

THE CAPTIVATING ZAMBEZI KAVANGO BIRDING CONNECTION: BIRDING BOTSWANA and ZAMBIA

August 2009 Trip Report



Flying in Okavango Delta by Michael Poliza

By Kim Frost, Denmark

This birding tour in Botswana and Zambia was Kim and Sunneva Frost's fifth private safari with Avian Leisure. Their luxury accommodation included Wilderness Safaris' Toka Leya Camp in Livingstone, Selinda Camp in the Linyanti in Northern Botswana, and Tubu Tree Camp in the Okavango Delta, as well as the delightful Ichingo Chobe River Lodge and their Ichobezi Houseboat on the Chobe River.

Kim has written the trip report below describing their experience:

This for my wife and I our fifth private tour to Southern Africa commenced with an early August 2009 fly in to Livingstone in Zambia from Johannesburg . Objective outside of pure birding pleasure in search of species



Dickenson's Kestrel

new to me, embraced a long held scenic desire to view the awesome spectacle of the swollen Zambezi in full flood cascading in a headlong rush over the Victoria Falls on its serpentine way to the Indian Ocean in Mozambique.

In this regard I was not to be disappointed with early morning views in soft photographic light from the edge of a spray soaked forested spur overlooking the main gorge below me and the railway beyond that represents the umbilical transportation link between Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Lodgings for the first night were right on the Zambezi upstream from the falls and well within the national wildlife park that runs westwards along the north bank.

Our first outing in an open safari car constituted a logistically well orchestrated combination of a game drive for the afternoon followed by a sunset river cruise back to camp in a specially chartered motor boat. As such the best of both birding worlds were on offer and I made the most of this very special occasion. Highlights of the meandering game drive through mature mopani woodland to the boat jetty were stunning with good views of birds such as Southern Ground Hornbill, Brown Snake Eagle, Dickenson's Kestrel, Lizard Buzzard, Lilac-breasted Roller, Red-billed Hornbill, Crested Barbet, Brubru Shrike, Red-billed and Jameson's Firefinch, Blue Waxbill and White-fronted Bee-eater being obtained in quick succession.

Heading up the Zambezi River we secured close up views of Malachite, Pied and a Giant Kingfisher on a perch adjacent to the nest hole along with a noisy group of White-fronted Bee-eaters before swinging across the main current to the Zimbabwe side. Exposed sandbars held Water Thickee and White-crowned Plover followed by several views of Green-backed Heron patiently stalking about under the overhanging canopy of river palms and brushwood. Almost on cue with the plaintive and far carrying cries of a pair of African Fish Eagle ringing in the distance an African Skimmer swept into sight as it carved a reflective crease line across the main current before settling on an exposed sandbar for the night.

We had no sooner recovered from this 'mega' sighting when a female African Finfoot sneaked past in the



White-fronted Bee-eater



Rock Pratincole



Slaty Egret

shadow of a fringing reed bed before disappearing up a hippo track with its luminescent orange feet aflame in the late afternoon light to add a further 'key' special to our growing list.

All around the river was being criss-crossed by Wire-tailed Swallows, Brown-throated Martins and Collared Pratincoles hawking emerging insects above the white water rapids, while grunting hippos appeared and disappeared in quick succession as we zigzagged our way back to camp through their respective territories.

Just ahead of sunset, as we were about to go ashore on an island for 'sundowners', a rare and highly localized White-backed Night Heron was spotted sunning itself quietly in what remained of the evening light at close of play for the day.

What a way to end my first day and what an introduction to the birdlife of the Zambezi !

Day two started with my guide recording African Golden Oriole and African White-eye in a flowering msasa tree overhanging the breakfast deck. The former proved to be an unexpected 'dip' for me as only Black-headed Orioles were recorded during the rest of the trip.

Crossing the Zambezi into Botswana at its confluence with the Chobe river proved to be relatively simple and colorful affair as brightly painted trucks, olive painted safari cars, taxis of all descriptions and pedestrians in vibrantly colored T-shirts and cotton skirts from local and foreign destinations converged on the immigration offices on both sides of the river for passport control clearance.

Once across we boarded a speedboat and headed across the Chobe channel to our lodge on Impalila Island , the most eastern extension of the Caprivi Strip in Namibia.

The final downstream run across a white water rapid to our landing beach took us within arms reach of a stunning Rock Pratincole nonchalantly observing proceedings from the top of a potholed boulder in midstream. Clearly we were off to a great start as a follow on to Zambia!

Directly opposite the camp we had a tree packed to nesting capacity with Yellow-billed Storks and White-



Chirping Cisticola



Bradfield's Hornbill



Pel's Fishing Owl

breasted Cormorants while African Finfoot made their way up and down the river below the viewing deck. Add to this the electric blue flash of a Half-collared Kingfisher and you have an idea of the scene before us with assorted herons and egrets flying about us in all directions.

Within the camp itself Arrow-marked Babblers, Orange-breasted Bush Shrikes, Yellow-bellied and Terrestrial Bulbuls and White-bellied Sunbirds were tame and approachable additions to the riverside delights.

That afternoon we set off for the Chobe Game Reserve with a mix of game and bird watching in mind. This was the first time I had been game viewing in a boat and the occasion proved to be an unforgettable experience as the elephant and a host of wading birds seemed hardly to notice our presence as we drifted by in close proximity. Birding highlights were Slaty Egret, Black Heron doing its 'canopy' wing act, Great White Egret in abundance, African Marsh Harrier, Long-toed Plover, African Wattled Plover, African Jacana, Comb Duck, Luapula Cisticola and a herd of elephants 'snorkeling' their way across the main river to the flood plain!

The following morning we set off in search of Swamp Boubou followed by Greater Swamp Warbler, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Chirping Cisticola and a pair of exquisite African Pygmy Geese dabbling about in a lily covered backwater. Add to this an unexpected sighting of an Allen's Gallinule in a fully exposed position on a lily pad with an African Jacana for company and you have a feel for the day.

Our night was spent aboard a houseboat in Elephant Bay on the Chobe River overlooking an extensive sand bank complete with breeding African Skimmers and a resident Water Monitor that was being continually harassed by skimmers and plovers as it plodded about in search of eggs and chicks.

Returning to Kasane, Botswana, early the next day for our flight to the Okavango Delta we had the unexpected pleasure of sighting a White-browed Coucal in the crown of a creeper covered lead wood tree and close by an agitated pair of Schalow's Turacos as they cavorted about in the canopy of a jackal berry tree in the grounds of a safari lodge.

On clearing immigration we 'ticked' off Brown Firefinch and Northern Grey Headed Sparrow before setting off for the airport. Our flight to a bush camp near the Savuti Channel on the Linyanti River was uneventful and it wasn't long before we were into new sightings once again. These included close up views of Pink-backed Pelican, Saddlebill and Marabou Stork feeding along the spill way in association with Hamerkop, Openbill and Slaty Egret.

Yellow-billed Oxpeckers were found in number on the first Cape Buffalo herd we encountered at an isolated pan. A much sought after Bradfield's Hornbill following an earlier Namibia birding trip was finally encountered whistling away in a fig tree on the game drive back to lodge to complete our suite of potential hornbill sightings for the safari.



Retz's Helmet Shrike



African Skimmers

Our next morning focused on woodland habitat within which we found Giant Eagle Owl, Dickenson's Kestrel, Ayre's Hawk Eagle, Meyer's Parrot, Arnott's Chat, White-crested Helmet Shrike and Swallow-tailed Bee-eater followed by Secretarybird and a single Red-necked Falcon in a stand of ilala palms in open grassland. Surprise of all was a Collared Palm Thrush in the lodge area - a bird not supposed to occur in Botswana according to the latest distribution maps...

A long drive to the Savuti channel paid off with Gull-billed and Whiskered Tern being recorded along with Hottentot Teal and a diminutive Lesser Jacana in a weed-choked backwater to complete our new listings for the day.

Next stop was a camp in the upper reaches of the Delta itself along the Kavango river.

Our focus hinged totally on locating a Pel's Fishing Owl in its day roost somewhere within the matrix of well wooded islands that dotted the delta area. In this regard we were not to be disappointed and with little ado we boated across the open papyrus swamps to a river camp with two of the most experienced guides in the camp. After a quick cup of coffee we switched to mokoros – the traditional hollowed out tree trunk canoe – and poled across to the first of a series of likely looking islands and then, as if pre-orchestrated, the advance guide announced he had found the bird. Needless to say we were ecstatic as there in the morning sun sat a well exposed Pel's Fishing Owl peering down at us with pitch black extra-terrestrial eyes as we stalked about in search of an optimum viewing position for the spotting scope below it.

Add to this the insistent chattering of an agitated Greater Honeyguide intent on leading us to a nearby bee hive and the musical churring of a party of highly endearing and inquisitive Retz's Helmet Shrikes and you have a closing scene only Africa can provide.

This was unquestionable the birding highlight of the trip and the note we ended on as we coursed our way back through the papyrus swamp with Squacco Herons and Great White Egrets flushing in all directions along the meandering channel back to base camp for our last night.

As usual Patrick from Avian Leisure was our tour leader. He knows the preferred habitat of every single bird and is a second-to-none field ornithologist. An addition, he never takes chances neither in the traffic nor in populated areas with the risk of crime. Not to mention his excellent knowledge of history, geography, politics and wines! Thanks to his excellent guidance, total sightings for the seven night itinerary added up to 228 species for a winter trip to the tropics. Once again I wish to acknowledge the thought and planning by Avian Leisure that went into ensuring all aspects of the trip were outstanding in every respect to make for a hassle free experience that exceeded all expectation.

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