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Birding Cameroon, Part 1, Northern Cameroon: Guinea Woodlands to Sahel

by Michael Mills and Callan Cohen from Bulletin of the African Bird Club volume 10.2, September 2003

Cameroon, straddling the border between West and Central Africa, is the sudden focus of a birding revival. Once the domain of only the most dedicated of birders, the avian riches of Cameroon are finally beginning to receive the popular attention they deserve: we estimate that the number of birding trips at least quadrupled from the 2002 to the 2003 season. This renewed interest has undoubtedly been due to Nik Borrow and Ron Demey's thorough new fieldguide to West Africa [1] and Claude Chappius' bird vocalisation compilation for the region [2], as well as the discovery of new stake-outs for some of its harder-to-find species.

Cameroon is certainly a strategic destination to explore: its range of habitats stretches from rainforest to the Saharan edge, encompassing two of Africa's Endemic Bird Areas (EBAs), defined by BirdLife International as the continent's hotspots of narrow-range endemic birds. The Cameroon Mountains EBA, a string of forested volcanic peaks, holds 26 highland species that are found nowhere else, including Mount Kupe Bush-shrike and Bannerman's Turaco, both of which have community-based conservation projects dedicated to protecting their habitats. At the base of these mountains are vast humid lowland forests, comprising the Cameroon and Gabon Lowlands IBA. Although only holding 6 endemics, caves deep within these forest are home to one of the world's most enigmatic creatures: the Red-headed Picathartes, probably Cameroon's most celebrated bird. North of these forest zones, the climate becomes drier and gives way to Sudan-Guinea savannas. This biome extends both into West and Central Africa and holds 45 biome-restricted species, including Adamawa Turtle Dove, Violet Turaco and Dybowski's Twinspot. In the far north, the land descends into the Sahel biome, proving convenient access to the species that are found in this dry band which lies adjacent to north Africa's Sahara desert. This combined diversity makes it the richest country in West Africa for birding with c915 species having been recorded. Cameroon surely offers some of the most exciting birding experiences on the continent. Well-planned trips have recorded four of the world's Top 50 most desirable birds, as defined recently by BirdWatch magazine, namely Red-headed Picathartes, Mount Kupe Bush-shrike, Arabian Bustard and Egyptian Plover.

This article, the first in this two part series, overviews the essential birding sites of northern Cameroon, focussing on the key species, their habitats and a selection of photographs, many of which are of species that have never been published before. We make our way northwards from the vicinity of Ngaoundéré, central Cameroon's largest city on the cool Adamawa Plateau, down to the broad-leaved woodlands of the Benoue plains, and finally to the Sahel at Waza National Park in the extreme north of the country.

For practical access details to these sites, a number of reports are available on the internet, including our own tour reports and annotated checklists (www.birdingafrica.com). Also available free of charge is our detailed guide to birding in Cameroon for independent travellers (write to cameroon@birdingafrica.com).

Egyptian Plover (Ron Hoff)



Ngaoundaba Ranch

Situated on the wooded Adamawa Plateau overlooking a crater lake, Ngaoundaba Ranch offers a picturesque introduction to northern Cameroon's varied avifauna. Cool, forested gullies crisscross lightly wooded uplands, holding an extraordinary number of localised and charismatic birds. Steep-sided banks provide great vantage points for viewing the canopy of the sheltered forests. Multi-coloured flocks of seedeaters rove along the rank forest edges. Among the more abundant Black-crowned and Orange-cheeked Waxbills, search for family parties of Black-bellied Firefinch and shy pairs of picture-perfect Dybowski's Twinspot. Brown Twinspot prefers the moister, ranker areas, particularly along the margin of the crater lake and the scarce Yellow-winged Pytilia can be found drinking at shaded pools.

Easier to spot in the gallery forest canopy are gaudy groups of White-crested and Ross's Turacos, although they are likely to be heard before being seen. Bamenda Apalis, the only of Cameroon's endemics to be found in the northern areas of the country, and retiring Leaflove, are also usually located by voice. Also watch for the little-known Willcock's Honeyguide along the forest edge, which may oblige by hawking insects at eye level, but beware of confusion with the very similar Lesser and Least Honeyguides, both of which are present. Blackcap Babbler chatters alongside its plainer cousin, Brown Babbler.

The cool, shady understorey, is home to several special skulkers, including Grey-winged and White-crowned Robin-Chat which betray their presence with their melodious songs. First prize, however, is the curious Spotted Thrush-Babbler, a shy bird of uncertain taxonomic affinities that can prove elusive at the best of times. The unique black and yellow Oriole Warbler (Moho), familiar to birders from the Gambia, prefers thick tangles in the mid-storey, particularly around the many palm fronds. In passing you may spot Green-backed Woodpecker, Square-tailed Drongo or a Blue-breasted Kingfisher sitting motionless on its perch.

The surrounding woodlands are often more active, hosting large mixed species flocks. Among the most conspicuous birds are typically vociferous Western Grey Plantain-Eater and Senegal Parrot, and restless bands of Yellow-billed Shrike. Starling flocks are a key feature of the avifauna here and should yield not only Purple, Bronze-tailed and Splendid Glossy Startling, but also the highly localised and particularly exquisite White-collared Starling, the latter one of the most desired Guinea woodland endemics. Senegal Eremomela, White Helmet-shrike, Splendid Sunbird, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Black Woodhoopoe, Brown-backed Woodpecker, White-shouldered Black Tit, Red-shouldered and White-breasted Cuckooshrikes and Spotted Creeper are all regular in the feeding flocks. Blue-bellied Roller is scarce here, but has been recorded more regularly in recent years. Near the entrance to the ranch where the woodland is particularly stunted, watch out for Red-winged Warbler. The bare, oft-burnt ground provides ideal habitat for Heuglin's Wheatear and supports a small breeding population of Brown-chested Lapwing, an inconspicuous African plover that has an east-west migration across Africa. Tall-grassed areas, particularly around the lake, hold Whistling Cisticola and Marsh Tchagra, whereas Double-spurred Francolin is rather common where the grass is sparser. If you are exceptionally lucky you may find a Schlegel's Francolin, one of the ranch's most sought-after species, quietly scurrying through the grassy understorey.

For those who venture out after dark, a spotlighting session may prove very rewarding. African Scops Owl is common, and White-faced and Spotted Eagle Owls are present in small numbers. Nightjar diversity is impressive; Freckled, Long-tailed and Plain all occur, but pale in comparison to spectacular Pennant-winged and Standard-winged. The latter frequently displays on its lekking grounds near the ranch entrance, and may be flushed from its day roost in burnt, rocky areas. Bronze-winged Courser also occurs: listen for its eerie call.

Bénoûé National Park

North of Ngaoundaba the road winds its way down the escarpment of the Adamawa Plateau onto the

seemingly endless, woodland-cloaked Benoue plains. Low population pressures have left extensive areas intact, some of which fall into the Bénoué National Park. The richest birding habitat is a broad band of gallery forest that follows the wide Benoue River along the park's eastern border. Black-headed Gonolek, dainty Red-winged Grey Warbler, White-cheeked Oliveback, Black-bellied and Bar-breasted Firefinches, and Oriole Warbler frequent the dense tangles. The larger stands of trees may shelter a roosting Verreaux's Eagle Owl or Banded Snake Eagle, Viellot's Barbet, a striking Bearded Barbet or a dazzling pair of Violet Turaco. Here too one may find one of Africa's most attractive doves, Adamawa Turtle-Dove, which can be seen drinking at pools along the riverbed. The undisputed highlight, however, is the eye-catching Egyptian Plover, which actively chases insects along the exposed sandbars.

In the surrounding woodlands, mixed species flocks regularly hold Fine-spotted Woodpecker, Senegal Batis, Pygmy Sunbird, Cabanis's Bunting and Yellow-bellied Hyliota, and the stately Abyssinian Ground Hornbill can be seen pacing along determinedly. With some harder work you may be rewarded with Brown-rumped Bunting, West African Seedeater, Blue-bellied Roller, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Red-winged Pytilia or Black-faced Firefinch. Warblers abound in the rank grassy areas, with African Moustached and Red-winged Warblers, and Red-faced, Winding, Croaking, Short-winged, Rufous and Dorst's Cisticolas all being possibilities. Stone Partridge can often be seen scurrying from the roadside, whereas the secretive White-throated Francolin prefers good grass cover. Four-banded Sandgrouse favour bare areas, often feeding in the road. With a touch of good fortune one may find an Ovambo Sparrowhawk, White-fronted Black Chat, the scarce Rufous-rumped Lark or rare Emin's Shrike.

White-collared Starling
(Ron Hoff)



The extreme north: Waza and Mora

Lying on the edge of the Sahel close to the border with Chad, Waza and Mora are the hottest and most arid areas in the country. While the majority of Cameroon's endemic species are found in the forests of the south, this extreme northern area hold some of Africa's most desired species. The sparse grasslands near Mora are arguably the best place on the continent to search for the nomadic Quail Plover, a long-legged relative of the buttonquails. Its camouflage is so effective that it can walk undetected between a group of birders although, if surprised, it usually takes flight to reveal the white flashes in its primaries. Its superb camouflage is only outdone by Golden Nightjar, whose discovery here in March 2003 (see page 124) is one of Cameroon's most exciting recent finds. It remains to be seen whether this silver-and-gold gem is a regular visitor to this area. The highly localised Cricket Warbler, only discovered here in the last decade, may be found in the small bushes. Lying just to the north, the town of Waza and the adjacent national park are also a focus of most visits to the region. Desert transformed temporarily to marshlands, the floodplains' waters from last season's rains whittle away to small pools under the sun's parching rays, but still attract a profusion of bird life. It is worth spending time at the waterholes and surrounding acacia thickets both in Waza National Park and south of Waza along the main road. Most conspicuous are an array of storks, including Yellow-billed, African Openbill, White, Saddle-billed, Marabou and Woolly-necked, and impressive flocks of Black-crowned Crane. Large congregations of migrant Garganey assemble with smaller numbers of other waterfowl, while wading birds are represented by the likes of Senegal Thick-knee, African Wattled Lapwing and various Palaearctic migrant species. The waterholes also entice impressive numbers of granivores to drink, usually dominated by heaving swarms of Red-billed Quelea. Other small finches regularly seen include African Silverbill, White-rumped Seedeater, Sahel Paradise Whydah, Black-rumped Waxbill and colourful Cut-throat, African Quailfinch and Zebra Waxbill. Doves thrive in this region and with African Morning, African Collared, European Turtle and Black-billed Wood Doves all being regular. Just after dusk watch for flocks of Four-banded Sandgrouse, and once it is dark you may be fortunate to see Long-tailed Nightjar drinking on the wing.

With such a super-abundance of food, raptor numbers are always impressive. Best of all the intra-African migrants that are present in the dry season: Grasshopper Buzzard and the remarkable African Swallow-tailed Kite. This is one of the only places in African where the latter may be fairly common and small groups may be seen flying gracefully overhead. Bird hunters, such as Gabar and Dark Chanting Goshawks, and Red-necked and Peregrine Falcons, run amok among the birds around waterholes, often putting swirling masses to flight. Eagles are well represented and diverse mammal community supports healthy populations of vultures: watch overhead for flocks of African White-backed and Rueppell's Vultures, and the odd Lappet-faced, White-headed or Egyptian. Dense acacia thickets, which are scattered throughout the region, offer the most diverse birding and a good selection of Palaearctic migrants and resident species. The diminutive Sennar Penduline Tit, which combs the finer acacia branches for insects, is highly sought after. River Prinia, only recently confirmed for Cameroon, is actually quite common in the acacias on alluvial soils. Its call is clearly different from Tawny-flanked Prinia which occurs in the adjacent woodlands. Masked and Isabelline Shrikes sit and wait for their prey to pass, while Clapperton's Francolin actively scratch in the bare earth. White-billed Buffalo-Weaver are easily found around their large, messy nests, and Yellow-crowned Gonolek skulk in the thickets. Open country, usually lightly grassed with scattered bushes, should yield a whole suite of other species. Within the Waza National Park, watch out for Arabian Bustard stalking along the lightly grassed floodplains, particularly in the early morning. Although this species extends widely across the Sahelian region (recorded from Morocco, although almost extinct there), Cameroon is one of the only places where it can be seen reliably. White-bellied Bustard is more widespread, together with Chestnut-bellied Starling, bold Black-headed Lapwing, ever-busy Rufous and Black Scrub-Robins and dazzling Little Green Bee-eater.

In the second part of the series we explore the endemic-rich highland forests of the south, as well as the lowland haunts of Red-headed Picathartes.

Acknowledgments

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