

BUCKBIRD JOURNEYS Ltd

DJIBOUTI (a step into the little known)

Sunday 18 – Wednesday 21 November 2007

Participants

Louise Augustine (LA), Hugh Buck (HB), David Daniels (DD), David Hoddinott (DH), Pearl Jordan (PJ), Werner Suter (WS)

This trip was designed as an extension to Yemen and Socotra for a short look at an almost unknown (birdwise) country, albeit one starting to develop a tourist industry – mostly for its underwater life. Prime aim was to seek out the highly endangered Djibouti Francolin with additional ones to find the range restricted Somali Sparrow and to see what else this little visited destination could offer. A number of restricted range birds in Africa were an additional lure.

Day by Day

Sunday 18 November

Yemenia finally relents and delivers us safely at Djibouti City late in the evening. Visas and immigration prove no problem, French born Valerie of Agence le Goubet is there to meet us and an air conditioned bus delivers us to the seaside La Siesta Hotel. Some enjoy their first cold beers for several days whilst Whimbrels titter in the dark from the nearby shore.

Monday 19 November

The birding starts early as the tide recedes from the bay across the road from us. A variety of Herons, Gulls (including White-eyed), Terns and waders are on view and the nearby scrub holds Common (Somali) Bulbul, Red-billed Firefinch and a nice flock of Arabian Golden Sparrows – the first of a series of good Asian birds for Africa as the situation in nearby Yemen is reversed.

Yemenia's antics of yesterday have necessitated some further re-arrangements which cut into our morning but by 1000 we are away in our bus, out of town, through the rubbish strewn outskirts and into dry acacia scrub. Chorusing Rosy-patched Bushshrikes draw us to a halt and the scrub soon produces, amongst others, a Yellow-breasted Barbet, noisy Red-fronted Warblers, several Eurasian Hoopoes, a Northern Crombec, a perched up Rufous-tailed Bush-Robin and a neat little rusty limbed Salt's Dik-Dik. Our destination is the Refuge de Decan, resting spot for trans-located animals and here a trio of rusty capped male Somali Sparrows are our first major success of the trip. The muddy expanses of Djibouti Bay on the way home are littered with birds including Lesser Flamingos, a couple of Goliath Herons and an Egyptian Goose.

Here we sadly say goodbye to LA and PJ who, unable to manipulate their flights home, are on their way back to Sana'a in the evening. The rest of us, to a greater or lesser extent financially worse off, are now joined by our redoubtable guide Houmed Ali and it is in his Land Cruiser that we now head west, initially along the busy trunk road to Ethiopia filled with choking lorries, then north along the edge of the Golf de Tadjourah and the bay of Le Goubet Kharab. A couple of Lanners are spied going at the Pigeons on the outskirts of town and then the landscape gets more and more desolate and spectacular as we traverse the forbidding lava flows around Lac Assal – third largest salt lake in the world.

There are birds to be seen including new things such as Desert Lark and White-crowned Black Wheatear but it is mostly the mammals – the Pelzen's "race" of Dorcas Gazelle, several Gerenuks, more Salt's Dik-Diks and a few Ethiopian Rock-Hyraxes which catch the eye. Despite the counter attractions I keep us moving, now up the gravel road to our destination of the juniper forests of the Foret du Day. A Klipspringer, a couple of Bonelli's Eagles and some close Hemprich's Hornbills interrupt our progress but by 1700 we reach the rustic rondavels of the Campenement Touristique where we dump our bags. We have just enough time to get to the Villa de Gouverneur (Governor's Mansion), first through the sadly dying junipers (drought and fungal infection seem to be to blame) replete with troupes of Hamdryas (Sacred) Baboons and then, on foot, along the spectacular escarpment and down to the dry "well".

This is prime Francolin territory and Houmed knows the score (he has worked with the World Pheasant Association in their attempts to save this species). He soon locates a covey of four birds which give us a variety of views before disappearing, one bird taking to flight. The Djibouti Francolin is entirely restricted to this one biotype, is down to less than 1000 birds and, with the dying forests all too plain to see, the future scarcely looks bright. But for us our major objective has been achieved, we dine well on spaghetti and salad and our simple rondavels are comfortable enough, despite a few mosquitoes, on the starry night.

Tuesday 20 November

But by dawn the stars are gone and a damp mist and spitting drizzle greet us. This is apparently a common winter phenomenon here but this is apparently the first of the season. Back at the Francolin site the mist is thick and although Houmed locates another covey they are impossible to see and we only hear them in the gloom. We thank our gods that we got here in time yesterday evening. A male Red-tailed Wheatear, of the colourful xanthoprymna race, is a good bird for Africa but scarcely dazzles in the opacity.

The mist and intermittent drizzle persists and, although we add a few more – Cardinal and Nubian Woodpeckers, Green-backed Carmaroptera, Black-eared Wheatear and Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush – by mid morning we have had enough and decide to opt for a slow return to Djibouti City in the lower sunshine. At our lunch spot (a delicious whole roast kid goat) DH gets the mammal we all want. We have talked up the little Gundi like Speke's Pectinator into something special and the one found sunning itself on an old wall in its rocky habitat gives prolonged scope views, spectacles, curled tail and all. A great mammalian tick!

At the end of Goubet Kharab the coast is full of surprises. Persian Shearwaters, Bridled (and a single immature Sooty) Terns are here in numbers, some of them dead or moribund on the beach. This is apparently a regular occurrence, perhaps these essentially marine species getting trapped at the end of this arid gulf although it is difficult to see how they cannot get out again. A few Rose-ringed Parakeets are flying around in the evening in Djibouti City as we regain the Hotel la Siesta for an upmarket final dinner with wine in their terrace restaurant.

Wednesday 21 November

All good things come to an end and two pairs of Crab Plovers are our final new bird. Clean and comfortable Eritrean Airlines whisk us away on time to Dubai where the party breaks up, some to meet again in two weeks time – in Sierra Leone!

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And through them Houmed Ali Houmed (Francolin guide)

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BIRDS and OTHERS recorded in Djibouti

18 – 21 November 2007

Bold A species endemic to the Horn of Africa

***** A species of restricted range in Africa

Birds

- 1* Persian Shearwater (*Puffinus persicus*)
At least 20, some dead or moribund, Goubet Kharab 20/11
- 2 Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotatus*)
- 3 Pink-backed Pelican (*Pelecanus rufescens*)
- 4 Goliath Heron (*Ardea goliath*)
Adult and immature Djibouti Harbour 19/11
- 5 Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)
- 6 Western Reef Egret (*Egretta gularis*)
- 7 Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*)
- 8 Western Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)
- 9 African Sacred Ibis (*Threskiornis aethopicus*)
- 10 Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*)
- 11 Lesser Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus minor*)
- 12 Egyptian Goose (*Alopochen aegypticus*)
- 13 Osprey (*Pandion halietus*)
- 14 Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*)
- 15 Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*)
- 16* Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciatus*)
2 Day Village 19/11. Very restricted range in sub-Saharan Africa
- 17 Lanner Falcon (*Falco biarmicus*)
- 18 **Djibouti Francolin** (*Francolinus ochropectus*)
4 Foret du Day 19/11. Heard 20/11. A flagship species on the endangered list
- 19 Crab Plover (*Dromas ardeola*)
4 Djibouti Harbour 21/11
- 20 Eurasian Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)
- 21 Spur-winged Plover (*Vanellus spinosus*)
- 22 Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*)
- 23 Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*)
- 24 Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*)
- 25 Greater Sand Plover (*Charadrius leschenaultia*)
- 26 Lesser Sand Plover (*Charadrius mongolicus*)
- 27 Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*)
- 28 Eurasian Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*)
- 29 Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)
- 30 Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*)
- 31 Common Redshank (*Tringa totanus*)
- 32 Terek Sandpiper (*Xenus cinereus*)
- 33 Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*)
- 34 Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)
- 35 Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)
- 36 Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*)

- 37 Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*)
- 38* White-eyed Gull (*Larus leucopthalmus*)
3 Djibouti Harbour 19/11, 3 on 20/11. A very good species for Africa
- 39 Sooty Gull (*Larus hemprichii*)
- 40 Heughlin's Gull (*Larus heuglini*)
- 41 Caspian Gull (*Larus cachinnans*)
- 42 Caspian Tern (*Sterna nilotica*)
- 43 Saunder's Tern (*Sterna saundersi*)
- 44 Bridled Tern (*Sterna anaethetus*)
20 or so, apparently in trouble, Goubet Kharab 20/11
- 45 Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*)
1 immature Goubet Kharab 20/11
- 46 Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*)
1 Goubet Kharab 20/11
- 47 Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*)
- 48 White-winged Tern (*Chilidonus leucopterus*)
- 49 Speckled Pigeon (*Columba guinea*)
- 50 Rameron Pigeon (*Columba arquatrix*)
2 Foret du Day 19/11 and 20/11
- 51 Laughing Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*)
- 52 Namaqua Dove (*Oena capensis*)
- 53 Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*)
Small numbers Djibouti City 20/11 and 21/11
- 54 African Scops-Owl (*Otus senegalensis*)
Heard Foret du day 19/11
- 55 Little Swift (*Apus affinis*)
- 56 Eurasian Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*)
- 57 European Roller (*Coracias garrulus*)
- 58 Hemprich's Hornbill (*Tockus hemprichii*)
Foret du Day 7 19/11, 2 on 20/11. A village bird here
- 59 Yellow-breasted Barbet (*Tachyphonus marginatus*)
1 Refuge de Decan 19/11
- 60 Nubian Woodpecker (*Campethera nubicus*)
Male Foret du Day 20/11
- 61 Cardinal Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus fuscens*)
2 Foret du Day 20/11
- 62 Desert Lark (*Ammomanes deserti*)
2 Goubet Kharab – Foret du Day road 19/11, 12 on 20/11
- 63 Black-crowned Finch-Lark (*Eremopterix nigriceps*)
- 64 African Rock Martin (*Hirundo fuligula*)
- 65 Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)
- 66 White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)
- 67 Long-billed Pipit (*Anthus similis*)
- 68 Fork-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus rhipidurus*)
- 69 Somali Bulbul (*Pycnonotus (barbatus) somaliensis*)
Common in upper arid regions below Foret du Day
- 70 Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush (*Motacilla saxatilis*)
Male Foret du Day 20/11
- 71 Blue Rock-Thrush (*Motacilla solitarius*)

- 72 Rufous Bush-Chat (*Cercotrichus galactoides*)
1 Refuge de Decan 19/11
- 73 Black Scrub-Robin (*Cercotrichus podobe*)
- 74 Blackstart (*Cercomela melanura*)
- 75 White-crowned Black-Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucopygia*)
Goubet Kharab road
- 76 Desert Wheatear (*Oenanthe deserti*)
- 77 Black-eared Wheatear (*Oenanthe hispanica*)
1 Foret du Day 20/11
- 78* Kurdish Wheatear (*Oenanthe xanthopyrna*)
A fine male Foret du Day 20/11. As far as is known only a vagrant to Africa
- 79 Isabelline Wheatear (*Oenanthe isabellina*)
- 80 Pied Wheatear (*Oenanthe pleshanka*)
81. Red-breasted Wheatear (*Oenanthe bottae*)
- 82 Eastern Olivaceous Warbler (*Hippolais placida*)
- 83 Upcher's Warbler (*Hippolais languida*)
- 84 Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*)
- 85 Brown Woodland Warbler (*Phylloscopus umbrovirens*)
- 86 Menetrie's Warbler (*Sylvia mystacea*)
- 87 Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*)
- 88* Arabian Warbler (*Sylvia leucomelaema*)
1 Foret du Day road 19/11. Another good one for Africa
- 89 Graceful Prinia (*Prinia gracilis*)
- 90 Red-fronted Warbler (*Urorhipis rufifrons*)
- 91 Northern Crombec (*Sylvietta brachyura*)
- 92 Green-backed Carmaroptera (*Carmaroptera brachyura*)
- 93 Southern Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*)
- 94 Black-crowned Tchagra (*Tchagra senegalensis*)
- 95 Rosy-patched Bush-Shrike (*Rhodophoneus cruentus*)
At least 10 around Refuge de Decan 19/11. Nominate race
- 96 Somali Starling (*Onychognathus frateri*)
Common in lowland bush. Rides on camels
- 97 Red-billed Oxpecker (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*)
2 Foret du Day 20/11
- 98 Nile Valley Sunbird (*Hedydipna metallica*)
- 99 Shining Sunbird (*Cinnyris habessinica*)
- 100 White-breasted White-Eye (*Zosterops abyssinica*)
- 101 **Somali Sparrow** (*Passer castanopterus*)
3 males Refuge de Decan 19/11. Endemic to the Horn of Africa with an outpost in NW Kenya / SW Ethiopia
- 102* Arabian Golden Sparrow (*Passer euchlorus*)
At least 30 near our hotel in Djibouti City 19/11. an excellent bird for Africa
- 103 Rueppell's Weaver (*Ploceus galbula*)
- 104 Crimson-rumped Waxbill (*Estrilda rhodopyga*)
- 105 Red-billed Firefinch (*Lagonostica senegala*)
- 106 African Silverbill (*Lonchura cantans*)

Top 3 birds as voted for by the participants

- 1 **Djibouti Francolin**
- 2 **Somali Sparrow**
- 3 **Rosy-patched Bush-Shrike**

Mammals

- 1 **Pelzen's (Dorcas) Gazelle** (*Gazella (dorcas) pelzeni*)
Common enough in the dry country along the Golf de Tadjourah and Goubet Kharab. An endemic "race" restricted to the Horn of Africa
- 2 Salt's Dik Dik (*Madogella saltiana phillipsi*)
In the same area as the Gazelles. A different "race" to that in Ethiopia
- 3 Gerenuk (*Litocrarius wallei*)
Remarkably common in the same area
- 4 Ethiopian Rock Hyrax (*Procavia habessinica*)
Common in suitable habitat
- 5 **Somali Elephant-Shrew** (*Elephantula revoili*)
Based on range this would seem to be the only candidate for the one seen by DH (others?) in the euphorbia scrub below Foret du Day on 20/11. Classified as endangered by Duff and Lawson
- 6 **Speke's Pectinator** (*Pectinator spekei*)
The mammal of the trip! One watched closely near the junction of the Foret du Day / Djibouti City road 20/11. Another seen by DD nearby. Endemic to the Horn of Africa
- 7 Unstriped Ground Squirrel (*Xenus rutilus*)
- 8 Cape Hare (*Lepus capensis habessinicus*)
1 Refuge de Decan 19/11
- 9 Bat sp
Foret du Day evening of 19/11
- 10 Hamadryas (Sacred) Baboon (*Papio hamadryas*)
These spectacular beasts were common in the Foret du Day

