

Birding in Sierra Leone: an emerging West African destination

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Observer les oiseaux en Sierra Leone: une destination ouest africaine qui gagne en popularité.

Cet article, fondé sur l'expérience de l'auteur en décembre 2006, présente quatre des meilleurs sites pour observer les oiseaux en Sierra Leone: la zone de Freetown (pour, entre autres, le Picatharte de Guinée *Picathartes gymnocephalus*), l'île de Tiwai, la forêt de Gola (le seul site du pays où se trouve le Malimbe de Ballmann *Malimbus ballmanni*) et la Sierra Leone du Nord.

Until recently, Sierra Leone was a country that no 'sensible' birder would dream of visiting, ravaged by more than ten years of civil wars that were exemplified by the horror and barbaric practice of amputation by machete. Since 2004, however, the situation has dramatically changed, and whilst there is no denying that the scars of war and poverty are still very much part of everyday life in Sierra Leone, the country is now safe to visit and birders, and other tourists, are beginning to return.

Because Sierra Leone is of similar size to the Republic of Ireland, it is fairly easy to visit most parts of the country during a relatively short trip. Despite its small size, this West African country supports a remarkable diversity of birds, many of which are virtually impossible to see elsewhere. The other large areas of forest where birders might encounter most of the restricted-range species that occur in Sierra Leone are mainly in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, both of which are currently less easy to visit. Another advantage, especially for Anglophones, to visiting Sierra Leone is that it is primarily an English-speaking country.

Lying between 7° and 10° north of the equator, Sierra Leone not only boasts some of the richest accessible rainforests west of the Dahomey Gap, but also has much drier savanna forests in the north, with their own distinctive avifauna. The rainforests in this part of West Africa, which once covered hundreds of thousands of square kilometres, form the Upper Guinea Forests Endemic Bird Area, but are now much reduced (by nearly 80%). BirdLife International considers this EBA to be of critical priority for conservation efforts.

From a conservation standpoint, Sierra Leone is hence of great importance, and it is notable that 15 of the 16 bird species restricted to the Upper Guinea Forests EBA occur in Sierra Leone.

Amongst them are a number of threatened species, the best known of which is probably the **White-necked Picathartes** *Picathartes gymnocephalus* whose remarkable appearance and nesting habits are highly unusual (Thompson *et al.* 2004). Also found in Sierra Leone are the near-mythical **Gola Malimbe** *Malimbus ballmanni* (Endangered), as well as other globally threatened species such as **White-breasted Guineafowl** *Agelastes meleagrides* (Vulnerable), **Rufous Fishing Owl** *Scotopelia ussheri* (Endangered) and **Green-tailed Bristlebill** *Bleda eximius* (Vulnerable). Many threatened mammals, including **Pygmy Hippopotamus** *Hexaprotodon liberiensis*, also occur in these forests, and whilst these were heavily hunted in recent decades, it is hoped that a greater conservation awareness may start to reverse this trend.

Logistics and travel

I visited Sierra Leone in December 2006 on an 18-day private birding trip with two friends (see Jon Hornbuckle's report on the WorldTwitch website www.worldtwitch.com). It was my first visit to West Africa, and my first serious taste of African rainforest birding. Compared to some other tropical forest regions, particularly those in the Neotropics, West Africa is relatively species poor, but it is nevertheless just as exciting and there are many superb birds to find. Like rainforests anywhere, however, those in Sierra Leone contain a significant number of low-density (e.g. **Western Wattled Cuckooshrike** *Lobotos lobatus*, **Nimba Flycatcher** *Melaenornis annamarulae*, **Gola Malimbe**), shy or skulking species (e.g. **White-breasted Guineafowl**, **Nkulengu Rail** *Himantornis haematopus*, **African Pitta** *Pitta angolensis* and **Black-headed Rufous Warbler** *Bathmocercus cerviniventris*) that are a serious challenge to find or see well. We therefore arranged our trip though



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Figure 1. Gola forest from the air (David Zeller)
Vue aérienne de la forêt de Gola (David Zeller)

Figure 2. White-throated Blue Swallow / Hirondelle à bavette *Hirundo nigrita* (Keith Valentine)

Figure 3. Congo Snake Eagle / Serpente du Congo *Dryotriorchis spectabilis* (Keith Valentine)

Figure 4. White-necked Picathartes / Picatharte de Guinée *Picathartes gymnocephalus* (Guy Shorrock)

a local guide, Kenneth Gbenga, who did a great job of organising our transport and accommodation, and knew the layout of the main birding sites. However, unless you have a lot of time on your hands, it is advisable to join an organised tour led by an experienced birding guide to optimise your chances of seeing a larger proportion of the birds.

Travelling within Sierra Leone is relatively tough, with very dusty dirt roads in many areas, fairly long drives between some sites, very few tourist-class hotels, and the need for permits and to negotiate with villagers to visit certain sites—all of which are disincentives to independent travel. The best time to visit is from December to February, when it is relatively dry. During the wetter months, many of the roads are difficult to traverse without a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

Birds and birding sites

Freetown area

There is excellent birding within an hour or so of the capital, Freetown, on the Western Peninsula. The easiest access is at Guma Dam, from which one can bird along an almost unused road. Most of the birds found here are widespread and liable to be encountered at other localities visited, but of particular note are **Melancholy Woodpecker** *Dendropicos lugubris*, **Grey-headed Bristlebill** *Bleda canicapillus* and **White-tailed Alethe** *Alethe diademata*. To see the star bird here requires the observer to wait patiently in the forest, after climbing a short but obscure narrow trail from the road. Here, after a half-hour wait in nervous anticipation, we had excellent views of several **White-necked Picathartes** an hour or so before dark, one of which was very inquisitive, hopping to within a few metres of us.

Freetown Golf Course harbours a patch of gallery forest where several special species occur, most notably **Crimson Seedcracker** *Pyrenestes sanguineus* and **Turati's Boubou** *Laniarius turatii*.

Also perhaps worth visiting near Freetown is the Regent Forest area, where there is a Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Sanctuary, although it was officially closed during our visit, allegedly because a Chimpanzee *Pan troglodytes* had killed one of its keepers. This site has productive secondary forest along the entrance road where we saw our only **Forest Scrub Robins** *Cercotrichas leucos-*

ticta. **Capuchin Babbler** *Phyllanthus atripennis* may also be found along the entrance track, but this species is probably more easily seen elsewhere.

We also visited an area of mangroves east of the city, near 'No. 2 River Resort', where there is good food and **Brown Sunbirds** *Anthreptes gabonicus* around the restaurants. Although we spent two hours in an engine-less boat on the river, vainly hoping to see **White-crested Tiger Heron** *Tigriornis leucolopha* or **White-backed Night Heron** *Gorsachius leuconotus*, we saw almost nothing here (though we probably glimpsed the night herons at dusk). Other birders, however, have managed to see these species near the river resort.

Tiwai Island Wildlife Sanctuary

Tiwai Island (12 km²) is situated in the Moa River, 10 km north-west of Gola West, and is the site of the country's only community-based conservation programme. It supports a superb tract of tall rainforest and was my favourite locality that we visited; it is certainly worth spending at least two days here. There is no accommodation nearby, but there is an excellent tented camp within an area of concrete shelters in a large forest clearing, whilst the local villagers can cook for you, provided that you bring sufficient food. There is a modest fee for visiting. Visits should be arranged in advance (e-mail: tiwai_island@hotmail.com; website: <http://www.tiwaiisland.org/tiwai.htm>).

We found the best of the many trails to be that emanating from the far left corner of the research station: this trail has a number of good side trails that can also be explored. During our visit we found many interesting species, and bird activity was much higher here than at any other rainforest site we visited. Hornbills seemed to be everywhere. Some of the birds possible here include **Spot-breasted Ibis** *Bostrychia rara*, **Hartlaub's Duck** *Pteronetta hartlaubii*, **Long-tailed Hawk** *Urotriorchis macrourus*, **Cassin's Hawk Eagle** *Spizaetus africanus*, **African Finfoot** *Podica senegalensis*, **Rock Pratincole** *Glareola nuchalis*, **Black-throated Coucal** *Centropus leucogaster*, **Bates's Swift** *Apus batesi*, **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher** *Halcyon badia*, **Shining-blue Kingfisher** *Alcedo quadribrachys*, **Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill** *Tockus camurus*, **Yellow-casqued Hornbill** *Ceratogymna elata*, **Spotted Honeyguide** *Indicator maculatus*, **Little Green Woodpecker** *Campethera maculosa*, **Fire-bellied Woodpecker**

Dendropicos pyrrhogaster, African Pitta, Blue Cuckooshrike *Coracina azurea*, Finsch's Flycatcher Thrush *Stizorhina finschii*, Sharpe's Apalis *Apalis sharpii*, Rufous-winged Illadopsis *Illadopsis rufescens*, Buff-throated Sunbird *Chalcomitra adelberti*, Chestnut-winged Starling *Onychognathus fulgidus*, Red-vented Malimbe *Malimbus scutatus*, Maxwell's Black Weaver *Ploceus albinucha* and Yellow-mantled Weaver *P. tricolor*. Night birding was not rewarding when we visited, but several species of eagle owl and two species of fishing owl have been reported from the area.

Many mammals are also present here, but most are very shy and some very rare. Pygmy Hippopotamus, Chimpanzees and several species of monkey (including the spectacular Diana Monkey *Cercopithecus diana*) could potentially be encountered.

Gola area

The forest reserves of Gola, in the south-eastern extremity of the country, have long been recognised as being of spectacular importance for birds and other wildlife (Allport *et al.* 1989, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2008). These include Gola North (45,800 ha), Gola East (22,800 ha) and Gola West (6,200 ha). The two best areas to visit are Gola East, which is on fairly level ground, and Gola North, which is hilly, with most land lying above 300 m. Accessible areas of Gola East (and Gola West) are fairly close to the town of Zimmi, which in turn is c.2 hours drive from Tiwai Island. We visited all three forest reserves, but concentrated our time in Gola East, which is easily visited from a hotel base in Zimmi. Gola West is also close to Zimmi, but we found that the one trail into the area was overgrown and very difficult to follow; Spotted Honeyguide was the only notable bird seen. To visit Gola North one can either stay in Belebu village, where there is a simple guest-house, or opt for a difficult drive, followed by a 12-km walk and camping. I would like to have spent longer at Gola North, since the forest here was excellent, but Gola East also has an abundance of good birds.

At Gola East we concentrated on a trail that started on the main road, some 1.5 km from the boundary. This trail had been used by the Royal Society of the Protection of Birds (the BirdLife partner in the UK) for survey work. Birding here

was often slow, but over time we saw many interesting species, including Red-thighed Sparrowhawk *Accipiter erythropus*, White-breasted Guineafowl, Red-billed Dwarf and Black Dwarf Hornbills *Tockus hartlaubi*, Brown-cheeked Hornbill *Ceratogymna cylindricus*, Rufous-sided Broadbill *Smithornis rufolateralis*, Lowland Akalat *Sheppardia cyornithopsis*, Kemp's Longbill *Macrosphenus kempii*, Red-billed Helmetshrike *Prionops caniceps*, Green-tailed Bristlebill, many greenbuls and sunbirds, including Buff-throated, four species of malimbe, Chestnut-breasted Negrofinch *Nigrita bicolor*, Crimson Seedcracker and Red-fronted Antpecker *Parmoptila rubrifrons*. Western Wattled Cuckooshrike also occurs in Gola East, although we failed to find this rare canopy species, as well as Yellow-footed *Melignomon eisentrauti* and Willcocks's Honeyguide *Indicator willcocksii*, and the poorly known Rufous Fishing Owl (a bird of smaller forest streams).

Roadside farmbrush en route between Zimmi and Gola East, just beyond a large marshy area that the road traverses, was also very productive. Here we found Red-cheeked Wattle-eye *Dyaphorophya blissetti*, Puvél's Illadopsis *Illadopsis puvéli*, Capuchin Babbler, Fiery-breasted Bushshrike *Malaconotus cruentus* and Sooty Boubou *Laniarius leucorhynchus*.

We accessed Gola North from the village of Belebu, which is only about two hours drive from Gola East, but at the end of a very bad road with hazardous log bridges. Despite this, we made the journey in a two-wheel-drive vehicle and spent the night in the village. From here one needs a guide who knows the trails to take you into the forest. We hoped to find Gola Malimbe here, but failed. Birds we did find on our short visit included Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill, Bristle-nosed Barbet *Gymnobucco peli*, Brown-eared Woodpecker *Campethera caroli* and a displaying Rufous-sided Broadbill. Nimba Flycatcher has also been reported from this area. Lyre-tailed Honeyguide *Melichneutes robustus* can also be found in the primary forests of Gola North.

Flooded fields near Kenema, within driving distance of Gola East, hold some interesting species, including the locally uncommon Forbes's Plover *Charadrius forbesi*. Kenema is another gateway to Gola North; from here it is possible to reach a remote camp in the Lalehun Forest of Gola



Figure 5. Johanna's Sunbird / Souimanga de Johanna *Cinnyris johannae* (Keith Valentine)

Figure 6. Buff-throated Sunbird / Souimanga à gorge rousse *Chalcomitra adelberti* (Keith Valentine)

Figure 7. Stone Partridge / Poulette de rocher *Prilopachus petrosus* (Keith Valentine)

Figure 8. Black Dwarf Hornbill / Calao de Hartlaub *Tockus hartlaubi* (David Hoddinott)

Figure 9. Blue-throated Roller / Rollier à gorge bleue *Eurystomus gularis* (Keith Valentine)

Figure 10. Standard-winged Nightjar / Engoulevent à balanciers *Macrodipteryx longipennis* (David Shackelford)

North. We did not have time to visit this area, or a four-wheel-drive vehicle, which is essential, but several of the commercial bird tour companies who have visited the area recently have been successful in finding a range of exciting species, including one of the rarest birds in Africa, **Gola Malimbe**. **White-breasted Guineafowl** and the skulking **Grey-throated Rail** *Canirallus oculus* are other exciting prizes here. All of the aforementioned sites hold populations of other skulking species, such as forest rails and **Latham's Forest Francolin** *Francolinus lathami*, so these should be looked for at all of these sites.

Northern Sierra Leone

A day's drive north from Zimmi is the town of Magburaka, where we stayed at the Pampana Guesthouse. From here it is easy to visit the Bumbuna area, where savanna and scrub provides a very different type of birding and a completely different avifauna. Roadside birding near Bumbuna can produce species such as **Ahanta Francolin** *Francolinus ahantensis*, **Green Turaco** *Tauraco persa*, **Baumann's Greenbul** *Phyllastrephus baumanni*, **Blackcap Babbler** *Turdoides reinwardtii*, **Green-headed Sunbird** *Cyanomitra verticalis*, **Turati's Boubou**, **Emerald Starling** *Lamprotornis iris* and the host-mimicking **Jambandu Indigobird** *Vidua varicola* and **Cameroon Indigobird** *V. camerunensis*. Indigobirds are best searched for along the road from Kenema to Makeni.

Of course, there are many more species to be seen on any trip to Sierra Leone than are mentioned here, and needless to say there is much yet to be discovered about the avifauna. This article is merely designed to whet your appetite and to encourage more birders to explore the exciting birding that await in this relatively 'new' West African destination.

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Gola Forest—a park in progress

The Gola Forest Reserves have been the subject of an ambitious project to protect these magnificent forests in perpetuity. The Sierra Leone government's Forestry Division has been working with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (CSSL) to protect these forests since 1990. In 2002, a new phase was begun to establish the Gola Forest as the country's first Rainforest National Park and only the country's second park, after Outamba Kilimi National Park. With support from the European Union, FFEM, Conservation International and the Darwin Initiative, the partners have been recruiting and training the 100 staff that are needed to protect the forest, support community development and education work, and undertake much-needed biological surveys.

The Forestry Division has recently established visitor fees and an entry permit system for the forest, as well as opening new trails and access roads. It is still early days and this year the project will be developing a park headquarters closer to the forest and basic visitor facilities.

Permits to enter the forest can be obtained from the Gola Forest Programme offices in Kenema, two hours away. The project can also provide guides for visitors, and basic camping equipment. Contact the office on +232 (0) 76 420218 or e-mail golaforest@yahoo.com for more information.

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