

Northern Senegal

(St. Louis, Richard Toll and Podor)

8 & 9 September 2018



A pair of male Savile's Bustards, Lophotis savilei, in courtship display mode

Synopsis:

A short break over a weekend to visit three renowned birding spots in northern Senegal: the marshes south of the northern town of St. Louis, and the Mauritania border towns of Richard Toll and Podor. It being 'off-season' September and the rainy season, expectations were modest, but the trip ultimately turned up a few surprises and delivered three lifers: **Savile's Bustard, Fulvous Babbler and Jacobin Cuckoo**.

My guide was the very amiable and capable, Abdou (Carlos) Lo whom I learned of from Andry Mears' trip report of a trip to Northern and Central Senegal in March-April 2018. Abdou seems to prefer his birth name for his French-speaking customers and 'Carlos' for his English-speaking clients. I admire his flexibility. He is based at Toubacouta, south-central Senegal, and can be contacted for guiding services at: carlosToubacouta@yahoo.fr

Friday, 7 September

A dash to beat the (awful) Dakar traffic on a Friday evening. We departed in Abdou's comfortable mini-van from the capital at 15:30 and arrived at our hotel in St. Louis at 20:00 (259 kms). St. Louis was the original capital of French West Africa and merits a visit in its own right with time to explore the charming and laid back colonial centre.

Saturday, 8 September

We departed at 05:00am, bound northeast for Richard Toll (106 kms) and then on to the Podor area (approximately 100kms further east). Our chief reason for visiting Podor was to try our luck for **Golden Nightjar**, *Caprimulgus eximius*, a true desert Sahelian species, which had been seen by Mears and Abdou at in the same area at Easter time 2018. However, we approached the quest with low expectations given the rains in the area and the greening of the desert. We searched in vain for close on five hours; surmising that the bird was likely to have retreated north and east into the true desert of the Sahel for the rainy season. Another trip in the making!

However, the birding was pleasant, the heat tolerable and the open savanna was alive with good numbers of birds, many of them in active courtship and breeding mode. Especially prominent was **Sudan Golden Sparrow**, *Passer luteus* – indeed, it seemed that every thorn bush housed at least one nest with attendant proud bird parents.



Thorn bush and Sparrow nest – and typical vegetation after the West African monsoon rains



Sudan Golden Sparrow (male)



The same bird having found a mate, or just a little recreational sex?

Other birds seen in the area were: **Temminck's Courser**, *Cursorius temminckii*; **Northern Grey-headed Sparrow**, *Passer griseus*; **Chestnut-bellied Starling**, *Lamprotornis pulcher*; **Greater Blue-eared Starling**, *Lamprotornis chalybaeus*; **Southern Grey Shrike**, *Lanius meridionalis elegans*; **Cricket Warbler**, *Spiloptila clamans*; **Northern Anteater-Chat**, *Myrmecocichla a. aethiops*; **Rufous Scrub Robin**, *Cercotrichas galactotes*; **Black Scrub Robin**, *Cercotrichas podobe*; and **Black-crowned Sparrow Lark**, *Eremopterix nigriceps*.



Rufous Scrub Robin (above) and Temminck's Courser (below)



Chestnut-bellied Starling (male at left) and female (right)

A nice surprise was an encounter with a small party of **Fulvous Babbler (or Chatterer)**, *Turdoides fulva buchani*, (which I hadn't expected, we being at its very southern-most recorded range along the Mauritanian border). In all, about six birds were seen, with one bird keeping vigil on top of a broom shrub. Interestingly, and despite the name, the birds were silent for the entire period of viewing (15 minutes):



At midday, we called our nightjar hunt off and drove back to Richard Toll for birding in a spot just outside the town (where I had hitherto birded). The lush vegetation was in stark contrast to the dry scene experienced back in March 2018. Here, our chief target was **Sennar Penduline Tit**, *Anthoscopus punctifrons*. However, despite four plus hours of searching, we were unable to locate a single bird. One bonus however, was a nice Beaudouin's Snake Eagle which gave good overflight views and then landed on a bush by the roadside:



After a quick lunch in Richard Toll, we changed strategy and moved to another spot along the irrigation channel on the north side of the road and birded until the evening. Again, no Penduline Tit, but some good birds encountered were:



Western Red-billed Hornbill, *Tockus erythrorhynchus kemp*



African Grey Hornbill, *Tockus nasutus*



Brubru, *Nilaus afer afer*



Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata* (l) and Pied Flycatcher, *Ficedula hypoleuca* (r)



Woodland Kingfisher, *Halcyon senegalensis* and Striped Kingfisher, *Halcyon chelicuti*



Golden sunset over the western plains

Sunday, 9 September

After a comfortable night organized by Abdou at a central hotel in St. Louis, we got a 05:00am start to explore some of the area immediately south of St. Louis. Here there are large tracts of open marsh lands dotted with medium-sized semi-desert trees (tamarisk is prominent). Lying close to the coast, there are also stands of mangroves in the more salty marsh zones.

Driving slowly along the unsealed road, I caught sight of a lone bustard and we immediately alighted the vehicle to search the surrounding bushland. We were soon onto a small party of **Savile's Bustards**, *Lophotis savilei*, which became more and more numerous, the more we searched. We had clearly arrived at what was a peak in the breeding season and birds could be heard calling all around. The call is distinctive and described in the reference *Borrow and Demey, Birds of Western Africa* as: *tuit! tutututututututu*. In almost all cases, we spied two males moving and displaying in pairs. At a distance could be discerned several lone females crouched under the shade of low shrubbery. The females were silent and would slip away silently, while the males continued their courtship exposed and quite out in the open:



Savile's Bustards, two males apparently vying for female attention



The Female Savile's Bustard



The male Savile's Bustard, with grey neck, calling for attention

Very pleased with our discovery and the large number of bustards in the area, we contented ourselves to spend the rest of the morning observing the bustards in courtship mode.

At 11:00am, we departed the area in order for me to have time to catch my late afternoon flight from Dakar to Bissau. *En route*, Abdou called a halt to check two cuckoos flying low over a peanut field.

These, to my delight turned out to be a lifer, the **Jacobin Cuckoo**, *Oxylophus jacobinus*, a migratory species that had entirely eluded me in Guinea-Bissau (and indeed is not included in the migratory range map).





Jacobin is distinguished from closely allied Levillant's Cuckoo by its smaller size and clean, (not striped), all-white neck

We made several other stops to check for our remaining target species, Desert Cisticola, *Cisticola aridulus*, but were ultimately, unsuccessful.



Typical wet season birding territory half-way between St. Louis and Dakar

By 16:00 we were at the new international airport, *Blaise Diagne*, 60kms east of Dakar in good time for my flight back home. All-in-all, a good trip, with few expectations, but three good life birds for the effort. I highly recommend Abdou/Carlos and hope to use his services for my next visit to Senegal.



My companions, Abdou Lo and our driver, Modou at an impromptu birding spot on the road back to Dakar



Desert blooming, typical plants of the northern desert in the West African 'wet': August-November

David Karr, Bissau, 15 October 2018

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