



BIRDING TOUR ETHIOPIA: COMPLETE ABYSSINIA

20 MARCH - 9 APRIL 2020



Ruspoli's Turaco (photo Niall Perrins) is one of our main targets on this trip

Ethiopia, “the Roof of Africa”, is an absolutely unique and spectacular birding destination. It is one of Africa’s most scenically beautiful countries, boasting some of the continent’s highest mountains and plateaus (but also contains a depression that reaches slightly below sea level), impressive escarpments, Great Rift Valley lakes and volcanoes, and very varied vegetation from juniper forests to arid savanna dotted with monstrous red termite mounds. Descending from the highlands to the deep valleys far below can seem like entering a completely different world, all within the same day – it is an amazingly varied country.

Ethiopia’s unique mountain topography situated in the middle of the “Horn of Africa” is not just stunningly scenic but has also produced a staggering number of endemic birds (about 30 species) found in no other country, in addition to quite a lot of birds that are most easily found in Ethiopia – especially since other countries in north-east Africa are currently considered unsafe to visit. The list of Ethiopian endemics includes two awesome **Turaco** species, **Ruspoli’s** and **White-cheeked**, the striking, bizarre, and taxonomically puzzling Stresemann’s **Bushcrow**, and **Archer’s** (Liben, Sidamo) **Lark**, which is sadly considered the next bird to probably go extinct in Africa. Ethiopia is also one of the best places to see birds such as **Arabian Bustard**, with luck having **Northern Carmine Bee-eaters** riding on their backs. Ethiopia’s birds are generally easy to find, and in addition to the plethora of endemics it is not too difficult to end up with an impressive bird list of well over 500 species after a three-week trip to this country.

Ethiopia of course also boasts such fabulous mammals as **Ethiopian Wolf**, some awesome primates including **Gelada** and **Hamadryas Baboons**, and many others. The country also has a spectacularly rich and ancient history and all in all is a wonderful country to travel in.

Itinerary (21 days/20 nights)

Day 1. Addis Ababa

Our 21-day tour starts in the fascinating high-altitude city of Addis Ababa, which has a population of about 3.5 million people. Here we can already find many of Ethiopia’s more common endemics, such as the oddly-proportioned **Thick-billed Raven**, **White-collared Pigeon**, the beautiful **Abyssinian Longclaw**, the pretty **Black-headed Siskin**, **Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher**, **Black-winged Lovebird**, and others.

Overnight: Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa

Day 2. Sululta Plains to the top of the Jemma Valley

Before reaching Debre Libanos, we cross the famed Sululta Plains, which are a brilliant place to find the beautiful **Spot-breasted Lapwing**, the taxonomically strange **Blue-winged Goose**, and other endemics. We also hope to find our first **Gelada Baboon** (nicknamed bleeding-heart baboon) – these ferocious-looking but vegetarian baboons have huge vocabularies and a complex social system. We’ll eventually reach our well-placed accommodation, from where we will look for **Egyptian Vulture**, **Griffon Vulture**, **Bearded Vulture**, and other raptors as they gracefully sail by, as well as **Little Rock Thrush** and many other mountain birds.

Overnight: Ethio-German Park Hotel, Debre Libanos

Day 3. Birding the Jemma River

Today we enter a truly different world. We descend from dizzying heights to the Jemma River so far below us. We enter an arid land, where we look for a very different suite of birds compared to those of Debre Libanos. We look for species such as **Speckle-fronted Weaver**, **Fox Kestrel**, **Foxy Cisticola**, **Siffling Cisticola**, **Abyssinian Wheatear**, **Senegal Thick-knee**, **Black-billed Barbet**, and many others characteristic of East Africa's arid areas. In this area we'll also continue to look for some of Ethiopia's localized endemics such as **Harwood's Francolin**, **Erckel's Francolin**, **White-throated Seedeater**, and others.

Overnight: the best local hotel in Lemi Katema (and better ones are currently being built) or Ethio-German Park Hotel, Debre Libanos

Day 4. Search for the Ankober Serin

Among many other things today we go to dizzying heights to the Ankober Escarpment for a spectacularly localized bird, the endemic and vulnerable **Ankober Serin**. The scenery here is a lot more spectacular than our main target bird, which some people just call a "little brown job", while others are kinder and call it a "subtly beautiful bird" – but whichever way you look at it, the bird is unlikely to dazzle you, but it certainly takes you to marvelously beautiful mountains overlooking distant valleys. We could find other birds as well, like **Verreaux's Eagle** or **Bearded Vulture**.

Overnight: Eva Hotel, Debre Birhan

Day 5. Birding the Ankober – Melka Jebdu area

We continue birding the strikingly varied altitudes between Ankober and the low valleys, where we might encounter such beauties as **Verreaux's Eagle**, **Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk**, **Somali Crow**, **Half-collared Kingfisher**, **Hemprich's Hornbill**, **Nyanza** and **Mottled Swifts**, **Ethiopian Boubou**, **Erlanger's Lark**, **Red-faced Crombec**, **Rüppell's Black Chat**, **White-rumped Babbler**, **Abyssinian** and **Red-breasted Wheatear**, and many other exciting species.

Overnight: Eva Hotel, Debre Birhan, or Ankober Lodge, Ankober

Day 6. Transfer to Awash National Park

We will drive through some of Ethiopia's most remote country, if the road is good after gathering current information, to get to Awash National Park, birding the amazing Afar Plains, where a rich diversity of birds hopefully will make their appearance. We could see **Abdim's Stork**, **Yellow-necked Francolin**, **Kori Bustard**, **Black-headed Lapwing** (arguably the most spectacular plover species), **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse**, **Red-bellied Parrot**, **Bare-faced Go-away-bird**, **White-bellied Go-away-bird**, **Blue-naped Mousebird**, **Olive Bee-eater**, **Abyssinian Roller**, **Black-billed Wood Hoopoe**, **Abyssinian** and **Black Scimitarbills**, various **Hornbill** species including **Abyssinian Ground** and **Von der Decken's**, **Black-throated** and **Yellow-breasted Barbets**, **Greater Honeyguide**, **Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark**, **Grey Wren-Warbler**, **Grey-headed Batis**, **Slate-colored Boubou**, **Rosy-patched Bushshrike**, **Chestnut Weaver**, and **White-crested Helmetshrike**, among many others. In the late afternoon we will arrive at Awash National Park.

Overnight: Awash Falls Lodge, Awash National Park

Days 7. Birding Awash National Park

Awash is one of Ethiopia's premier national parks, which has a rich diversity of birds as well as mammals. We'll look for **Swallow-tailed Kite**, a host of **Bustards** including **Arabian, Buff-crested, Hartlaub's, Black-bellied, and White-bellied, Bruce's Green Pigeon**, and tons more. During our time here we also hope to find **Somali Ostrich, African Collared Dove, Singing Bush Lark, Gillett's Lark, Chestnut-backed and Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Larks, Boran and Ashy Cisticolas, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Pale and African Grey Flycatchers, Mouse-colored Penduline Tit**, four of Africa's most lovely **Sunbirds**, namely **Eastern Violet-backed, Nile Valley, Beautiful, and Shining, Southern Grey Shrike, Somali Fiscal, Woodchat Shrike, Northern Masked Weaver, Cut-throat Finch**, and many others. At this time of year we might also enjoy migrant **Common Whitethroat and White-throated Robin**. As always, raptor-watching will be spectacular – we can easily find 40-50 species on our three-week tour, and many of these are in Awash National Park.

Overnight: Awash Falls Lodge, Awash National Park

Day 8. Birding Awash National Park and the Ali Dege Plains

We continue birding Awash National Park and drive to the Ali Dege Plains, eventually arriving at our next lodge.

Overnight: Bilen Lodge, Awash

Day 9. Birding the Great Rift Valley lakes

After some final Awash birding today we drive to Lake Langano, where we will spend the night. We will bird this and other lakes, among them beautiful Lake Ziway, and wetland sites of the Great Rift Valley, looking for **Black Crowned Crane, Collared Pratincole, African Snipe** and several other shorebird species, various **Tern** species including **Gull-billed, Lesser and African Jacanas, Fulvous Whistling Duck, African Pygmy Goose, Western Marsh Harrier**, and many others. Other highlights today might be **Greater Spotted Eagle, Egyptian Vulture, White-headed Vulture, Clapperton's Francolin, Blue-spotted Wood Dove, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Buff-bellied Warbler, Northern Black Flycatcher, Blackstart, Black-headed and Pygmy Batises**, the striking **Masked Shrike, Green-winged Pytilia, and Red-fronted Warbler**, as well as many others.

Overnight: Simbo Beach Resort Langano

Day 10. Birding around Lake Langano and the Bishangary area

Some of the species we might find today are **Black-winged Lovebird, Banded and Red-fronted Barbets, Little Weaver, and Little Rock Thrush**. The rocky escarpment above the hotel holds **Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Mocking Cliff Chat, Abyssinian Wheatear, Fan-tailed Raven, and Rock Hyrax**. Alternatively, a walk in the adjacent dry acacia woodland might yield **Black-billed Wood Hoopoe, Bearded Woodpecker, Von der Decken's Hornbill, Boran Cisticola, Buff-bellied Warbler, Mouse-colored Penduline Tit, White-winged Black Tit, White-rumped Babbler, Grey-headed Batis, and Rüppell's Weaver**. Later on we may visit the grounds of another hotel for roosting **Slender-tailed Nightjar and Verreaux's and Greyish Eagle-Owls**, as well as **Clapperton's Francolin**.

During the afternoon we plan to visit the forest around Bishangari on the southeastern shore of the lake. The acacia woodland bordering the road could produce **Western Banded Snake Eagle, Bare-faced Go-away-bird, and Red-throated Wryneck**, among others. The remnant patch of

natural forest at Bishangari Lodge is home to a number of endemics and special birds, including **Scaly Francolin**, **Lemon Dove**, **Narina Trogon**, **Silvery-cheeked Hornbill**, **Yellow-fronted Parrot**, **White-cheeked Turaco**, **Abyssinian Woodpecker**, and **Ethiopian Oriole**. Noisy groups of **Grey-backed Fiscal** inhabit the more open areas, and **Guereza** can be found in tall fig trees.

Overnight: Simbo Beach Resort Langano

Day 11. Transfer to Wondo Genet

After further birding around the lakes we drive up the eastern escarpment of the Rift Valley to the hot springs of Wondo Genet. On our way we may encounter **Common Nightingale**, **White-winged Black Tit**, and **Grey-backed Fiscal**, while in a forest patch near Wondo Genet itself we look for awesome forest birds such as **Yellow-fronted Parrot**, **Black-winged Lovebird**, **Abyssinian Ground Thrush**, **Abyssinian Woodpecker**, **Brown Woodland Warbler**, **Narina Trogon**, and **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**. Also in this area we might find the massive **Silvery-cheeked Hornbill**, **Mountain Wagtail**, and the beautiful **Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike**.

Overnight: Wabi Shebele Hotel, Wondo Genet

Days 12. Birding Bale Mountains National Park

We drive to Dinsho, which is the gateway to the fabled Bale Mountains, which reach an altitude of around 4 500 meters (more than 14 000 feet). Here we spend the next two days birding varied habitats for such sought-after species as **Abyssinian Owl**, **Cape (Mackinder's) Eagle-Owl** (the most massive of three subspecies), **African Wood Owl**, **Wattled Ibis**, **Chestnut-naped Francolin**, **Moorland Francolin**, **Wattled Crane**, **Red-billed Chough**, **White-backed Black Tit**, **Abyssinian Catbird**, **African Emerald Cuckoo**, **Abyssinian Crimsonwing**, and, with luck, **Golden Eagle**, as well as a long list of other birds. Interesting mammals here are **Mountain Nyala**, **Klipspringer**, **Menelik's Bushbuck**, **Bohor Reedbuck**, and others. The days in this area are also a botanical treat, with vegetation ranging from *Hagenia*-dominated forest to giant *Erica* woods to high-altitude moorlands, sometimes with fabulous giant lobelias. In the adjacent Harena Forest it might be possible to spot some star birds like **Brown Parisoma**, **Ayres's Hawk-Eagle**, **African Emerald Cuckoo**, **Abyssinian Ground Thrush**, **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler**, **Rüppell's Robin-Chat**, **White-browed Robin-Chat**, **Abyssinian Crimsonwing**, and **Slender-billed Starling**, or even a flock of migrating **European Bee-eaters**.

Overnight: Goba Wabe Shebelle Hotel

Day 13. Drive to the Sanetti Plateau

As we leave Goba we soon reach nice stands of Juniper-*Hagenia* forest that are home to the endemic **Abyssinian Woodpecker**, **White-backed Black Tit**, **Abyssinian Catbird**, and **Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher**, plus **Abyssinian Ground Thrush**. Driving further, stands of *Hypericum* trees host the endemic *griseiventris* subspecies of **Brown Parisoma**. **Moorland** and **Chestnut-naped Francolins** and **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler** frequent dense shrubbery, while **Ethiopian Cisticola** prefers the more open areas.

Then we will be driving on Africa's highest road, passing close to the summit of Ethiopia's second highest mountain. Here on the Sanetti Plateau, an island of tundra in the tropics, the habitat is classified as "Afro-alpine moorland", characterized by a fascinating range of unique plants, including giant lobelias, which tower like monolithic giants over the rich tussock grasslands, and extensive cushions of yellow everlasting flowers. The grasslands are estimated to

support an incredible biomass of 8,800 pounds of rodents per hectare. Amazing! This obviously attracts a rich array of raptors, and we should see **Steppe** and **Golden Eagles**, **Augur Buzzard**, and the elegant **Pallid Harrier** circling over this verdant floral sea. They share this abundant food source with the plateau's most celebrated resident, the **Ethiopian Wolf**, crowned with the unenviable title of "the world's rarest canid." Watching these vibrantly-colored animals, most closely related to the Eurasian Wolf, exhibiting their hunting prowess while pouncing on **Giant Mole Rats** (another endemic to the Sanetti Plateau) is surely among Africa's greatest wildlife experiences. The plateau also holds the only Afrotropical breeding populations of **Ruddy Shelduck**, **Golden Eagle**, and **Red-billed Chough**. We will also search for **Black Stork**, **Wattled Ibis**, **Rouget's Rail** (particularly common and confiding here), the endemic **Blue-winged Goose**, **Spot-breasted Lapwing**, **Wattled Crane**, **Thekla Lark**, migratory flocks of **Red-throated Pipit**, **Abyssinian Longclaw**, **Red-breasted Wheatear**, the dumpy **Moorland Chat**, and flocks of the endemic **Black-headed Siskins**.

Overnight Goba Wabe Shebelle Hotel or Bale Mountain Lodge

Day 14. Birding the Genale Valley

Today we head south for the Negele area through the interesting, dry Genale Valley. Negele is one of Ethiopia's great endemic hotspots, and this entire area is brimming with great birds. Among many, many others we could enjoy **Brown Snake Eagle**, **Northern Brownbul**, **Yellow-breasted Apalis**, **Grey Tit-Flycatcher**, **Red-and-yellow Barbet**, **Upcher's Warbler**, **Red-capped Robin-Chat**, and **Golden-breasted, Superb, Shelley's, and Violet-backed Starlings**. With much luck we might even be able to admire Ethiopia's true megabird, **Ruspoli's Turaco**, in this area.

Overnight: Turaco Hotel, Negele

Day 15. Birding the Negele area and the Liben Plains

Today we will spend a full day in the Negele area seeking endemics and dry-land birds. Our main target here is the critically endangered **Archer's Lark**, with not many more than 100 individuals left. We will search for it in the Liben Plains, close to Negele. This and the surrounding area should hopefully also yield a vast number of other desirable species such as **Foxy Lark**, **Somali Short-toed Lark**, **White-crowned Starling**, **Shelley's Rufous Sparrow**, **Reichenow's Seedeater**, the incredibly localized Ethiopian endemic **White-tailed Swallow**, the handsome **African Bare-eyed Thrush**, **Spotted Palm Thrush**, **Pale Prinia**, and **Boran and Rattling Cisticolas**. Interesting ground birds like **Temminck's Courser**, **White-bellied Bustard**, and **Black-faced Sandgrouse** might also be encountered.

Overnight: Turaco Hotel, Negele

Day 16. Drive to Dilla

It is a long way to our next major birding destination, Yabello; therefore we drive halfway to Dilla, a lively agricultural town, via rural Aleta Wondo, for an overnight stay. Roadside birding should be very good and will provide a number of pleasant stops, and we are expecting to add many new birds to our burgeoning list. Good possibilities are more raptors, like **Gabar Goshawk**, **Ovambo Sparrowhawk**, and **Grey Kestrel**, or perhaps **Pearl-spotted Owlet**, **Black-throated Barbet**, **D'Arnaud's Barbet**, or **Nubian Woodpecker** – who knows?

Overnight: Get Smart Hotel, Dilla, or new hotel under construction

Day 17. Transfer to Yabello

To many people today may be the highlight of the tour, when we first encounter **Stresemann's Bushcrow**. This incredibly characterful species might be related to Middle Eastern ground jays, although its taxonomy is puzzling, and it even might not be a corvid at all. Of course, there are a host of other awesome birds to find as well, and this area keeps us as busy as ever. Among others, we might encounter **Banded Parisoma**, **Scaly Chatterer**, **Acacia Tit**, **Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird**, **Hunter's Sunbird**, the striking **Magpie Starling**, **Juba Weaver**, **White-bellied Canary**, **Golden-breasted Bunting**, the beautifully-colored **Purple Grenadier**, and **Grey-capped** as well as **Black-capped Social Weavers**. Time permitting, we'll go on a short night drive.

Overnight: Mobil Hotel, Yabello

Day 18. Birding the Yabello Wildlife Sanctuary

A full day in bushcrow country – but we'll also look for tons of other birds such as **Somali Courser**, **Somali Fiscal**, **Taita Fiscal**, **Short-tailed Lark**, and **Red-naped Bushshrike**, and also for many less range-restricted species like **Speke's Weaver**, **Black-faced Waxbill**, **Black-breasted Snake Eagle**, **Eurasian Hobby**, **Black Cuckoo**, and two spectacular **Whydah** species, **Steel-blue** and **Straw-tailed**. As always throughout this epic tour, we should stumble across a plethora of Eurasian migrants, which could include many different warblers, buntings, and all the others. This park also contains the improbably-long-necked **Gerenuk**, an antelope that feeds high up in trees and bushes while standing on its hind legs. A night drive might yield yet another mammalian treat, the **Somali Bushbaby**.

Overnight: Mobil Hotel, Yabello

Day 19. Yabello to Awassa

We drive to Awassa on the beautiful lake of the same name, where we visit the absolutely fascinating Awassa fish market – here an incredible plethora of **Hamerkop**, **Marabou Stork**, and **Great White Pelican**, as well as various larids and a multitude of others feed on the scraps within meters of people. On the lake we may find the second pelican species, **Pink-backed Pelican**, and **Lesser Black-backed Gull**. We also look for woodland birds here, such as both **Eurasian** and **Red-throated Wryneck**, **Western Banded Snake Eagle**, **Blue-headed Coucal**, **Red-faced Cisticola**, **Red-headed Weaver**, the beautiful white form of **African Paradise Flycatcher**, **Northern White-faced Owl**, and others.

Overnight: United Africa Hotel, Awassa

Day 20. Birding Gibe Gorge

Today we drive to Gibe Gorge (early departure) – this is a beautifully scenic area, which hosts some fabulous and sought-after birds, including **Red-billed Pytilia**, **Yellow-throated Sandgrouse**, **Vinaceous Dove**, **Western Black-headed Batis**, **Bar-breasted Firefinch**, and **Abyssinian Waxbill**.

Overnight: Yejoka Hotel, Welkite

Day 21. Transfer to Addis Ababa airport, departure

Our flight leaves Addis Ababa later in the day. We will bird or relax on the hotel grounds at Welkite, going straight to the airport from there.

Please note that the itinerary above cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Duration: 21 days
Limit: 4 – 9
Date: 20 March - 9 April 2020
Start: Addis Ababa
End: Addis Ababa

Price: US\$6,580 per person sharing, assuming 4-9 participants
Single supplement: US\$633

Note: Booking the tour late might lead to a price increase if only expensive rooms are available at certain hotels.

Price includes:

Accommodation
All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 21
Bottled water
All transport

Price excludes:

Visa
International flight
Drinks except bottled water
Personal insurance
Gratuities
Items of a personal nature, such as gifts