



COMPLETE GABON – RARE BIRDS AND APES

25 AUGUST – 10 SEPTEMBER 2024

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*This tour is specifically timed to coincide with the arrival of the highly localized **African River Martin** into Gabon – we hope to encounter them breeding within Loango National Park (photo Niall Perrins).*

Gabon is a relatively undiscovered gem and hosts a great many difficult African bird species. This French-speaking country is located in Equatorial West Africa and complements our “bulge of Africa” tours much further to the north-west (Ghana being the usual destination we run in that part of the world, along with Senegal). While Gabon has no endemic birds, there are several tantalizing species such as **African River Martin**, **Rosy Bee-eater**, **Vermiculated Fishing Owl**, and various other Congo-basin species that are arguably more easily found here than anywhere else.

Almost 70 percent of Gabon is still covered by pristine, primeval lowland rainforest, which is part of the appeal, and, with a country population of just 1.5 million people, these forests remain relatively untouched. The country also has a wide range of other habitats, not only tropical rainforest but also coastal lagoons, pristine beaches, large rivers and associated riverine vegetation, montane-type grasslands, and broken miombo woodland, all of which are home to a wide variety of fabulous birds. Gabon also boasts spectacular animals, and these still relatively untouched wildernesses (such as within the amazing Loango National Park, and the vast Lopé National Park) are home to the likes of (African) **Forest Elephant**, the striking **Red River Hog**, three species of crocodile, **Western Gorilla** and the iconic **Mandrill**, amongst others.



***Mandrill** is one of the special mammals we make a concerted effort to find on this tour – with **Mandrill** trekking permits included in the cost of the tour (photo Hans Hillewaert- Wikimedia Commons).*

Our well-designed, comprehensive Gabon tour visits all of the key birding sites and targets a great deal of the country’s many specials. Beginning in the coastal capital city of Libreville, we transit inland firstly to forested Lope National Park, followed by the wild open expanses of the Lekoni region and the Bateke Plateau, before moving onto the extremely wild and largely untouched forests of the greater Makokou area. The bulk of our birding will be lowland-forest-based birding,

however, we will also ensure we explore some of the grasslands and associated woodland environments for a fine change. Among the many possible species, we hope to find such prized birds as **Black-headed Bee-eater**, **Dja River Scrub Warbler**, **Congo Serpent Eagle**, and **Congo Moor Chat**, amongst many other Congo-basin species, more easily sought here than anywhere else in their range. We then transit back to Libreville, and take a short domestic flight to the coastal wetlands, rivers, and surrounding forests of the greater Loango National Park. We conclude our tour here, seeking out the country's more well-known specials, such as **African River Martin** and **Rosy Bee-eater**, along with others such as the rare **Vermiculated Fishing Owl**.

Unique to our tour are the unparalleled opportunities to see both **Mandrill** and **Western Gorilla** – for both of which we specially dedicate time to seeing and trekking on our tour.

Itinerary (17 days/16 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Libreville

Today is your arrival day, and you are welcome to arrive at your leisure (there are no formal plans for birding today). Following your arrival into the Gabonese capital of Libreville you will be transferred to your hotel, where the tour will begin with a group dinner.

Overnight: Libreville hotel

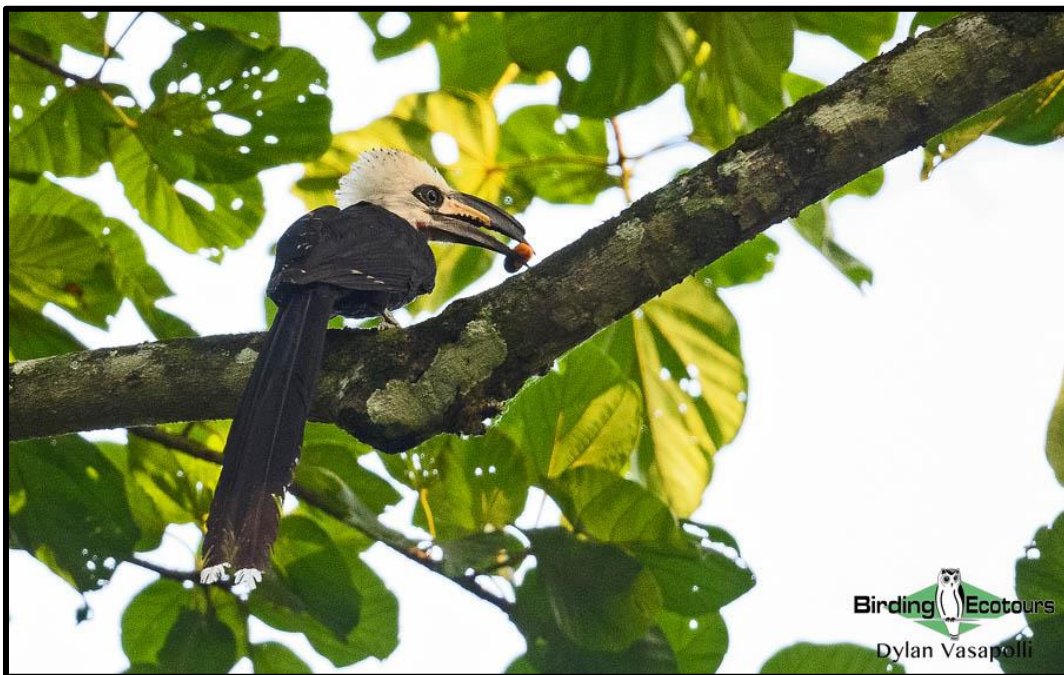


*The splendid **Black Bee-eater** occurs throughout the country.*

Days 2 – 4. Birding Lopé National Park

We have a long transfer on Day 2, as we head for Lopé National Park, where we will spend three nights.

We will have two full days to explore Lopé National Park (along with some time during the afternoon of Day 2 as well). This is one of the biggest national parks in Gabon, offering a mix of rivers, bush savanna, open plains, and forest. Given the size of the reserve we will only be able to cover a fraction of it; however, we will access some of the most exciting areas in the reserve. In the open areas we will try for species such as **Senegal Lapwing**, **Blue-breasted Bee-eater**, **Compact Weaver**, and **Red-headed Quelea**, while arguably our biggest target will be the localized **Dja River Scrub Warbler**. In the forest and at the forest edges we will seek out **Long-tailed Hawk**, **Red-chested Owlet**, **Lyre-tailed Honeyguide**, and the superb **White-crested Hornbill**, among other more common species, while the rivers will see a suite of species likely, including **White-crowned Lapwing**, **African Skimmer**, and **Rock Pratincole**. **Bat Hawks** are also regular over the rivers in the evenings. We will also be sure to keep an eye to the sky for the sought-after **Bates's Swift**.



White-crested Hornbills, with their amazingly long tails, frequent the forested sections.

The scarce **Grey-necked Rockfowl** does occur in the area; however, during the dry season (when we run this tour) it is rare and nearly impossible to see, and is perhaps more easily sought on our Cameroon tour, or in the wet season during January and February (we can arrange tours by special request). As such, we will not focus on this species during this tour. Amongst the many birds present here, we will watch out for **Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill**, **Speckled Tinkerbird**, **African Shrike-flycatcher**, **Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher**, **Brown-throated Wattle-eye**, **Western Black-headed Batis**, **Red-eyed Puffback**, **Fiery-breasted Bushshrike**, **Lowland Akalat**,

Yellow-lored Bristlebill, Chattering and Croaking Cisticolas, Lemon-bellied Crombec, Fraser's Forest Flycatcher, Grey Tit-Flycatcher, Vieillot's Black and Dark-backed Weavers, Splendid Starling, Superb and Reichenbach's Sunbirds and Quailfinch.

Not only is Lopé home to many bird species but also to populations of (African) **Forest Elephant** and **African (Forest) Buffalo**, along with a wide variety of primates, including **Putty-nosed, Crowned, and Moustached Monkeys, Grey-cheeked Mangabey, Black Colobus** – and most importantly, the rare and stunning **Mandrill**.

*We have a special activity set aside, where we undertake to track and see **Mandrill** within Lopé. Please note that this half-day activity is included in the tour cost.

Overnight: Lopé National Park

Day 5. Transfer from Lopé National Park to Lekoni

We will depart the fantastic Lopé National Park bound ultimately for Lekoni, a small 'town' in the south-eastern parts of Gabon – however, we will only reach Franceville tonight (a short hop away from Lekoni). This is a long transfer; we will be departing in the morning, and only arriving very late in the afternoon, with limited time for birding along the route.

Overnight: Franceville hotel



***Black-collared Bulbul** is a range restricted species that favors mesic grassy savannas on the edges of forests – and is one of our primary targets of the Lekoni region.*

Days 6 – 7. Birding Lekoni and surroundings

The area around Lekoni is rather unique in equatorial Africa – comprising of most notably the higher-lying grasslands of the Batéké Plateau – a habitat zone that seems very much out of place here. Naturally, this somewhat isolated habitat hosts many unique bird species, not found elsewhere in Gabon and more characteristic of further south in Africa – such as parts of Angola and Zambia. In addition to these montane-type grasslands there are also small tracts of somewhat-stunted miombo woodland along with patches of montane forest, creating a fantastic birding environment! Arguably the most prized bird of the grassland zone is the sought-after **Congo Moor Chat**, which is relatively common and normally fairly conspicuous. However, not to be outdone are other sought-after species such as **Finsch's Francolin**, **Black-rumped Buttonquail**, **White-bellied Bustard**, **Flappet Lark** and the unique local form of **Rufous-naped Lark**, the prized **Black-collared Bulbul**, **Fawn-breasted Waxbill**, and **Short-tailed Pipit**.

Where the grasslands give way to miombo-type woodlands we will focus on other species, such as the prized **Black-headed Bee-eater**, **Black-backed Barbet**, **Black Scimitarbill**, **Gorgeous Bushshrike**, **Red-capped Crombec**, **Yellow-bellied Hyliota**, **Tinkling Cisticola**, **Green-capped** and **Salvadori's Eremomelas**, **White-winged Black Tit**, **Souza's Shrike**, **Western Violet-backed Sunbird**, **Wood Pipit**, **Cabanis's Bunting**, and the rare and localized **Black-chinned Weaver**. We will also be sure to visit a few of the montane forest patches present in the area, and here we will search for species such as **African Broadbill**, **Black Bee-eater**, **Blue-throated Roller**, **Angolan Batis**, **Bocage's Bushshrike** and **Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat**, amongst others.

Overnight: Lekoni guesthouse (basic)



*The scarce **Black-backed Barbet** occurs in the wooded portions of the Batéké Plateau.*

Day 8. Transfer from Lekoni to Makokou

Following the Lekoni area, our next major birding destination is the impressive forests of the greater Makokou area (which includes the vast Ipassa Strict Nature Reserve/Ivindo National Park, and surrounds). This is another very long drive, with limited birding available along the way – though well worthwhile as we access some of the most pristine tracts of Congolese lowland forest available. The sought-after **Red-throated Cliff Swallow** breeds under some of the culverts on the route and will be one of our main targets.

Overnight: Makokou hotel

Days 9 – 10. Birding the greater Makokou area

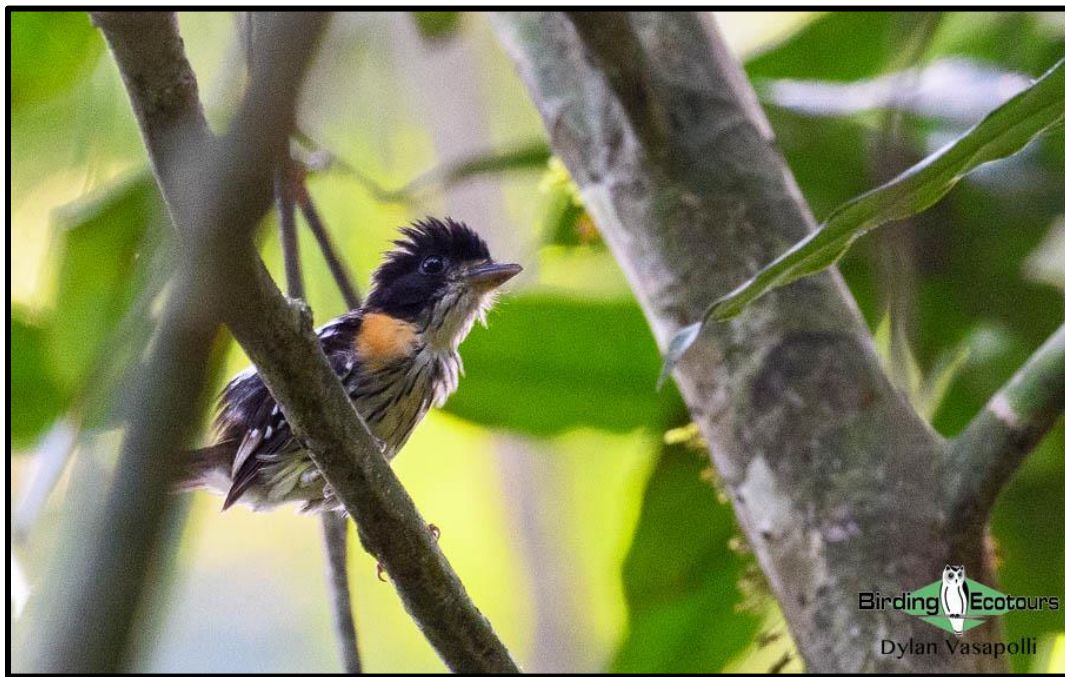
We have two full days of birding, in which to explore and try to find as many of the exciting species that exist here as possible. Our time will be divided between the Ipassa-Makokou Strict Nature Reserve, Ivindo National Park, and some general roadside birding along old forestry tracks in the surrounding area. Most of our birding will be done on foot as we explore and venture down some of the paths cut into the forest while investigating calling birds and bouts of activity. Naturally, forest birding can be difficult, and this area is certainly no exception; however, with patience and a bit of luck we should enjoy a number of the area's many specials.



*An abundance of hornbills frequents the mature and relatively undisturbed forests of the greater Makokou region – here two giant **Black-casqued Hornbills** fly over the canopy.*

The canopy and upper levels of the forest play host to some of the larger and arguably more vocal species, and we will search for the massive **Great Blue Turaco** along with its more 'normal'-sized cousins, **Yellow-billed** and **Guinea Turacos**. A plethora of **Hornbills** occurs here, including

sought-after **White-thighed**, **Black-casqued**, **Red-billed Dwarf**, **Black Dwarf** and **White-crested**, while **Piping** and **African Pied** are usually more common. **Chocolate-backed Kingfishers** call from the upper reaches of the massive trees, yet remain as difficult to see as ever. **Barbets** are also well represented, and the area hosts **Hairy-breasted**, **Grey-throated**, **Yellow-billed** and **Yellow-spotted**, along with a number of **tinkerbirds** such as **Yellow-throated** and **Red-rumped**. The deep calls of **Afep** and **Western Bronze-naped Pigeons** ring out throughout the forest, and it normally takes some effort to track these birds down. A number of **Cuckoos** are also present, and our main targets will feature the sought-after **Yellow-throated**, along with **Dusky Long-tailed** and **Olive Long-tailed**, while more widespread species include **African Emerald**, **Black** and **Red-chested**. Not to be forgotten, a number of **Woodpecker** species also occur here, and species such as **Yellow-crested**, **Brown-eared**, **Buff-spotted**, **Gabon** and **Green-backed** all feature. Many passerines also frequent the higher reaches, and we'll be keeping an eye out for **Red-eyed Puffback**, **Western Oriole**, **Purple-throated Cuckooshrike**, **Green Hylia**, tiny **Rufous-crowned Eremomela**, **Fraser's Rufous Thrush**, **Dusky Tit**, **Fraser's** and **Little Green Sunbirds**, and all of the world's **Nigritas**- **Grey-headed**, **Pale-fronted**, **Chestnut-breasted** and **White-breasted**.



Rufous-sided Broadbill is a shy denizen of the forests – though we may get lucky and find one displaying.

We will need to be quite fortunate, however, to come across the poorly known **Spot-breasted Ibis**, **Plumed Guineafowl**, the rare **Black-collared Lovebird**, the sought-after **African Piculet**, and the stunning **Rufous-bellied Helmetshrike**, along with the likes of **Fernando Po Batis**, **Black-necked Wattle-eye**, **Yellow-capped Weaver**, and both **Rachel's** and **Red-crowned Malimbés** – but all are distinctly possible.

Species that prefer the mid-strata and vine tangles coming down from the canopy include the sought-after **Bare-cheeked Trogon**, secretive **Rufous-sided Broadbill**, **African Dwarf** and **Blue-breasted Kingfishers**, **Blue Malkoha**, **Fraser's Forest**, **Yellow-footed** and **Chestnut-capped Flycatchers**, **Bates's Paradise Flycatcher**, **Gabon Batis**, **Yellow-bellied** and **White-spotted Wattle-eyes**, **Western** and **Yellow-throated Nicators**, **Yellow-browed Camaroptera**, **Grey Longbill**, the sought-after **Gosling's Apalis**, **Maxwell's Black Weaver**, and **Crested**, **Blue-billed**, **Red-bellied** and **Cassin's Malimbres**.



Yellow-footed Flycatcher is a scarce Central African species that is not easily seen anywhere.

We will also be able to hone our bulbul skills immensely here, with a vast number of different species occurring within the forest, including sought species such as **Sjöstedt's**, **Ansorge's**, **Yellow-whiskered**, **Falkenstein's**, **Honeyguide**, **Golden**, **Spotted**, **Eastern Bearded** and **White-bearded Greenbuls**, while other possible species include **Swamp Palm Bulbul** and **Little, Slender-billed, Little Grey, Plain, Simple, Icterine, Xavier's** and **Red-tailed Greenbuls** along with **Red-tailed Bristlebill**.

Tangles, thickets, and bushy growth in the lower strata down to the ground play host to shy species such as **Black Guinea fowl**, **White-spotted Flufftail**, **Blue-headed Wood Dove**, the beautiful **Forest Robin**, **Brown-chested** and **Fire-crested Alethes**, **Brown Illadopsis**, **Lowland Sooty Boubou**, **Olive-green Camaroptera**, **Banded Prinia**, and both **Red-tailed** and **White-tailed Ant Thrushes**. Some of the more open areas of the forest, clearings in the forest, and forest edge zones will be searched for further species such as **Scaly Francolin**, **Grey** and **Red-fronted Parrots**, **Gabon Coucal**, the tiny **Tit Hylia**, **Mackinnon's Shrike**, **Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher**, **White-chinned Prinia**, **Dusky-blue Flycatcher**, and the secretive **Woodhouse's Antpecker**.

Keeping an eye out for raptors is likely to produce species such as **Cassin's Hawk-Eagle**, **Congo Serpent Eagle**, **Long-tailed Hawk**, **Red-thighed Sparrowhawk** and **Red-chested Goshawk**. These are also great areas to scan the skies for aerial feeders, and we will be on the lookout for **Mottled**, **Cassin's** and **Sabine's Spinetails** and the scarce **Forest Swallow** along with **Square-tailed Saw-wing**. Flowering trees in these zones as well as in the forest proper play host to large numbers of **Sunbirds**, featuring **Tiny**, **Carmelite**, **Grey-chinned**, **Collared**, **Blue-throated Brown**, **Olive-bellied** and **Superb**.

The grassy verges to the roads and tracks in the area host a variety of colorful seedeaters, amongst them **Black-bellied Seedcracker**, **Western Bluebill**, **Black-headed** and **Orange-cheeked Waxbills** and **Black-and-white Mannikin**. While here, we will also try our luck for some of the prized nocturnal birds occurring here, which might include the localized **Sjöstedt's Barred Owlet**, **Akun** and **Fraser's Eagle-Owls**, as well as both **Bates's** and **Brown Nightjars**.

Overnight: Makokou hotel



*The calls of **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher** ring out from the canopies of the tallest trees – these non-aquatic kingfishers thrive in the forests.*

Day 11. Transfer to Libreville

After a great few days exploring the impressive forests of the Ipassa/Ivindo area around Makokou, our time in the east of the country draws to a close as we make the long trip back to the capital, Libreville, so we can prepare for the exciting conclusion of this trip in the spectacular Loango National Park. This is another very long journey that will see us getting into Libreville in the early evening.

Overnight: Libreville hotel

Days 12 - 15. Birding the lush wilderness of the Loango National Park

Saving the best for last, we transfer south (via a flight to Port-Gentil) to the magical Loango National Park, where we spend four nights.

This is one of Africa's greatest remaining Eden's (as quoted by Time Magazine), oozing raw Mother Nature. We will spend our time between two camps located deep within the park, giving us the best opportunities to access the excellent coastal savannas, thick riparian swamp forests and vibrant lagoons that make up this wilderness. We have several key birding targets, with arguably the most important going to the highly localized **African River Martin**. These rare birds arrive during the dry season to breed here – and this is the specific reason why we time our tour during this period. We will visit known colonies and spend some quality time with these strange birds. The beautiful **Rosy Bee-eater** also frequents these more open areas, and we can often see these two special birds alongside each other. The rarely seen **Vermiculated Fishing Owl** is another of our major targets for the park, and we may also be able to compare it to its equally impressive cousin, **Pel's Fishing Owl**. The scarce **White-bellied Kingfisher**, and **Loango Weaver** are also to be found in the swampy wetland areas, and if we're extremely lucky, **White-crested Tiger Heron** as well. If we haven't come across them already, the forested areas here are also home to another scarce and sought-after duo – **Bare-cheeked Trogon** and **Rufous-sided Broadbill**. We will also try for the localized **Violet-tailed Sunbird** during our searches.



*Pel's Fishing Owl (pictured) should be seen as we work the myriad of internal waterways within Loango National Park – and we will also try for the near-mythical **Vermiculated Fishing Owl**.*

Other possible species to be found include **White-backed Night Heron**, **African Finfoot**, **West African Crested** and **Damara Terns**, **White-crowned Lapwing**, **Forbes's Plover**, **African Crane**, **Long-tailed Hawk**, **Yellow-billed Turaco**, **Senegal Coucal**, **Shining-blue Kingfisher**,

Blue-breasted and **Black-headed Bee-eaters**, **Yellow-throated Tinkerbird**, **Black-casqued Hornbill**, **Yellow-billed Oxpecker** (often on mammals), **Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat**, **Grey-rumped Swallow**, and **Long-legged Pipit**. While some of the more common and widespread species of the area include **Great Egret**, **Woolly-necked Stork**, **Palm-nut Vulture**, **African Skimmer**, **Little Tern**, **Grey and Rock Pratincoles**, **White-fronted Plover**, **Water Thick-knee**, **Grey Parrot**, **Giant** and **Pied Kingfishers**, **Yellow-breasted Apalis**, **Rufous-vented Paradise Flycatcher**, **Swamp Boubou**, and **African Pied Wagtail**.



***Red River Hog** is a mammalian target whilst we're in the amazing Loango National Park (photo Otomops- Wikimedia Commons).*

Aside from the many birds we'll be seeing, the park is arguably more famous for its other wildlife. Herds of (African) **Forest Elephant** roam freely, as do numbers of **African (Forest) Buffalo** (the smallest subspecies of African Buffalo). We will keep a special eye out for the spectacular **Red River Hog** and, on the waterways, **Slender-snouted Crocodile**. If we're very lucky, even **Leopard** makes the occasional appearance.

*One of the main attractions on the mammalian front for us is the opportunity to track **Western Gorillas** – and we make special time on this tour for the group to not only see these rare gentle giants, but also get a deeper insight into their lives as we venture after a habituated group studied by researchers.

Overnight: Loango National Park (Akaka & Tassi Camps)



White-crested Tiger Heron is a rare inhabitant of Loango.

Day 16. Final birding in Loango National Park, and transfer back to Libreville

This is the last full day of the tour. We have a final morning to spend within the stunning Loango National Park, searching for any species we may not yet have seen, or enjoying our final moments with some of the iconic park species, which may include **African River Martin** and **Rosy Bee-eater**. Around midday, we will likely need to bid farewell to the park, and start our journey back to Port-Gentil, from where we will take an evening flight back to the capital, Libreville. Upon arriving at our comfortable hotel, we will settle in for one final group dinner, reminiscing about all the excellent bird and wildlife encounters we have experienced.

Overnight: Libreville hotel

Day 17. Departure from Libreville

This is your departure day, and you are welcome to leave at your leisure. Please note that there are no formal birding plans for the day, and the tour will officially conclude after breakfast.

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.

Gabon is notoriously expensive, and from time to time we have to make quite major changes (but without adversely affecting the birding targets) to keep the prices in check to some extent.

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|---------------------------|---|
| Duration: | 17 days |
| Limit: | 4 - 8 |
| Dates: | 25 August – 10 September 2024 25 August – 10 September 2025 |
| Start: | Libreville |
| End: | Libreville |
| Price: | US\$9,700 per person sharing based on 4 – 8 participants (2024) US\$10,760 per person sharing based on 4 – 8 participants (2025) |
| Single supplement: | US\$TBD (2024) US\$TBD (2025) |

Price includes:

All accommodation
Airport transfers
All meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 17
Bottled water
International tour leader and local guide
Park entrance fees
All guide fees
Excursion costs
*Domestic flights cost (Libreville – Port-Gentil; Port-Gentil – Libreville)
*Mandrill tracking permit (Lopé NP)
*Western Gorilla tracking permit (Loango NP)

Price excludes:

International flights to/from Libreville
Travel insurance
Entry visas
Soft and alcoholic drinks (except water)
Gratuities (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))
Gifts and other items of a personal nature