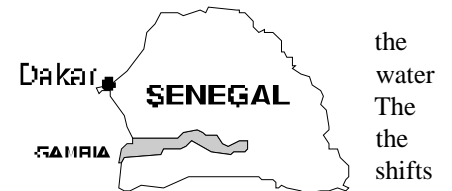


THE GAMBIA

GATEWAY TO AFRICAN BIRDING

SIX HOURS flying time away from Europe, The Republic of The Gambia has justifiably become extolled as the gateway to African birding. It is a small country, a microcosm in a vast and varied continent. Located at 14° north at the interface of the dry and humid zones in West Africa, The Gambia is situated at the crossroads for birds belonging to these major climatic belts. Africa is custodian to 2,229 bird species and the Gambian list totals ca. 550 of which ca. 150 breed in Europe. It is thus an area of great migratory importance. The species density for the landmass (10,367 sq. km) is astonishing; there are birds everywhere.

Completely surrounded by the much larger, francophone, Senegal except along Atlantic Ocean seaboard, the country is dissected by one of West Africa's major courses, The Gambia river, which rises in the Fouta Djallon plateau in Guinea. The river flows its last few hundred kilometres through the largely flat topography of Gambia. It is tidal along much of its length with a zone of brackish water that according to the dry and rainy season. Associated tracts of riparian forest, creeks, bolons and inter-linked wetlands, all so prominently varied in their ecology, make up a complex network upon which the birdlife here depends.



In the forest of **Abuko** a 30-minute drive from Tanji alongside the canopy dwelling Guinea Touraco and Yellow Chested Apalis, it is likely you will see foraging Melodious and Olivaceous Warbler. Likewise at the easily accessible **Tanji Bird Reserve** 1000s of Royal and Caspian Tern and an odd White-fronted Sand Plover share the beach with Whimbrel, Sanderling and dense flocks of Sandwich Tern. **Bund Road**, a two kilometre stretch of highway, divides a vista of the main river estuary on one side from the capital Banjul on the other and regularly provides views of 60 plus species of mixed terns, waders, herons, pelicans, ibis, egrets, and gulls in a single hour's watch at the optimum visiting time of low tide.

In the extensive dry savanna woodlands of **Kiang West National Park** in Lower River Division 150km to the east, European Redstart and an occasional Bonelli's Warbler join industrious mixed breeding parties of Senegal Batis, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, White-shouldered Black Tit and Yellow White Eye. In the wide ranging blue skies that spread over this same habitat, winter visiting Booted Eagle is dwarfed by the immensity of the regularly seen Martial Eagle, Africa's largest raptor.

Near to Kiang West and just a boat trip across the majestic River Gambia is the sprawling mangrove forest of the **Baobolong Wetland**. The rare White-backed Night Heron breeds here above armies of fiddler Crabs and amphibious mudskippers. Common Sandpiper and Greenshank forage alongside the tiny malachite kingfisher, one The Gambia's nine species. You expect up to eight of them on a round country safari with only the little known shining Blue Kingfisher proving elusive for most. The tranquillity of this aquatic wilderness, now recognised as a site of international importance, is complemented by the squeaky ditty of the graceful and local Fairy Blue Flycatcher darting about low over the water, and the bark of a departing Goliath Heron. Blue-breasted Kingfisher, a mangrove specialist that predates upon mudskippers and fiddler crabs, croons its cascading song, effecting a domino effect down adjoining territories. On a two-hour motorised pirogue canoe trip here six of the eight listed Bee-eaters have been recorded including the magnificent Northern Carmine. The luckiest, diligent watcher might get a glimpse of African Finfoot picking its way through a network of semi-submerged mangrove stilts or even spot the rare Pel's fishing Owl somnolently awaiting the hour of dusk hidden deep in the towering canopy of the swamp.

Here in The Gambia Africa converges with the palearctic in a non-stop show of accessible bird watching. Photographic and filming opportunities in good light are many. Come to The Gambia in any month and a varied ornithological spectacle awaits you. Come in November through early December and you will just be in time to see an overlap of hectic wet-season breeding activity, resident Bishops, Wyhdahs and Weavers bedecked in bright ornate nuptial plumages mixed with a surge of Warblers and Waders from the north, and an assortment of intra-African migrants yet to return south as the rains come to a close, are still in the country.

Diverse and accessible habitat always make for pleasurable birding. Ocean, scenic beaches and estuary, remnant pockets of coastal climax forest, a vast river with a labyrinth of varied mangrove and riparian forest, dry savanna woodlands, agricultural pasture and paddy fields. For a careful eager eye there is rarely a moment in The Gambia when there isn't

something to watch. A good road network, very friendly co-operative people, excellent coastal hotels to suit all pockets, comfortable climate and adequate bush accommodation away from the coastal hotels combine to make nationally protected areas and numerous important bird sites all attainable in a two week stay. A general absence of dangerous game allows safe passage on foot to birdwatch almost anywhere a rare phenomena elsewhere in birds rich Africa, there is no need to constantly look at birds from the restrictions of a bus window here! Dawn comes up at about 06.30pm and dusk cools the day at 19.00pm. During these hours it is feasible to record well in excess of a hundred species in a day at the coast and in the region of 275 in a well led and selected site round country safari. Stay out at night and you are likely to add a few nightjars, owls, and even a courser or two.

One thing is for sure and that is **The Gambia Means Birds**. The country has four protected areas managed by the Department of Wildlife and Parks Management (DWPM) and these contain a good cross selection of all The Gambia's birds. Additionally there are three RAMSAR sites under survey; the Bao-bolon Wetland and Nuimi National Park in North Bank Division, and the Tandi Wetland complex, which encompasses Bund Road, Old Cape Road, Camolou and Oyster Creek all near Banjul.

To the more adventurous birder The Gambia has become synonymous with the Egyptian Plover or Crocodile Bird, bird of striking markings and confining nature, it is the logo of The African Bird Club and the River Gambia is famed as a virtually guaranteed place to ensure seeing this magnificent bird, if you come at the right time! The pilgrimage to Basse Santu Su at the very east of the country just before the river disappears into Senegal has become renowned as the number one global site to see this bird. A few remain into February in most years to return when inundation forces them back out of Senegal where they breed, after the first atoms of the season's rains.

So many familiar European birds need African space to live in order to balance their annual equation of migratory movement. Here is country that is aspiring for support from visiting ornithologists to make this equilibrium possible, you can come here and really help. So, come through the gateway; come birding in The Gambia.

Climate

The climate is dominated by a system of rainy and dry seasons; the former breaks in most years in mid-June and finishes by mid October. Temperatures range from 43°C inland during the day in May to 14°C in January at night. However day temperatures generally average a mean of 28°C over the year at the coast to 34°C in the east. In the two weeks immediately after the rain concludes soaring humidity and high temperatures combine to make conditions uncomfortable and this is a time for hardened tropical birders who don't mind changing their cotton clothing several times a day and drinking an endless stream of liquid, birding then is hard but the rewards are rich! By early November the air has cleared and life without an air-conditioner or fan becomes bearable again, by mid December you may even require a light sweater in the evenings should you wish to go out looking for standard-winged Nightjar and African Scops owl. Days of hot dusty harmattan wind blowing south off the Sahara can occur anytime in the dry season but this rarely effects the quality of the birding for long. Strong gales may bring in quantities of Northern Gannet, good numbers of skua and storm petrel species; this is a good time to take your scope out over the sea from the beach bar of your hotel.