GABON: GENERAL INFORMATION



Vermiculated Fishing Owl *is a rare bird, and a major target for tours to Gabon.*

INTRODUCTION

Gabon, located in west-central Africa along the Atlantic coast, has long been an exciting destination for birders, largely because of its relatively low population and the extensive tracts of forest that remain intact. Much of the country is still well preserved, offering excellent opportunities to explore some of Africa's richest rainforest habitats. However, Gabon is also a notoriously expensive destination, largely due to its oil wealth, and birding tours are no exception. Costs can be surprisingly high, even for very basic services and amenities. These high costs make tourism in Gabon prohibitively expensive and are one of the main reasons why infrastructure, particularly tourism-related infrastructure, remains so poorly developed.

Gabon has become a safe bet in terms of west-central African birding, offering many exciting birds like **Black-headed Bee-eater**, **Vermiculated Fishing Owl** and **African River Martin**, along with many of the same sought-after specials as can be found in the far less safe Cameroon – and, as such, is the preferred destination of travel to this part of the world. Added to this is the fame that the luxurious Loango National Park has built up, with its incredible conservation success, especially for **Western** (Lowland) **Gorillas**. All these ultimately make Gabon a very attractive and sought-after country for ecotourism.

The tour begins and ends in Gabon's coastal capital, Libreville, and can broadly be divided into two sections. The first takes us through the country's interior, visiting key birding destinations including the Lekoni region, Idjanga Private Reserve, Makokou and Ipassa, and Lopé National Park. This is the more challenging part of the tour, involving some long and occasionally arduous travel days, as well as several nights in basic accommodation with limited facilities. The birding can also be demanding at times, particularly in the dense lowland forests, where many species are elusive and require considerable patience and effort. However, this section offers a wonderful variety of habitats, from the unusual grasslands of the Batéké Plateau to extensive rainforest, woodland and savanna.

The second section takes us to the spectacular Loango National Park, where we spend three nights exploring its remarkable wilderness. This is a welcome change of pace, with comfortable lodges providing a good base for our activities. Boat trips are a major part of our time here, allowing us to explore the park's rivers, lagoons and waterways in search of an impressive variety of birds and mammals. With its pristine landscapes, abundant wildlife and exceptional birding opportunities, Loango is a fitting highlight and a wonderful way to round off the tour.

It is important to emphasize that this is a challenging tour, designed for dedicated birders who are prepared to spend long days in the field, mostly exploring forest habitats in search of rare, elusive and poorly known species. The tour also includes two significant mammal experiences: ***Mandrill*** *and* ***Western Gorilla*** *trekking. However, the primary focus throughout is firmly on birding. Participants should be prepared for consistently humid conditions and, particularly in the interior of the country, some very long and arduous travel days along extremely poor roads.*

PASSPORT AND VISA

Your passport must be valid for a period of at least six months after the date of your arrival in Gabon. Please make sure that there is at least one full empty page available in your passport. Please make sure that you also bring a photocopy of your passport, to be kept in a different location from your passport, in case of loss.

Most countries require a visa which needs to be arranged in advance. Please make sure you find out accordingly, and well in advance of your tour. Birding Ecotours can assist in providing documentation to confirm your participation on the tour, in support of your visa application. The onus is on you, as a client, to secure your visa to travel here. Kindly do liaise with us, as we are happy to assist with this process.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

We require (see Birding Tours Terms and Conditions - Birding Ecotours) that you purchase trip cancellation insurance in case you have to cancel due to illness just prior to the tour departure date, to protect yourself against accidents, illness, loss of valuables, luggage etc. and travel interruptions or delays of all kinds. Allianz Travel and Generali Global Assistance are two options to consider.

SAFETY

This tour does not spend much time in large cities, and we generally stay in areas which are considered safe. We recommend that you do not leave personal items of value in the vehicle while it is unattended (while the vehicle is parked at the hotel overnight, for example) – if you are ever in doubt, please check with the tour leader.

Much of Gabon is very rural, and we spend the bulk of our time in these rural areas/small villages and such. Petty theft is a risk, though most of the people we encounter are friendly.

HEALTH, PESTS AND DANGEROUS ANIMALS

While out birding on foot in some areas there could be ticks (and other biting flies and insects) around, and so it is mostly recommended to wear long trousers and especially check yourself for ticks after the day out in the field. Additionally, it is a good idea to spray your legs/trousers and particularly boots/socks with anti-tick spray/similar.

Rabies (although rare) does still exist in some areas and, although the chances of encountering rabid animals on this trip is very low, we strongly advise against touching/petting domestic animals while out in rural areas. Please consult your tour leader if you are ever unsure.

We will be visiting areas inhabited by venomous (and non-venomous) snakes although, as usual, we will be very lucky to see any. To minimize the risk of snakebites or other stings and bites (which is very low), we recommend hiking boots, jeans/long trousers, and a good dose of care, to minimize the danger.

Large mammals are present in Gabon, although they are mostly confined to the larger national parks – where we usually have park rangers with us. There is a chance we may encounter animals such as **African Forest Elephants**, **Western Gorillas**, **Mandrills**, **Cape** "Forest" **Buffaloes**, and many others, whilst out birding. *Note that we do have two scheduled activities, **Mandrill** and **Western Gorilla** trekking – which takes us close to these animals, under the guidance of rangers and staff that study and work with these animals. As always, our tour leaders and local guides are there to help, should any dangerous situation arise.

Please carefully read the UK Foreign Travel Advice for Gabon and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) information for travelers to Gabon (or your government's equivalent health travel advice for Gabon). Below, we have mentioned a couple of specific items but, first and foremost, be informed with the updated information at the above links.

Required immunizations for travel to Gabon: **yellow fever vaccine**.

It is recommended that you are up to date with all routine vaccinations, such as Polio and Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR). Additionally, it is also recommended to get vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B, Meningitis, Rabies and Typhoid. Please keep in mind that if you have never had one of these illnesses, you should be inoculated at least six weeks prior to your trip for the best protection.

Malaria

We strongly recommend anti-malaria drugs for travel to Gabon. Note that as per the CDC, Chloroquine prophylaxes are not effective here. The following chemoprophylaxis are recommended: atovaquone-proguanil, doxycycline, mefloquine and tafenoquine. Please consult your doctor.

Mosquito repellant, long trousers/jeans and long-sleeved shirts, particularly at night when malaria (*Anopheles*) mosquitos bite, are advised, in addition to the drugs.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Please make sure that you are covered with medical insurance in case of an emergency while on these trips. Without insurance the cost of medical care can be extremely high.

Please notify us at the time of registering for the tour of any medical conditions you think we should know about (including allergies, heart conditions, epilepsy, etc.). This will greatly help us in catering for your needs.

***Importantly, all participants will need to get a doctor's signed authorization certificate that certifies your physical capabilities, in order to participate in the Mandrill and Gorilla trekking activities. If you do not complete this, and thus cannot participate in these activities, you will not be refunded for these items (unless arranged in advance of your tour). Birding Ecotours will issue these certificates shortly before the tour, for your doctor to complete and sign.**

WATER/FOOD

We provide unlimited bottled water in the tour vehicles, and you are welcome to take water from the vehicle for the evenings, when not provided in the hotel rooms. More expensive bottled water available at restaurants is excluded from the tour cost and is for your account, but (again) you are welcome to take water from our tour vehicle whenever you want.

*While within the high-end Loango National Park, all drinks are included (except a few, but the staff will make you aware of which are included/excluded).

The bulk of our breakfasts and lunches will be enjoyed at our hotels and lodges throughout the tour. Very occasionally, packed breakfasts and packed lunches will be required. Dinners are always held at our hotels or lodges. *Meals on travel days will be more limited and often consist of basic picnic-style sandwiches/similar, eaten on the road.

Kindly note that breakfasts are usually held early in the morning (before sunrise and our birding; between 05h00-06h00). There are generally big gaps between meals (6+ hours), and bringing various snacks (such as cereal bars, trail mix etc.) is recommended.

It is also important to note that meals are simple, not very exciting, and without variety, especially on the first leg in the interior of the country, The main options are usually chicken/fish and rice. Breakfasts are often bread and eggs. Once we get to Loango National Park there are upmarket lodges, and the services and meals are of a much higher standard and the food is usually excellent.

As always, please inform us if you have any food allergies or other dietary requirements. Unfortunately, we cannot guarantee that these can be accommodated throughout the tour. Gabon is a rural African country with extremely limited availability (or none at all) of specialist foods (such as for gluten intolerance etc.). If you have special requirements/allergies, we kindly ask you to bring your own appropriate/replacement foods, since it is often impossible to purchase such in the country.

CURRENCY AND MONEY

The Central African Franc (CFA) is the official currency, and we recommend that you have sufficient cash in local currency to cover expenses such as drinks, tips, and other items of a personal nature (such as gifts). Credit cards are not widely accepted for payment.

We suggest you get all your local currency immediately when you arrive into Gabon – either exchanging foreign money like US Dollars or Euros at the airport, or withdrawing from an ATM in Libreville. ATMs are uncommon, restricted to the big towns which we pass on only one or two days of the tour, and many don't work. Note: US and Canadian Dollars and Pound Sterling cannot be used for purchases. Euros, however, are often accepted (often at an unfavorable exchange rate).

WEATHER

It will be hot and humid throughout the tour. The maximum is often near 95^0F/35^0C, with high humidity. It is advisable to have some warmer clothes, as some folks may feel the need for a

jersey/jacket in the evenings, and a raincoat. Although we visit towards the end of the dry season, early rain is possible. Previous tours (run during the Aug/Sep period) have experienced lots of cloud/overcast weather, mostly with no rain.

Please be aware that the high heat and humidity make this tour challenging.

ELECTRICITY

The standard voltage is 240 V. If you intend to recharge camera batteries etc. in your hotel room, you will need an international adapter. In Gabon the power plug sockets generally make use of Type C (Click here).

All our hotels/lodges have access to electricity throughout the day/night, and many have backup generators, in case of power failures or power outages. Remember, this is rural Africa, and sometimes the electricity does go out – we sadly don't have control over this.

A good torch will be useful if you wish to join us for a night walk or drive. If you intend to join any nocturnal activities, you'd be advised to bring at least one good torch, preferably with a strong beam. All the places we stay at will have electrical outlets for chargers and laptops.

INTERNET/WIFI

Wi-Fi internet is not widely provided at the hotels and lodges throughout the tour (only provided at a few), although cellphone signal is usually good. Where available, Wi-Fi is often not accessible from your room, only in the main reception area/dining area.

Should you wish to remain connected, we advise you either:

- Purchase an eSim compatible with your phone (such as those available on AloSim.com, for example).
- Purchase a local sim card with data at the airport, on your arrival.

TRANSPORTATION & LENGTH OF DRIVES

Road conditions in Gabon can be very challenging, with many routes consisting of narrow, potholed and often busy roads. Travel between destinations is therefore generally slow, and participants should not expect modern highways or quick transfers.

Transport arrangements on this tour are somewhat complex, involving two domestic flights and road transfers in two, or occasionally three, 4x4 vehicles. We use 4x4s because many of the roads are in very poor condition and unsuitable for the minibuses we typically use on our other tours. The vehicles are generally reasonably comfortable, although, as is often the case in rural parts of Africa where maintenance and servicing facilities are limited, they can be somewhat rugged. Air-conditioning is available in all our tour vehicles.

We will spend a considerable amount of time travelling by road, as journeys from our accommodation to the birding sites can often be lengthy. Three days in particular involve very

long transfers, with much of the day spent driving along rough roads. A small seat cushion or back support may be useful for added comfort on these journeys.

As with all our birding tours we make use of a seat rotation policy within the vehicle. This will be explained by your tour leader at the start of the tour.

Some roads are unpaved and can be very dusty, particularly when vehicles pass. If we are birding alongside these roads, you may find a scarf or other form of dust protection useful.

Game drives in both Lopé and Loango National Parks are generally conducted in the lodges' open-sided safari vehicles, similar to those commonly used elsewhere in Africa. These vehicles typically have a canopy overhead but no side windows and getting in and out may occasionally require a little climbing.

We will undertake several boat trips during the tour, using boats of varying sizes depending on our group size, particularly in Loango National Park and around Omboué. We will also travel by boat from Lambaréné to Omboué, a journey of several hours that is likely to be made at a relatively high speed. Boats are the primary means of transport within Loango National Park, and our luggage will accompany us when transferring between the lodges, typically being stowed in the boat's various storage compartments.

WALKING

This tour involves a fair amount of walking, both during our birding activities and on the optional ape treks. We will generally drive to a suitable area, then explore on foot, moving around as we search for birds. On some occasions, particularly when birding the Ipassa forests near Makokou, we may spend several hours out on foot. Although the distances covered are often not particularly great, the more tiring aspect can be the time spent standing in one spot while patiently waiting for or trying to observe shy, elusive or skulking species.

*There is one notable, long and difficult birding walk planned – to look for the mega **Grey-headed Rockfowl**. This walk is to a new site and is somewhat unknown – but it is envisioned to be multiple hours each way, covering a lot of distance. It is best to bank on this being a hard and challenging walk, through dense forest, not on dedicated trails.

A considerable amount of our birding will take place in forest habitats, either along trails within the forest or from roads that cut through the forest, in addition to the rockfowl walk mentioned above. On occasion, we may also venture off-trail to track down particular species. Aside from these activities, the walking involved in our birding is generally not particularly strenuous, with most routes following level ground or having only gentle undulations.

Aside from our birding walk, we will also have two ape treks (**Mandrill** and **Western Gorilla**). These are unknown entities, the walking can either be very easy and quick (short distance), to incredibly difficult and long (covering a large distance). Both of these occur off trails and involve much bush walking. The gorilla trek, especially, can be difficult, depending on where they are that day (they can occasionally be in swampy areas that are difficult to access, and can require walking

in water (up to waist high), through vine tangles and dense forests etc.). This is why we require a signed doctor's certificate (which will be provided – see under "Medical Conditions" above).

Participants should be able to manage these conditions and, most importantly, be comfortable on their feet for many hours at a time.

PACE OF TOUR

This is an intense and difficult tour, with long days virtually every day, and will only appeal to more dedicated birders. In addition, the birding (and travel) conditions are mostly difficult as well. The roads are bad and the birding is mostly forest-based, thus, views of birds can be obstructed and/or brief and/or poor – often leaving folks wanting more.

We will generally start the days off early, with a pre-dawn breakfast before spending the full morning birding – as we try to maximize the morning coolness, before the heat sets in. We usually return to our hotels/lodges for a lunch break (and a short siesta during the oppressive midday heat). We then typically resume in the mid/late afternoon, but note that the afternoons are usually hot. Due to the rural nature of Gabon, most of our birding sites require some driving to reach them from our hotels/lodging.

We will do a few nocturnal trips, looking for scarce owls and other birds and mammals, but these aren't a regular/daily feature.

It is possible to opt out of some activities should you not feel up to it, but this generally isn't possible on the days when we transit between accommodations. We don't do much birding on our travel days in Gabon.

MANDRILL & GORILLA TREKKING

As mentioned previously in this document, these activities are included in the tour price and give unparalleled opportunities to see these rare apes. A doctor's signed medical certificate is mandatory to take part in these. (You will be refused - and no refund issued - if you do not have this completed and signed by a doctor). We will issue these to clients shortly before the tour begins, to be filled out and signed by your doctor.

For those who have trekked **Eastern** (Mountain) **Gorillas** and **Chimpanzees** in East Africa (like Uganda, for example), please note that the trekking in Gabon is quite different.

- A maximum group size of four per day is allowed (therefore, our group will likely be split up over two days – those folks who are not trekking will be taken out birding, and vice versa).
- The trekking is far more "wild" than East Africa, in that there is usually considerable effort needed to locate the animals.
    - The Mandrill trekking can take a while, with lots of driving around, and radio-telemetry usually needed to locate the Mandrills, before the hiking to get to them begins.

- The gorilla trekking, likewise is not as easy as in East Africa (where trackers spend lots of time with the various gorilla families, keeping track of exactly where they are). There is only a single group that is habituated, and they wander widely through the forests. There are occasions where they are not found that specific day (although we are then usually allowed to try again in the days following, until we have seen them).

These are exciting activities (but can include challenging walking conditions to find them), that we feel that no trip to Gabon would be complete without them.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation on this tour ranges from standard to basic and is generally more modest than the level of accommodation we use on most of our other tours, particularly those in Southern and East Africa. Air-conditioning is not available at many of the properties, and while en-suite bathrooms are provided at most locations, limited accommodation options in certain areas may mean that we occasionally need to share bathrooms and, depending on group size and room availability, even rooms.

We do everything possible to secure the best available accommodation at each destination, although options can be extremely limited in some areas. In particular, we will stay at the very rustic Ipassa Research Station (which has no hot water), the newly established reserve at Idjanga, and a basic hotel in Lekoni. Some of the establishments also have a limited number of rooms, meaning that single travelers may occasionally need to share, depending on the group size and room configuration.

Travelling in more remote parts of Africa can also come with some practical challenges. These may include non-functioning hot water pumps, faulty plug points, air-conditioning problems, inadequate room lighting, and other maintenance issues. We kindly ask for your patience and understanding should any of these situations arise, as resolving such problems can be difficult, particularly in more rural parts of Gabon.

On a more positive note, our hotel in Libreville and the lodges within Loango National Park are of a good standard and generally offer a comfortable stay.

WHAT TO BRING

Clothing Casual and informal dress is fine in the hotels. Loose, lightweight, breathable field clothing works best, with a warm fleece or jacket for cooler weather/evenings. As mentioned previously, some warmer clothing is recommended, certainly a minimum of a warm fleece and a rain jacket. Rain is a possibility, so an umbrella and/or rain gear is always useful to have.

* Note that cotton clothing is not recommended, and quick-dry nylon, linen or bamboo clothing items are usually best.

Laundry can be done at all establishments throughout the tour (at your expense) – but please note that a lead time of at least one day is needed (it is therefore not possible to get laundry done if we stay at a hotel/lodge for only a single night – but it is possible if we have two nights or longer).

Sunglasses, sunhat and sunscreen (rated SPF 30 or higher) are essential. A pair of trousers (or several) or a long skirt, and a long-sleeved shirt should be included to help protect against forest vegetation and the sun. Swimwear can be brought since there are swimming pools at some of the lodges.

We will undertake numerous boat trips in Gabon, particularly within Loango National Park, although none are expected to involve wet landings or embarkations. Sandals are generally useful in such situations, as your feet may get wet when getting on and off the boats.

We recommend lightweight walking boots for when out on foot, and a second pair is often useful. Please ensure that your footwear is comfortable, as much time is spent on your feet on this tour. You may consider sandals/Tevas as well, for use around the hotels/lodges, and for getting in/out of the boats.

Do not forget – BINOCULARS, prescription drugs (also bring the generic names for these drugs), toiletries, prescription glasses (and a spare pair), insect repellant, camera, flashlight, batteries (for electronic equipment and chargers for the re-chargeable batteries), plug adaptors, alarm clock, mosquito repellant, money pouch, field guide(s), a soft-sided duffle-style luggage bag is recommended (hard-sided luggage is not always ideal), daypack/backpack, and your favorite road snacks!

Key documents and cash – Passports, your travel or health insurance cards (you can send us copies to file in case of emergency), credit cards – Visa and Mastercard are best – see above, US dollars, euro or pounds can be exchanged for local currency at the airport as you arrive into the country (if you prefer not to simply draw from ATMs), cash for drinks, gifts, **tips**, items of a personal nature etc.

Luggage – Due to restricted space in the vehicles, please pack as lightly as possible. A medium-sized, soft-sided duffle bag (not the hard-sided cases) works best for packing in the vehicles. This allows us to better fit the bags. Please bring a daypack to keep items that you wish to use or need on a daily basis.

*Additionally, we make use of several domestic flights in Gabon, and these are usually on small aircraft with a strict one check-in bag, weighing ~40 pounds (20 kilograms) per person.

Books – We recommend purchasing a copy of "Birds of Western Africa – Second edition – Borrow, and Demey, 2014". Also, it is always worth reading Birding Ecotours' blog on recommended field guides.


Birding Ecotours