



Senegal and 8AK

By Margaret Hobby

On 28th November, 2014, we flew from a cold and grey Birmingham Airport to a cloudless blue West African sky, quite a shock to the system. We decided to go to Senegal because the previous January we had been to The Gambia and had such a good time, we felt we needed to see just what was beyond The Gambian border. Being a birding trip we were soon heading north from Dakar to Saint Louis and to the Djoudj National Park, near the border with Mauritania. Djoudj is a National Bird Sanctuary, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Ramsar Site, ranked number 65 in the World's top 100 birding sites. This large wetland in the Senegal River delta comprises a large lake surrounded by streams, ponds and backwaters, forming a sanctuary for large numbers of water birds including purple heron, black crowned night heron, African spoonbill, white pelican, lesser and greater flamingos and black crowned cranes, not to mention all the ducks and waders in very high concentrations. We stayed overnight beside the Sanctuary at Hotel Djoudj and, of course, being beside so much water, as we ate our dinner the mosquitoes ate us. Why is it that insect repellent always seems to attract the insects when it is supposed to do the opposite?

We were awoken the next morning by the whistling ducks creating bedlam in the wetlands and we were soon off to explore the park and surrounding area. As we stood watching the reed beds and lagoons, we often saw spectacular clouds of thousands of ducks being disturbed by perhaps a marsh harrier, or some other bird of prey and then the birds would swarm about like the murmurations of starlings back home. In the afternoon we had a boat trip on the River Senegal to get closer to the African darters, long-tailed cormorants, etc. and, as we turned a bend in the river, there was a large island with a colony of great white pelicans grunting and pushing in their thousands, for here is their breeding ground. It was impossible to even guess how many were in this area but it was many thousands and every year they come here to breed. From all the pushing and shoving going on it was obvious there just wasn't room for them all and, in fact, some were lining the banks of the river away from the main island. What a sight and smell!

The following morning we checked out a small pool close to the hotel and spotted a total of seven painted snipe, looking beautiful in the morning sun, before heading off to Richard Toll, north east of Djoudj. Richard Toll is a small town close to the Mauritanian border whose main production is sugar from the large cane fields close by. It also lies in the 'Sahel' area of North Africa which is the eco-climatic and biogeographic zone between the Sahara Desert and the broad belt of tropical rain forest of Guinea and the Congo. Although there was plenty of water by the coast, once away from this it is a vast expanse of arid tamarisk and acacia scrub, where in the dry season very little seems to grow.

After lunch we visited one such scrubby area just beyond the town of Richard Toll where we had more bird sightings, including black-shouldered kite, black-headed lapwing, green wood-hoopoe, Vieillot's barbet and, in another area close by, we found a pair of Verreaux's eagle owls high up in a tree. With less than an hour of good daylight left, we went off for the aerodrome on the edge of town looking for a cricket warbler, which we eventually found much to the excitement of our guide. It was only a 'little brown job' and I was not that impressed, but I *was* impressed by a Montagu's harrier which soared above us.

Many of the roads are of tarmac and very good, unlike those we had encountered in The Gambia. Most of the people live in villages beside the road with houses made from wood and rushes woven together. They are very communal and, although poor, we did not see any pot-bellied children nor any beggars. When we stopped, children would run up to us and I wrongly assumed they were going to beg. Instead, they wanted to shake our hands and hold them, as if they couldn't believe the colour of our skin. We saw very few, if any, people of European origin during the whole of our stay, and although I am told French people do normally visit because it is a French-speaking country, the ebola scare had certainly kept people away. The hotels only seemed to be open for us, and this is normally the busy season. If guests do not return, the tourist industry will really suffer and hotels will close for ever with the loss of a much needed income.

We were woken up at 4am next morning by the call to prayer from the mosque which was close by! Fortunately, we managed to doze off again before waking at a more sensible hour of 6am. After a quick breakfast, we returned to the acacia woods just north of Richard Toll and here we found about twenty five chestnut-bellied sand grouse which had dropped into a wet patch.

After our stay in the north, we then travelled south-east to Kaolack, birding all the way and, after an hour, we came to a carcass being stripped by vultures, with the Eurasian griffons dominating the Ruppell's, white-backed and smaller hooded vultures in the squabble. We could get as close as the smell would allow; they certainly were not going to let us put them off their find. We stayed in Kaolack after a long day on the road.

Early morning is always a good time for birds and next day's highlights included the swallow-tailed kites in their hundreds as they flew over us on their way from their roosting place to the feeding grounds. Heading east parallel with the northern border of The Gambia, we spotted many different birds at the water holes including our first piapiac and Sudan golden sparrows as they dashed to and fro to drink. Eventually, after riding a bumpy track through the forest, we reached our 'camp' at Wassadou.

Wassadou Camp sits on a cliff overlooking a remote bend in the Gambia River, shaded by towering kapok



trees and the ideal spot to watch the river for birds and mammals, particularly hippopotami, who announce their presence quite loudly with their explosive burps. There were also monkeys and baboons swinging noisily from the trees. Wassadou is in a very remote spot, with very limited electricity and only cold water which was only available when the electricity was on. We stayed in typical Senegalese huts but all were adequately equipped, though trying to charge camera batteries was a challenge. They also stayed surprisingly cool despite having no air conditioning.

On the first day we had a boat trip up the river. The boat was very small and so half our party of eight used the boat in the morning and the other half waited until the afternoon. The highlight of the boat trip for me was seeing the red-throated bee-eaters at their nest holes. They nest just like sand martins do in England, in small holes in the river bank, in very large flocks. When they are disturbed they fly off in a swirl and all the fiery colours, the red, green, blue and yellow, looks magical, a sight I will never forget.

Another highlight of the boat trip was being able to get really close to the Egyptian plovers who fly up and down the stream just above the surface and suddenly land on the sand. Here we witnessed them jumping a little in the air and landing with their feet flat, so disturbing the sand. In this way they seem to be able to eat flies which lie just below the sand's surface. What a clever little bird. Also on our boat trip we saw large monitor lizards basking on the river bank and also an eight foot cobra! Quite a sight. It was on one of these boat trips that several hippopotami became inquisitive and gradually got nearer and nearer our very small boat. We were beginning to get rather alarmed when the boatman started the motor again and we shot off down the river. I think we got close enough.

Soon it was time to leave this magical place where few people seem to venture (not this year anyway) and drive west through scrub and hamlets of mud huts with thatched roofs, eventually arriving in Toubacouta which is by the coast again. On the first morning there was a commotion in the hotel car park and another pearl-spotted owl was found. After this we went for a walk around the grounds and then the local village area. Birds included swallow-tailed bee-eater, yellow-fronted tinkerbird, more bearded barbets, melodious warbler, Montagu's harrier, scarlet-chested sunbird, pygmy sunbird and beautiful sunbird and a group of five white-crested helmet shrikes which kept flying around us. We also went on a drive around the area looking for a Saville's bustard but it was all in vain. There were many local people around harvesting their peanuts and also fields of hibiscus plants full of seed heads which they eventually turn into a juice.

Toubacouta is beside the Saloum National Park and Saloum Delta and whilst here we had another boat trip up towards the mouth of the estuary. Again we saw many birds, but all the time throughout our trip we had been looking out for ospreys and, in particular, some which might have a

tag on a leg, showing that they had been ringed in Europe and were now wintering in West Africa. Usually, the ospreys sit at the top of a tree with their feathers covering their legs. The osprey we soon came across did exactly this. While Brian was still clicking on his camera, it decided to fly off and, yes, he managed to get a photo of its legs. Of course, with digital cameras you can blow up the picture and we were all able to read the dark green ring tag, with 8AK on it. We have since reported this and had it confirmed that the bird is in fact a German one, rung as a nestling on 30th June 2004 at Dobbin, NE Germany, about 90 miles NW of Berlin.

Our last day was taken up by a long drive back to Dakar which included a ferry crossing. There was only one ferry which ran every hour and carried about twelve vehicles and it was obvious we were not going to be included on the next ferry. However, money changed hands, and we were on the ferry ahead of others in the queue!

Our flight back home was uneventful. We had seen 270 birds, many of them new to us. The last birds we saw were two peregrine falcons sitting together just like those on Derby Cathedral – an appropriate ending to a very good holiday.

Key to collage on Page 20

1. Osprey
2. Spur-winged Goose
3. African Fish Eagle
4. As above
5. African Swallow-tailed Kite
6. Great Cormorant
7. Palmyra Palm
8. Wattled Lapwing
9. Wassadou
10. Golden Orb Weaver Spider (Female, with tiny male above)
11. Great White Pelican
12. Guinea Baboon
13. Squacco Heron
15. Hammerkop
16. Ruppell's Griffon Vulture
17. Western Great Plantain-eater
18. Cobra

Photographs by the authors



Senegal

