

The Gambia 21st to 28th December 2007

After the inevitable delays, freezing fog, we set off out of the cloud to bright sunshine and so was set the weather for the next week. The Sahara was huge, noticed what I first imagined to be goats walking in long lines and then realized we were too high for that to be distinguished and concluded they were trees following the track of water-courses now dried. Some green there but suspect they were farms significantly irrigated because of lack of trees. Flew over Mauritania, which sounds as if it should be an old principality of Europe and then Senegal to the The Gambia. Hurly burly of a foreign land and the locals sensing whiter than white meat ready for some plucking. One guy tried to elicit £5 from us for wheeling Maggie's bag 20 metres. Did not oblige.

The drive to our hotel was truly memorable. It was the day after a Muslim festival of 'slaughter' where lots of animals are killed for the public holiday the next day and that was the day of our arrival.

Everywhere beside the road were young and old alike dressed in such fine clothes: shocking pinks, deep purples, lime greens, white from top to toe. Glitter and beauty. One memorable scene was five girls standing on the kerb to cross the road. Three older girls in blue interspersed with two smaller dressed in brown and white swirls. They carry colour in a way we can not. All this colour and apparent joy was back-dropped with goats, cows, piles of rubbish, dust, kiosk like shops, cars, bikes, various tropical trees and bushes broken walls and stones, piles of tyres, broken metal and up the side streets or set off from the road as far as we could see houses cobbled together from wood, tin and sometimes stone. An amazing sight-truly. Arrived at the Atlantic Hotel in Banjul and eventually settled in our room. Got to get a handle on the tipping-not sure how it works!

Lamin 1 gave a brief briefing this morning. Lamin is the name normally given to first born Muslim boys hence the country rolls in Lamins. Lamin 2 is the tall thin man I saw on arrival yesterday-he is the 'bird man' advertised by his ever-present binoculars. We will meet him in person later. So it was down to the pool and I swear the man in blue who gives out the chairs knew I was a bit anti-social and put our sun-loungers under the trees away from the crowds, very astute of him.

It was then that the bird-watching began. I had already spotted [Speckled Pigeon](#) and [Pied Crow](#) from my room's window. Exotic enough to begin with and full of that wow factor. On the sun-lounger under the oil palms, not far from the pool [Cattle Egrets](#) came insect hunting strolling past sometimes no further than one metre away. Noisy [Long Tailed Glossy](#)

[Starlings](#) gambolled above my head. Our starlings are stunning but these were something else! There were [Hooded Vultures](#) in profusion, later rising on thermals in numbers up to fifty at a time. There are three hooded vulture nests in the grounds and it was not unusual to see these rather dyspraxic birds, when perched on a palm, trying to gather one leaf from a frond as an addition to its nest. It was also not unusual after a great deal of effort to see them drop them! Wheeling sedately over the hotel regularly were [Black Kites](#) and flitting occasionally above our heads were the perfectly named [Beautiful Sunbirds](#). Hearing the first recognizable 'cheep' of the holiday I spotted a [White Wagtail](#) with its undulating flight and penchant for foraging at the edge of human activity. In the grounds of the hotel is a purpose built area for birds designed and maintained for a long time by Clive Barlow co-author of 'Birds of the Gambia'. I took a little stroll there and saw a female [Red Billed Firefinch](#), lovely, but unfortunately without an accompanying male which is truly a mind-bogglingly red. The 'binocular man' Lamin2 spotted me having a beer over lunch with the 'bird book' on the table and came over for a chat. He agreed to give me guided tour of the grounds. He showed me the vulture nests-I saw one bird sitting. He is making a special study of this bird. Counting how many birds in thermals at different times of the year, incubation habits and their behaviour. On the tour in addition to what I had already seen we saw [Bulbul](#), [Senegal Coucal](#), [Shikra](#) and [Village Weaver](#). The shikra is a small, beautiful hawk not unlike the sparrow hawk, and it was sitting calmly in a tree as the weaver birds were going ballistic but it was quite unconcerned.

The next day we decide to visit the famous Albert Market. It's very advisable to take an official guide. For 150 Dalasis he will escort you there and back and keep the 'bumsters' away. The 'bumsters' are notorious in The Gambia but nonetheless often very charming young men trying to survive. They are masters of charm and will stick with you with the perseverance of a leech. It does make trying to walk on your own a hassle hence we took the guide. Saw a [House Sparrow](#) near the president's Palace. We strolled back along the beach and I saw a [Grey headed Gull](#). Afternoon was spent reading on the sun-loungers. Six additions to the list: [Red Billed Hornbill](#), [Yellow Crowned Gonolek](#) (a wonderful looking bird), [Rose Ringed Parakeet](#), [Grey Woodpecker](#), [Green Wood Hoopoe](#) and [Bronze Mannikin](#).

On Christmas Day we went with Lamin2 to Abuko Nature Reserve. It's a good reserve. We saw three different species of monkey a tiny antelope - a moving shadow and a flicking tail! The birding was magnificent. [Hammerkops](#), a prehistoric looking bird, were collecting nesting material.

African Darter drying its wings. In quick succession Squacco Heron, Grey Heron, Black Crowned Night Heron, Palm Nut Vulture, African Harrier Hawk and Black Kite. On an island were Common Sandpiper and Green Sandpiper. A Laughing Dove was strolling along a track and a Senegal Coucal in a nearby bush. Then for me the bird of the day a Giant Kingfisher first a female with a bloodied fish in its beak and then great views of a male in the crook of a branch. More wonders came in the shape of a Violet Turaco and Green Turaco and a Western Grey Plantain Eater. We also saw Little Greenbul, Common Bulbul, African Thrush, Hybrid Red-Bellied Flycatcher, Common Wattle Eye, Black Headed Weaver, Village Weaver, Senegal Firefinch and the shadows of foliage a Western Bluebill. A truly memorable birding day but thank goodness we had an experienced guide. I would have spent half of my time looking in the guide if it wasn't for Lamin.

The following day we took a taxi to Senegambia and on the way I saw an Abyssinian Roller swaying on a wire also an African Jacana walking over lily-pads. The driver took us to four pools, very still and apparently clear although lorries were arriving and off-loading water that I think had been siphoned from septic tanks. There was certainly a wiff in the air. We saw White faced Whistling Duck, the beautiful Spur Winged Plover, Black Winged Stilt, Bar Tailed Godwit and Pied Winged Swallow.

On the beach the following morning I saw Sanderling and a Kelp Gull flying parallel to the shore.

I had one more trip with Lamin. He agreed to take myself and a keen photographer called Eric on a walk beside the Bund Road. This road is busy with lorries zig-zagging from left to right trying miss the pot holes so it can be a little 'hairy'. On the left of the road were the tidal banks near the mouth of the River Gambia and on the right were the mangroves. Two good habitats. Well there were large numbers of Pink Backed Pelican, numerous Long Tailed Cormorants, Grey Heron, Western Reef Heron and Squacco Heron. We saw Great White Egret and Little Egret as well as Marsh Harrier and Osprey. The osprey was perched on a stump above the mud - I don't think it moved for the whole two hours we were there because on our return it was still perched on same stump. There were many Pied Kingfishers perched on wires looking intently into the mangrove swamp and when flying calling strangely. Here is just a straight list of the other bird seen: Ringed Plover, Spur Winged Plover, Curlew, Whimbrel, Bar Tailed Godwit, Redshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Slender Billed Gull, Grey Headed Gull, Royal Tern, Sandwich Tern, Caspian Tern, Gull Billed Tern, Laughing Dove, Black Billed Dove, African Mourning Dove, Senegal Coucal, Giant Kingfisher, Blue Cheeked Bee Eater, Red

Billed Hornbill, Wire Tailed Swallow, Sub-Alpine Warbler, Village Weaver, Bronze Mannikin and last but by no means least the absolutely wonderful male version of the Senegal Fire Finch.

I think there are over 400 species on the Gambian List and I, at least, made a little in-road into their number. I would recommend a visit although go with pound coins you are prepared to give away and take guides. It was a wonderful holiday and the birds speak for themselves.
Bill Shaw.