



**HIGHLAND ZIMBABWE TO COASTAL MOZAMBIQUE
BIRDING TOUR– AFRICAN PITTA SPECIAL**

21 NOVEMBER - 05 DECEMBER 2023



*This tour is specifically timed to maximize chances of finding the mythical **African Pitta**.*

This tour easily yields more than 400 bird species, and while centered on locating the mythical **African Pitta**, it also generates a wide range of other localized southeast-African species found nowhere else. On this tour, the pitta is not our only quest, as we also look for the beautiful **Böhm's Bee-eater** (only recently discovered south of the Zambezi River), the stunning, elusive and localized **White-chested Alethe**, the unusual, dazzling little **Livingstone's Flycatcher** (which is taxonomically enigmatic), **Mangrove Kingfisher**, **Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo**, **East Coast Akalat**, **Swynnerton's Robin**, **Chirinda Apalis**, **Roberts's Warbler** and so many other localized, stunning birds to tempt the southern African lister, world lister or anyone who simply wants to admire or photograph some of Earth's best-looking birds. Below you will also read about the suite of miombo (*Brachystegia*) woodland endemics we seek on this trip, along with **Blue Swallow**, a rapidly declining denizen of highland grasslands. And all the others.



*The stunning **East Coast Akalat** is a denizen of the lowland forests in Mozambique.*

Zimbabwe and Mozambique, combined, are very diverse in terms of bird species, but even more diverse in terms of bird families and orders. In a study comparing these two countries combined, it was shown that Zimbabwe/Mozambique had the highest diversity on the planet in terms of avian orders, with 30 different bird orders represented! (the study compared areas of equal surface area across the globe in terms of bird diversity). These two countries combined were also shown to share with coastal West Africa and Tanzania/Uganda, the second-highest count of different families (a staggering 103 bird families!), only surpassed by northern India (the same surface area) which has 104 bird families. While South American countries have more species than anywhere else in the world, the large number of families and orders of these African countries (especially Zimbabwe/Mozambique) and of India, is staggering.

This tour provides a productive birding transect from highland Zimbabwe to coastal Mozambique. Aside from the excellent birding that awaits you, this tour is scenically very attractive with lush tropical wetlands, vast rolling hills blanketed in stunning woodland and imposing mountains never far away! The Eastern Highlands straddling the Zimbabwe/Mozambique border, the Mashonaland Plateau, Mount Gorongosa (part of the huge Gorongosa National Park where we can also see some of Africa's big game) and the Zambezi Delta are just some of the landscapes you'll enjoy on this bird trip of a lifetime.

Beginning the tour in Harare on Zimbabwe's Mashonaland Plateau, we immediately start searching for a host of south-central-African endemics, which are almost exclusively confined to the unique miombo woodlands in this region. Many of these birds contain this woodland type in their name, such as **Miombo Tit**, **Miombo Rock Thrush** and **Eastern Miombo Sunbird**, while other sought-after species such as **Whyte's Barbet**, **African Spotted Creeper** and the curious **Boulder Chat**, a species almost entirely confined to Zimbabwe, feature as well. Following a few days around Zimbabwe's capital city, we transition to the spectacular Eastern Highlands for the next leg. The Eastern Highlands' evergreen forests hold some highly localized endemics such as **Chirinda Apalis** and **Roberts's Warbler**, as well as several birds that are more easily found here than in other countries, such as **Swynnerton's Robin**. We also bird mountain grasslands for the Vulnerable (IUCN) **Blue Swallow**, this area being one of the last remaining strongholds for this scarce, rapidly declining species.



The Vulnerable, declining Blue Swallow is still relatively common at Inyanga

After a few days in this idyllic mountain paradise we eventually cross the border into the rich lowlands of Mozambique, ultimately making our way towards the sprawling Zambezi River Delta area. The Zambezi is one of Africa's greatest rivers, and its delta is vast, providing habitat for a great variety of birds and other wildlife. After crossing from Zimbabwe into Mozambique, our first

birding site is the incredible Gorongosa National Park, one of Africa's greatest game parks and best conservation success stories, where the Urema floodplain hosts thousands of waterbirds along with some of Africa's top megafauna such as **Lion** and **African Elephant**. The deciduous woodlands in this area host further sought-after species such as the scarce **Speckle-throated Woodpecker** and **Racket-tailed Roller**. The nearby Mount Gorongosa massif has featured on our tours in the past, and will likely do so in the future once more, but for now and the foreseeable future, access to the mountain (and its endemic subspecies of **Green-headed Oriole**) is sadly impossible.

Following our time in the Gorongosa area, we transit into the Zambezi River Delta region, where we set our sights on the lush and immense lowland forests. Here, we initially (until we've found it!) dedicate ourselves to finding **African Pitta**! Although we time this tour to try and best coincide with the onset of the pitta's breeding season, when this species is at its easiest to find thanks to its unique display flight when its call gives away its presence, this is always a difficult challenge and we will need some luck to find this highly prized bird! To date though, we have an impeccable track record at finding this bird and are yet to miss this species on any of our tours to the region. A vast array of other sought-after species occur in these forests, and while searching for **African Pitta**, we hope to encounter **East Coast Akalat**, **White-chested Alethe**, **Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike**, **Lowland Tiny Greenbul**, **Mangrove Kingfisher** and many more! We end the tour in the coastal town of Beira in Mozambique, where the vast and verdant coastal grasslands host many exciting species. In years of good rainfall, sightings in these grasslands may include the nomadic **Blue Quail** and **Great Snipe**, as well as resident species including **Wattled Crane** and **Locust Finch**.

All in all, this tour includes some of the richest birding areas of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, encompassing an amazingly wide range of habitats. Starting the trip in Harare and ending it in Beira means that we can minimize driving time and maximize birding time. Given just 15 days this is the route to take if you want to find the greatest number of tough and localized birds, along with a very respectable total bird list.

This tour can be easily combined with our **Complete Malawi tour**, which takes place directly before this tour, and offers an excellent suite of complementary localized south-east African species. Otherwise, this tour can be combined with our popular **Namibia, Okavango, and Victoria Falls Birding Adventure**, which could be preceded by our premium **Subtropical South Africa Birding Tour** and even, preceding that, with our **Cape Town and Beyond, South Africa Birding Tour** amounting to a stunning southern African mega tour (read [our blog](#) to see what this mega tour can deliver!).

Itinerary (15 days/14 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Harare, Zimbabwe

Our international flights arrive in Harare, Zimbabwe (usually around midday), and we transfer to our comfortable guest house within this city's suburbs, where we spend two nights. The gardens sometimes host **Variable Sunbird**, barbets, and other dazzling species. If this is your first trip to Africa, prepare to be swamped with new birds, many of them brightly colored. In the afternoon,

time permitting, we will try to track down the prized **Boulder Chat** around Harare, and will also get our first taste of miombo birding, which is likely to produce **Miombo Tit**, **Southern Hyliota**, **Green-capped Eremomela**, **Red-faced Crombec** and **Eastern Miombo Sunbird**. More widespread species also occur around here, and are likely to include **Southern Yellow White-eye**, **Tropical Boubou** and **Flappet Lark**.

Overnight: Harare

Day 2. Birding Harare's miombo woodlands and surrounds

Today we spend much of the day visiting further miombo woodland sites around the city, such as the wonderful Haka Park, where we will focus more time targeting *Brachystegia* woodland specials, such as **African Spotted Creeper**, **Green-backed Honeybird** and **White-breasted Cuckooshrike**. We can also try for some of the species we may have missed the previous day, while further widespread species to be sought include **White-crested Helmetshrike**, **Grey Penduline Tit**, **Stierling's Wren-Warbler** and **Red-headed Weaver**. We will also explore some of the open, grassy floodplains during the course of the day. Although we are too early for these floodplains to be inundated with water, bringing with it many exciting tropical species (Harare is famous for its supreme wetland birding later in the season and we have a specific tour setup for this pursuit), the now mostly dry floodplains do still host some desirable species such as **Rosy-throated Longclaw**, **Pale-crowned Cisticola** and **Yellow-mantled Widowbird**. Following a good day and an even better introduction into miombo woodland birding, we will round off the day with a wonderful meal.

Overnight: Harare



The prized African Spotted Creeper is a big target on this tour.

Day 3. Transfer to Aberfoyle Lodge, woodland birding en route

Today we plan to leave early and embark on a half-day drive to the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe near the border with Mozambique, and then downwards to the low altitudes of Honde Valley, which is contiguous with the Mozambican coastal plain. We have a lot of distance to cover today, but en route we'll be sure to spend some time birding around Goshu Park, just east of Marondera, for any miombo birds we might have missed near Harare. This is another fantastic site, and it allows us our best chances for some species such as **Whyte's Barbet**, **Miombo Rock Thrush**, **Wood Pipit**, **Western Violet-backed Sunbird** and **Black-eared Seedeater**. One further stop will see us calling into the incredible Nyanga Mountains where we will focus our attention on the scarce **Blue Swallow** – here at one of the last strongholds for this species. While searching for the swallow we may also find other sought-after Eastern Highland species, such as the endemic **Roberts's Warbler**, **Barratt's Warbler** and **Olive Bushshrike**. Eventually we reach the comfortable Aberfoyle Lodge deep in the Honde Valley, where we will be based for two nights.

Overnight: Aberfoyle Lodge, Honde Valley



*The scarce **African Broadbill** occurs in the riverine forests of the Honde Valley.*

Day 4. Birding Aberfoyle Lodge and the Honde Valley

After our late afternoon arrival the previous day, this will be our first chance for birding this incredible area, and we will spend the day visiting sites around the Honde Valley, such as the famous 'Wamba Marsh', Katiyo Tea Estate and indeed on the expansive grounds of the lodge itself. The Honde Valley is a scenic area with huge tea estates punctuated by villages, subsistence farmland, and small patches of attractive riverine forest. The Mutarazi Falls can be seen in the distance as they plummet an impressive 762 meters from the Nyanga Highlands which tower above this fertile valley. Feeders around the lodge attract some strikingly beautiful birds such as **Red-**

throated Twinspot and **Red-faced Crimsonwing**, and nearby riverine forests are home to the scarce **Pallid Honeyguide**, **Silvery-cheeked Hornbill**, **White-eared Barbet**, **African Broadbill**, **Common Square-tailed Drongo**, and as always, many others. The rivers running through the area host **Half-collared Kingfisher** and **Mountain Wagtail**. **Ayres's Hawk-Eagle** is often seen in the area, as is **Palm-nut Vulture**. Keeping an eye skywards might produce sightings of **Scarce** and **Mottled Swifts**, both of which have colonies in the area, and are a regular sight overhead. **Lesser Seedcracker** is the most sought-after bird here in the Honde Valley, and while we'll allocate a good amount of time looking for it, this remains one of the toughest trip birds, and it's certainly easy to miss. Some of the outlying areas away from the lodge host other exciting species such as **Blue-spotted Wood Dove**, **Green-backed Woodpecker**, **Moustached Grass Warbler**, **Fan-tailed Grassbird** (Broad-tailed Warbler), **Marsh Tchagra**, **Singing Cisticola**, **Grey Waxbill**, **Magpie Mannikin** and **Black-winged Red Bishop**, amongst others. This is a very birdy area, and we are sure to see a high number of species as we traverse the valley.

Overnight: Aberfoyle Lodge, Honde Valley



*Delightful **Red-faced Crimsonwings** are a target in the Eastern Highlands and visit the feeders!*

Day 5. Birding the Honde Valley and the Bvumba (Vumba) Highlands

We have the morning available to try and track down any of the species we may have missed the previous day, and following a hearty late breakfast, we'll leave the wonderful Aberfoyle Lodge and Honde Valley behind, and transit, via Mutare, to the Bvumba Highlands. Here we will stay at the rustic yet charming Seldomseen Cottages, that are set right within some of the best montane forest in the region with almost all of the Eastern Highlands' forest species occurring right on our doorstep! We will spend three nights here, birding the lush grounds and their surrounds, and further into some of the woodlands nearer Mutare. We will likely spend the afternoon exploring the

Seldomseen grounds and familiarizing ourselves with some of the specials occurring in the area. Common and vocal species we're likely to see include some of the area's prized birds, such as **Chirinda Apalis**, **Roberts's Warbler** and **Stripe-cheeked Greenbul**, while other more widespread species such as **Cape Batis**, **Olive Bushshrike**, **Cape Robin-Chat**, **African Dusky Flycatcher**, **Olive Thrush** and **Olive Sunbird** abound in the grounds.

Overnight: Seldomseen Cottages, Bvumba Highlands



Roberts's Warbler is confined to the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe, and neighboring Mozambique.

Days 6 – 7. Continued birding in the Bvumba Highlands

We have two full days to explore this area to try and find all its many special birds. We will need to put more time into the forested areas, as they host the bulk of the specials, and the very localized **Swynnerton's Robin** will be one of our main targets. Noisy **Livingstone's Turacos** bound in the treetops, while the secretive **Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon** calls from high up within deep cover, with dainty **White-tailed Crested Flycatchers** never far away. The understory however, is often of more importance, supporting the likes of **Orange Ground Thrush**, **Barratt's Warbler**, **White-starred Robin**, **Green Twinspot**, and the ultra-secretive **Buff-spotted Flufftail**, this being one of the best areas to see the latter! **Black-fronted Bushshrikes** keep to the thicker tangles, while species such as **Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird** aren't shy to show themselves, while **Lemon** and **Tambourine Doves** explode from the forest floor. The open areas play host to species such as **Cape Grassbird**, **African Yellow Warbler**, **Singing Cisticola** and the cute **Yellow-bellied Waxbill**, while some of the protea-clad hills and flowering trees support a wealth of nectar-loving species, such as **Bronzy Sunbird** and if we're lucky, **Gurney's Sugarbird**. Raptors abound in this area, and we'll be sure to keep our eyes out for **Crowned** and **Long-crested Eagles**, along

with **Augur Buzzard**, while the smaller **African Goshawk** and **Black Sparrowhawk** are never far away from forested areas. The Eastern Highlands also host some excellent miombo woodlands, and we will be sure to include some time in these during our stay. These woodlands are the primary range for the scarce **Cinnamon-breasted Tit**, and this species will likely be our main target. Of course, these woodlands support the full array of miombo specials, and if we missed any species such as **African Spotted Creeper**, **Whyte's Barbet**, **Red-faced Crombec**, **Miombo Rock Thrush** and **Miombo Tit**, we will be able to try again for these species. We may also be lucky and find one of the 'regular' **Collared Flycatchers** here (this is a rare migrant to southern Africa), while the grassy slopes are good for the scarce **Tree Pipit**.

Overnight: Seldomseen Cottages, Bvumba Highlands



Red-winged Prinia (Warbler) is widespread in the lowlands of Mozambique.

Day 8. Bvumba Highlands to Gorongosa National Park, Mozambique

We will spend the morning birding around Seldomseen and the Bvumba Highlands, searching for any species we may still be missing. Following breakfast, we depart for Mozambique, entering Mozambique through the Forbes/Machipanda Border Post outside of Mutare. Once all the border formalities are complete and we are in Mozambique, we will continue onwards to the Gorongosa National Park, where we will likely arrive in the afternoon. The entrance road towards the park passes through some phenomenal mixed-miombo woodlands, and we will be sure to spend some time birding these rich woodlands this afternoon (time permitting), and over the next two days. While we will likely be familiar with the bulk of the miombo birds already, these woodlands do host a number of other target species we may well not have seen yet, some of which include **Thick-billed Cuckoo**, **Speckle-throated Woodpecker**, **Racket-tailed Roller**, **Pale Batis**, **Arnot's Chat**, **Red-winged Prinia (Warbler)**, **Orange-winged Pytilia** and **Miombo Blue-eared Starling**.

We will eventually make our way into the Gorongosa National Park, and onwards to the Montebelo Lodge, where we will be based for two nights.

Overnight: Montebelo Lodge, Gorongosa National Park

Day 9. Birding Gorongosa National Park

We have a full day to explore the park, and surrounds. Depending on road-access (flooding does occur from time to time), we will try to access the stunning Urema Floodplain which will present us with a host of new species. Among others, we'll look for **Great White** and **Pink-backed Pelicans**, **Grey Crowned Crane**, **Saddle-billed Stork**, **Long-toed Lapwing**, **Collared Pratincole** and many more. Other species such as **Dickinson's Kestrel**, **Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher** (Vanga Flycatcher), **Collared Palm Thrush**, and **Short-winged Cisticola** are to be sought in the area as well. This is a phenomenal raptor area, a true testament to how 'wild' these parts are, and we stand a good chance at seeing a number of vulture and eagle species, with the likes of **White-headed Vulture**, **Bateleur**, **Martial** and **Wahlberg's Eagles**, and **Lizard Buzzard** all being regular. The woodlands throughout this area support some forest-edge species as well, which include the likes of **Brown-necked Parrot**, **Narina Trogon**, **Crowned Hornbill**, **Bearded Scrub Robin** and **Eastern Nicator**. We should also encounter some of our first large mammals of the tour, with many of Africa's megafauna such as **Cape Buffalo**, **African Elephant**, **Lion**, **Giraffe** and a host of others, occurring in the park as well.

Overnight: Montebelo Lodge, Gorongosa National Park



*Woodlands in the Gorongosa area host the prized **Racket-tailed Roller**.*

Day 10. Gorongosa to the Zambezi River delta area

Today we make our way to M'phingwe Lodge, near Caia. This is in the Zambezi delta area, which is another absolute treasure-chest for special birds, including a whole new suite of species we won't yet have seen. Following breakfast in the morning, we will bird on the drive out from our lodge along the access road, searching for any of the woodland species we may still need (mentioned on Day 8), before starting the drive, in earnest. The condition of the road to Caia seems to vary from year to year, and although it has recently been upgraded, the journey may still take some time to complete. We will likely arrive at the rustic yet wonderfully comfortable M'phingwe Lodge in the late afternoon, and time permitting, we may explore some of the vast concessions (*coutadas*) surrounding the lodge, and get a slight head-start on some of the species listed for Days 11 – 13 below.

Overnight: M'phingwe Lodge, Catapu



Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike sometimes occurs in large flocks in this area.

Days 11 – 13. Birding M'Phingwe Lodge and surroundings

We have three full days to spend birding in the stunning mixed woodlands and towering lowland forests spread throughout the region. This is an incredibly rich area and hosts a great many birds, and our chief target will be the dazzling **African Pitta**, which we will hopefully find displaying in its preferred forested habitat. The audible wing-beats and loud frog-like call herald this highly prized bird, and we have had great success with finding this bird over the last ten years or so, and have yet to miss this species on this tour. Some of our other target species will include **White-chested Alethe**, **East Coast Akalat**, **Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike**, **Livingstone's Flycatcher**, **Lowland Tiny Greenbul**, **Mangrove Kingfisher** (in this area away from the coastal mangroves it frequents elsewhere in its range), rare **Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo**, **Green**

Malkoha, Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher, Woodward's Batis, Plain-backed Sunbird, Black-headed Apalis, and Southern Banded Snake Eagle. Finding all these specials, some of them real skulkers, takes time, and is why we have three full days to properly explore and bird this area. We are sure to accumulate a large list of species in this area; we may also come across species like the magnificent **Pennant-winged Nightjar, Mottled and Böhm's Spinetails, Broad-billed Roller, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, African Hobby and Mosque Swallow**, to mention a few. We will also be sure to include some time near the Zambezi River, and will importantly try to get to the Villa de Sena region, where a recently discovered population of **Böhm's Bee-eater** (the only known population in the southern African subregion), has been found). The associated Zambezi River floodplains also have excellent birding and give us further chances for species such as **Moustached Grass Warbler, Marsh Tchagra and Short-winged Cisticola**, while also hosting species such as **Rufous-winged Cisticola and Southern Brown-throated Weaver**.

Overnight: M'phingwe Lodge, Catapu



*A population of the glorious **Böhm's Bee-eater** has recently been found in the area – the only known population in the southern African subregion!*

Day 14. M'Phingwe Lodge to Beira

Today we have a long trip to get to Beira from the wonderful M'Phingwe Lodge, and we will be departing early in the morning (around sunrise). Depending on the state of the road, we will likely arrive in the afternoon, and will immediately head off after checking in at our comfortable B&B. The rest of the day will be spent birding the vast floodplains (although usually dry at this time of year) and grasslands associated with the Rio Savane (Savane River). Some of our chief targets here will include; **Locust Finch, Blue Quail, Black-rumped Buttonquail, Great Snipe, Rufous-**

bellied Heron, Red-headed Quelea, Wattled Crane, and also the uncommon **Lesser Seedcracker** – but it must be noted that some of these are nomadic, and only present under suitable conditions. While more widespread species such as **African Pygmy Goose, Lesser Jacana, African Marsh Harrier, Senegal Lapwing, Black-bellied Bustard, Yellow-throated Longclaw** and **Copper Sunbird** are also to be sought. Depending on time available, and the state of the ocean tides, we may also be able to access coastal habitat where we'll look for **Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers, Terek Sandpiper, Crab-plover** (scarce), along with **Lesser Crested Tern** amongst others.

Overnight: Beira

Day 15. Birding Beira, departure

The first half of the morning will see us birding the above-mentioned areas around Rio Savane and Beira, searching for the specials of the area, before having to transfer to the airport, where this tour will conclude around midday (as most of the flights out of Beira depart in the early afternoon).



*The dainty **Lesser Jacana** can be found in the Rio Savane area.*

Please note that the itinerary 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. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different international guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling.

Duration: 15 days
Group Size: 4 - 8
Dates: 21 November - 05 December 2023
Start: Harare, Zimbabwe
End: Beira, Mozambique
Prices: US\$7,055 per person sharing – based on 4 - 8 participants
Single Supplements: US\$677

Price includes:

All accommodation
Meals (from lunch on Day 1 until breakfast on Day 15)
Unlimited bottled water
Expert tour leader
Local bird guide fees
All National Park/Game Reserve entrance fees (including a game drive in Gorongosa National Park)
All ground transport, including airport pick-up and drop-off

Price excludes:

International flights (to Harare, and from Beira)
Visas (Zimbabwe and Mozambique)
Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls, etc.
Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or birding excursions
Soft/alcoholic drinks
Personal travel insurance
Gratuities (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))