

The Gambia

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Leaders

Solomon Jallow and Vaughan Ashby

A personal report by Martin Tribe and Helen Heyes

Day 1: After an uneventful six-hour flight to The Gambia we arrived and braced ourselves for the heat. Surprisingly, as we left the plane, it didn't feel as dramatically different to the UK temperatures as we thought it would – little did we know what was coming up. By the time we got to the baggage collection area we were much hotter and beginning to feel we were in a tropical country.

As ever, when arriving in a new country, we kept seeing new birds and had no time to identify them. Teasing glimpses occurred everywhere and we did manage to identify Cattle Egret, Western Marsh-harrier, Pied Crow, Yellow-billed Shrike and a Shikra. Then we were heading for the hotel but still with noses to the window for more frustrating views of possible lifers. Even though everything seen from the coach was likely to be seen later we were still tense. We did



Temminck's Courser

manage to see African Grey Hornbill, African Palm Swift, Long-tailed Glossy Starling, Hooded Vulture, White-billed Buffalo-weaver, Piapiac and Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starling. Our advice to newcomers to The Gambia is to relax a bit – we saw all these birds again later and, of course, much better.

After checking in to the hotel we met by the pool and were joined by our local leader Solomon Jallow (top birder, excellent eyes) for a walk along the famous Casino Cycle Track – don't be misled, cars drive along here too. Yes, it was still hot, even at about 4.30 in the afternoon. We were about to have one of those times when birds keep on coming and almost everything is new.

Red was the order of the day with a pair of Red-billed Hornbills, a pair of Red-billed Firefinches, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus and Red-eyed Doves – four lifers in as many minutes with more appearing all the time. Grey-headed Sparrows put in an appearance, a bird that was more attractive in real life than in the guides; Green Wood-hoopoes were heard, then seen clinging to the trunks of palm trees whilst in the grass we both heard and saw Double-spurred Francolin.

Further along the path we came across Brown Babblers and a fine Bearded Barbet. A Palmnut Vulture flew overhead and a pool amongst ricefields held Cattle and Western Reef-egret. A Senegal Coucal was found in a nearby bush and a 'ticking' Red-winged Warbler had everyone peering into the tall grass for a look. On the short walk back we added African Harrier-hawk, White-headed Whistling-duck, Speckled Pigeon, a Northern Crombec and a male Village Indigobird in a pathside tree and a Pearl-spotted Owlet flew past only to disappear into a tree and never to be seen again. That made 28 lifers on our first day!

Day 2: The birding began early with a walk to the hotel restaurant for breakfast – a couple of singing male Beautiful Sunbirds were first, then Common Bulbul and Vinaceous Dove, and, in the carpark as we waited gathered together, a Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling.

Now to our first site, the not-as-smelly-as-expected Kotu Pools (for Pools read sewage ponds). Black-winged Stilts were very common and amongst them we found Common, Green and Wood Sandpipers and Black-tailed Godwit. Spur-winged Plovers were also easy to see and classy-looking birds in flight. Just try getting a photo of one flying past though! Two Black Terns showed well over the first pool and we had various good flyover-species: Red-billed Hornbill, Western Grey Plantain-eater, Black-shouldered Kite and Senegal Parrot. Of course, Pied Kingfisher was found here as were Grey-headed Gulls showing their obvious white feathers in the wings.

As we walked around we picked up more new species: Splendid Sunbird, Intermediate Egret, African Mourning Dove, Bronze Manakin, Senegal Thick-knee and Long-tailed Cormorant. At the edge of one pool we found our first African Jacana and nearby marshy land added African Wattled Lapwing and Blue-bellied Roller, plus wintering Western Olivaceous Warblers, more Northern Crombecs, and Village Weavers. As we reached the road a small raptor appeared and was identified as a Grey Kestrel. It kindly landed in a nearby palm and everyone had great views, even those who had gone ahead and had to rush back!

Next stop was the nearby Kotu Bridge, crossing Kotu Creek. Mudflats and mangroves characterized the area and we picked up Greater Ringed Plover, Hamerkop, a pair of Variable

Sunbirds and a very red Northern Red Bishop. We also tracked down a calling Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird right at the top of a tree. Then, as the group stood on the bridge, an almost-disaster occurred.

The single slab of unreinforced concrete our intrepid leader, Vaughan, was standing on cracked and gave way, crashing down into the river below. Vaughan disappeared down the resulting gaping hole! Fortunately he managed to cling to the next slab with his finger tips and the rest of us dived to his rescue. Apart from being shaken and somewhat cut on his left leg he was OK but had to head back to the hotel for treatment. We hastily cleared the bridge, using the road, not the pavement!

The group, less three members, headed off to the golf course getting a flock of nine African Silverbills on a telegraph wire on the way. The golf course is a watered area that held some excellent birds such as Bearded Barbets, Green Wood-hoopoes, a close and very accommodating Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Bronze-tailed Glossy Starling, Blue-bellied Roller, Little Bee-eater and Red-chested Swallow. Part of the golf course is edged by part of Kotu Creek. Here we added Black-headed Lapwing, along with Senegal Thick-knees, various egrets and 50+ Grey-headed Gulls. Also here we heard Yellow-throated Leafloves and a Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird. It is worth pointing out that the temperature had increased and we were all feeling it. Fortunately some locals appeared and offered to get us drinks. We put in an order and soon were lounging in the shade with cool drinks reviving our flagging physiques.

After a late lunchtime break (thank goodness for the hotel's ability to supply chips!) we again headed out along the cycle track. Although it was about 4pm the heat was still present but bird activity was picking up after the midday inactivity. Birds we now refer to as 'usual' were seen, you know the kinds, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu, Northern Crombec, Red-billed Firefinch, Bronze Manakin, Beautiful Sunbird – birds that yesterday were lifers but today are relegated to common Gambian species – still very nice though.

As well as the 'common' stuff we added a Fine-spotted Woodpecker feeding on the trunk of a palm, and a small pool held a fine Black-headed Heron – a very classy looking bird. Another pool with high grass looked quiet until we reached it when it erupted with Great, Squacco and Black Egrets. Fortunately the birds flew only a short distance and then settled on trees and bushes. The Black Egrets are very special birds; not truly black, more very dark slaty-blue.

The afternoon walk continued down to the beach where we viewed an ocean almost devoid of birds – one Gull-billed Tern flew past. However, looking inland brought us a family of at least eight Piapiacs, four African Grey Hornbills and a Senegal Coucal – all close and showing very well. Continuing on we had another two Blue-bellied Rollers, more Little Bee-eaters, a silhouette of a Black-crowned Tchagra, Shikra and a very good-looking Lizard Buzzard. The walk and the day's birding ended with a surprise (at least to me), a Levalliant's Cuckoo, and a couple of African Thrushes.

Day 3: Today we started at Brufut Woods. Surprisingly, the drive to the woods in open landrovers was quite cool and some people even experienced goose-bumps. This was not to last!

OK, we'd only been in Africa two days so there's lots of new stuff still to see. However, to

experience in a very short time our first ever African Golden Orioles, Fanti Saw-wings and African Paradise Flycatcher plus good views of Beautiful and Splendid Sunbirds, Yellow-throated Leaflove, Bearded Barbet, Pearl-spotted Owlet and another Grey Kestrel, was terrific. One of those times when one does not know which way to look first. There are some birds which one expects to see but which wouldn't make it onto a most wanted list. We have found such birds are often far more enjoyable and good-looking than the guides suggest – one of these was Mottled Spinetail. The white that runs all around the rump was obvious and the bird is a very distinctive shape and surprisingly large and bulky.

We had a few minutes break as we walked along a narrow wood-surrounded path then things picked up again: a pair of Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters were first, 'scoped at close range, soon followed by a Fork-tailed Drongo, Black-billed Wood-doves, Abyssinian Roller and a Pallid Swift. Birds seen feeding on the path ahead turned out to be male and female Pin-tailed Whydahs, including some fine full-tailed males. Solomon then found a cuckoo (as I said, great eyes – it was very hard to see) which turned out to be Klaas's. This was quickly followed by a skulking Grey-backed Camaroptera which most managed to see (we saw more later in the trip).

As the woods opened up a bit we came across Dark-chanting Goshawk, singing Tawny-flanked Prinia and Whistling Cisticola and a juvenile Gabar Goshawk flew overhead. A shout caused us tail-enders to hurry forward to view a Brown-backed Woodpecker after which Helen spotted a small bird on a branch which was our first Striped Kingfisher. A short walk later we saw the welcome sight of two landrovers and a cool box containing drinks. As we were enjoying a break we had to put in a bit more effort to ensure we all saw the Yellow-fronted Canary found in a nearby tree.

Next stop was a group of small pools and woodland where we hoped for Black Crake – the first bird we saw was Black Crake although it was not seen by everyone. We were all then distracted by a beautiful African Pygmy Kingfisher which spent time sitting near an equally beautiful Malachite Kingfisher.

Walking through the woods we picked up an African Harrier-hawk in a tree, an adult Gabar Goshawk flying through the woods, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, both Blue-spotted and Black-billed Wood-doves and Green Wood-hoopoe. Back at the pools we all managed to see the Black Crake and then admired 50+ Bronze Manakins balancing on grass stems and drinking from the poolside.

All this and we hadn't yet stopped for lunch. That was the next thing and we had food and a rest in a nice shady area. Naturally it wasn't long before we began to wander about in case there was anything about, despite being aware that the usual situation is for birds to cease being active lunchtime to late afternoon. It was a good thing we didn't really consider this since, despite the heat, we found a good patch full of birds: Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, a male and two female Northern Puffbacks, a pair of Grey Woodpeckers, a showing-well Grey-backed Camaroptera, Yellow-billed Shrike, Common Bulbul, Red-billed Firefinch, Black-necked Weavers and two African Thrushes.

Having seen what the beach was like near the hotel we didn't have high expectations for the

beach at Tanji. However... this is a sandy beach with the ocean one side and a lagoon the other. The lagoon held the birds. Terns were abundant with Sandwich, Royal, Caspian, Lesser Crested and Gull-billed. Waders were also present with Greater Ringed Plover, Whimbrel, Sanderling, Common Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Common Redshank and Turnstone, plus, of course, African Wattled Lapwings and Kentish Plovers. As we scanned the area we found, on the other side of the lagoon, a small, unfamiliar wader. Is it or isn't it we thought. It turned to face us and the forehead was shockingly white – it was a fine White-fronted Plover. We admired this fine-looking bird until it flew. However, it flew towards us and landed quite close. It was then joined by another and both proceeded to walk towards us as they fed!

Also here we had Pied Kingfishers hovering and plunging into the water, many Grey-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls, 21 Slender-billed Gulls and two Kelp Gulls, an adult and a juvenile.

As we walked back towards the landrovers, rather plagued by hordes of local children, Peter Mitchell stopped to scan some small islands off shore and announced he had both Pink-backed and Great White Pelicans in view. These were duly admired despite the constant quiet 'hello's from the children and pleas for addresses, sweets, pens or money. They can seem a bit of a problem but are generally friendly. However, they don't seem to know the meaning of 'no' – it seems to mean go away so another can replace you then come back soon after!

Day 4: Abuko – The Gambia's first reserve and a place that must be visited on any trip to the country. It's an area of pools and primary forest, and is the place to see many forest species.

We had high hopes when we arrived and we weren't disappointed. Within minutes we had seen African Jacana, Striated, Black-headed and Squacco Herons, two Violet Turacos (quite superb in flight), Hamerkops and Palmnut Vultures. Also at the main pool we had both Pied and Giant Kingfishers. We began to walk the trails and soon heard an interesting call note. Peering into the dense tangle of bushes and trees we managed to see an adult and juvenile Snowy-crowned Robin-chat. One forest speciality got – a few more to go yet. The next forest bird was Little Greenbul, often heard, not often seen and not too exciting when they eventually are seen. We heard then tracked down Common Wattle-eye and then Black-necked Weaver plus a more-easily-seen Grey-backed Camaroptera. More Red-bellied Paradise Flycatchers were found followed by our first Blackcap Babblers feeding in the leaf litter.

Grey Plantain-eaters and Red-billed Hornbills could be heard almost everywhere but usually stayed up in the canopy. In a more open area we had, in quick succession, two more sought-after forest species: Green Hylia and Yellow-breasted Apalis. Again both heard before being seen. Back in the wooded depths a bit further on we came across a group of four African Paradise Flycatchers, one male had a splendid tail – all showed very well and didn't seem bothered by our presence as they moved past busily feeding. Then we were back in a more open area which held Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters and Splendid Sunbirds. Finally, for this visit to Abuko, some of us dropped by the photographic hide and, after a short wait, were rewarded with, in addition to the usual Red-eyed Doves and Bronze Manakins, both Lavender and Orange-cheeked Waxbills and Blue-spotted Wood-dove, followed by a female Northern Puffback.

A drive to nearby Lamin Lodge, a wooden structure on a river bank and within a mangrove

swamp, was followed by lunch whilst overlooking the mangroves. The mangroves held quite a few bird species, unfortunately most were too far away to be seen well or, in some cases, identified. However, the Grey-headed Sparrows nesting in rafters of the lodge were very accommodating!

So, what did the mangroves hold? Some, at least to me, surprising species: Red-billed Firefinch, Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Common Wattle-eye and Little Bee-eaters, plus some distant sunbirds. More expected were Great Egret and Western Reef-egret, Pink-backed Pelicans, Whimbrel and Common Redshank and Sandwich Tern. New for the trip were three Subalpine Warblers and a Broad-billed Roller, plus a few Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters feeding from perches and flying past.

Unfortunately Pete Basterfield was suddenly taken ill and couldn't take part in the rest of the day. He was back to fitness the following day though.

After lunch we drove to a nearby site, although I have no idea where it was, and set up 'scopes to, apparently, stare at the branches of trees. Hidden in the depths of this grove was a single White-faced Scops Owl and, with a few contortions, we managed to see it well. After this success we headed back to Abuko.

As we arrived at the opposite end of Abuko to where we started this morning we heard Green Turacos making quite a racket. We tracked down the noise and had a pair showing very well, and then a single joined them. Another peek from the photo hide and we saw another Green Turaco coming to drink followed by a right cracker of a bird: a Western Bluebill.

Our path this evening was almost the reverse of the route we had taken this morning. We had another Snowy-crowned Robin-chat (different site). more Black-necked Weavers and Little Greenbuls, Fork-tailed Drongo and African Thrush. An open area had us gasping at the beauty of a male Scarlet-chested Sunbird flashing his iridescence in the evening sun followed by a brace of cuckoos: first a female African Emerald Cuckoo then a male Klaas's Cuckoo. A stationary Fanti Saw-wing gained our attention as did two loud Senegal Parrots shooting overhead. There was more to come in this area: African Golden Orioles and, flying to roost, Black-crowned Night-herons and Great Egrets. A glance backwards to see where the others were and I saw something new. I called Solomon over and said 'there's a Pied Hornbill up there'. I am pleased to say that it stayed put and all saw it well. Finally a couple of us had a brief view of a Grey-headed Bristlebill, another notoriously skulking forest species.

Day 5: Time for a new woodland, well, wooded savannah would be more accurate. En route we picked up a Woodland Kingfisher on a telegraph wire plus a nearby Senegal Coucal. The new wood was near Yundum so we named it Yundum Woods. We started with two Dark-chanting Goshawks and eventually saw four birds here. The wood also produced our our first Rufous-crowned Roller. Whistling Cisticola was heard and yet another cuckoo found. First identified as either African or Eurasian Cuckoo it avoided us for a bit then flew straight towards us. A few of us had a good view of the front of the bird and we realised it was a Red-chested Cuckoo, a bird we hadn't considered we would see on our trip to The Gambia. This bird is a bit of a rarity here and was a lifer even for Vaughan.

The usual woodland birds were easily found: Bearded Barbet, Green Wood-hoopoe, Fine-spotted Woodpecker, Lizard Buzzard, the doves, plus a wintering Common Redstart. I stopped for a 'call of nature' whilst the others carried on. Whilst busy I noticed some hirundines flying nearby. A quick check with the bins showed them to be new for the trip and indeed my life. I shouted, very loudly I am told, 'Pied-winged Swallow' and gesticulated urgently in the birds direction. Everyone managed to catch up with these birds which was a relief because they were flying in a fast and determined manner and weren't hanging around.

Just after the swallow excitement we came across a Northern Black Flycatcher and I had a small bird with apparently huge tail-streamers. Most confusing until I realised it was a Village Weaver carrying two long grass stems which were perfectly positioned to extend the apparent length of its tail! More common woodland species followed with Senegal Parrot, African Golden Oriole, Yellow-throated Leaflove and Vieillot's Barbet. We also had our first Purple Glossy Starlings, mixing with Greater Blue-eareds in a tree and then a Wahlberg's Eagle was spotted circling overhead. The long tail of this species makes it pretty obvious even from quite a distance. With all eyes on the sky we found a Lanner Falcon shooting overhead followed quickly by another. A couple of Senegal Eremomolas were the next new birds for our list.

We then came across a bees' nest high in a tree. Worth a check it was felt so we staked out both the nest and the surrounding trees. Now things started to hot up and we had a very intense few minutes. We started with Greater Honeyguide heading for the bees' nest, then Cardinal Woodpecker, Singing Cisticola, Common Chiffchaff, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Northern Puffback and Little Weaver! The highlight for Helen, me and some of the others was a Black Wood-hoopoe – not black but deep purple and a far nicer-looking bird than is indicated in the guides.

A good morning so far then – now off to the Senegambia Hotel for lunch and a wander around the famous (and well-watered) gardens. On the way we had to make a quick stop to look at a fine Abyssinian Roller and a pair of Namaqua Doves.

After a pleasant lunch, with accompanying Beautiful Sunbirds in the trees and a calling Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, we headed out into the Senegambia gardens. We had one main target and it was to be found in an island of trees by the putting green! I heard a singing bird and tracked it down. I called the rest over to view this splendid target species: a White-crowned Robin-chat, noticeably larger than its Snowy-crowned cousin.

A good lunch followed by such a good (and easy) bird had us all in good spirits as we headed towards a sprinkler that was attracting birds. Blackcap and Brown Babblers ducked and dived under the spray and Village Weavers filled the surrounding trees.

Continuing on the paths and around the blocks of rooms we enjoyed good views of many more species: a family of Red-billed Hornbills feeding on the ground, Piapiacs, a Woodland Kingfisher, Blue-bellied Rollers, Speckled Pigeons on the building roofs, Greater Blue-eared, Long-tailed and Bronze-tailed Glossy Starlings at another water source and Lavender Waxbill and Northern Black Flycatcher. One large bird flew in, landed on a tree branch and flew off almost immediately. A couple of us got on it and realised it was our first Blue-breasted

Kingfisher. Unfortunately it was gone before we could even shout and we were unable to relocate it.

Day 6: Today we headed for Pirang. Everyone will tell you this is a failed shrimp farm. What they don't say is it is a huge area and without cover or shade. Still, good birds! Before we had even arrived we had already seen Western Marsh-harrier, Black Kites, our first Long-crested Eagle (Solomon again – no-one else would have seen the bird sitting in the palm tree so well hidden), Red-chested Swallows, Violet Turaco, Pied Hornbill and Village Indigobird.

So, to Pirang. Lots of large artificial pools and the occasional natural-looking stream. Within 100 metres of the landrovers we had picked up Striated Herons feeding at a stream edge, Wire-tailed Swallows hawking over the water, a Grey Kestrel hunting over the grasslands, a rather orange-looking Northern Red Bishop singing from a grass-surrounded bush and a lone Malachite Kingfisher watching the fish from its protruding vantage point of a stick.

The walk continued: a close Long-tailed Cormorant perched in a small tree showed very well and four Spoonbills flying over were identified as European. A fine Black-shouldered Kite sat high in a tree watching the strange site of mad Europeans and Canadians walking around its home. Quailfinches put in their usual appearances – that is a brief flight view as they frantically tried to avoid us. A very skittish species which we never did manage to see on the ground.

Big wading birds were abundant: Great and Intermediate Egrets, Hamerkop, Purple and Grey Herons plus, new for the trip, a pair of Woolly-necked Storks and a group of seven Yellow-billed Storks feeding on a dry pan. Of course, the big bird most people want to see here is Black Crowned Crane and as we turned right and walked along another ridge two were spotted flying in the distance. These two kindly flew quite closely past us as we admired two fine examples of this sadly declining species.

A juvenile African Harrier-hawk gave us pause for a few seconds as we thought it looked very eagle like – this was not the only time the juvenile of this species was to cause confusion! We were then distracted by numerous Crested Larks, each of which had to be checked in case we came across a Plain-backed Pipit (which we didn't!). However, all eyes were soon on the path a few metres ahead when a pair of Chestnut-backed Sparrow-larks landed there and proceeded to feed, unconcerned by the mass of people staring at them.

The next pool contained large areas of grassy reeds and was a favoured haunt of various hirundines. We had close views of Barn, Mosque and Rufous-chested Swallows, the latter two looking much larger than the species we were used to.

We had now reached pools with exposed sand and mud favoured by waders and terns. Wintering Eurasian species were well represented with Little and Temminck's Stints, Curlew Sandpiper, Pied Avocet, Common Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Kentish Plover, Little Tern and a lone European House-martin. On the more exotic side we had Pink-backed Pelicans, 13 African Spoonbills, five Greater Flamingoes, 18 Slender-billed Gulls and numerous Caspian and Royal Terns. The ridges between pools held Senegal Thick-knees and Black Kites and we were treated to three Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters flying over passing food to each other.

As we drove out of the Pirang area a sudden stop was called for as a Dark-chanting Goshawk flew overhead. This was a fortunate stop because someone spotted three Yellow-billed Oxpeckers feeding on the backs of nearby cows.

Next we headed back to the savannah woodland to the famous Faraba Banta Bush Track – not to be found marked as such on any map! We began by driving along the track, all eyes scanning the surrounding habitat. A sudden stop for a raptor atop a bush added Grasshopper Buzzard to the ever-growing list, soon to be followed by a rather distant male Bateleur. This track has a reputation for being good for raptors and we also had Lanner Falcon, Grey Kestrel and Palmnut Vulture.

At our first stop 'Canadian Pete' spotted a lone dark bird on a branch and called our attention to it. Solomon was on the case and called Square-tailed Drongo – a very good bird to get, usually rather difficult. Also at this stop, we heard two Brubrus, and saw Rufous-crowned Roller and Woodchat Shrike. A bit further on we made another stop and spotted a juvenile raptor in a tree. All 'scopes were on this bird, plumage details noted and identification points discussed. This bird was another rarity for the area, an Ovambo Sparrowhawk. Yet another bird I hadn't thought we'd see. Our final stop added two Black-winged Red Bishops, Yellow-fronted Canary and Fork-tailed Drongo.

Now we headed down towards the border with Senegal, to a disputed area, although the road signs, and the fact that we went through a border post indicated we were indeed in Senegal. We were near the village of Seleti at some waterholes known as, unsurprisingly, Seleti Waterholes (although we saw only one waterhole). The water levels were very low because of the poor rains this year. Cows were drinking from the water and we often had to 'scope beneath them to see the birds drinking from the pool. So, what were the birds using this water source? Flocks of Bush Petronias and Bronze Manakins contained Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus and Orange-cheeked Waxbills plus Black-billed Wood-doves, Grey-headed Sparrows and Village Weavers. Spur-winged and African Wattled Lapwings sat or fed on the far side, an adult African Harrier-hawk landed on the edge and began to walk around hunting in the grass and a Bateleur flew past. An interesting find was a white-phase Western reef-egret. Three Broad-billed Rollers put in an appearance and dived to the water surface to pick up insects. We were then distracted from this fine display of aerobatic skill by a most extraordinary bird, a male Exclamatory Paradise Whydah with full breeding-plumage tail. These birds have to be seen to be believed – the guides do not indicate how unusual they look in flight. Finally a party of 15 Piapiacs arrived and sat in a bare tree with a few Purple Glossy Starlings. They all managed to ignore the adult Dark-chanting Goshawk that flew over, seemingly uninterested in a quick meal.

Last stop of the day was the marsh at Mandina Ba. We thought we'd have to wait for birds to come into roost but our target birds were easily found, a male, female and juvenile sitting together in a tree. They were Hadada Ibises, a declining species in The Gambia and apparently the only three present here this year.

Day 7: Tanji Bird Reserve is situated on the coast and comprises both dense and open woodland and beach and sand spits. It is split by a road that runs along a ridge right through it. We stopped on this road and scanned from our raised vantage point. Yellow-crowned Gonolek could be

heard (a statement true of a lot of The Gambia) and a pair of noisy Senegal Parrots flew over. A sunbird landed on top of a tree and I managed to 'scope it. Helen and Pete B also saw it in the few seconds before it flew off. This was not good news because it was a male Green-headed Sunbird – another difficult bird to get. Sadly it was not refound. Also here I saw a brief view of a pair of Yellow-backed Weavers.

We entered the reserve proper and began seeing some of the usual woodland species: Vieillot's Barbet, African Golden Oriole, Northern Crombec and Variable Sunbird. A Double-spurred Francolin flew up suddenly from the path and Western Olivaceous Warbler was heard. Solomon stopped and scanned a large leafy tree and announced he had found African Green Pigeon – two birds were eventually seen by all; their colouring is very good camouflage.

More common species were found: Red-eyed and Vinaceous Doves (usually not mentioned because they are everywhere!), Northern Black Flycatcher, Grey and Red-billed Hornbills, Common Bulbul and Osprey. Wintering Yellow Wagtails flew over now and then, and Little Bee-eaters were seen fly-catching from bushes (these are The Gambia's commonest bee-eater). Black-billed Wood-doves were common here.

By now we had reached the coast and could see a sandbar with a great number of birds on it. I did some estimates of the numbers seen: 350 Caspian Terns, 700 Royal Terns, 900 Common Terns, both races of Lesser Black-backed Gull, about 75 in total, a probable juvenile and two adult Kelp Gulls, 30 Sanderlings, 12 Whimbrels, 16 Bar-tailed Godwits, a lone Grey Plover, four Slender-billed Gulls, a few Ruddy Turnstones and a lifer for many in the form of an Audouin's Gull. I didn't bother counting the number of Grey-headed Gulls! Black Kites cruised over the tideline and a Pomarine Skua appeared from behind a sandbank and headed out to sea.

Back at the landrovers we crossed the road to check out the other side of the reserve. Not much about since it was quite late in the morning but we did get Variable, Splendid and Beautiful Sunbirds together in one tree, a female Northern Puffback, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird and a Bearded Barbet.

The Bund Road is another well-known area of The Gambia, which runs along the south side of the country's capital Banjul. But before we visited this site we had to drive through the capital, stop at what seemed to be a random place, walk down an alley filled with wood-workers and out onto the south beach of the mouth of the River Gambia. Why did we do this? Our exact question. Standing on the beach we had the answer: the river mouth is good for wintering skuas (jaegers). We had very close views of two Arctic Skuas (Parasitic Jaeger) and three Pomarine Skuas plus literally hundreds of Black Terns, lone Slender-billed Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull and two Royal Terns. Everyone was impressed by the skuas and some even bought a tee-shirt from the local sellers that had come to see if there was a business opportunity.

So, to the Bund Road proper. One side borders a sea littered with old wrecked boats. It does have a tidal sandy beach which attracts waders and gulls and terns. The telegraph wires are known for Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (we had four) and there's some mangroves about too. The beach held a flock of 19 Little Stints and the usual gulls and terns. Visibility wasn't too good due to the position of the sun. The mangrove-sided stream held 50+ Pink-backed Pelicans and Long-tailed

Cormorants.

A short drive on we parked by some houses and entered a narrow alley. Eighteen people with optics carefully walking down a narrow alley, over old bits of wood and trying to avoid slipping into the open sewer that ran down the alley! An interesting experience – no-one fell in! Why were we risking ourselves like this? This is the only path to a tidal area which might hold good birds. Once we had cleared the nearby rubbish dump we marched across the flats to where the tidal water was. We had seen Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters at Lamin Lodge but rather distantly. Here we had them flying overhead and sitting on nearby bushes – ace views of excellent birds. Also here we had White and Yellow Wagtails, 10 Pied Avocets, Common Redshank and Black-winged Stilts.

Last stop of the day was Camalou Corner, an area of mangroves and open water and a place where heron-type birds come to roost. We had four Squacco Herons, a juvenile Purple Heron, Grey Heron, two Black-crowned Night-herons and a lot of distant white egrets. A new bird was added to the list when a flock of nine Sacred Ibis flew in later followed by another six. Finally we had our first African Darter aiming for the other birds roosting in the distance.

Day 8: Today we left the coast and headed up river to Tendaba Camp, a drive of about 70 or so miles. We were in a coach with air-conditioning! Luxury! Our driver was not one for going slowly, whether the road was a good one or a more typical Gambian road. At one point we were waved into a police check post, the driver slowed down, pulled over towards the policeman, then, for no apparent reason, accelerated away to the accompaniment of police whistles!

Of course we did actually stop on the way but only for birds and only in places without signs so I'm not sure where they were. At one point I think we stopped at or near Brikama Forest Park. Wherever we were we hoped for new species and being inland a bit would hopefully help. Our first stop, apparently randomly selected because it looked the same as miles of other terrain, was a bushy wooded area. We walked along the road and almost immediately got a Yellow Penduline-tit. Obviously the leaders knew things we didn't! Also here were Northern Crombec, Yellow-fronted Canary and Black-crowned Tchagra.

Now it was time to penetrate the bushes. We found a narrow path and followed it into the savannah. Stopping after about 20 metres we were treated to good views of a White-shouldered Black Tit as Swallow-tailed and European Bee-eaters flew overhead. A bit further on we came across Bush Petronia and our first White-rumped Seed-eater. Then we found a Grasshopper Buzzard, a juvenile Bateleur flew over and we managed to track down a singing Brubru on top of a tree. Later the group split and some had White-crested Helmet-shrike, others didn't – I didn't, Helen did! Nonetheless, a worthwhile stop I feel.

Next stop, possibly at Brikama, just after we spotted a Hoopoe, was caused by the appearance of a raptor sitting in a lone tree in the middle of a field. We crept a bit closer and 'scoped the bird – our first Brown Snake-eagle, it's yellow eyes watching us with disdain. This open area also held a pair of Grasshopper Buzzards, European Bee-eaters, two Pallid Swifts, Mosque and Rufous-chested Swallows. At one point another Brown Snake-eagle arrived and two were in the sky together, one being mobbed by a Grasshopper Buzzard – magic stuff! Suddenly a cuckoo was

called, tracked down and identified as African Cuckoo, another good bird to get, with a bill showing much more yellow than its European cousin. Back by the bus an adult and two juvenile White-backed Vultures flew over, and a Rufous-crowned Roller was found. A short drive later we came across 10 White-crested Helmet-shrikes so we all caught up on that one – a great relief! This bird was my 999th species in my life. Canadian Pete was also close to 1000 and we were excited to know what would be our 1000th birds.

Next stop, Tendaba Camp – by the river, nice rooms with mosquito nets! We saw little on our first quick look around the area: one Slender-billed Gull on the river, two Ruddy Turnstones, Black Kite and White Wagtail. After lunch I promised not to see my 1000th bird unless the others were present and three of us headed back to our rooms. We did a bit more exploring of the area on the way and, as destiny would have it, found my 1000th bird. A small pool of water had attracted some birds, 12 Black-rumped Waxbills. So 1000 for my life. Others rushed back for the others whilst I staked out the site. Before the others arrived all the waxbills disappeared into nearby trees! Everyone did see them, eventually!

4pm arrived and, covered in mossie repellent, we gathered by the jetty for our pirogue trip up a bolong (creek). First we had to cross the river Gambia – it's only a mile or so across at Tendaba! We had a distant view of the nest of an African Fish Eagle and eventually managed to see a bird sitting on the nest. Ospreys were seen on the riverside trees and, as we approached the entrance to the bolong, we flushed a Goliath Heron which flew up the bolong away from us. As we entered the bolong the engine was cut and we drifted along, eyes peeled for anything moving in the mangroves or trees. Helen spotted a Mouse-brown Sunbird but I failed to get on it. Fortunately, as we cruised the bolong we saw eight more and heard many more than that. African Darters were easily seen as were Pink-backed Pelicans and Whimbrels. All finally caught up on Blue-breasted Kingfisher. Fiddler Crabs were abundant on the mud, one excited person pointed out Cribbler Flags but we knew what they meant.

We didn't see the hoped-for African Finfoot and only a few managed to glimpse a shadow that was a White-backed Night-heron. Still, good birds were had such as Black-headed Heron, 14 European Bee-eaters in a tree, a lot of Common Sandpipers, a female or juvenile male Pallid Harrier, wintering Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers and calling African Mourning Doves, a great noise, a kind of cheerful laughing bubbling. As the light fell we had a pair of Brown-necked Parrots streak past looking noticeably different from the more common Senegal Parrots. Fun was had as we again crossed the river when we got stuck on a sandbank! A bit of rocking and judicious use of the engine soon had us free.

Day 9: Today we headed further up river to the old capital Georgetown, a lot further to drive than we did yesterday to get to Tendaba. First we had to walk around Tendaba airfield – disused. More woodland to check plus open damp grassland. Stone Partridges could be easily heard but not seen. We again found the African Fish Eagle's nest and could again see a bird was present. The walk took us through open country with scattered bushes, over to the swampy grassland. On the way to the damper areas we had six Great Cormorants, Osprey, Senegal Coucal, Brubru, Western Bonelli's Warbler, various Glossy Starlings, Palmnut Vulture, Senegal Parrot and Grey Hornbill. The damper area held a few Zitting Cisticolas, and, in the nearby trees, Senegal Eremomela, Black-crowned Tchagra and a fly-past by a Gabar Goshawk. Two Sacred Ibis fed in

a field with Hamerkops and another tree held Northern Crombec and a Willow Warbler (which was hunted for so our Canadian friends could tick it).

A nearby large tree held a male Grey Woodpecker plus two stationary Mosque Swallows and a Rufous-crowned Roller. The tree next to that held two great-looking Bruce's Green Pigeons and we had another Levalliant's Cuckoo. A small bird perched on an open branch attracted my attention and I put the 'scope on it. 'Cut-throat' I immediately shouted and directed everyone to the lovely male bird sitting for all to see.

More searching yielded Black-shouldered Kite, Fork-tailed Drongo, Grey Kestrel, Namaqua Doves, two White-rumped Seedeaters and a Yellow Penduline-tit. By the time we had completed the circuit we were all centimetres taller due to the mud on our boots. We then took turns to borrow a screw-driver to scrape the boots clean. I disappeared into some very tall grass and flushed a Stone Partridge which John also saw as he walked past. Now the drive to the ferry crossing between Yelitenda and Bambatenda. On the way we had a couple of stops, first for Wahlberg's Eagles (three) and then for a superb adult Beaudouin's Snake-eagle which appeared in the distance, flew closer, and eventually just lazily flew over us and began circling as it gained height on a thermal. Quite superb – everyone was making suitably appreciative noises as we all enjoyed this very special moment.

So, to the ferry and an insight into Gambian culture. The actual river crossing had many vehicles waiting to cross, a huge line of lorries was parked along the side of the road, some, we were told, having been there or expecting to be there, for weeks. To get across requires one to put money in the right hands (despite the sign up the road encouraging people to 'Say no to bribery'). We went for a walk whilst others did the business. Black Kites were common and we had a nice adult White-backed Vulture with them. Looking at the lorries we found a few supporting Osama Bin Laden so we suggested to our Canadian friends they stay quiet in case someone mistook their accents as American!

As we crossed on the ferry we saw two Yellow-billed Storks flying across the river and a circling flock of about 200 Great White Pelicans in the distance. Now we were on the North Bank and about to experience the North Bank Road, a road of legend and of enormous potholes! How true the stories were. Fortunately we soon stopped at a waterhole, happy to find one since many of the usual waterholes had dried up already. Our driver took the bus off to find fuel and we sat beneath a huge tree to have lunch. It was 104 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. After eating some of us braved the sun to check out the waterhole, a good one with a nice marshy surround. Here we had six Black Egrets, some doing the famous umbrella feeding technique which I was very pleased to see, two Great Egrets, two Hamerkops, seven Little Egrets, one Intermediate Egret, six Grey Herons, eight Squacco Herons and a Yellow-billed Stork.

Back in the shade of the trees we added a nice male African Golden Oriole, a circling adult African Harrier-hawk, African Mourning Dove, a Grey Woodpecker, three Green Woodhoopoes and five Yellow-billed Oxpeckers on horses in an adjacent field.

The driver appeared with a fueled vehicle (good news since the air-conditioning requires fuel and without it we would have suffered severely) and we headed off to find another waterhole. En

route we had brief views of flying Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-larks. We found what looked like a good waterhole and settled down with 'scopes to watch the area. There were two main spots the birds came to: only one could be viewed at a time so birds being called were often invisible to some of the group. Still, it was a great area even if it was very hot and almost impossible to find shade – the things we do for birds! Who could be unhappy with excellent views of Lavender Waxbills, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus, Yellow-fronted Canaries and Bush Petronias? Plus, three adult, full-tailed Exclamatory Paradise Whydahs coming to drink and then flying around in that amazing bouncing way, an immature Pin-tailed Whydah, Northern Red Bishops (mostly in eclipse although some had a few remaining red feathers), Laughing and Namaqua Doves and White-rumped Seedeaters. The best birds were a male Sudan Golden Sparrow which landed where I couldn't see it, flew off and landed in a nearby tree which I could see, and a pair of Cinnamon-breasted Buntings.

Next stop was the famous Kau-ur wetlands, sadly rather dry this year but still with some open water and marshy areas. Almost as soon as we had stopped and set up 'scopes someone found our main target bird – the superb Egyptian Plover. We eventually saw at least five birds, some feeding on the road in front of us. A Common Moorhen was found, then a Purple Swamphen. In the middle distance a flock of about 1000 Collared Pratincoles wheeled in the air only to disappear into the marsh as they landed. Spur-winged Lapwings and African Wattled Lapwings were expected and duly found as were Senegal Thick-knees and a couple of African Jacanas. Unexpected, at least by me, was a flock of European Turtle-doves. Other migrants were Yellow and White Wagtails, Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, Marsh Sandpiper, 44 Ruff and large flocks of Sand Martins. Rather fortuitously I found a lone Brown-throated (Plain) Martin amongst them which Helen and Pete B also got on. The others had all gone on ahead and so missed this one. It would have been rather challenging to try to explain where it was in a whirling flock of martins!

Last stop was a small lake somewhere – I have no idea where we were. We again had a specific target bird here and, with its lilies and open areas plus shady reed-fringed banks, this lake looked very suitable. As ever it was the keen eyes of Solomon that found the birds, a pair of African Pygmy Geese. These birds sat out in the open for a while and were enjoyed by all before disappearing into the reeds. Two more Egyptian Plovers were found here and numerous eclipse bishops were identified by Solomon as Yellow-crowned. A tick but it would have been nice to see a breeding male – oh well. Still, later on we came across a Rüppell's Griffon-vulture as we continued to head towards Georgetown.

It was not our intention to try to get to Georgetown in the daylight. We were aiming to get nightjars on the way and so needed a fading or set sun. Glimpses were had as birds shot off the road and we eventually stopped and got out Vaughan's mega torch. Birds flew and when hit by the beam dived to the ground and sat on the road. using this we managed to confirm we had Long-tailed Nightjars in view. Once these were done we started the final leg to our camp for the night.

Georgetown is on an island on the river. The ferry doesn't run late – we were late! Fortunately Solomon had family with influence on the island and when we arrived the ferry made an appearance! After a very long but productive day we arrived at Bird Safari Camp to find their

lone generator had broken down and there was no power. No power = no light and no water! An interesting situation somewhere where streetlights are something other people have and where a group of sweaty tourists had just arrived! Still the stars in the sky were fantastic and who could complain when serenaded by African Scops-owls?

Day 10: A brief glance around the car-park as we waited for the gang to assemble and we saw Bruce's Green Pigeon, Grey Plantain-eater, Shikra, Yellow-throated Leaflove and Senegal Parrot. Today we were heading even further upriver to the area of Basse Santa Su. First we had to get across the river again to the road on the south bank. This was achieved using a ferry with a duff engine. There was a metal cable running across the river. We were told men to one side, women to the other. Perhaps for some religious reason we thought but no – it was to allow the men to pull the ferry across the river using the metal cable! Saves fuel I guess.

First birding stop was yet another famous site – Bansang Quarry. Most people know this is THE place to come to see the breeding colony of Red-throated Bee-eaters. Most surprisingly, some tour companies do not come this far east to seek these birds! So, 50+ Red-throated Bee-eaters. Before going there I wasn't too enamoured with these birds even having seen them on video. In real life they are stunning birds. Worth every second of the long journey to see. Bansang had some water puddles in it too which attracted Bush Petronias, Yellow-fronted Canaries, Black-rumped Waxbills and Grey-headed Sparrows. New for the trip was a single Red-billed Quelea, dull plumage but with a nice, obvious red bill. A Dark-chanting Goshawk sat in a nearby tree and a Shikra sat on the quarry edge, eyeing up the smaller birds. A fine Mottled Spinetail flew across the quarry face looking lordly amongst the Little Swifts.

What could follow the Red-throated Bee-eaters? We headed further east, to a site just past Basse, to find out. The bus seemed capable of driving along any track and did so to get to some fields. We did have to make a sudden stop when a nice Grey-headed Kingfisher was spotted in a bush by the track.

We disembarked and walked along a mud ridge and down onto some fields. Would the birds still be here or had they moved on? Solomon had only found two recently and they were distant. Then the magic began again – one, then two, then three and eventually five Northern Carmine Bee-eaters flew over, hawked, sat in bushes and generally showed fantastically. Both Northern Carmine and Red-throated Bee-eaters in one morning – a genuine highlight of the trip. We are stunned that some tours do not make the effort to go this far east to see these birds.

Quailfinches put in their usual fly-past views and we found another two Red-throated Bee-eaters, a nice Speckled Pigeon and three Abyssinian Rollers, then we headed off for an early break (rather an unusual circumstance and one worth mentioning!) and lunch. We found ourselves sitting on a cool balcony overlooking the Gambia River and the crossing at Basse. Basse used to be the place people came to to see Egyptian Plover and sure enough two pairs of the birds were present on the far bank. One pair actually flew across the river and landed on the jetty – that's where this picture was taken. It was much easier to get close to these birds than the ones at Kauur. Birds were seen well both on land and in flight, and they are pretty spectacular in flight.

A flower-covered bush below the balcony held a pair of Scarlet-chested Sunbirds, a male

Beautiful Sunbird and a pair of Red-billed Firefinches. A gap in the bushes allowed us to view a small open area which held Bush Petronia and Grey-backed Camaroptera whilst, overhead, we admired soaring Hooded Vultures, Black Kites and Little Swifts. The Little Swifts appeared to be nesting just below us and close fly-bys were happening all the time. The combination of the balcony, sun, view, cool drinks, good food and birds was superb.

Still, this laziness and indolence had to come to an end and soon it was time to hit the road again, head back to Georgetown, pull ourselves back across the river and do some birding around Bird Safari Camp. We had a couple of decent birds on the drive back – two Collared Pratincoles near the river and a juvenile Brown Snake-eagle perched in a tree near the camp.

Our late afternoon walk around the camp's savannah woodland started with two Senegal Parrots (almost always seen in pairs wherever we were) plus Western Grey Plantain-eaters, Broad-billed Rollers and Yellow-crowned Gonoleks. A Pearl-spotted Owlet was spotted high in a tree, an African Paradise Flycatcher put in an appearance and looking towards the unseen river we found another African Fish Eagle. It was about time we had a new bird and sure enough one was found – a female Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrike – another bird that looks far better in real life than in the books. As we all sought and found the bird, which was feeding high in a tree, the male was also found. The male was the orange-shouldered variant rather than the classic red-shouldered and, as intimated earlier, was not as good looking as the female (at least in our opinion!).

As ever, we knew there were more birds to find and soon came across yet another Grey Kestrel and a confiding Cardinal Woodpecker. More-common birds were also present including Yellow-billed Shrike, Vinaceous and Red-eyed Doves, and Stone Partridges could be heard. A sudden stop was necessitated when Solomon (again!) spotted a good bird – a visible Stone Partridge which everyone could now catch up on, once they'd worked out that it was only visible from a very limited area! As we admired this bird a rather distant flock of 29 Four-banded Sandgrouse flew past and a flock of starlings arrived to feed in nearby bushes sticking up from the surrounding grassland. Naturally we had to check each bird just in case and Helen found the one we'd been looking for – a single Lesser Blue-eared Glossy Starling amongst the Greater Blue-eareds.

So, some great birds. Would there be more to come? Yup. Next we found Bruce's Green Pigeon, always a nice bird to see, then Pete B found a small bird in a tree which he said was very yellow. But where had it gone? The tree was close and not tall, some leaves and no obvious bird. Pete's description hinted at another new species so we got a bit worried! Then it was refound and some of us shouted 'Pygmy Sunbird, male Pygmy Sunbird'. Yet another ace bird to get. Our almost final birds had all been seen before but it's nice to see Bronze-tailed Glossy Starlings, Village Indigobirds and a Lizard Buzzard. One more bird to get. A short walk took us to a wetland area and, as the sun descended to the horizon and it was close to dark birds started flying in, calling and circling nervously before landing at the edge of a pool close to the edge of the path. We had seen them earlier but the views now were much better – the birds were Four-banded Sandgrouse and were seen very well in the torch light.

After dinner we found that the birding day had not yet ended! As you can imagine, it was dark outside so we thought 'owls'. The night we arrived we heard African Scops Owls all over the

place and all night. Tonight, nothing! Hmmm. A tad worrying but Birdfinders are not to be deterred by a small thing like the apparent lack of birds – we would find them! So, there we stood, a warm evening in a woodland in Africa, in silence. Vaughan was, as usual, very well equipped: this time with his mega-powerful torch and a tape recording of African Scops Owl. The tape was there as a back up in case the birds were distant or hiding and we didn't want to overuse it and disturb them. A burst of scops owl song and we soon had a reply. It was not long before there were four birds in the area – however, finding them was a different matter to hearing them! Cue the torch. Directing someone to a bird in a tree in daylight can be a challenge; at night it is worse, even with the aid of a torch and comments like 'follow the light'! Eventually all saw the birds well and retired to bed well satisfied.

Day 11: Today we were to leave Bird Safari Camp and head along the more civilised south bank road back to the coast. However, first we had to do another check of the woods for a final target bird. The sun was up but we still heard African Scops Owl plus the distinctive call of Stone Partridges. Common Bulbul and three Brown Babblers were found and then three Broad-billed Rollers flying around and perching on top of trees. So, to our target birds. Solomon had local information and we were soon beneath a huge tree searching the branches. Solomon found the birds – Verreaux's Eagle-owls. One bird flew but the other stayed put, at least for a while. After a few minutes the other bird flew to join the first in the crown of a not-too-distant palm tree. All saw the birds well, some even saw the famous pink eyelids as the birds stared at us and occasionally blinked.

We were not leaving yet – it was now down to the riverside to board a boat. The boat warrants some description: it had two decks, the lower with seating and the upper open to the sky with standing only. The obvious place to bird from was the top deck so we started to climb onboard onto that deck. This was when we realised the design of the boat was one we weren't expecting – it had a flat bottom to avoid becoming trapped on sandbanks. This means it is rather unstable and as we crowded the top deck the boat started to tilt, not gently but quite quickly! Hurried instructions to get to the lower deck were followed with alacrity! Even on the lower deck, with people distributed both sides, we were advised to not dive to one side when a bird was spotted as we'd end out in the river!

This instruction was put to the test when a flock of 10 Comb Ducks flew past but everyone saw the birds. A Grey Kestrel sat in a riverside tree near to some African Mourning Doves and, as we gently cruised up the south bank of the river, we heard Oriole Warbler and Common Wattle-eye. Time for yet another new bird – not a good-looker but new in the form of Swamp Flycatcher. We saw a few of these during the journey. Bruce's Green Pigeons were again seen as were three Yellow-throated Leafloves, Osprey, African Harrier-hawk, Long-tailed Cormorant and Pied Kingfisher.

The boat moved back across the river to the north bank and we soon had Blue-breasted Kingfishers (four in total) and Squacco Herons on the day list. I was scanning ahead and shouted that we were coming up to a Red-necked Falcon perched on a tree. The boat wobbled but did not tip as people positioned themselves for the bird which was seen very well by all – in fact we saw three! Then we had a close juvenile African Fish Eagle and a flying adult, Violet Turaco and a flock of six Spur-winged Geese flying past. Spur-winged Geese numbers increased when we

found a distant tree, which we eventually got closer to, containing at least 20 individuals. Yellow-crowned Gonolek was seen, 13 White-faced Whistling-ducks flew past and we found our second Grey-headed Kingfisher.

The trees were thinning out and grassland, cultivation and riverside bushes formed the habitat at our sides. I found a cuckoo species in one of these trees and shouted 'there's a cuckoo in that bush' which necessitated the boat doing a slow turn so we could go back and check out the bird. Well worth the effort since it was an adult Dideric Cuckoo.

The muddy banks held African Wattled Plovers, Senegal Thick-knees, and a Striated Heron whilst bushes added two Bearded Barbets and Abyssinian Roller. As we approached the landing jetty Solomon said he could hear a Grey-headed Bush-shrike. We heard it too and another calling to it from the other side of the river. This would be a top bird if we could find it!

Disembarkation was followed by all of us semi-surrounding a large leaf-covered tree where we believed the bush-shrike to be. Of course, it was right at the top and invisible but could be clearly heard. Aki walked to the other side of the tree and, in an impressive piece of spotting, found the bird showing through an almost circular gap in the leaves. What a bird! Seen brilliantly in the 'scopes it was a highlight of the trip.

Next stop was Jahaly Ricefields. As we arrived we screeched to a halt to check out a large raptor in a nearby dead-looking tree. It was obviously one of the snake-eagles but which one? After a few minutes of intensive observation, and of photographers trying to creep closer, it flew and Solomon and I both shouted 'It's a Beaudouin's'. The bird flew away and then circled back and over our heads.

On to the ricefields proper. There was quite a lot of water here and marsh birds were in evidence: at least 10 Squacco Herons were seen, over 100 (and there must have been many more) African Jacanas, Eurasian Marsh-harrier, Cattle Egret, Purple, Grey and Black-headed Herons. A singing Winding Cisticola was found which showed well to all but we were too late in the season for the hoped for but scarce Black Coucal. We did pick up two African Silverbills and four Cut-throats.

After a short drive to a nearby village we were soon watching a colony of Marabou Storks. Everyone says these birds are ugly and they are correct. Still, it was a new bird. At the same place a lone Rüppell's Griffon-vulture circled with Hooded Vultures and two Red-necked Falcons sat in a palm tree.

Our next stop was Sinchu Gundo Lower Basic School which is always visited by the Birdfinders' tours to drop off school equipment brought by the participants. We took pens, pencils (lead and coloured), notepads, rulers, educational posters and, brought by Satomi and Aki, some brightly-coloured plastic recorders (of the flute variety). The headmaster said the thing they most need is pencils and paper because although the government supplies the teachers they do not supply any equipment. The excitement of the younger children was something to see and they all wanted to touch us to see if we felt the same as them! Also here we had our first African Hawk Eagle.

Our final stop of the day was a place called Batelling Track where we saw Swallow-tailed Bee-eater and our target bird White-fronted Black-chat, a bird which kindly sat up on a branch so we

could admire its white front.

The sun might have gone down by now and the birds gone to roost but the excitement wasn't yet over. As we rushed down the road, occasionally bouncing around as we hit a hole or two, we heard a huge bang. Had we hit something or had a tyre burst? We were still moving so the latter seemed unlikely. However, our concern meant the driver had to stop (he didn't do so until we requested it) and we examined the tyres. At the back of the bus are double wheels, one inside tyre had shredded and was throwing steel-strengthened rubber against the bottom of the bus. The driver shrugged in a Gambian way and showed no concern at all. So we carried on in the dark with, every now and then, a loud crash as a bit more tyre departed its usual spot and bounced off the undertray and off into the distance.

Another highlight was our hunt for diesel fuel. We were low again and needed a fill-up. In a village Solomon spoke to a man. None was to be found at garages but the man's kids got on the bus and we drove to another part of town. Here we stopped by an unexceptional house which, we later were told, held a large amount of diesel. Solomon did the business and large plastic containers of fuel were loaded onto the bus roof. The smell of diesel was noted but we were too tired to worry about that now! Besides, diesel meant we would make it back and not be trapped somewhere in the middle of The Gambia. After such a long day the hotel was eagerly anticipated and seemed pure luxury when we made it back.

Day 12: Now we were back on the coast we intended to visit some places we had already been to before to see what else we could pick up. One visit to one place will never give all the species that one might see. So, back to Yundum Woods. We walked a different path to the one taken on our first visit and soon found our second Pygmy Sunbird, another male and a bird, I am told, that is not commonly found on the coast. Grey-headed Sparrows were, of course, around, as was Tawny-flanked Prinia, a Whinchat and two Woodchat Shrikes. More usual savannah woodland species were found: Splendid, Beautiful and Variable Sunbirds, Pin-tailed Whydah, Green Wood-hoopoe, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu, Little Bee-eater and various doves. We found an open area surrounded by trees and saw a Pearl-spotted Owlet fly into one of the trees. As soon as it landed a nearby tree erupted with Village Weavers who proceeded to mob the poor owl. A little further on we came across feeding and stationary Red-chested and Pied-winged Swallows and Fanti Saw-wings and a sitting Lizard Buzzard. As we watched a Senegal Eremomela the call came of 'Senegal Batis'. We dived for the sound and saw a fine male batis feeding in the open. A few metres to the right the female was also feeding. As we enjoyed these new birds another Black Wood-hoopoe was found, again looking much better than in the books.

More 'common' birds were found: Wahlberg's Eagle, African Harrier-hawk, Brown Babbler, Yellow-billed Shrike, three Green Turacos, Fine-spotted Woodpecker, African Golden Oriole, Northern Black Flycatcher, Blue-bellied and Rufous-crowned Rollers – the list goes on. At one stop we found a weaver nest of unfamiliar design and were soon watching a pair of Vitelline or African Masked Weavers. On the way back we again found the Red-chested Cuckoo, still in the same area as it had been a few days before.

Next we were aiming for a bird we really wanted to see. A short drive and we were walking through a field that had been harvested of its watermelons. In total we found seven Black-headed

Lapwings and a few Piapiacs, both of which were easy to see but neither of which were what we were after. Then someone found the first of our target birds and we eventually found four of them: Temminck's Courser. Very hard to see until one gets one's eye in. Of course, if they move and then freeze they disappear again! Some people managed to spend many happy minutes staring at muddy furrows searching for these elusive creatures. But once they were found it was worth the effort and strain! It was also entertaining to watch the photographers amongst us creeping up on the birds and just as they were about to take the picture the birds ran off. This seemed to happen quite a lot! A top ten wanted bird if ever there was one.

Back on the theme of woodlands we again drove to Brufut Woods. Just as we stopped a Tawny Eagle flew overhead and we heard Whistling Cisticola. The woodland birds were pretty much the same as we had had before; the highlights being Northern Puffback, Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, 12 Pin-tailed Whydahs, again including some full-tailed males, a heard-only Common Nightingale, a Pearl-spotted Owlet (we actually saw six Pearl-spots here) being mobbed by African Thrushes, Senegal Eremomela and Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Blue-bellied Roller, Shikra, Violet Turaco, a Common Redstart and a Pied Hornbill.

In this area, but in an unnamed place, perhaps still part of Brufut Woods, we walked through a grassy field for no apparent reason. We found a Long-crested Eagle as it came into roost in a palm tree and saw a Grey-backed Camaroptera and Palmnut Vultures. We also heard, and finally saw, at least two Oriole Warblers, a bird we had heard before but had yet to see. Also here were Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Senegal Parrot, Tawny-flanked Prinia and Senegal Coucal and heard-only Stone Partridge.

Day 13: Yesterday we had the success of the Oriole Warblers. Today, in the hotel garden, at breakfast we had three! We had breakfasted here every day we were at the hotel and never heard any; now they decided to show.

Marakissa is another woodland area and was our first stop of the day. We were hoping for one particular species and failed to get it – more of that later. It was one of those mornings when, although the birds were good, we couldn't find anything new and some people began feeling a bit down. We did enjoy treetops containing a selection of male, female and juvenile sunbirds: Splendid, Variable and Beautiful, at least five Pied Hornbills, a male Northern Puffback, a Common Swift, Blackcap Babblers and, of course, Pearl-spotted Owlet – probably the easiest owl in the world to see!

There's a place by a river called Marakissa River Camp. Some of us sat on the roof terrace overlooking the river, some at the river's edge and some inside. Although it was the hottest part of the day we managed to fix up an umbrella for shade and, whilst eating lunch, check out what was using the river. Ospreys put in occasional appearances as did Great Egrets, Pied Kingfishers, Spur-winged and African Wattled Lapwings. A Common Greenshank and a Common Sandpiper fed along the river bank and African Darters flew past. We were delighted by a close Blue-spotted Wood-dove in the open in a tree and enjoyed soaring African Harrier-hawks. Mike had been sitting by the river bank checking everything that appeared and had seen a couple of Black Crakes and a sunbathing Giant Kingfisher. We managed to catch up with the crake later but the Giant 'Fisher didn't come past again.

After a few hours lounging around and eating, with some birding, we headed off to a nearby bridge over stream and some woodland. Pied-winged Swallows flew around the bridge and, in the woods, we had four Blue-bellied Rollers, two Shikras, seven African Green Pigeons, six Green Wood-hoopoes, a showing-well Yellow-throated Leaflove and a soaring Tawny Eagle (above, not in, the woods!).

Now we headed to a non-woodland habitat, almost on the southern border with Senegal, at Darsilami. This area is very open with cultivation and a river. There used to be a restaurant here but it was now just a ruin. There were hoped for species to be had here and we had a superb time. As we got off the landrovers we immediately had two Yellow-throated Longclaws on a nearby bush. Then a Plain-backed Pipit flew up and over and away, not stopping as we hoped. Then, after some risky crossing of muddy, steep-sided rice fields, we found two Yellow-mantled Widowbirds, one still with vestiges of the yellow on its mantle. Three new and good birds in a few minutes – this was now counted as a good place to stop!

We hadn't finished at Darsilami yet. The river held hawking Wire-tailed Swallows, Common Greenshank, one Marsh Sandpiper and Gull-billed Tern. An area of reeds/grasses had plenty of cisticolas, mostly Zitting but good views of some sitting up showed them to be Black-backed Cisticolas – another new bird. Six Little Bee-eaters and two soaring African Hawk Eagles finished off the visit but not the day's birding.

We intended to finish back at Marakissa woods. We stopped beneath a couple of open trees, open in that they didn't have many leaves so we could see any birds in them, and waited to see what would come past. First was an African Grey Hornbill soon followed by two White-crested Helmet-shrikes. Then came Red-eyed Dove and Green Wood-hoopoe and the much-wanted shout to say the bird we were seeking had arrived and a superb-looking adult White-breasted Cuckoo-shrike came into view. This bird was bigger than I had imagined and looked great. I know we had been waiting, effectively, all day for this bird but it was well worth it – both cuckoo-shrikes on the same trip, a very good record. It showed well for a while then flew off leaving many satisfied birders. To finish off we had yet another Pied Hornbill, African Thrush and 15 Piapiacs.

Day 14: Oriole Warblers at breakfast again – two or three seen and heard: then back to Abuko. The main pool held Giant Kingfisher, Grey and Black-headed Heron and Black-crowned Night-heron. From a hide giving a different angle on the pool we found, hiding in shrubbery, a juvenile Little Bittern, a bird Solomon hadn't seen in Abuko for about ten years! He was, admittedly, slightly skeptical but Paul had video evidence and the one-man rarity committee accepted it!

Time for another primary-forest walk. Common Wattle-eye, African Thrush and Little Greenbul were seen along with a lot (I didn't count how many) of Black-necked Weavers. A Grey-headed Bristlebill showed really well. Vaughan said it was the best views he'd ever had – well, it did come to about six feet away! We could even see the bristles. Very soon after this bird Pete B said he had a woodpecker. I feel Solomon and Vaughan both knew what this was straight away as they rushed to his side and failed to see the bird which had moved. Fortunately it was soon relocated and we all had plenty of opportunity to watch a well-behaved Buff-spotted Woodpecker – yes we could see the buff spots too! This is a good bird to get. Abuko is about the

only place to find it and it normally stays high in the canopy. Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher was again seen as was Western Grey Plantain-eater, Blue-spotted Wood-dove and Green Turaco. Our heard-only list comprised Ahanta Francolin and Yellow-breasted Apalis but we again had good views of Green Hylia. I checked out a couple of sunbirds and informed the gang that there was a pair of Collared Sunbirds just above their heads. That made sunbird species number eight!

Leaving Abuko we headed for Lamin Ricefields, near where Solomon was brought up and lives. Ricefields was a true enough description but not a complete one. The area included what looked like a graveyard for old cars and a ready supply of sewage! The sewage outlet certainly attracted the Hooded Vultures! There were at least 50 here, mostly in trees and on the ground.

A muddy area held three Wood Sandpipers, two Western Reef-egrets, Great, Little and Cattle Egrets, Squacco Heron plus four African Jacanas, a Shikra in a tree, four Spur-winged Lapwings, three Common Greenshanks and four Common Redshanks. African Mourning Doves were heard and seen closely. As ever we had a target species to get. In previous paragraphs I have raved about Solomon's bird-finding ability. This one must be ranked amongst the best. He looked at the reed-fringed edge of the muddy area, borrowed my 'scope and announced he had found a male Greater Painted Snipe! The true worth of this can be seen when I explain that naked eye this bird was invisible. Through binoculars this bird was invisible. Through a 'scope it was invisible until one's eye suddenly realised there was actually a bird in the field of view. Each time I looked again through the 'scope I had to put in effort to find the bird again even though it hadn't moved. We were truly impressed. To further entertain us Al stood in a shallow puddle which turned out to be a four foot deep pool of what might kindly be described as water – well, it had water in it!

By now it was getting late so we dropped by Abuko again on the way back to the hotel. The main pool held, as well as the usual stuff, a pair of Giant Kingfishers and an African Pygmy Kingfisher. Some went to see if they could track down the Ahanta Francolins (only Solomon and Al saw one) whilst Helen, Pete B and I stayed by the main pool in the hope of a White-backed Night-heron. Alas, the bird did not show. We did get Black-shouldered Kite and five Mosque Swallows on the drive back though.

Day 15: Our last morning in The Gambia and no real birding was done. I did wander down to a large pond next to the hotel to see what was about. The pond was covered with lilies and there was a lot of rubbish dumped at its edges. Still, a few birds were to be found: a lone White-faced Whistling-duck, two Wood Sandpipers, one Common Greenshank, 14 African Jacanas, three Squacco Herons, 28 Cattle Egrets and a single Malachite Kingfisher using a lily flower to fish from.

So, that was it. Two weeks of pretty intense birding, often in great heat. We have to say it was well worthwhile. Some people, including us, had hundreds of lifers and we made some good friends. People were willing to help others and we had a good team spirit. Vaughan, Solomon and the team of drivers were all excellent, ensuring everyone saw the birds – Solomon really is The Gambia's top birder and everyone seems to know him. Without him the trip would not have been the success it was. Vaughan is well-equipped, capable and at all times very professional; and he's a good birder too. The tour organization was excellent, the accommodation simple in places but we weren't there to lie around! The food was acceptable if a bit similar each day but a

bit limited for vegetarians (fortunately we are not). For those worried about strenuous exercise in the heat, we did stop at lunchtimes, usually for about three hours. On the days we returned to the hotel this gave people a chance to try out the swimming pool, which is a very good way to cool down. Should anyone need a recommendation for a birding holiday company we happily recommend Birdfinders.