

Ethiopia

29 Oct–15/21 Nov 2011

Participants

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Rouget's Rail

Leaders Solomon Berhe and Mike Betts

Day 1: Seven of us had met at Heathrow the previous morning to fly out on British Midland, and we arrived in Addis Ababa in the 'wee small hours'. Fortunately there had been only a handful of passengers on the second leg of that flight from Amman in Jordan, since it still seemed to take forever to be processed through immigration, change money etc. But Solomon was there to meet us and whisked us away to the Ghion Hotel where we were able to have a few hours of sleep before meeting the rest of the party at breakfast: these included Ferdinand who had flown individually from Germany and the six members who were to continue with the extension at the end of the main tour: they had flown overnight on the direct Ethiopian Airways flight. Some people managed a few minutes in the hotel grounds and immediately began to chalk up new species, but soon after breakfast we all moved off in the four Land Cruisers in which we were to travel for the next fortnight. Solomon had decided that we had enough time available to travel north as far as Debre Libanos, rather than just visit Gefersa Reservoir. Hooded Vultures and Black (Yellow-billed) Kites circled overhead, and we quickly began to find some of the highland endemics – Thick-billed Ravens, Wattled Ibises and Brown-rumped Seedeaters were all very evident. We very quickly realised just how sharp Solomon's eyes were: our first stop was for another endemic, a White-winged Cliff-chat perched on the corner of a shed just outside the city, and as we watched it we also found White-collared Pigeons and Black-headed Siskins. A walk for an hour on the Sululta Plain reminded us not only of the near-midday heat but also of the altitude, around 2,500 metres, but it also gave us the opportunity to find the endemic Blue-winged Geese, Erlanger's Larks and Abyssinian Longclaws among a host of other species. At our lunch stop at the German Eco-Lodge at Debre Libanos Black (Yellow-billed) Kites swooped on any food left momentarily unguarded, whilst Steppe and Tawny Eagles fed nearby on a carcass put out for them, and we began to identify the various vultures circling around the escarpment. Gelada Baboons, also endemic, put in a brief appearance, and we were later to see others closer to the town. On our journey home we stopped at another marshy area for Black-winged and Three-banded Plovers, and also found a flock of over-wintering Red-throated Pipits. It was dark as we returned to Addis, and we realised very quickly that night driving in Ethiopia is not to be recommended: with so many people and animals on the roads, and inadequately (if at

all!) lit vehicles, it is a hazardous business. We were all delighted to get safely back to the Ghion, exhausted but mesmerised by all that we had seen that day.

Day 2: We set off early for our long drive down to Awassa in the Rift Valley, contending first with the chaotic Addis traffic. Near Debre Zeit we paused at Lake Chelka, where the water level was high after the 'big rains' of the late summer. White-backed Ducks and Southern Pochards were seen, as were Little and Great Crested Grebes, and in the trees and fields nearby we found Black-winged Lovebirds, an African Paradise-flycatcher, and a cisticola which identified itself as Croaking in response to Nicholas playing its song on the iPod. We subsequently stopped at the delightfully named Dreamland Hotel for a cool drink, taking the opportunity to survey the birds on its crater lake, before we moved off again. Turning into the Rift at Mojo, we found the first of several Abyssinian Ground-hornbills, then soon stopped at Lake Koka where we began to find a variety of wetland birds including Pink-backed Pelicans and some waders, as well as Wire-tailed Swallows feeding young on a barn, whilst a Long-crested Eagle was perched in a nearby tree. After lunch we took an amazing walk along the fishing causeway of Lake Ziway where we were able to see at close quarters just how closely the Ethiopians co-exist with their birds: fishermen threw discarded fish remains to the waiting Marabou Storks and Hamerkops, whilst Ruffs, Wood and Marsh Sandpipers foraged around them, and Spur-winged Lapwings had almost to be moved out of the way to let pedestrians pass. An African Darter caught a spiny fish, a Tilapia perhaps, and had great difficulty in manoeuvring it to swallow the right way round, and we also found four species of kingfishers nearby, Pied, Malachite, Woodland and Pygmy. It was getting dark by the time we reached the Awassa No 1 Hotel where we found comfortable rooms complete with mosquito nets.

Day 3: An early walk at 06.30 in the splendid hotel grounds soon introduced us to a variety of woodland birds. A Spotted Creeper showed well, and we found Eurasian and Red-throated Wrynecks in adjacent trees: that seemed something of a record, until we then found three different barbets, Double-toothed, Black-billed and the endemic Banded, in a single tree! Silvery-cheeked Hornbills flew around, calling noisily, and Hadada Ibises probed the damp pasture. After breakfast we visited the fish market, but this seemed to be under redevelopment so we went on towards the marsh, finding Saddle-billed Stork, Spur-winged Geese and some more waders. This area too seems to be being redeveloped as a park, and we were unable to get into the wetland at the end, which has been fenced off. But we found a European Roller, and then an Abyssinian Roller, surely one of the most attractive of birds, perched in a Euphorbia Candelabra, as well as Bruce's Green-pigeon. A subsequent walk by the shore of the lake enabled us to watch the fishermen in their papyrus canoes, and also gave us excellent views of Black Crakes. But by now it was mid-morning and time to move to Wondo Genet, stopping once more for a final look at Lake Awassa where we could see Hippopotami largely submerged offshore. As we drove through the plain for the next half-hour the telephone wires held many neatly spaced Northern Carmine Bee-eaters. Driving up into the hills to Wondo Genet we began to see the dreadful effects of deforestation, with so many of the native trees cut for firewood, and throughout our stay there we were to witness so many loads being brought down to market by women and indeed by children of all ages. The Waba Shebele Hotel must have been very smart in its heyday, with lovely gardens and a strange 'space age' dining room, but has become, like so many of the older hotels in the country, decidedly tired. But after a short rest after lunch to sort ourselves out, we walked out past the hot springs in which many locals were bathing. The clouds, which had been building up overhead, dispersed, and we soon found Mountain and Grey Wagtails and a Sharpe's Starling which was to be particularly faithful over the next two days to one particular tree.

Day 4: Our pre-breakfast walk swiftly gave us endemic Yellow-fronted Parrots, and as we approached the flooded gravel pit we found a Little Rock-thrush. A Half-collared Kingfisher, usually an elusive species, showed well, and a Tambourine Dove was on the path ahead of us. A longer walk after breakfast showed us just how seriously the forest has been degraded, with poor secondary vegetation taking over. We found a Grey Cuckooshrike and a Lemon Dove, whilst two Scaly Francolins scuttled across the narrow path, sadly only seen by the front people: a later search on the edge of a glade revealed a couple more, but still not everyone was to see these denizens of thick undergrowth. We found an African Harrier-hawk (still sometimes known by its old name *Gymnogene*), and a Crowned Hawk-eagle drifted overhead. Our afternoon walk was however severely disrupted by a heavy rainstorm: once again we had seen the clouds building up, and this time they clearly meant business! Solomon had spotted a barn nearby, and despite the

sighting of a Rameron Pigeon nearby we were soon forced to take cover. We found that the barn, with a good corrugated roof, was home to a mother and her children, as well of course to their cattle, but she was remarkably welcoming and indeed the whole barn soon filled with locals sheltering from the heavy storm. Everyone was very friendly despite the total lack of a common language, there was much giggling and laughter and many photos were taken. This was the only storm of the tour that properly forced us to stop birding, but was to be the first of several heavy downpours we were to see over the next week, when we seemed to be under some low-pressure system. After it eventually ceased we were able to watch a male Pin-tailed Whydah flitting from bush to bush in display flight, and as we walked home in the gathering gloom we had rather poor views of an endemic Abyssinian Woodpecker, a view that we improved upon a couple of days later.

Day 5: We had a long drive ahead of us, to Goba on the east side of the Bale Mountains, so left at 07.30, not early enough to prevent three members from trying, sadly unsuccessfully, to find Scaly Francolins at dawn. Soon after passing through Shashemene on a good road we found a Grey Kestrel perched on a telephone post, whilst a Wahlberg's Eagle and Lanner Falcon flew overhead. Crowned Lapwings and Cape Crows were by the roadside, and the countryside looked lush and green after the recent rains. We noted the Chinese supervisors at road works, and eventually came to the area where the road is still under construction as it passes over its high point at 3,400 metres. We stopped by a small settlement near the summit, where we found a circling Lammergeier, Black Storks and Red-billed Choughs. A later stop produced Yellow-shouldered Widowbirds, but then Solomon stopped again by a river gorge, and after a short walk found us a Cape Eagle-owl perched under shade on a rock face. We stopped for lunch by a marshy pool on the Dinsho Plain: by this stage we had become rather tired of the sandwiches produced by hotels, and Solomon had produced fresh bread, jam and honey, with boiled eggs and bananas, and indeed this was to become our preferred lunch thereafter. And it was at this stop that we found two more highland endemics, a flock of Spot-breasted Lapwings and some Rouget's Rails, whilst a Thekla Lark posed for photographs. Driving on into the Bale National Park we came upon Mountain Nyalas and Bohor Bushbucks, and at the Park Headquarters we also found Menelik's Bushbuck. A walk in the woods there gave us two more owls for the day, an African Wood-owl and an African Long-eared (Abyssinian) Owl, as well as the elusive Cinnamon Bracken-warbler. Moving on to the Waba Shebele Hotel in Goba, we were somewhat surprised to find a packet of contraceptives in each of our bedrooms – but at least the showers were hot!

Day 6: After a cup of coffee at 06.00 we set off for the long drive on dirt roads to Sof Omar, the target being the very range-restricted endemic Salvadori's Serin. The road was actually quite good going, and we passed through well-populated fertile agricultural areas. At about 10.00 we stopped for breakfast on the edge of Sof Omar Gorge, where we were joined by the local tribe of Grivet (Vervet) Monkeys who were anxious to compete for our food. A walk through the gorge subsequently did reveal several Salvadori's Serins, which responded well to Nicholas playing their call on the iPod. We also found Northern Red-billed and Von der Decken's Hornbills, Slate-coloured Boubous, White-rumped Babblers and Rufous Chatterers and a Pearl-spotted Owlet. We also found a Leopard Tortoise, Salt's Dik-Diks, and Rock Hyraxes as well as a Monitor Lizard. The threatening clouds did not disrupt our plans but there had obviously been considerable rain and the track on our way home was very wet. People in the first and second vehicles that afternoon – we changed vehicles every few days – managed to see a Caracal cross the road.

Day 7: It rained very heavily in the night, but some people were out for a short early walk in the hotel grounds where they found a Brown Parisoma, but by 07.30, after a breakfast, which seemed to take forever to be served, we left for the Sanetti Plateau of the Bale Mountains. Cloud was low, but we stopped in the foothills to look, unsuccessfully, for Abyssinian Ground-thrush, though we did find several Abyssinian Catbirds. By 09.00 we were driving through rain followed by low mist, but we spotted Chestnut-naped Francolins by the roadside and more Rouget's Rails, which seemed so out of place on this high scrub-covered ground. As we reached the plateau at about 10.30 we drove out of the mist and cloud and into sunlight. We were now at about 4,000 metres, driving on what is described as 'Africa's highest road' and close to Mount Tullu Deemtu which at 4,377 metres is Ethiopia's second highest peak, and the next few hours were magical: another Lammergeier and a Great Spotted Eagle flew overhead, Spot-breasted Plovers shrieked around us, Ruddy Shelducks inhabited the pools along with Blue-winged and Egyptian Geese, and an

Abyssinian Wolf, having crossed the road about ¼ mile ahead of us, decided to have a closer look at us and came to within about 100 yards, giving us a wonderful opportunity for photographs. We had poor views of a Giant Molerat, the Wolf's main prey species, which is apparently the size of a Hyrax. Further along, we were privileged to find a pair of Wattled Cranes that gave us wonderful views as they walked gently ahead of us. On the far side of the plateau, as we began our descent, a short walk gave us the Bale subspecies *griseiventris* of Brown Parisoma, an apparent candidate for a future split. We also found an endemic White-backed Black-tit in a village on the edge of the Haremma Forest. Returning across the Plateau after lunch in the Forest we stopped for a group photo just before finding a second Wolf, but sadly the sun had now gone and the light was fading: we had two unsuccessful stops, for Moorland Francolins and later for Abyssinian Ground-thrush, but we did find Slender-billed Starlings.

Day 8: Another early start after a 6am cup of coffee, as we had to drive a long way on dirt roads to Negele: some people had been awoken in the middle of the night by chanting, which was apparently an Ethiopian Orthodox church service which begins on a Saturday evening – the worshippers had obviously not been deterred by more heavy rain! We did manage this time some limited views of the Abyssinian Ground-thrush, a notoriously shy bird, but then set off to cross the Sanetti plateau again. This time the weather did not relent on the top – indeed to our amazement the ground on the plateau had a thin covering of snow! – so we did not really stop until we entered the Haremma Forest again where, after another picnic breakfast, we encountered an Crowned Hawk-eagle and, at the opposite end of the scale, an African Reed-warbler whose song was very reminiscent of the European species. We also saw the Bale Mountain Vervet Monkeys, with facial markings quite different to the Grivets we had previously see. We then drove a very long way through the forest, impressed that there were no obvious signs of tree cutting, indeed for a long way there were few signs of human habitation at all. Stopping around noon just beyond the village of Dolomena, we found Collared and Marico Sunbirds, Village Indigobird, Northern Black-flycatcher, Bronze Mannikins and a Pygmy Kingfisher. Further along we found a Shikra on an electricity wire and Golden-breasted Starlings. The forest here was beginning to turn into Acacia savannah, and tall termite mounds became a common feature; many of these were the feeding stations of colourful Red-and-yellow Barbets. At our picnic lunch stop people wondered whether an owl was around as so many birds seemed agitated, and indeed Solomon found another Pearl-spotted Owlet that was the centre of attention; there were also White-crested Helmetshrikes and an Emerald-spotted Wood-dove. Later we found a Gabar Goshawk. The clouds were beginning once again to build up, but fortunately no rain came to interfere with the day's main target species, Prince Ruspoli's Turaco, which Solomon located for us amongst some broadleaved trees by a stream. This stunning endemic is only found in a tiny area of southern Ethiopia near the Genale River. We had good views of two birds, well worth the long journey to see them. We later forded the Genale, finding Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Shelley's Starlings and Red-billed Buffalo-weavers. But the rains then began and the last hour or two of the drive into Negele were very wet, giving our drivers a difficult time on the potholes road. So we again arrived in the dark, this time at the Nile Hotel, only to find that the rooms had been let to some American servicemen involved, so they told us, on a bridge-building task. So we were taken to another accommodation block, where we did have something of a group sense of humour failure! We had been warned that the accommodation would be basic – and so it was. The rooms themselves were adequate, and we later found the beds comfortable, but only three had showers, and the communal showers and toilets, of the hole-in-the-ground type, are better left undescribed! The food there wasn't much better either, and indeed the following day (for we were to spend two nights there) Solomon went into the market and bought food for us and indeed helped with the cooking.

Day 9: We left just before 08.00 and headed east to the Liben Plain. The sky had cleared and it looked like a warm day ahead. We stopped by the roadside for Foxy Larks, found a Tawny Eagle on its nest with a young bird just visible, and then set off on foot across the grassland. Our target was the highly threatened endemic Sidamo Lark, undiscovered until 1968 and restricted to a tiny area of this plain where its miniscule population is threatened by overgrazing, indeed it is thought to be a probable candidate for the next species extinction. Solomon nevertheless found one for us quite quickly, and we were able to watch it at close quarters, running through the grass and also in song flight. In the same area we also found Somali Short-toed Larks and Pectoral-patch Cisticolas. On a nearby pool were two African Spoonbills and, further away on the plain a large marshy area yielded Abdim's, White and African Open-billed Storks, a Black-headed Heron and Collared Pratincoles, whilst a pair of Kori Bustards wandered

seemingly unconcerned between us and a nearby village. On the drive back to Negele we found Levaillant's Cuckoos, whilst White-crowned Starlings foraged nearby. Whilst waiting for the vehicles to be re-fuelled after lunch back at the Nile Hotel we were treated to a formidable flying and stooping display by an Ayre's Hawk-eagle, which seemed determined to decimate the local feral pigeons. We then went for quite a long walk in the savannah to the north-west of Negele, managing to find a male Straw-tailed Whydah en route, and on our walk encountered White-bellied and Buff-crested Bustards, the elusive Bare-eyed Thrush, a Spotted Palm-thrush and Orange-bellied Parrots. As dusk approached we heard Donaldson-Smith's Nightjars but could not get any to respond to the iPod.

Day 10: We had another long drive ahead of us on dirt roads to Yabello, but Solomon distrusted the hotel's ability to give us a reasonable picnic breakfast, so he cooked excellent porridge for us instead, and we got away at 06.30. We were not sorry to leave that hotel, but a stop at Negele is essential to find Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and the Sidamo Lark. Looking ahead hopefully we did see a smart-looking hotel being built next to a petrol station, and Solomon expects it to be open next year with decent facilities, fingers crossed! We travelled a long way through savannah country, sometimes flat, sometimes hilly, once again amongst tall termite mounds albeit without the barbets. We stopped to look at a colony of Lesser Masked-weavers in a village tree, during which time a motorcyclist managed to fall off his bike: this happened at the other end of the small village, but certainly drew away the crowd of our onlookers. Mid-morning we stopped by the Dowa River, where there was much evidence of recent flooding, but this was not deterring the numerous gold-panners of both sexes who were working beside the fast-flowing river. Here we found the very-localised Juba Weavers nesting in bushes beside the river, and the similarly localised African White-winged Dove, and also found our first Blue-naped Mousebirds. Our approach to the river put up a couple of noisy Senegal Thick-knees, whilst high overhead a flock of White Pelicans was joined in their V-formation by Sacred Ibises. Later we turned off the reasonable dirt road onto a much smaller track – we were assured that this was a short cut – and soon stopped for our picnic lunch, where we also found a Somali Bunting. Shortly afterwards we came across our first Vulturine Guineafowls with their stunningly attractive breast plumes, but we also came across the first of several difficult streams we had to ford. These seemed to get progressively more difficult as the effects of the recent rains were still swelling the water levels. But we continued to bird, finding Eastern Violet-backed Sunbirds, Pringle's Puffback, and our first endemic White-tailed Swallows. Just outside one village were the remains of a donkey carcass surrounded by vultures, giving us particularly good views of the Lappet-faced species, which is much less common than the other large vultures. But after further stream crossings, which clearly made Solomon more anxious, we did, at about 18.00, come out onto tarmac – our first for five days! What would have happened had we been unable to ford any of those streams as the waters continued to rise was a question we chose not to ask! For now we were very content to arrive, ten miles further on in more rain, at the Yabello Motel. Despite being clearly a truck stop and filling station, the rooms were clean, most of the plumbing worked or was fixed for us, and we had a good meal, next to a party of Chinese road supervisors. We noted that they even had pizzas, which we were delighted to order for ourselves the next day!

Day 11: We had a gentle start just before 09.00, with everyone happier after a comfortable night and reasonable food. Yabello is just south of 4° North, so we were close to the Equator and had been warned to expect it to be very hot, but the sky was still overcast as we set off, with rain a real possibility again. We drove south towards the Kenyan border (albeit still over 100 km away) with our first target being the endemic and enigmatic Stresemann's Bush-crows, very restricted in range around Yabello. We were approaching a breeding colony, finding on our way Yellow-vented Eremomelas, a Mouse-coloured Penduline-tit, Boran Cisticola and a Great Spotted Cuckoo, but heavy rain began to fall and drove us back to the vehicles with the intention of returning later in the day. By this time one of our vehicles had developed a defective shock absorber, and had to return to Yabello for repair, but fortunately this was done during a break in the rain, so we continued to bird in its absence, finding a Red-naped Bush-shrike which we were able to track down by its song in the thick acacia, and which responded well to the iPod. We also found a Three-streaked Tchagra nearby and a White-rumped Shrike. Indeed, shrikes were numerous that day, with Red-backed, Isabelline and Lesser Grey being amongst the winter visitors from the north, whilst resident Red-naped and Rosy-patched Bush-shrikes were also seen. We also found a Jacobin Cuckoo just before the rain returned – and, fortunately, our vehicle had returned too! The rain was so heavy that it even drove away for a while the ever-present

watching children! Fortunately it stopped again as we came to a termite mound that was being inspected at close quarters by a pair of Stresemann's Bush-crows, and we were able to watch them for some time as they probed for food, sometimes accompanied by Shelley's Rufous Sparrows. The rain eased just before lunch and we turned off the tarmac onto a dirt road: as our picnic was coming to an end Solomon noticed half-a-dozen Somali Coursers coming into land about 800 yards away, and we were able to get quite close to them. During that afternoon we also found a Banded Parisoma, African Pipits, Chestnut Sparrows, Reichenow's Seedeaters, Gillett's Larks, a Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush and several Somali Fiscals. From a rise in the same area we were able to look out over a wide plain where we saw Gerenuks (the long-necked tree-browsing gazelle), and Grant's and Thomson's Gazelles. But the clouds were darkening again, a rainbow formed, and heavy rain began to fall so we began to retrace our route to Yabello. We did however have another short break in the rain as darkness approached and Solomon once again took us off onto a dirt road. Here he stopped and Nicholas played the iPod for both Three-banded Courser and Donaldson-Smith's Nightjar – and both worked successfully! The courser, otherwise known as Heuglin's, was spotted briefly on the ground in the beam of Solomon's powerful torch, whilst the nightjar fluttered closely around us. A pretty good ending to a bird-packed day!

Day 12: About half the group went out for an early walk behind the hotel and found, amongst others, a Verreaux's Eagle. The rest of us got up at a slightly more leisurely time and watched it through the telescope of one of the early risers! How's that for easy birding? We left just before 09.00 to drive north to Langano in the Rift Valley, expecting that the reasonable tarmac would continue on this main road from Kenya – how wrong we were! The potholes got worse and worse, and this was to continue all the way to Awassa. There was lots of evidence too of the recent heavy rain, ditches and streams were full, small lakes had formed, and yet there was no evidence in any of the villages, even where the huts had corrugated iron roofs, of any attempt to collect this fresh water. And there were lots of villages and lots of people all the way: clearly the mainly hilly area we passed through was very fertile: there were many banana groves and Solomon pointed out drying racks for coffee. Children seemed to line the road, cheering as the 'ferengis' passed by. We did stop at one village on the edge of a marsh where we found Woolly-necked and Abdim's Storks, and Solomon lined up the children to present them with pens that Mike McGavigan had brought from Scotland. Later an Abyssinian Ground-hornbill flew across the road, the first one we had seen take to the air. We stopped at a largish town, Dial, for lunch in a small cafe, but then continued north through Awassa after which we watched a flock of Lesser Kestrels hawking over the fields, before re-fuelling at Shashemene where an enterprising young lady sold us coffee whilst we waited, then on to Langano where we stopped for the next two nights in the Waba Shebele Hotel by the side of the lake. The weather had become noticeably drier as we re-entered the Rift Valley.

Day 13: We had an early morning start, driving to the nearby grounds of the old Bekele Mola Hotel, which is now being renovated. Walking around the land nearby we soon heard then found a male Bearded Woodpecker, the largest of the eight species to be found in Ethiopia, and we found Rüppell's Weavers. But our principal target, Verreaux's Eagle-owl, was to elude us despite us searching its normal territory a couple of times. However we were well compensated by a very obliging Greyish Eagle-owl that allowed us to get close enough to take good photographs. Back to the Waba Shebele for breakfast, we were able to enjoy at very close quarters the daytime roost of the Slender-tailed Nightjars outside the hotel reception area, though one we were about to photograph in good light suddenly took off to escape a marauding cat. We also checked out the gulls on the shore, most of them being the dark *fuscus* race of Lesser Black-backed. Then we set off for Bishangari where we were to spend the rest of the day. Driving down the dusty track we soon found a Somali Ostrich, which we guessed had escaped from the nearby Abijatta/Shalla Reserve where they were introduced some years ago. Nearby was a Common Jackal. As we drove further there seemed to be a never-ending number of children who, more accustomed in that area to tourists, chased after the vehicles crying out 'You – give me pen!' Hardly endearing! We stopped by the old container bridge into Bishangari (though were later to cross the new replacement which no longer limits the size of vehicles) and walked down to the lakeside, where we found Little and Temminck's Stints, Kittlitz's Plovers, Sanderlings and other waders, whilst a Pallas's Gull (Great Black-headed), one of the few additions to our checklist, flew past. In a tree a cuckoo was identified as our familiar Common Cuckoo, though we had to check it carefully to confirm that it was not an

African one. We drove on then and lunched in the meadow behind the Bishangari Lodge, whilst Northern Carmine Bee-eaters settled on the anthills and tree stumps around us. We then walked with a local guide into the impressive Ficus wood beyond the meadows: it was very quiet being early afternoon, but eventually our guide led us to a Narina Trogon, a stunningly attractive bird with its green head and throat, green back and bright red belly, as it sat quietly in a tree above us. We also had a brief view of a Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrike. Our route back to the vehicles took us through the grounds of the lodge where we took the opportunity to visit the tree-house bar for a cooling drink.

Day 14: Most of us were awoken in the middle of the night from loud drumming and beating music: by 02.30 I could stand it no longer so went and found a group of men outside one of the huts who were dancing around a fire: fortunately, since they outnumbered me and several beer bottles were in evidence, they agreed slightly reluctantly to turn off the music. They said they were local employees, but the manager next day said they were late arriving guests! So we were a bit jaded for our pre-breakfast walk. We were to leave after breakfast for our final destination at Awash, but first paid a short visit to the shore of Lake Abijatta, where we had distant views of Greater and Lesser Flamingos as well as a huge raft of Northern Shovelers: four Common Cranes trumpeted their arrival, and we also saw Pied Avocets and Kentish Plovers and wondered what other species a tower hide might have revealed. Driving on north up the Rift Valley, we stopped at another marsh on the edge of Lake Ziway whilst the drivers went for provisions: whilst we still failed to find Lesser Jacana, we did see African Openbills, a Yellow-billed Stork and, at last, a Black Heron in amongst the numerous marshland birds, whilst African Pygmy-geese and Hottentot Teals swam amongst the water lilies. Driving on past Lake Koka, we turned onto the Djibouti road at Mojo, and stopped soon thereafter for lunch in a shady grove where we found Cinnamon-breasted Buntings. Then on eastwards, with the weather becoming distinctly hotter again, with not a cloud in the sky. We were approaching the old volcanic crater when Solomon came to a stop as he spotted a couple of male Eastern Paradise-whydahs, with their incredibly long tail feathers: they seemed to trail so far behind in the air that we wondered how they managed to find the energy to fly at all! We also found a Red-backed Scrub-robin. When we reached Lake Beseka we noticed that the water level was abnormally high by the roadside, further evidence of heavy rain, but we walked off into the arid cindery volcanic landscape where we found the endemic Sombre Chat, a very localised and little-known species which inhabits these rocky areas and lava fields. Nearby was a Blackstart. Then onwards to our final destination, the new Awash Falls Lodge, which we reached in time to have a look at the impressive falls of the Awash River.

Day 15: A pre-breakfast walk with Grum, the local guide, was quite quiet, though we found a Little Sparrowhawk (about which we debated for some time!), an Eastern Grey Plantain-eater, and Shining Sunbirds. At 08.30 we set out for a drive through the southern sector of the National Park, where we found Green-winged Pytilias, many Namaqua Doves and a Buff-crested Bustard. At the lookout at the old Kerranyu Lodge we were treated to a wonderful talon-locking display by two Verreaux's Eagles: although most of us had seen the species before, we all felt that this dramatic sighting was one of the highlights of the trip. Driving on after a cooling drink in the bar, we came upon Beisa Oryx with their incredibly long impressive horns, and a Black-backed Jackal. It was soon afterwards that we found the much-hoped for Arabian Bustard, but the grass was long and it was difficult to make out much detail below the neck. Later we found Chestnut-backed Sparrow-larks and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. We then drove into Awash village for lunch at a restaurant owned by an elderly Greek lady, and it was noticeable how the European management resulted in a general improvement in quality of food and standards of service. We paused awhile there to escape the worst heat of the sun before driving north-east for an hour on the Djibouti road: this brought us to a wide flat grassy plain with long fields of view: we failed to find a Secretarybird, but did see several Somali Ostriches, whilst an Arabian Bustard stalked through the grass with a couple of Northern Carmine Bee-eaters using its back as a vantage point as it disturbed the insect life, a wonderful example of symbiosis between the species. A Martial Eagle, the largest eagle in Africa, sat atop a tree over half a mile away, but was clearly identifiable, and we could also see Grevy's Zebras, Soemmerling's Gazelles and Warthogs grazing on the plain. But the afternoon was drawing in, and we began the long drive back to the Lodge, with the heavy Djibouti traffic making the journey rather tedious. It was dark by the time we entered the National Park again, and the lead vehicle disturbed a Spotted Thick-knee on the track.

Day 16: Another early walk with Grum was to be our last opportunity before starting the long drive back to Addis, and we were rewarded by a much better view of the Lesser Kestrel, and by Sulphur-breasted and Grey-headed Bush-shrikes, whilst an African Grey Hornbill trumpeted 'farewell' on a treetop with its beak held high. We left the comfortable Lodge with a last look at the Nile Crocodiles hauled out on rocks below the viewing point, but Solomon soon found us a couple of elegant Madagascar Bee-eaters on the roadside wires. Stopping at about 10.30 at the end of Lake Beseka, we chanced upon our first Chestnut-headed Sparrow-larks as well as Chestnut-backed ones, which we had previously seen, a useful comparison. We then had a long drive to the familiar and welcome terrace at the Dreamland Hotel at Debre Zeit where we lunched whilst watching a couple of aspiring starlets being photographed for a local film: it was noticeable that fewer members concentrated this time on the birds below on the crater lake! Then on again, in steadily worsening traffic, eventually arriving in a somewhat shell-shocked state in Addis at about 16.00. We were able to call at a shop selling local crafts and at a coffee shop to stock up with gifts to take home, before moving to the Embilta Hotel: those going on the extension were to stay there overnight, whilst those of us returning home were able to have a hot shower and sort out our bags before leaving for the airport: we had our final review of species seen that day and worked out that the total for the trip had been just over 470 species. Solomon also told me that we had covered 3,200 km, albeit we had only covered a small section of this very large country, and we made a final presentation to our four drivers, Samson, Mohammed, Andy and Alemayehu, who had looked after us so well during some pretty difficult driving conditions. With that, we bade farewell to the group who were staying on for the extension and left for the airport – only to find that our BMI flight was delayed by three hours for unexplained technical reasons. But we had made up one hour by the time we arrived in London, and nobody was seriously affected by the delay. It had been a memorable tour in a fascinating and very friendly country, still little visited, and facing enormous problems of poverty and population growth: we had been exceptionally well led by Solomon, the birds had been superb, and very approachable possibly due to the lack of any hunting pressure. We had inevitably missed a few species – but then one always needs an excuse to return... .

Mike Betts