

## **Nigeria and Okomu Forest trip report**

**If all you think of when you hear the word Nigeria is “drugs, 419 scams and winning the Nigerian lottery again.....for the 8<sup>th</sup> time this year” then maybe, like me, you need to think again!**

I have just returned from a trip to Lagos and to Okomu National Park, one of the largest conserved areas of lowland forest in Nigeria – and the birding experience of a lifetime. Any trip to a new country – let alone a new region, is always exciting and the prospect of new and spectacular birds had me anxiously waiting for confirmation that my visa had been granted and that the trip was on.

Our small group flew into Lagos on the scheduled SAA flight on Friday 12<sup>th</sup> January and, taxiing up to the sprawling terminal in Lagos International Airport, I saw first hand the effects of the Harmattan – the dry wind blowing off the Sahara which, for two months each winter, turns Nigeria’s skies a hazy, dust-laden yellow.

Nigeria is surrounded by francophone countries and took the decision to adopt the regional practice of driving on the right-hand side of the road some twenty odd years ago. Night-time curfews were enforced during the change-over but even so there was spectacular carnage on the roads until people had got the hang of things. I am glad that the dust had long settled by the time of our visit.

The drive from the airport into Ikoyi where we were staying was still indescribable and made the worst scenes on the Ben Schoeman between Joburg and Pretoria look like a walk in the park. Ikoyi is one of four islands which form part of Lagos and is linked to the mainland via an extremely long (15 km) bridge. Even at ten in the evening, and in the middle of a critical fuel shortage, there were five lanes of traffic somehow travelling on a three-lane bridge. Everyone was hooting – and yet in spite of what appeared to be total chaos most drivers cheerfully accommodated the sudden lane changes of their fellow road users. What an introduction to a new country!

Waking early the next morning I was aware of unfamiliar bird sounds from the garden outside the window and, after dressing hurriedly, went out to explore what the neighbourhood had to offer. The next two hours brought great views of African Thrush (a lot like our Karoo); Western Grey Plantain Eaters feeding on the fruits of the Breadfruit Tree; Mottled Spinetails screaming shrilly as they passed overhead; Splendid Glossy-Starlings; Senegal Parrots and Rose-ringed Parakeets; Variable Sunbirds; Grey Woodpeckers (like our Olives) and Lanner; Shikra and European Honey Buzzard. Broad-billed Rollers, Woodland Kingfishers and both Black Heron, rather grubby-looking Cattle Egrets and a Little Egret feeding in the open drains next to the roads led me down to the channel separating Ikoyi from the mainland. Great views of a Western Reef Heron wrapped up a great start to my Nigerian list.

After breakfast we sat in the garden watching out for anything new and were able to add the magpie-like Pia-Piac – an all-black, long-tailed crow to the growing list. Land is at a premium in Lagos and, in the afternoon, we visited an area where swamp forest had been filled in to create new building land. Birds were scarce but Ethiopian Swallows, Yellow-throated Longclaws, Water Thick-knees, White-fronted Plovers and a single Royal Tern made for a mixed bag of familiar-, as well as new species.

Early the next morning we headed east towards the city of Benin, stopping for an all-too-brief look around the Lekki Conservatory on the outskirts of Lagos. We were early, but our host Phil Hall who is “Mr. Conservation” in Nigeria persuaded the gate guard to let us through. A walk along the wooden boardwalks provided great views of a family of Mona monkeys which eyed us sleepily as we passed below them. The first of several Little Greenbuls announced their presence with nasal-sounding chattering and then we were in a small hide looking at Green Sandpiper, African Jacana and Striated-(Green-backed), and Black Herons.

The vegetation structure changed and the path took us through open grassland with scattered bush-clumps. Birding excitement came in the form of Carmelite-, and Olive-bellied Sunbirds; a large flock of Yellow Wagtails passing low overhead; Cuckoo Hawk; Grey Kestrel; African Harrier Hawk; Palmnut Vulture; Blue-spotted Wood-Dove; Fire-bellied Woodpecker; Whinchat and also the first of many White-throated Bee-eaters of the trip. A party of Red-vented Malimbés – the first of these striking red-and-black weavers of the trip, wrapped up a spectacular two hours at Lekki. I could have spent several more hours exploring this wonderful reserve but Okomu was calling and we hit the road.

The road between Lagos and Benin carries heavy traffic and, for most of its length, is a double-laned highway with a solid concrete barrier separating the vehicles. The road is mostly in good condition but every now and then deep potholes caused diversions and at one point I was amazed to see vehicles travelling in both directions – on both sides of the highway! Anyone trying that in South Africa would probably have a life expectancy of only seconds. There were also numerous police roadblocks and we were grateful for the consular plates on our Range Rover which meant we were simply waved through. Birding was restricted to what we could identify in passing and apart from numerous Grey-hooded Kingfishers, Broad-billed Rollers and Black Kites, we only added Hooded Vulture to the list.

Our arrival in Okomu National Park after a four hour drive was heralded by a spectacular change in scenery. The forest had been logged historically but is still largely intact and the height, structure and density of the tree cover are breath-taking.

In addition to a spectacular range of birds that was our primary target, it is still home to a number of forest elephant and buffalo, as well as a large variety of primates including a small (and very wary) troop of chimpanzees. It is also home to over seven hundred different butterfly species and the roads and paths through the forest were ablaze with colour and movement.

The drive through the forest to the lodge at Okomu EcoResort was at midday and fairly rushed but we still managed great sightings of Fanti Sawwing and Eurasian Honey Buzzard plus spectacular views of the inappropriately-named Black Bee-eater – a gorgeous bird with a crimson throat and turquoise blue- streaked body.

The Okomu forest is characterised by a number of shallow lakes scattered through the forest and these have formed clearings of between eighty and one hundred and fifty meters in diameter. At two of these, viewing platforms have been built high into Cotton-Silk trees overlooking the clearings and we made for the newer of these after lunch.

The climb up is not for the faint-hearted, or for anyone with a fear of heights – thirty six meters straight up inside a lattice-work of wooden struts, and, with the 70 steps placed

450 mm apart, a great cardio-vascular work-out. Once on the platform however it was all worth it. The view over the canopy was spectacular ...and the birding was even better. Over the next two hours I added sightings of numerous new birds. Most striking were the enormous White-thighed-, and Black-, Yellow-, and Black-and-White-casqued Hornbills whose heavy wing beats were clearly audible even across the clearing. Numbers of Piping-, and African Pied Hornbills brought the number of new members of this family to five for the trip and a host of smaller species – Velvet-mantled Drongo, Blue-throated Brown-, Buff-throated-, and Superb Sunbirds, (along with the more familiar Collared's) plus Purple-headed Glossy-Starlings added colour and excitement.

Just before dusk forced us down from the platform, a series of calls echoed across the clearing. Parts sounded similar to those of a Red-, or Yellow-billed Hornbill but these were interspersed with a variety of eerie hooting sounds – creating for me one of the most vivid memories of this trip. Seconds later I was looking at my first Great Blue Turaco – a breathtaking bird that in spite of its large (about twice the size of our louries) size bounded with effortless grace through the canopy of an adjacent tree. As we carefully descended, the plaintive-sounding whistles of a Fire-crested Alethe rose from the darkening forest below.

The following morning had us heading for the second platform – even higher at thirty eight meters above the forest floor. On the way we stopped to observe a large colony of Bristle-nosed Barbets nesting in a large dead tree stump. There must have been at least sixty pairs of these strange dull-brown birds buzzing around and, with the possible exception of the Naked-faced Barbet which we saw later; these have to be the ugliest members of this usually colourful family. Great views of White-tailed Ant-Thrush feeding in the road and a tantalizingly brief glimpse of an African Pitta that flew out in front of our vehicle kept the list ticking over.

Our luck continued and our sojourn on the new canopy platform brought great views of Cassin's Hawk Eagle as well as the diminutive Lemon-breasted Crombec, Boiko Batis and a stunning Rufous-crowned Eremomela – a bird which makes our members of the genus look really dull and boring!

Speckled Tinkerbird – a rather large and strange-looking tinkerbird was next but this was followed by stunning views of a pair of Yellow-spotted Barbets, surely one of the most strikingly-coloured members of the family.

Piercing whistles announced the arrival of a trio of African Grey Parrots and they repeatedly circled close overhead in response to Phil's whistling. What a difference seeing these birds in their natural setting – instead of a cramped cage! We decided to walk back to the lodge and added Red-headed-, Gray's-, and Red-vented Malimbés and Maxwell's Black Weaver; Blue-headed Wood-Dove, as well as stunning views of Blue Cuckoo-Shrike and Green Hylia to the growing list.

Our last morning saw a return to the first platform where we were treated to a spectacular show by five species of hornbill feeding opposite us. They were later joined by a party of Spotted Greenbuls and a single Mona Monkey. Cassin's Spinetail flitted through the canopy across the clearing, and the calls of Red-rumped Tinkerbird had me searching the trees – but unfortunately the bird remained elusive.

The walk back to the lodge brought great views of Red-tailed Greenbul and a brief stop at a fruiting Oil Palm gave us great views of all four species of tiny Negrofinch – White-breasted-, Chestnut-breasted-, Grey-headed-, and Pale-fronted; and then it was time to pack up and head for Lagos and our flight back to Johannesburg. A Western Bluebill feeding on the road verge before we left the forest plus a flock of the local race of Village Weaver nesting with Veillot's Black Weavers at a refuelling stop wrapped up a stunning five days. The list for the trip stood at 127 species but of these 56 were lifers! Not bad for a winter trip when birding is supposedly more difficult. I can't wait to get back to Okomu, and this time I want to also get up to the mountain forests of Cross River and, hopefully see my first Picathartes!!!

Geoff Lockwood

Note if anyone would like to find out more about Okomu, including pictures of some of the birds check out the website at [www.okomuecoresort.com/](http://www.okomuecoresort.com/)