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Birding Africa Ethiopia Tour

23 March - 9 April 2016

Tour Report by leader Ethan Kistler

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Tour Summary: By adding two more days to our typical 16-day tour we were able to spend a little more time at key sites and ended up tallying a record 540 species! We racked up all Ethiopian and Eritrean endemics and had great views of **Red-billed Pytilia, Salvadori's Seedeater, Arabian Bustard, Yellow-fronted Parrot, Abyssinian Woodpecker, Rouget's Rail, Moorland Francolin, Prince Ruspoli's Turaco, Liben Lark, White-winged Collared Dove, Juba Weaver, Stresseman's Bushcrow, White-tailed Swallow** and **Abyssinian Waxbill**. Additionally, we also had great mammal sightings with the highlights being Ethiopian Wolf, Gerenuk, and Gelada Baboon.

The group convened the evening before the tour officially began with a walk around the grounds of the hotel seeing Wattled Ibis, Abyssinian Slaty-Flycatcher, Brown-rumped Seedeater, dozens of Tacazze Sunbirds, and singles of Common and Wood Sandpipers in the small creek that runs through the grounds. After dinner we were rewarded with great views of African Wood Owl right outside the reception and had an Abyssinian Nightjar call once.

Our first stop the next morning was at the Sululta Plains just north of Addis Ababa. Here we had up close views of Wattled Ibis, Spot-breasted Lapwing, Blue-winged Goose, Ethiopian Cisticola, and Abyssinian Longclaw – five endemics right off the bat. Other highlights included Long-legged Buzzard, Black-winged Lapwing, Moorland Chat, and a small selection of waders (shorebirds). Moving north we made a few brief stops picking up Lanner Falcon, White-winged Cliff-Chat, Abyssinian Siskin, Moorland Francolin, Erlanger's Lark,

four species of vultures including the impressive Bearded Vulture, and the endemic Ethiopian race of African Stonechat. We eventually arrived at Debre Libanos, where we spent the rest of the day birding around on foot along the ridge of the escarpment. Working our way towards the monastery we had great views of Bruce's Green-Pigeon, White-cheeked Turaco, Hemprich's Hornbill, Banded Barbet, a dozen Ortolan Buntings, and an Abyssinian Woodpecker pair. Around our accommodation we added Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Ethiopian Boubou, Mocking Cliff-Chat, Grey and Mountain Wagtails, and a small flock of White-billed Starlings to name a few.

An early morning start allowed us to get to the Jemma Valley right at sunrise before descending down the escarpment. Erckel's Francolin was found soon after arriving, and not long after five cooperative Harwood's Francolins – one of our main targets for the day – showed well for the group. Other birds at this vantage point included Black-winged Lovebird, Singing Cisticola, Abyssinian Wheatear, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, and Red-collared Widowbird. After reaching the bottom of the escarpment, we headed towards a stakeout Red-billed Pytilia spot – a bird easy to miss! Luck was with us when we ended with three different pairs along the river bed. The area was also quite active with hundreds of birds coming in to drink. Vinaceous Dove, Green-backed Eremomela, Barred Warbler, Yellow-rumped Seedeater, Cut-throat Finch, and large flocks of weavers, bishops and queleas coming in to drink were some of the highlights. A picnic lunch at the Jemma River produced Woolly-necked and Yellow-billed Storks, Goliath Heron, and Senegal Thick-Knee while raptors above included Martial Eagle, African Fish-Eagle, Dark Chanting Goshawk, and Augur Buzzard. Before leaving the valley we had great views of Abyssinian Ground-Hornbill, six species of kingfishers, four Fox Kestrels, Black-eared Wheatear, and Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver to name a few. Driving through vast open plains on our way to our accommodation for the night, we enjoyed flocks of migrating Lesser Kestrels along with Red-breasted and Isabelline Wheatears.

The next morning was spent at Melka Ghebdu along a streambed where we hoped to see the endangered Yellow-throated Seedeater. Birdlife International estimates the population between 250-999 mature individuals. Not too long after arriving, we were having great extended views of six! The surrounding scrub also hosted Eastern Plantain-eater, Yellow-breasted Barbet, Grey-headed Batis, White-throated Robin, Scarlet-chested, Beautiful and Shining Sunbirds, Chestnut Weaver, and a surprise Red-billed Pytilia and Greyish Eagle-Owl. After lunch back in town, we travelled up in elevation into the clouds to search for another range-restricted species – the Ankober Serin. The wind and cold was in stark contrast to the hot dry scrub of Melka Ghebdu, but after a little bit of searching we had a flock of 18 serins flying over our heads and down the road. We followed, of course, eventually having great scope views of a couple that blended in perfectly with the rocky environment they were feeding in. Also present were ~70 Abyssinian Siskins and at least 45 Red-throated Pipits.

After a great night's rest, we continued our journey south towards Addis before making our way east into the Afar region. Prior to lunch we made a couple stops picking up African Snipe, Green Sandpiper, and fantastic views of the smart looking African Quailfinch. Lunch was had overlooking Lake Bishoftu, a volcanic crater lake with steep rocky slopes and cliffs. Some of the highlights over pizza included Southern Pochard, several rafts of Black-necked (Eared) Grebes totalling c. 400 individuals, Abdim's Stork, White-winged Tern, and Red-rumped Swallows flying past at eye-level. After lunch we made an hour stop at Lake Basaka adding Pink-backed Pelican, Intermediate Egret, Western Reef-Heron, and our two main highlights for the day – Blackstart and Sombre Rock Chat. Before arriving at our accommodation near Bilen, we were treated with views of Abyssinian Roller, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, and after dusk a Slender-tailed Nightjar.

The following morning was spent birding the Bilen area around on foot adding a good number to our trip list. Around the accommodation we had White-headed Buffalo-Weaver, Bush Petronia, Nile Valley Sunbird, Rufous Chatterer, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and an Arabian Bustard in the scope. Heading down towards the marsh area, we picked up Black Scrub-Robin, Egyptian Vulture, Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Ethiopian Swallow, and Bluethroat to name a few. After lunch we headed to the dry Aledoghi Plains where not only did we pick up some great birds such as Somali Ostrich, Black-headed Lapwing, Chestnut-bellied & Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Somali Fiscal and Chestnut-backed Sparrowlarks, but also our first Gerenuk of the trip – a strange looking long-necked antelope endemic to the Horn of Africa.

A whole day in Awash National Park provided excellent birding and a nice break from long distance driving. In all we recorded nearly a hundred species around our accommodation and surroundings. As we left the gate of the camp, we had our first new birds of the trip – Madagascar Bee-eater, a recent arrival to the region, and Grey-headed Bushshrike. A couple walks into promising habitat provided good views of Rosy-patched Bushshrike, Gillett's and Foxy Larks, Red-fronted Warbler, Grey Wren-Warbler, Buff-bellied Warbler, Mouse-coloured Penduline-Tit, Spectacled Weaver and Somali Bunting. In the more open areas of the park we had great views of Secretarybird, Shikra, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Double-banded Courser, and four species of bustards: Arabian, Kori, White-bellied, and Buff-crested. Driving back at dusk we stumbled on a Plain Nightjar along the road.

Today was mainly a travel day as we worked our way south through the Rift Valley towards our accommodation on Lake Langano. En-route we made stops at Lakes Koka and Ziway, where we picked up Northern Shoveler, Garganey, Goliath Heron, Black Heron, Saddle-billed Stork, Sedge Warbler, White Wagtail, and a whole host of waders including Collared Pratincoles and Black-tailed Godwits. We arrived at Lake Langano with a couple hours of daylight remaining

allowing time to bird around the grounds. A short stroll produced one of our targets – Clapperton's Francolin.

The next morning, we spent a couple hours nearby at Abidjatta-Shalla National Park. One of the main attractions here are the alkaline lakes that host tens of thousands of Greater and Lesser Flamingos. We weren't disappointed and the flamingos were joined by several hundred waders including our only Dunlin and Pied Avocets of the trip. The nearby acacia scrub provided great views of Pygmy Falcon, Gabar Goshawk, Marico Sunbird, Common Rock-Thrush, and others. Back at our accommodation situated on Lake Langano, we recorded over a hundred species just on the grounds over the rest of the day! Highlights here included Northern White-faced Owl, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Von Der Decken's Hornbill, Rufous-necked Wryneck, Black-headed Batis, White-winged Black-Tit, Marsh Warbler, Whinchat, Violet-backed Starling, and Freckled Nightjar after dusk to name a few.

We headed off the next morning after breakfast towards the impressive Bale Mountains working our way up in elevation. Stops along the way provided our first Verreaux's Eagles, Red-billed Choughs, and Cape Eagle-Owl of the trip before going above tree line. Moorland Chat and Rouget's Rail became common along the road's edge as we proceeded. Our main stop for the day were the Hagenia-juniper dominated woodlands surrounding the park headquarters, where we targeted a couple specialties. A couple hour walk produced excellent views of Abyssinian Long-eared Owl, White-backed Black-Tit, Brown Woodland-Warbler, Abyssinian Catbird, and Abyssinian Ground-Thrush (seeing a pattern here?).

The following morning, we continued up in elevation to the Sanetti Plateau picking up Somali Crow along the way. The Sanetti Plateau is mostly over 4,000 metres in elevation and is a prime location for high altitude species. Blue-winged Goose, Spot-breasted Lapwing, Moorland Chat, Rouget's Rail, Abyssinian Siskins were common throughout the plateau while a couple small ponds held Ruddy Shelduck, Yellow-billed Duck, and Northern Pintail. Tawny and Steppe Eagles and several Augur Buzzards circled overhead while Chestnut-naped and Moorland Francolins worked the road edges. Eurasian Crag-Martins were a surprise pick-up. However, the true highlight of the day was two Ethiopian Wolves, and endangered and declining species. Descending down the other side, we spent the remaining several hours birding the Haremma Forest picking up African Crowned Eagle, Ayres' Hawk-Eagle, Sharpe's Starling, Garden Warbler, Alpine and Scarce Swifts, African Emerald Cuckoo, African Hill Babbler, and Silvery-cheeked Hornbill to name a few.

We returned to the Haremma Forest the next morning to pick up a few missing species including Mountain Buzzard, Narina Trogon, and most importantly Abyssinian Crimsonwings – a very difficult bird to see – of which two individuals were very cooperative for the group. The rest of the day was spent traveling south towards Negele making countless stops along the way. Our main target

was Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and it didn't take long at all to find several at a couple fruiting fig trees. Other highlights along the way included Great Spotted Cuckoo, Red-and-yellow Barbet, Eurasian Golden and African Black-headed Orioles, Northern Brownbul, and Shelley's Starling.

Leaving the hotel early, our first stop of the following morning was the Liben Plain, which hosts one of the rarest larks in the world – the Liben Lark. Classified as Critically Endangered, this species population may be under 100 individuals in total, declining rapidly, and could become Africa's first recorded bird extinction. Luck was with us as we recorded three individuals including some superb looks at this special species. Also on the plain were Somali Short-toed Lark, White-crowned Starling, Plain-backed Pipit, Shelley's Rufous Sparrow, and a colony of Vitelline Masked-Weavers. We pressed on to a stakeout Salvadori's Serin location where we picked up Three-streaked Tchagra, Somali Tit, Tiny Cisticola, Brown-tailed Rock Chat, Red-headed Weaver and eventually great views of a Salvadori's Serin pair. En-route back to town for lunch we picked up several Comb Ducks and a dozen White Storks mixed in with a larger number of Abdim's Storks. Following lunch, we ventured to another stakeout location, this time for Salvadori's (Juba) Weaver. Finding them didn't take too long and other birds included African Hawk-Eagle, Red-backed Shrike, and Black-bellied Sunbird. Our final stop of the day was just after dusk which yielded five Three-banded Coursers and Donaldson-Smith's Nightjar.

After a successful day around Negele, we headed off the next morning towards the Yabello region birding along the way. First stop was breakfast where we added Lilac-breasted Roller, Eurasian Hobby, and Golden-breasted Starling. Next stop was near the Dawa River where we picked up White-winged Collared-Dove, Spotted Mourning-Thrush and Hunter's Sunbird. Moving forward, we made a few stops at key sites where we walked promising scrub picking up a lot of targets such as Pygmy Batis, Pringle's Puffback, Somali Crombec, Kenya Violet-backed Sunbird, D'Arnaud's Barbet, Red-naped Bushshrike, Upcher's Warbler, Pale Prinia, Yellow-vented Eremomela, and Purple Grenadier. Several more incidental stops provided Vulturine Guinea fowl, Bristle-crowned Starling, Black-capped Social-Weaver, Purple Roller, and White-tailed Swallow before arriving at our wonderful accommodation for the next two nights. Beautifully situated in prime birding habitat, we had several Stresemann's Bush-crows (which nest onsite) and Magpie Starling.

After a great sleep to the calls of African Scops-Owl and Sombre Nightjar, we walked the grounds around our accommodation picking up Black Cuckoo, Spotted Flycatcher and White-browed Robin-Chat before breakfast. The rest of the morning was spent birding the Yabello-Mega Road and Soda Plains where we tallied around 140 species and added a large number of birds to our trip list. The Yabello-Mega Road yielded Long-crested Eagle, Little Sparrowhawk, Common Cuckoo, Mottled Swift, Great Reed-Warbler, Boran Cisticola, Banded Warbler, Scaly Chatterer, and Purple-banded Sunbird while the Soda Plains

provided Grey Kestrel, Short-tailed Lark, Chestnut Sparrow, and Grey-headed Social-Weaver.

The next day was mostly a travel day as we travelled back north through the Rift Valley towards Lake Awassa. That didn't stop us from seeing new birds along the way, including a nesting colony of Speke's Weavers, Broad-billed Roller, White-headed Vulture, Booted Eagle, and Little Rush-Warbler at a random little wetland.

An early morning start the next morning was the start of another excellent day. Before lunch we recorded over a hundred species just on the grounds of our accommodation on Lake Awassa. Countless species were added to our trip list with the highlights being Greater Painted-Snipe, Blue-headed Coucal, Northern Carmine Bee-eater, Double-toothed Barbet, African Hobby, African Spotted-Creeper, Thick-billed Weaver, and most surprisingly several Cuckoo Finches. After lunch we packed up and headed towards Wondo Genet where we spent two and a half hours targeting some species we still haven't seen which resulted in Black and Ovambo Sparrowhawks, Lemon Dove, Green Twinspot, African Firefinch, Black-and-white Mannikin and most importantly Yellow-fronted Parrot. We had then seen all Ethiopian and Eritrean endemics marking a great finish to another excellent day! Soon we headed for Bishangari.

When you stay right at a prime birding location, it's great to be able to walk right outside your room and instantly be surrounded by great birding. A short walk before breakfast and a couple hours after provided over 100 species, with the new additions including Scaly Francolin, African Spoonbill, African Olive-Pigeon, Bare-faced Go-away-bird, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, all three cuckooshrikes and a migrant Masked Shrike. After lunch we headed for our accommodation near Gibe Gorge.

Our final day focused on Gibe Gorge and a whole assortment of new target species. Our picnic breakfast stop provided Gambaga Flycatcher, African Cuckoo and Lesser Blue-eared Starlings. The remaining part of the morning was spent in the bird-rich valley and along the Omo River. Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat, Fawn-breasted (Abyssinian) Waxbill, Bar-breasted and Black-faced Firefinches, and Orange-breasted Waxbill were some of the highlights. However, the main highlight of the day certainly went to an Egyptian Plover. You can't ask for a better ending! We loaded up and headed back to Addis for our evening flights home.