we were back at Kombo Beach. We met again at 19:00 to go over the day's checklist before dinner and discuss tomorrow's plans. Tomorrow would be a busy day as we would be heading to Tendaba where we would be spending the next two nights. Night at Kombo Beach Hotel.



14-Dec-09 – Today we would have to make an early start today to ensure we caught the first **ferry from Banjul to the north shore** as would we be traveling all day to reach Tendaba Camp. To do so we would have to make a second river crossing at Farafenni to get back to the south bank of the river. Breakfast was therefore at 05:30 and while we were eating we also packed ourselves sandwiches from the bread and rolls, cheese and ham that were put out on the buffet. We loaded up the bus and were on our way at 06:00. The plan was to get on the first or second ferry. This would all depend on how much traffic was at the crossing and how persuasive Sering could be. Besides our birding gear, we all brought small packs with 2 days worth of cloths and essentials. Lynn and I combined ours into one of our carry-on bags. Everything else was left at the Kombo Beach.

We made the first ferry crossing which was the chaotic scene as advertised and left the dock at 07:05 and quickly moved a couple 100 yards and then seemed to stall. Whether it was the tide, a mechanical problem or just the captain decided he needed a cup of tea to watch the sunrise, I don't freaking know but we didn't move again for almost 20 minutes. What we did get to do was to scan for birds and watch all the herons and egrets cross the mouth of the Gambia River. On the crossing we saw one or two Black-headed Gulls, a Pomarine and a couple Arctic Skuas and both Royal and Caspian Terns. Then the ferry lurched forward and the crossing proceeded but not before the true highlight of the crossing occurred and the sponge cake lady made her way to those of us standing on the upper level. James made the executive decision to buy about 20 of these small cakes. Needless to say, this made the sponge cake lady's day and we enjoyed these tiny cakes for days to come. Finally at 08:20 we disembarked at Barra and began the long drive inland to search for a very special bird, Egyptian Plover, which we hoped to find feeding along the wetlands along the river's edge. We knew the plover had been seen at two spots the week before about 3 hours from the ferry landing.

One north side specialty we got almost immediately upon clearing the town of Barra was a Northern Anteater Chat. We fueled the bus and started to make some time before making a pit stop along the road. So not to make it a completely frivolous stop, we picked up a pair of Northern Puffbacks and several Bush Petronias. Also along this stretch of road were some Red Patas Monkeys that warranted a photo stop.

The usual collection of herons and egrets were at every wetland stop we now made although we did have our first groups of Yellow-billed and Woolly-necked Storks now appearing as well as some Marabou Storks soaring overhead. Also new for the trip list were Little Egret and Reed Warbler. Getting away from the coast along the north shore of the river provided just enough difference of habitat for all these new species. These wetlands were also providing wintering grounds for Ruff, Marsh Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts and White-faced Whistling Ducks.



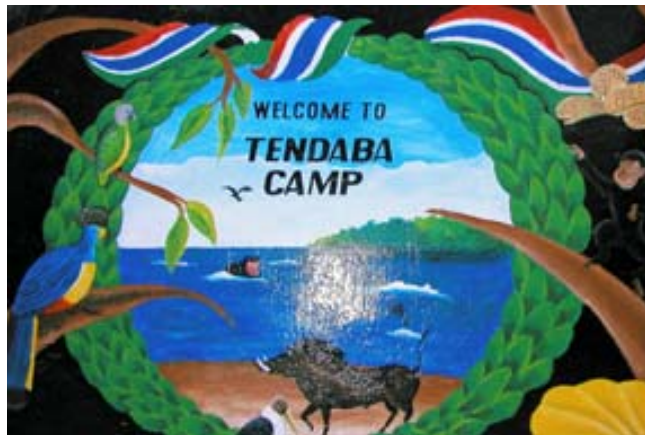
Our lunch stop was at the **"Big Tree"** where they always have lunch and it was very productive as raptors had started to soar. We had one Wahlberg's Eagle and several Beudouin's Snake Eagles. Later in the day we would have Grasshopper Buzzards and Brown Snake Eagles. Before getting back on the road (remember today was about getting Egyptian Plover and arriving at Tendaba and we hadn't achieved either yet) we did a bush walk for Saville's Bustard. The vegetation was dense in patches and by the time a bustard was flushed; those of us at the far end of the line had to be content with the Common Quail we had just flushed. You win a few and you lose a few. It was time to make a move as it was 13:45 and we had about an hour to get to the first plover spot.

It was approximately 14:30 when we arrived at **"Kaur"** and began scanning for the Egyptian Plovers. There were lots of shorebirds and waders and all of a sudden we notice that Sering is running back down the road towards us. He had gone a couple hundred yards further down the road to look for the plovers. He is all excited and pointing at the edge of the marsh right in front of us. From down the road, he had seen a pair of plover fly across the marsh and land about 10 yards from us. WOW! What luck!! What gorgeous birds. James breathed a huge sigh of relief and we were all thrilled. I think this was a life bird for everyone but our guides but even so I don't know how anyone could tire of seeing this bird. It has to be one of the top 10 birds on peoples list no matter how many birds they have seen. Sering then worked to keep all the school kids from hounding us as they had been coming from the other direction asking for pens and bottles.

From here we then started to head back west towards Farafenni and the ferry crossing back to the south bank in order to reach Tendaba. However we first would be stopping at a watering hole, henceforth known as **Sering's watering hole**. It is

a good thing we did as the place was loaded with birds including a few we didn't see anywhere else such as Red-billed Quella, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Black-rumped Waxbill, and Sudan Golden Sparrow. At another watering hole further along the road we saw two warthogs. Somehow we not only made the 16:45 ferry but it crossed without any delays (unless this was really the 13:45 ferry running very late). From the ferry we saw a Marsh Mongoose hunting in the mangroves.

Just before pulling into Tendaba as it was almost dark, we had one of the most memorable events of the trip. We had both Long-tailed and Standard-winged Nightjars feeding over the road and a nearby field. The Standard-wing Nightjar had a full set of standards on both wings and the surprise of the find made the moment. A group of sleepy birders hustled out of the bus and into the field to watch these birds. At the time I think everyone's thoughts were on food and a cold beer or two. Sering even jumped out the passenger's window rather than climb over all the stuff in the bus to get to the side door. We finally arrived at Tendaba at 19:15, were shown to our rooms and hurried to dinner at 19:30. We somehow managed to do our checklist before going to bed after what had been a very long but highly successful day. Night at the **Tendaba Camp**.



15-Dec-09 – Breakfast was at 07:00 and then we would be taking a pirogue trip to explore the **Kissintuku Creek**. After eating we reconvened to walk as a group through camp and the small town site of Tendaba to the dock to load up the pirogue for our 08:00 departure. As we loaded up the pirogue, several Spur-winged Geese flew down river allowing for a much better look than we had the day before.



Dawn on the Gambia River



African Darter

The banks of the creek held numerous African Darter drying themselves off in the trees, Western Reef Herons feeding along the banks and Pied, Malachite and Blue-breasted Kingfishers. Seeing numerous Western Reef Herons up close you really could develop an appreciation for how elegant they are. We also had better looks at Woolly-necked and Yellow-billed Storks.

Shorebirds feeding on the mud banks include Whimbrel, Senegal Thick-knees, Greenshanks, Spur-winged Lapwings and Common Sandpipers. Two Goliath Herons were feeding on the banks and a Grey-headed Kingfisher made for a pleasant surprise and pushed the kingfisher count to 7 for the trip.



Spur-winged Lapwing

A flock of Sacred Ibis could be seen feeding in the marsh when we all stood up to stretch and several Mouse-brown Sunbirds were found. These sunbirds are mangrove specialists so this trip was our best chance for finding them.

Around 10:15 we turned the pirogue was turned around and we started back to the dock at Tendaba. As we did we came across two Hamerkop nests and then a real treat an adult White-back Night-heron. The pirogue pilot maneuvered the craft so each person could see this small heron buried deep in the mangroves. The viewing window was very tiny and rather than move about the pirogue, the pilot moved the boat with the current so we drifted up and back until we all saw this secretive bird. As each person would finally come upon the viewing window you would hear

something to the effect like, "oh there it is", and in that way he knew he had succeeded.

We were back at camp at noon and what often is only a two hour trip had somehow turned into a 4 hour adventure. Much as the canoe trips at Sacha had been so much fun, this reminded me how much I like birding this way so I had no complaints. Lunch was from 12:30 to 13:00 and we then took a 2 hour break to avoid the heat of the day.



Cabins at Tendaba Camp

At 15:00 we headed back out to bird in the **Bateling Forest Reserve** until dusk. It was a sunny day so the afternoon thermals were strong and there were lots of raptors and vultures in the sky including a young Martial Eagle, multiple Brown Snake Eagles, Beaudouin's Snake Eagles, Grasshopper Buzzards, Montague Harriers and of course Yellow-billed Kites and Dark-chanting Goshawks. A group of 6 Stone Partridge slowly crossed the road in front of the bus allowing us to view them from the comfort of this "rolling hide". As we walked about the reserve we found Spotted Thick-knee, Bearded and Viellot's Barbets (barbets are a great family of birds wherever you see them), an entire new list of swallows including Rufous-chested and Mosque, Yellow Penduline Tit, Yellow White-eye and Senegal Batis. We also picked up a new bird for the Sunbird cumulative Gambia list with a Red-winged Pytilia.

We were going to end the day at **the old landing strip** and en route we found a pair of Red-Necked Falcons perched in a tree. These were much better than the one that picked off a bird at Sering's Watering Hole the day before. At the landing strip, we had several Four-banded Sandgrouse, a few Wattled Lapwings and a couple Long-tailed Nightjars. Back at the bus we heard two African Scops Owls calling and managed to coax one into view with a "tape". We were back at Tendaba by 19:30 for dinner. While conditions at Tendaba were certainly rather rough even in the "VIP" cabins and the food was simple at best, I would have to say that some of the rather harsh criticism I read on-line was unfounded or perhaps misguided. If I had gone there expecting the Ritz or the Four Seasons then yes I would have been seriously disappointed but with your expectations reasonably set, "it was what it was". Could they make improvements absolutely but again it was what I expected. However, thankfully the plumbing worked and there was edible food. Night at the Tendaba Camp.

16-Dec-09 – Breakfast was again at 07:00 and we would be leaving Tendaba at 07:45. We would start the day's birding back at the **Bateling Reserve** before heading back to Banjul. We would be making an attempt for repeat or better looks at species we had the day before for people who missed birds. James is very good

at quietly making sure everyone sees everything as long as you make sure he knows what you've missed or want second looks at. This included making a second stop for Spotted Thick-knee, Black Scimitarbill and Viellot's Barbet. New birds we found today at Bateling today included White-shouldered Black-tit, Pale Flycatcher, and Rufous Cisticola.

We also had another of those beautiful and poorly named birds in a pair of Brown-rumped Buntings. These buntings are brilliantly yellow on their chest and in keeping with a theme that had arisen over the previous few days; we decided to rename these birds "Sering's Golden-Breasted Buntings". This seemed to be so much better because, who would notice the rump compared to the breast or the striped head.



At 11:15 we started to leave the reserve and we hadn't yet found Abyssinian Ground Roller. This area was our best chance for this bird and because the rainy season was a particularly wet one, the grasses were especially tall making it a challenge to find this meter tall bird. As we were driving back to the main road, Abraham our driver saw a likely candidate at the far side of a field. Sering insisted it was a goat's tail. A conversation in one of the native languages took place with only the words goat and ground-roller in English coming through. Fortunately Abraham held his ground and HE WAS RIGHT! So we quickly jumped out of the bus and moved across the field to get an angle on the Abyssinian Ground Roller before it walked into the couscous stalks. After it disappeared, Sering went around to flush it back into the open and we watched it fly back to another field. As much as Sering didn't want to admit he thought the bird was initially a goat, he was more please to give Abraham his props for finding this bird more than 100 meters away and sticking to his guns about what he saw.

We made a stop at the **Brumen Bridge** where we had 2 of the 3 Bateleurs we had on the drive that morning and we also had White-backed, Ruppell's Griffon and Hooded Vultures soaring overhead. Our lunch stop was just on the far side of the bridge and while enjoying lunch we had two White-headed Vultures. Our lunch stop was from a little after noon until 14:00. While the first part of the vacation was partly sunny and cool for The Gambia with afternoon temperatures in the low 80s, the last few days were now sunny and the afternoon temperatures were now in the low 90s.

We were headed to the **Farabarbarta Bush Tract** for Greyish Eagle Owl but on the way we made a stop for Greater Honeyguide. This was a roadside wet area in which we were able to call in two Black Crakes before looking for the honeyguides. The honeyguides were supposed to be hanging out at a large beehive but in the few minutes we had to look for them we had no luck. However, we did find a Woodland

Kingfisher here. This was the 8th kingfisher for the trip and only the 2nd time this species has been seen on a Sunbird trip to The Gambia. This was just another example of the pretty amazing birding we had been having all week. We still had about a half hour to go before we reached the Farabarbarta Tract; however, we had a local guide to take us right to the owl and he had seen the birds early in the day so this would be fairly reliable once we picked him up. Around 15:45 we met our guide by the side of the highway. We drove into the bush tract a few minutes and then walked in the rest. We found or rather were shown the pair of Greyish Eagle Owls and were back on the highway by 17:00.

We were back at the Kombo Beach Hotel by 18:00 in time to take hot showers before meeting for dinner at 19:30. Did I mention that part of the charm of Tendaba was cold water showers without much water pressure? As I said, if you had the proper expectations you weren't likely to be disappointed but if you expected a lot than you were probably going to be disappointed. Night at Kombo Beach Hotel.



Kombo Beach Hotel

17-Dec-09 – Breakfast was at the usual 06:45 and 07:30 as we set off for **Pirang Shrimp Ponds and Forest** for our last full day of birding in The Gambia. Access to the shrimp ponds is no longer allowed but you can still bird the perimeter from the causeway and there is good birding to be had there. Over the years as The Gambia has become a more popular birding location, access to these ponds has been restricted by the owners to eliminate the risk of contamination to the ponds that might occur from having groups of birders visiting the area.



Pirang Shrimp Ponds

A couple of local guides quickly joined us "to help" and we quickly found Great White Pelicans, two Long-crested Eagles, and multiple flocks of Eurasian and African spoonbills flying around looking for feeding and roosting sites. There was of course

the usual collection of herons and egrets and the ever present Pied Kingfisher to entice the photographers yet again.

We again had several Crested Larks and Yellow Wagtails. Several African Quailfinch teased us by flying overhead but they never landed anywhere near. A pair of Pied Hornbills was seen flying over the forest and we penciled them in to be tracked down later in the morning. At the end of the causeway we came across a pair of Pygmy Sunbirds and of all the sunbirds we would see on this trip and we would see 8 species, these were my favorite. We then worked for several White-throated Bee-eaters in the mangroves across the channel. These were the 6th species of bee-eater we would see well on this trip. Sorry Sering, those specks on the horizon that were Northern Carmine Bee-eaters just don't count on my list for a 7th species of bee-eater. Not that I didn't believe you it is just that I couldn't see anything to identify the birds myself that afternoon. The point of this rambling is that there are lots of fantastic birds to be seen in The Gambia and you can see them well and repeatedly. This was a great introduction to birding in Africa. (N.B. This is being written after I got home and I feel this way even with all the trouble getting home, read on for those details). We loaded up into the bus and went over to the forested area of Pirang where we wandered around for about 2 hours. Before leaving the shrimp ponds, the local guides showed us an active quailfinch nest. These tiny birds build a very small nest on the ground amongst the grasses not unlike an Ovenbirds nest.

In the forest we again had both of the Paradise Flycatchers, Green Crombec, Pied Hornbill and several Collared Sunbirds. Around 11:45 we headed to the Marakissa Area for lunch at the **Marakissa River Camp**. The camp is run by a Dutch man and his Gambian wife. Prior to lunch we had a pair of White-crowned Robin-Chats in the vegetation around the patio where we would be eating our lunch. Besides a nice meal, the water drip here had been attracting a Lesser Honeyguide so after lunch we pulled up chairs and relaxed and waited. Although the Lesser Honeyguide did not show up a young male Greater Honeyguide did show up along with Long-tailed and Purple Glossy-Starlings.

After lunch we went birding and had better views of African White-eye and another group of White Helmetshrikes. After what seemed like an eternity (okay it was only 6 days) of trying to find what is supposed to be a common bird, we found a pair of Pearl-spotted Owlets. Actually the pair of these pygmy-owls like birds responded really well and made it all worthwhile although I think after Red-eyed Doves calling this is one of the calls we all will be hearing in our dreams. In one of the marshes, James went out in an attempt to flush Greater Painted-snipe and only succeeded in flushing Common Snipe and African Jacana. We were back at the Kombo Beach Hotel around 18:00 and met for what we thought would be our last night in The Gambia at 19:00 to do the day's checklist and have our "farewell" dinner. Night at Kombo Beach Hotel

18-Dec-09 – Today we were scheduled to be leaving Banjul but first we would be doing a little bit of birding in the morning before returning to the Kombo Beach Hotel to clean up and pack before having lunch and checking out. Breakfast was at 06:45. We departed at 07:15 and made a stop at the bridge over **Kotu Creek** that wasn't 100 yards from our hotel entrance for Oriole Warbler. We had thought we were going to go the Senegambia Hotel grounds but obviously Solomon who joined us again this morning and Sering had other ideas. Within 10 minutes we had a pair of

these very striking birds and were on our way to **Brufut** which is about 30 minutes away.



Walking the woods at Brufut

The hopes here were for Verreaux's Eagle Owl and for final looks at lots of other birds that find refuge in this remnant forest habitat. Well we were to be pleasantly surprised. Yes we did have the rollers along the road that we had been seeing all week and the hornbills and the Yellow-billed Shrikes but once we arrived at Brufut we found it to be alive with birds. Our first big surprise was a Grey-headed Bush-shrike, while it took some effort eventually we all saw this guy well. On 7 previous trip, James has only had this species twice before. Then we had a pair of White-faced Scops Owls. They were only about 10-15 feet up, they were in a tree alongside the road and much more in the open than the other White-faced Scops Owl we had a week earlier. The next big surprise was a pair of Klaas's Cuckoos that chased each other for a few minutes before finally perching ever so nicely in view for us. When they did so, they were in the company of Lavender Waxbills, Red-checked Cordon blues, Northern Red Bishops and the best plumaged Black-necked Weaver we saw the entire trip. (I'm finally writing all of this from my sparse notes as I'm sitting in the Heathrow Airport Renaissance Hotel in London so my sequence of events may be a bit off although the jest of things is there.)

We came to Brufut for the Verreaux's Eagle Owl and needed to keep moving or we would be in danger of seeing too many birds and running out of time and not seeing the owl. We'd been in the forest for 60 minutes and really weren't anywhere near the owl yet but I don't think anyone really minded. We then came upon a couple of Copper Sunbirds. These were the 8th species of sunbird for the trip. Not too shabby! At last we came to the path which leads to the owl. Now it was just a 10 minute walk to the owl if we weren't distracted. Imagine birders walking in a forest getting distracted, go figure, huh? Anyway, the owl was tucked up in a dense cluster of branches in a tall tree and even through a scope it was difficult to see its face. However, it was mission accomplished and we headed back to the hotel with a quick stop at the local sewage ponds. After all it wouldn't be a birding trip without a stop at sewage ponds, a garbage dump and/or a cemetery (if not all three).

We were back at Kombo Beach at 10:30. We were all packed up and headed to lunch by 11:55. On the way we ran into a couple we knew from the flight down and who we had seen during the course of the week. They said they "heard the flight

home was delayed a couple hours". When we saw James at lunch he said he hadn't heard anything about that yet but that he would investigate. Sure enough the 16:45 original departure time was currently being delayed to 21:55. He still wanted to head to the airport at 14:00 as scheduled and wait there to get checked in and get through security so that we can get ahead of the crowd and any other flights leaving. It seemed to be a reasonable plan, plus it for some reason the delay wasn't as long we would be there. As check in we were given our 1st letter of apology for the delay and a voucher for 200 dalasi for food.

Around 21:55 we did board the plane, had been given our safety instructions and actually started to taxi 100 feet when the pilot shut everything down. Had we taken off we have landed at 02:00 on the 19th and we couple have used our room near Gatwick as a day room before transferring to Heathrow. Anyway, after shutting down the plane, the Captain tells the crew to prepare for arrival and the stairways are brought back and all 400 passengers are asked to leave the plane and back into the terminal we go. Something was observed from the rear landing gear. If they can repair it, the fix only takes 15-20 minutes and we will get back on the plane. If not they ground agents will have to find hotel rooms for everyone for the night. Finally around 22:00 we learn that they need a part to make the repair and we are grounded. Arrangements are being made and we will have to reclaim our luggage, load up on a bus and then we will be taken to hotels back in town. Clearly this happens fairly frequently because, tour buses appeared in short order and arrangements were made. By 01:30 on the 19th Lynn and I were back in a room at Kombo Beach. Actually everyone in our group was back at Kombo Beach all be it in different rooms from where we had started 12 hours earlier. We were told that information about the rescheduled flight would be available at breakfast as it would take time to deliver the part and now the crew needed a mandatory rest period before it could fly again.

Original Itinerary

Check-in at Banjul: 2:45pm

Date	Airport	Terminal	Flight No	Departure	Arrival	Airport
18 December	Banjul		MON4515	4.45pm	10.30pm	Gatwick

One more night at the Kombo Beach Hotel in The Gambia.

19-Dec-09 – If we had made it to the UK our flight home on British Airways BA0069, with an originally scheduled departure of 17:05 from London Heathrow, which would get us into Philadelphia at 20:35. However, as we had spent another night in the Gambia at the Kombo Beach Hotel and hoped to be catching a flight out today, we went to breakfast at 07:30 to learn when the flight out today would be with our fingers crossed and not much hope of making this flight. At breakfast we learned that lunch would be at 13:00 and that shuttle buses to the airport would begin running at 16:00 with our flight currently scheduled to depart for Gatwick at 18:00. We could stay in our room until then and knew we'd have to rebook our flight home once we reached London. We would just have to check in with the

Monarch Airlines and go through a minor security check as we all had gone through passport control the day before.

So after a leisurely breakfast we lounged around our room. At lunch we learned that the shuttled buses would be coming at 15:30 and that even though the east coast of the US was going to be hit by a big storm that our British Airways flight was still confirmed to fly. Naomi was trying to contact BA on the internet from Kombo Beach but didn't have any luck. Bill, Naomi, Lynn and I figured since we weren't able to do anything while in Banjul, we'd just handle it once we got to Heathrow. We'd have to roll the dice with costs and then see what our travel insurance would cover. In the long run it was just as well as we didn't really know when we were going to get into London. The part for our plane was being flown in and the snow in the UK was delaying its arrival and hence our departure from The Gambia.

At 15:30 we boarded the buses back to the Banjul International Airport and waited in line for about 90 minutes before getting checked in and getting admitted back into the departures lounge. We were issued another boarding pass and a 2nd letter of apology explaining the delay. This would supposedly help with travel insurance claims and rebooking. On the plane we would be asked to complete a postcard in order to receive a 3rd even more detailed letter of explanation of this mess. We also all received a complimentary 1/2 liter bottle of water.

At 18:30 an announcement was made that the plane with the replacement part was due to arrive at 19:45. The repairs would only take 15-20 minutes and then boarding would take place at 20:15 with departure at 20:45. Let's just say people's nerves at this point were really becoming frayed as people were beyond tired and we were all having visions of another night in Banjul although no one wanted to say that out loud. One couple had managed to rebook their flights home already at a \$250/ticket rebooking fee and an outrageous holiday ticket fee. After getting home I later learned that they didn't make it home on that flight due to the winter storm across the Northeast. I believe they received their money back. Finally around 21:15 we boarded the plane and at 22:00 we took off approximately 29 hours late.

20-Dec-09 – We arrived at Gatwick at 03:30 in the morning to a plane load of cheers, sighs and thoughts of what's next for those of us who still had to get home. It took close to 90 minutes for our bags to appear and there wasn't a man, woman or child who wasn't wondering if Monarch hadn't left them in The Gambia. That would have been the perfect finish to a most forgettable trip home! No there just wasn't a complete baggage crew working at this early hour at Gatwick. Once we gathered our bags and said a quick farewell to everyone, we made our way to the National Express bus and somehow caught the 05:37 shuttle to Heathrow.

We arrived at Heathrow at 06:30 and proceeded to a huge rebooking queue which fortunately was soon reduced as all the Cunard cruise participants were pulled from it. When Lynn and I finally made it to the front of the line and were able to speak to a BA agent, we were greeted by a very helpful person who told us that because of the blizzard in the States, there was nothing available until Tuesday and by the way, we would have to fly London to Boston to Philly unless we wanted to fly London to Dublin to Boston to Philly. Of course we could try standby on the 21st but not today because there were already far too many people attempting stand-by today. Of course if we tried stand-by, she couldn't book our tickets without imposing penalties or our having to get back in the rebooking line. At this point, we asked to be booked

on the London to Boston to Philly flight before our heads actually exploded. We then received some good news. That was since our original flight on Saturday had been cancelled because of the storm not only were there no charges for rebooking but that we would also get a room, lunch, dinner and breakfast and shuttle bus service complimentary as a result. We would still have to pick up the costs for the 2nd night but at least that was a help. Bill and Naomi then got booked on the same flight and into the same hotel as us. Before catching the shuttle to the hotel we all had breakfast at Carluccinos in Terminal 5 of Heathrow.

We then caught the 09:37 Hotel Hoppa shuttle bus to the Renaissance Hotel checked into our rooms, cleaned up and relaxed for the first time in what seemed like days. Around 15:30 I went down to the bar for a snack and a beer and then around 16:30 we all met for dinner. Night at the Heathrow Airport Renaissance Hotel.

21-Dec-09 – After a very nice night's sleep in a very comfortable bed we all met for breakfast at 08:00. The day started out rather nice and had we felt as good today as we did when we woke up we probably would have made some plans rather than just to hang around the hotel but by mid-morning it started to rain and by lunch it was a nasty day with sleet and cold rain. Without having made any prior plans we all just spent the day reading, working on our bird lists and generally recovering from the 30+ hours we spent traveling the day before. Around 12:30 Lynn and I went down to the bar for lunch and we met Bill and Naomi for dinner around 18:30 for dinner. Night at the Heathrow Airport Renaissance Hotel.

22-Dec-09 - After another very nice night's sleep in a very comfortable bed we all met for breakfast at 08:00. We left for the airport at 11:00 and spent quality time at Terminal 5. Although we could check in right away, we could not drop our bags for about two hours. Because of all the delays that had accumulated over the last several days, BA was being rather strict about baggage drop off. So we found a place to sit and waited. Around 13:30 we queued up, dropped our bags off, went through security and then waited for our gate to be announced. Once that happened we made our way to the gate. Around 16:00 boarding started and a little before 17:00 we took off for Boston.

Around 18:30 we touched down in Boston, we made it quickly through passport control. Our bags eventually came up. We dropped them off at the transfer point and in spite of receiving less than an overwhelming sense of confidence from the person handling them that they would actually make it to the USAir plane, we all caught the shuttle bus to Terminal B and by 19:40 were at the gate as initial boarding announcements were being made. The plane took off around 21:00 and by the time we landed, gathered our luggage, called Pacifico and I dropped Lynn home it was midnight when I got home.

Only three days late but considering that there was a snow storm in the UK, a broken plane in Africa and a blizzard in North America that had to be dealt with what could a person do? All told that's quite a travel story and has nothing to do with the birds. In the UK I had 53 species (one lifer for me) and in the Gambia I had 272 species of which 202 were lifers for me. So I can safely say it was a fantastic trip even with the travel saga at the end.

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