

wild, but worth it

BIRDING IN BÉNOUÉ

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **RICHARD FLACK**

AFRICA CURRENTLY has a number of 'best birding destinations', but Cameroon is probably quite low on the radar at present. That could change, as this Central African country supports almost 970 bird species, of which a fair proportion are 'specials' - and nearly a third can be found in Bénoué National Park. >





above We watched the strikingly marked Egyptian Plover dashing here and there in its search for food.

right This female Pied Flycatcher was a camp resident.

previous spread, left A spectacular Violet Turaco surveys its riverine habitat.

previous spread, right An Abyssinian Roller, the most common roller in Bénoué, would sometimes perch in full view in the park's miombo-like woodland or savanna.

LOOKING FOR adventure laced with captivating birds and wild Africa at its best? I was, and I found it in Central Africa. A recent trip there took me to Cameroon, specifically Bénoué National Park in the north-east of the country, about 250 kilometres south of the town of Garoua. Covering 1800 square kilometres, the park lies on the bank of the Bénoué River, which forms its eastern boundary. It dates from 1932, when it was first gazetted as a faunal reserve, was upgraded to national park status in 1968 and was designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 1981.

Lying between the equator to the south and the Sahara to the north, Bénoué experiences a reasonably comfortable daytime temperature of 35 degrees Celsius in winter, when we were there. But at this time of year it also endures the harmattan, the strong, hot and dusty wind that blows down from the desert. Every three



or four days during our stay this wind brought clouds of sand that had a huge impact on visibility and made conditions challenging for photography: the good light of early morning and evening was not strong enough to penetrate the dust and we were left with the diffuse light typical of a cloudy afternoon to work with. Nevertheless, winter is a good time to

visit Bénoué as come April the rains arrive, making access to the park – and travelling around in it – incredibly difficult, if not impossible.

Savanna along with miombo-like woodland cover most of the landscape, with dense forest and riverine woodland lining the banks of the various rivers. An Important Bird Area, the park supports an



estimated 300 bird species, including a number of sought-after Central African specials. Given that I was there for 10 days, I had plenty of time to explore the different habitats and the birds in them.

As our camp was right on the river, that seemed like a good place to start. In winter the Bénoué was still flowing and quite deep in parts, which made it the perfect home for hippos and large crocodiles. Far from being deterred, we just took care to keep our wits about us while enjoying the spectacular birding both on the river and along its banks. The highlight here was one of the aforementioned Central African specials, the stunning Egyptian Plover. Our camp could not have been better situated for this cracker of a bird, which loves to forage on the sandbanks around the hippo pools. My introduction to the species was a pair I saw from the deck on the very first

morning while staring out over the river. It's impossible to mistake the black, white, grey and cream coloration and the quick dashes the birds make back and forth as they look for food. Getting a decent photograph, however, was not so easy; I only had to avoid a four-metre crocodile and a group of six hippos and do a few metres of leopard crawl before I managed it!

Even while admiring this striking bird, I couldn't stop my eyes from wandering up, down and around as so many other species flew past. At first glance they all seemed only too familiar, as if they were the same lapwings, turacos, parrots, doves, firefinches and raptors that we have in southern Africa. On closer inspection, though, they were quite different. Our Blacksmith Lapwing was replaced by the equally territorial and noisy Spur-winged Lapwing; our Grey-headed Parrot was traded for its

very skittish Senegal cousin; our Purple-crested and Knysna turacos were swapped for the undeniably beautiful Violet and White-crested turacos; and our White-fronted Bee-eater gave way to the very common and active Red-throated Bee-eater. Then our Southern Carmine Bee-eater and Southern Black Flycatcher were replaced by their Northern counterparts, while the Red-billed Firefinch was joined by its Bar-breasted and Black-bellied relatives.

The buzzards, kestrels, harriers and hawks were also similar but different: Grey Kestrels hawked for insects along the riverbanks, Western Marsh Harriers glided along the tree-line, Grasshopper Buzzards took advantage of the many veld fires that were raging in the area, and the Red-chested Goshawk replaced the corresponding African species. >

above Hippos on the banks of the Bénoué River ensured that we kept our wits about us when birding.



The river brought a feast for any birder's eyes and since this was my first trip to Central Africa, the experience was even more exciting as one new bird after the other came into view and I thoroughly enjoyed learning how to separate the different species and identify their calls and behaviour. After soaking up a few sunrises and sunsets over the water, I turned my attention to the adjoining forest and woodland. This habitat proved to be the most productive of the trip and yielded many of the local specials.

The Egyptian Plover had been at the top of my wish list, but a close second was the Oriole Warbler, or Moho. Not known for its accommodating nature, this normally furtive species tends to hide in dense vegetation and I felt very lucky when I encountered a breeding pair on the third day. They were within a hundred metres of the camp and I was able to spend several hours watching them as they rummaged around under the thick, tangled canopy. With its oriole-like colours, long, shaggy tail and thrush-like foraging behaviour, this warbler must rank as one of Africa's more peculiar species.

Fruiting trees on the riverbank attracted another range of exciting birds and once I had identified a few of the more common ones I would check daily to see what had dropped in for a meal. Purple Glossy, Long-tailed and Greater and Lesser Blue-eared starlings were regular noisy visitors, while Bearded and Vieillot's barbets turned up less often but were definitely worth waiting for. The forest and woodland habitat drew other terrific finds, such as Red-winged Grey Warbler, Pied Flycatcher and various sunbirds, including Variable, Beautiful, Western Violet-backed and Pygmy. Black-headed Gonolek and the striking African Blue Flycatcher were a couple of other notable highlights.



With a bit of patience and by carefully scanning the taller woodland trees, I was able to pick up several other species I was very happy to see, with the likes of Violet and White-crested turacos, Fine-spotted Woodpecker and Bruce's Green Pigeon at the top of the list.

Some birders focus particularly on species in families new to them or ones that belong to very small families, and the river edge and its woodland are home to a bird that fits both bills: the Grey-headed Oliveback. I held out little hope of encountering one, but while I was spishing under a thick canopy in the heat of the day in an attempt to draw out a couple of Red-winged Grey Warblers, an oliveback came into the open no more than two metres away. To get full-frame shots of this special bird was incredible enough, but when a male and female Brown-throated Wattle-eye, an African Blue Flycatcher and a male Beautiful Sunbird joined the party, I felt as though I'd died and gone to heaven. A surprise like this is what makes birding and bird >

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above *The Oriole Warbler is a skulker of note and I was lucky to find a breeding pair not far from our camp.*

left *Although it was very common, we never tired of watching the colourful Red-throated Bee-eater.*



African adventure

Getting to Bénoué National Park, and even Cameroon, is an adventure in itself. First there's the visa application process, which is by no means easy. Then there's the journey, which can take anything between 36 and 48 hours. The first leg is the flight to Douala, the commercial capital of Cameroon. We spent a night there at one of the established hotels, eating in because we'd been advised that driving around at night is not a good idea. We then took an advertised one-hour Camair-Co flight to Garoua in the north of the country. This can take as long as four hours, depending on the number of stops along the way. The drive from Garoua to the park is similarly beset by delays and can take between four and six hours, with stops for road blocks and any other difficulties resulting from the poor condition of the road. But once you're there, it's worth it!

The accommodation in the park is not what it used to be and it's worthwhile checking on the current situation before you book. We stayed at the beautiful Ndilla Safari Camp, a hunting camp on the park's border that lies right on the eastern bank of the Bénoué River.

photography such exciting and enjoyable hobbies.

The most challenging species of the thick riverside tangles and dark understorey was without doubt the rare Blackcap Babbler. To describe this bird as 'elusive' is no understatement; I have yet to encounter a babbler that is more evasive and alert. I saw some on at least five occasions, but was able to get my binoculars on them only once – a photograph was out of the question.

Close to the rivers we found a few floodplains where flocks of Four-banded Sandgrouse, the most common local gamebird, would come to drink in the mornings and evenings. They were joined by Vinaceous, Red-eyed and African Collared doves, among others, as well as seedeaters such as Bush Petronia, West African Seedeater and Northern Grey-headed Sparrow.

After the diversity and richness of the rivers and riverine forests and woodlands, I turned my attention to the tracts of savanna and miombo-like woodland that occupied the rest of the terrain. As is often the case in these habitats, the birding here was incredibly challenging. Hours would pass and we'd see little apart from a couple of petronias and a few doves. The apparently skittish nature of the birds didn't help. Although I've birded in a number of different countries and habitats, I have never seen birds take flight as quickly as they did here. This made for very frustrating birding, though it was also rewarding because when I did find something special and came away with a photograph, I knew I had worked for it.

Every now and then a spectacular Abyssinian or Blue-bellied



Roller would break the mould and perch in glorious full sight. A White-fronted Black Chat would suddenly begin chirping from a nearby tree, a Stone Partridge would miraculously appear in an opening in the grass or a Yellow-bellied Hyliota would come down to forage. Long distances of nothing but dust and heat would be broken by a Northern Ground-Hornbill on the march, the black-and-white back of a Senegal Batis, a skulking White-throated Francolin (the same size as our Coqui Francolin but much paler) or the yellow flash of a flying Bruce's Green Pigeon.

One of the most interesting species we encountered was first seen perched on the back of a goat belonging to one of the local villagers. The large black bird with a long tail and purplish eye is named from its call, Piapiac, and it's an African member of the crow family, sharing its genus, *Ptilostomus*, with no other species. It forages in flocks of 10 or more and is often observed following – or perched upon – goats and cattle, feeding on the insects they disturb. I even saw some following a herd of western kob with the same purpose.

Although I returned home happy with my Bénoué list, I did dip on four of the area's specials: the nomadic Emin's Shrike and

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Rufous-rumped Lark, the Adamawa Turtle Dove and the Standard-winged Nightjar. Everyone in the group thought they had seen the dove, but it was always flying away at full speed and the views were too fleeting to be sure. The shrike and the lark were nowhere to be found and I can only think that conditions weren't right for these two elusive species.

These dips weren't for lack of trying; I really did put in the effort, even to the extent of getting stuck in the middle of nowhere with two flat tyres, a broken radio and little daylight remaining. This is when you suddenly realise how vulnerable you are! When I saw the headlights of the rescue vehicle approaching I couldn't have been more grateful, and the cold beer back at camp was one of the best I have ever tasted. But I guess



it's adventures like this that keep birders coming back for more; if finding birds were easy, much of the sense of reward and fulfilment would be lost. Having seen more than 140 species, of which at least 60 were new ('at least' because I am still trying to get to grips with some of the region's LBJs, including Common Nightingale and Dorst's, Short-winged and Rufous cisticolas), I really cannot complain.

In conclusion, it's a long way to Central Africa and the journey is anything but easy, but if I'm asked whether it was worth it – absolutely! The birds live up to their description as 'specials' and the environment is pure wilderness. There is, moreover, wildlife on offer that may not be around for very much longer – lions, leopards, buffaloes and elephants still roam the banks of the Bénoué River, great herds of giant eland come down to it to drink, and various types of buck still live within the habitats bordering the river.

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above A member of the crow family, the Piapiac is named after its call.

above, left The largest of the three olivebacks in Africa, the Grey-headed is also distinguished by its white face and black throat.

opposite The Bearded Barbet is another stunning bird at Bénoué and one that you wouldn't want to miss.