Tour Summary: Our jam-packed 16-day Ethiopia tour successfully located all the Ethiopian and Eritrean endemics and racked up a total of over 500 bird species. Besides enjoying great views of local specialties such as Red-billed Pytilia, Salvadori’s Seedeater, Arabian Bustard, Yellow-fronted Parrot, Abyssinian Woodpecker, Rouget’s Rail, Moorland Francolin, Ruspoli’s Turaco, Liben Lark, White-winged Collared Dove, Juba Weaver, Stresseman’s Bushcrow, White-tailed Swallow and Abyssinian Waxbill, we were also treated to some very rare Ethiopian birds. We recorded perhaps the first Bamboo Warbler in Ethiopia for almost 40 years, saw only the fourth Eleonora’s Falcon and Amur Falcon for the country, and connected with the sought-after Basra Reed Warbler.
We started off with Brown-rumped Seedeater, Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher, Tacazze Sunbird, Blue-breasted Bee-eater and Brown Parisoma in our Addis hotel garden before heading north to the Solulta Plains. Here Abyssinian Longclaw, Ethiopian Cisticola, Blue-winged Goose, Wattled Ibis and Spot-breasted Lawping were enjoyed at close range, before continuing on to Debre Libanos, with Red-breasted Wheatear and Ethiopian Siskin seen en route. The cliffs around our lodge were home to Little Rock Thrush, Rueppell’s Black Chat, White-winged Cliff Chat, White-rumped Babbler and Stout Cisticola. Next on the cards was the Jemma Valley which delivered Harwood’s Francolin, Erckel’s Francolin, Fox Kestrel, White-billed Starling, Abyssinian Wheatear, Red-billed Pytilia, Black-winged Lovebird and Yellow-rumped Seedeater. En route to Debre Libanos we saw Erlanger’s Lark. From here we descended into the lowlands for the first time, where new birds came thick and fast. Highlights at Melka Ghebdu were Half-collared Kingfisher, Yellow-breasted Barbet and Yellow-throated Seedeater, before we climbed back to the highlands to make a short side trip to Gemassa Gedel for excellent views of Ankober Serin. After this we made our way to the Awash, via Addis Ababa and Debre Zeit with our first Rueppell’s Weavers of the trip. The Awash area added a wide variety of grassland and thornbush species, including Arabian Bustard, Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Lark, Hartlaub’s Bustard, Abdim’s Stork, Grey-headed Batis, Gillet’s Lark, Straw-tailed Whydah, Sombre Rock Chat and Red-winged Lark. We then continued south through the rift valley to Bishangari Lodge, with a lunch stop at Lake Ziway including African Pygmy Goose and Lesser Jacana. Bishangari yielded great views of Yellow-fronted Parrot, Three-banded Courser, Scaly Francolin, Narina Trogon and Banded Barbet before we visited Wondo Genet. Here Abyssinian Woodpecker was tracked down and Ethiopian Oriole was seen, and a surprise Bamboo Warbler found. Onwards into the Bale Mountains we paused for Cape Eagle-Owl and Abyssinian Owl before arriving at Dinsho, where a short stint of birding produced Abyssinian Ground Thrush, White-backed Black Tit and Abyssinian Catbird. After dark we saw Montane Nightjar. In the Bale Mountains Ethiopian Wolf stole the show, with more than 10 animals seen, but Brown (Bale) Parisoma, Moorland Francolin, Rouget’s Rail and Chestnut-naped Francolin kept us admiring birds too. Returning back to the lowlands, we stopped for Ruspoli’s Turaco and Red-throated Wryneck en route to Negelle, where Sidamo/Liben Lark, Three-streaked Tchagra, Somali Short-toed Lark, Eleonora’s Falcon, Amur Falcon and Salvadori’s Seedeater showed well. Continuing on to Yavello via the Dawa River and Soda plains we enjoyed a day full of good birds, with White-winged Collared Dove, Black-bellied Sunbird, breeding plumage Juba Weaver, Yellow-vented Eremomela, Pringle’s Puffback, Red-naped Bushshrike, Northern Grosbeak-Canary and White-tailed Swallow, with the next day in the same area adding Somali Courser, Stresemann’s Bushcrow, Secretarybird, Somali Ostrich and Scaly Chatterer. Finally we turned back north, returning to Addis via Lake Awassa with White-backed Duck, Basra Reed Warbler and Spotted Creeper, Lake Langano with Greyish Eagle Owl, and Gibe Gorge with Egyptian Plover, Clapperton’s Francolin, Abyssinian Waxbill and Barka Indigobird.
We kicked off our tour of Ethiopia with a short stint of introductory birding around the Ghion Hotel grounds. Here Brown-rumped Seedeater fed alongside Streaky Seedeater, Tacazze Sunbird and Montane White-eye fed on the numerous flowering plants, Dusky Turtle Dove and Baglafecht Weaver were conspicuous, Abyssinian Thrush hopped on the lawn, Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher sat quietly in the mid-storey with Blue-breasted Bee-eater, and Brown Parisoma crept around the canopy of a flat-topped Acacia tree. However, soon we were headed north to the Solulta Plains where we quickly found a couple of smart Abyssinian Longclaw that showed very well. During our stroll across the open plains we had our first encounters with many of the typical highland birds: Blue-winged Goose, Ethiopian Cisticola, Red-throated Pipit, White-collared Pigeon, Moorland Chat, Thekla Lark, Wattled Ibis and Black-winged Lapwing. Best of all, however, was the loose flock of about 50 Spot-breasted Lapwing scattered across the wet meadows, some allowing us to make a close approach. Continuing north towards Debre Libanos we made a few roadside stops for new birds such as Red-breasted Wheatear and Ethiopian Siskin. At Debre Libanos itself we settled into our accommodation with a view and then birded the surrounding cliffs and scrubland, where highlights included Little Rock Thrush, several dumpy Rueppell’s Black Chat, Fan-tailed Raven, White-winged Cliff Chat, Singing Cisticola, Stout Cisticola and White-rumped Babbler.
Very early the next morning we departed for the Jemma Valley, arriving just after the sun had climbed over the horizon. Erckel’s Francolin was quickly found from our vantage point and after a few minutes a couple of Harwood’s Francolin were spotted, but unfortunately they scuttled off before everyone could see them. We chased them for a while, spotting Black-winged Lovebird as we went, and eventually re-found them where everyone could watch them. Whew! Continuing down into the valley we paused for roadside views of White-billed Starling, Hemprich’s Hornbill, Abyssinian Wheatear, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Nyanza Swift and brief views of Yellow-rumped Seedeater. At the bottom of the valley a stroll along a small river was very productive and turned up some excellent sightings of our main target, Red-billed Pytilia, along with some flighty Crimson-rumped Waxbill, Abyssinian White-eye, Black-billed Barbet, Cut-throat Finch, African Silverbill and Foxy Cisticola. All too soon time had come to depart for Debre Birhan, but as we wound our way back out of the valley we came across quite an incredible birding spectacle. There was an eruption of termites next to the road and the raptors were honing in on the easy food source. Most obvious when we arrived were Tawny Eagle, Yellow-billed Kite, Dark Chanting Goshawk and Augur Buzzard, but then the falcons were noticed. Two Lanner Falcons, four Fox Kestrels, two Common Kestrels and a single Eurasian Hobby, all swooping past us at close range and giving excellent views. We soaked up the experience for nearly an hour, during which time an Egyptian Vulture came to see what was going on, bringing our raptor count to nine species! Eventually we had to tear ourselves away, so we climbed out the valley to enjoy a picnic lunch on its rim, where Ankober Serin put in an all too brief appearance. Back on the open plains we spotted our first Lesser Kestrels and (very surprising) the only Erlanger’s Lark of the trip, as we slowly made our way to Debre Birhan for the night.

A slightly later start the next morning saw us heading down another gravel road, this time past Ankober and on to Melka Ghebdu, with Bare-faced Go-away-bird seen immediately on arrival. Bird activity was high and we quickly located our first Yellow-throated Seedeater next to the road, although it played hard to get and some of the group battled to see it well. While we waited for the seedeater to re-appear we entertained ourselves with a variety of other birds – lovely Yellow-breasted Barbet showed well, a flock of White-crested Helmetshrike passed by, Half-collared Kingfisher was found at the river, Ethiopian Boubou sat out nicely, some breeding plumage Northern Red Bishops buzzed around, Reichenow’s Seedeater put in its first appearance and eventually Yellow-throated Seedeater was relocated for better views. From Melka Ghebdu we swiftly climbed back out the valley to Debre Birhan, where we grabbed a quick lunch before heading north to Gemessa Gedel. Almost as soon as we stepped off the bus a large flock of Ankober Serin flew in and landed nearby. At first the views were a bit distant but over the course of 20 minutes we managed to approach them within five metres for some excellent views. Happily we headed back to Debre Birhan, pausing for some good flight views of Bearded Vulture, and on to Addis Ababa for the night.

The next morning we continued our journey south, first fighting our way out of Addis through the slow traffic before arriving at Lake Chelekeke at Debre Zeyit. Rueppell’s Weavers were active in a thorn tree.
as we headed down to the lake shore and an African Yellow Warbler showed nicely before we started scanning with the scopes to pick out Lesser Flamingo, Garganey, Spotted Redshank and a variety of other waterbirds. A second stop along the lakeshore produced Western Black-headed Batis in some acacia trees and a large flock of African Citril with a few streaky, grey-faced males among them, supposedly Southern Citril. At the water’s edge there were lots of Hottentot Teal and a few other new waterbirds. But time was marching on so we continued into the Rift Valley and on to Awash town for lunch, along with some lovely Bristle-crowned Starlings.

The area had clearly received some recent rain, and as we continued our journey after lunch our first stop for some roadside White-throated Bee-eater turned out to be an exceptionally good one. An Arabian Bustard was spotted striding away, but it headed for the nearest shade and paused there to give us some great views. There were also several pairs of Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Lark which showed nicely, Black-chested Snake Eagle sat nearby and we lured in our first Rosy-patched Bushshrikes for a close-up encounter. Later, along the entrance road to Bilen Lodge we stopped for Pygmy Falcon, Nile Valley Sunbird, Abyssinian Scimitarbill and our first White-headed Buffalo Weavers before birding around the lodge for the late afternoon and early morning. There were plenty of birds around, including Red-fronted Warbler, Grey Wren-Warbler, more Yellow-breasted Barbets, Mouse-coloured Penduline Tit, flocks of European Turtle Dove, a couple of overflying African Collared Doves, Superb Starling, Yellow-necked Spurfowl, Somali Bulbul, Grey-headed Batis, Shining Sunbird, Northern Crombec, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. Carefully scanning for Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse almost worked, but instead we nearly trod on them and so had to make do with reasonably good flight views. A surprise find here was a single Red-chested Swallow perched on the wires along with some other swallow, and Ethiopian Swallow put in its first appearance here too. At night we enjoyed excellent views of Slender-tailed Nightjar and a roaring male lion came right past camp.

Heading for Awash National Park now we made a short detour to the Ali Dege plains where a large group of Abdim’s Stork was admired, the first of many hundreds seen during the trip. A second stop produced the hoped-for Straw-tailed Whydah along with non-breeding Chestnut Weaver, Gillet’s Lark, breeding-plumage Lesser Masked Weaver and Yellow-spotted Petronia. Once in the national park we focussed our attention on the open grasslands of the Ilala Sala plains. Here bustards were the highlight: a couple of bulky Kori Bustard, another Arabian Bustard, two male Hartlaub’s Bustard and a White-bellied Bustard (or at least its head) were spotted in a few hours. Other birds that will be remembered were Somali Fiscal, Abyssinian Roller, Helmeted Guineafowl, displaying Zitting Cisticola, Montagu’s Harrier, Ashy Cisticola, Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark, Red-winged Lark and Singing Bush Lark, and in the more bushy areas Crested Francolin, Buff-crested Bosh, White-bellied Go-away-bird, Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Nubian Woodpecker, Somali Bunting, Northern White-crowned Shrike and African Grey Flycatcher. Our last stop in the Awash area was at the Beseka lava flow, where we located Sombre Rock Chat very quickly and found a Blackstart for comparison not long after. A flock of perched Olive Bee-eater was a nice find too.

From Awash we continued our journey south through the rift valley, stopping for lunch along the way and then birding at Koka and Lake Ziway for a while. Highlights among the many hundreds of birds at these wetlands were a couple of Lesser Jacana and African Pygmy Goose. Our destination for the evening was Bishangari Lodge, set on the shores of Lake Langano with its private patch of forest. On the drive in we spotted our first Yellow-fronted Parrots in flight, but we had to wait until just after sunrise the next morning for excellent views of this, one of the trickiest endemics. The open Acacia woodland on the shore edge was alive with birds and while we waited for the parrots to show we saw Little Weaver, Buff-bellied Warbler, Blue-spotted Wood Dove, Red-faced Crombec and Grey-backed Fiscal. Once the parrots had come and gone we turned our attention to the forest, where Banded Barbet, White-cheeked Turaco, Tambourine Dove,
Western Banded Snake Eagle, Rueppell’s Robin-Chat, Red-chested Cuckoo, Lemon Dove, Scaly Francolin and Double-toothed Barbet were seen. Overhead we were surprised to hear Scarce Swift calling and quickly pin-pointed a couple of birds flying above us, a rarity in Ethiopia. After a relaxed breakfast a little more birding produced Three-banded Courser before it was time to leave for Wondo Genet, fortunately only a short drive away. On the way out Black Scimitarbill showed nicely and in Sheshemene town we saw our first Thick-billed Ravens.

Our short stay at Wondo Genet produced the most important bird we hoped to see, the scarce and unobtrusive Abyssinian Woodpecker which allowed us to study her through the scope as long as we wished. A good list of other forest species also clung to the last remaining forest patches, and we enjoyed some good looks at Black Sawwing, Brown Woodland Warbler, Scaly Francolin, Ethiopian Oriole, Sharpe’s Starling, brief views of Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill and the biggest surprise of the trip, Bamboo Warbler, which we heard calling and managed to see too.

From Wondo Genet we climbed back into the highlands, this time visiting the Bale Mountains in the south-eastern highlands. A lunch stop along the road produced our first Chestnut-naped Francolin but we pressed on to the known stake-out for Cape Eagle-Owl. The bird was pointed out to us where it sat well concealed on the cliff face and we studied it for a while before heading to a nearby tree where Abyssinian Owl was roosting. A short shower of icy rain drove us back the bus so we continued on the Dinsho, pausing only to admire African Snipe and our first Rouget’s Rail along the way. A short walk around Dinsho was very productive as we enjoyed excellent views of Abyssinian Ground Thrush, Abyssinian Catbird and White-backed Black Tit in short succession. After dark we were treated to excellent views of Montane Nightjar.

The rest of our time in the Bale Mountains was focussed on the Sanetti Plateau and Harenna Forest. Driving up to the Sanetti Plateau we paused to find Brown (Bale) Parisoma and Cinnamon Bracken Warbler on the ascent. Further up numerous Chestnut-naped Francolin and Rouget’s Rail scurried from the roadside, and we spotted two coveys of Moorland Francolin
near the road for excellent views. Our drives across the Sanetti Plateau turned up more than 10 Ethiopian Wolves which we spent some time admiring, and with their prey, Giant Root Rat and Blick’s Grass Rat. Many of the small wetlands held Ruddy Shelduck and a couple held groups of Spot-breasted Lapwing. A pair of Red-billed Chough was also seen. Dropping down the other side of the plateau into Harenna Forest was very productive with roadside Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Yellow-crowned Canary and African Olive Pigeon. African Emerald Cuckoo was scoped. Abyssinian Crimsonwing skulked in the undergrowth, but did emerge to give some good perched views.

An African Hill Babbler was coaxed from a thicket. And a second Abyssinian Woodpecker, this time a male, was found. And a lovely Black Sparrowhawk was admired at length.

From Harenna we continued to the southern lowlands at Negelle. A few short roadside stops kept adding to our list with Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike, Black-headed Oriole, Red-throated Wryneck, Eastern Chanting Goshawk and Boran Cisticola. However, all these species paled in comparison with the fantastic quartet of Ruspoli’s Turaco that sat up nicely for the scope. And as we neared Negelle our second major termite eruption of the trip drew at least 50 individual falcons, among them one male and several female Amur Falcon and at least two pale phase Eleonora’s Falcons which gave excellent and repeated fly-by views.

At sunrise the next morning we found ourselves out on the open Liben plains, the song of Somali Short-toed Lark filling the air. We fanned out to walk across the plains and it wasn’t long before we heard our first Sidamo/Liben Lark singing. A short search ensued but soon we were admiring this rare and delicately-marked bird at close range, watching as it scurried rodent-like between the grass tufts. After about 15 minutes a pair of Somali Short-toed Lark caught our attention nearby, so we watched them for a while. Slowly we started noticing other birds too: Ethiopian Swallow flitted right past us, Somali Crow was conspicuous, lots of Plain-backed Pipits were around and a large flock of White-crowned Starling was a welcome sight. Towards the edges of the plains we found Pectoral-patch Cisticola, Grey-capped Social Weaver and Shelley’s Sparrow.
The rest of our time in the Negelle area was focussed on some well-bushed areas and turned up a pair of singing Salvadori’s Seedeater, excellent views of Three-streaked Tchagra, another Eleonora’s Falcon (this time a dark phase bird) and lots of other more widespread bush birds: Buff-crested Bustard, Red-fronted Barbet, Purple Roller, Slate-colored Boubou, Von der Decken’s Hornbill, Red-and-yellow Barbet, Black-throated Barbet, Dodson’s Bulbul, Magpie Starling, Black Cuckoo and another Pygmy Falcon.

Time had come for the “biggest” day of the trip, the long and very birdy drive to Yavello via the Dawa River. We made an early start and shortly after sunrise arrived at our first destination. The bush was alive with Red-backed Shrike and Lesser Grey Shrike on passage, and Thrush Nightingale/sang from almost every thicket. During a short walk here we quite quickly found the scarce Black-bellied Sunbird singing from the top of a tree. Unfortunately you had to line it up with the right gap in the canopy to enjoy good views and it flew before everyone could do this. A little while later we could hear the calls of White-winged Collared Dove, and soon we were watching a pair with squab. Other birds seen here were Grey Kestrel, Golden-breasted Starling and Thrush Nightingale, but soon we were on our way to the Dawa River itself, with our first Vulturine Guineafowl en route and good looks at drinking Black-faced Sandgrouse on arrival. It was beginning to warm up so we wasted no time in striking out along the river in search of a certain weaver. Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird and Pygmy Batis kept us entertained, but we remained quite focussed until we found a large loose flock of rare Juba Weaver feeding in riverside thornbushes, including several lovely full-plumage males. After that we could turn our attention to other birds in the surrounding thickets, which included Pale Prinia, Yellow-vented Eremomela, Red-tailed Shrike, Bare-eyed Thrush and a lovely, duetting pair of Red-naped Bushshrike.

With a long drive still ahead of us we needed to keep on the move and made only a few short stops on our way to Yavello. At lunch new birds included Pringle’s Puffback and Banded Parisoma, Somali Crombec and Black-capped Social Weaver. More Vulturine Guineafowl were spotted near the road and later Northern Grosbeak-Canary and Shelley’s Starling were seen well. A heavy rain storm on the Soda Plains meant that we saved this for the next day, with the final new bird of the drive being several lovely White-tailed Swallow around one of the roadside villagers. The final new bird of the day was a great encounter with Sombre/Dusky Nightjar, which circled around our heads in the spotlight beam.
A more relaxed start the next day saw us enjoy some early morning birding around our accommodation. The highlight of course was several parties of Stresemann’s Bushcrow attending their nests, but other new birds included D'Arnaud’s Barbet, Spotted Palm Thrush, Vitelline Masked Weaver, Red-bellied Parrot and African Cuckoo, before we struck out south towards Soda. Our first stop was in some Commiphora bush where we located Great Spotted Cuckoo, White-bellied Canary, more Northern Grosbeak-Canaries, Tiny Cisticola, Purple Granedier, Chestnut Sparrow, another pair of Magpie Starling, Black-cheeked Waxbill and, eventually, a thicket-hugging group of Scaly Chatterer. The rainy weather had kept birds active and the Soda plains were still very productive when we arrived just before midday. In the first 30 minutes we enjoyed excellent sightings of Somali Courser, more Shelley’s Sparrow, Secretarybird, Chestnut Sparrow, Taita Fiscal, Foxy Lark, Desert Cisticola (one of five species of cisticola that could be heard from one place) and Wattled Starling. Lunch was enjoyed under a large, shady Acacia tree and after lunch we enjoyed good views of Somali Ostrich and Coqui Francolin nearby. Returning to Yavello we had just a couple of birds to look for: a group of Short-tailed Lark were quickly found and watched as they used their stout beaks as chisels, Hunter’s Sunbird seen superbly and a last-minute attempt at Brown-tailed Rock Chat ended with success. After dinner a nearby stroll resulted in great views of African Scops Owl.

The next day was one of the least birdy days of the trip, although the long drive to Awassa got off to a good start with a colony of Speke's Weaver admired on our way through town. The journey produced little of interest although we did register our only Woolly-necked Storks and European Honey Buzzard of the trip. On arrival in Awassa we wasted no time in dropping our bags and heading out along the lakeshore, seeing White-browed Robin-Chat in the gardens. Lots of White-backed Duck and African Pygmy Goose were spotted from the lake shore, but it was what frequented the thickets behind that was of real interest: Little Rush Warbler and Lesser...
Swamp Warbler were coaxed into view and then the tuneless croaks and chucks of a reed warbler drew our attention to a loose group of four Basra Reed Warbler, which I was secretly hoping to see as we were there during the four peak days of their northward passage through the Ethiopian Rift Valley. The next morning more exploration of shore-side habitats resulted in excellent views of Spotted Creeper, Black Heron, African Swamphen, Allen’s Gallinule, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Red-faced Cisticola.

Our next and final destination was Welliso/Gibe Gorge, but we broke up another long drive with stops near Sheshemene for Mottled Swift, at Lake Langano for Greyish Eagle-Owl, Slender-tailed Nightjar and our last lovely Black-winged Lovebirds, and Lake Ziway with Fulvous Whistling Duck and Knob-billed Duck as new birds.

Our final day was focussed on Gibe Gorge, with one last early start getting us there soon after sunrise. Our first stop here produced African Moustached Warbler, Gambaga Flycatcher, Pale Flycatcher, good looks at Yellow-rumped Seedeater and then some excellent views of at least 10 Clapperton’s Francolin crossing the road and then feeding in the fallow fields. Down at the river itself we found Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat in the denser thickets, Bar-breasted Firefinch, Lappet-faced Vulture circling overhead, an uncooperative male Black-faced Firefinch, Short-winged Cisticola, a surprise Barka Indigobird not yet in breeding plumage but singing and mimicking Black-faced Firefinch, at least 200 lovely Abyssinian Waxbill as the last specialty of the trip and, best of all, a single Egyptian Plover which allowed close approach. A grand finale to a great trip.