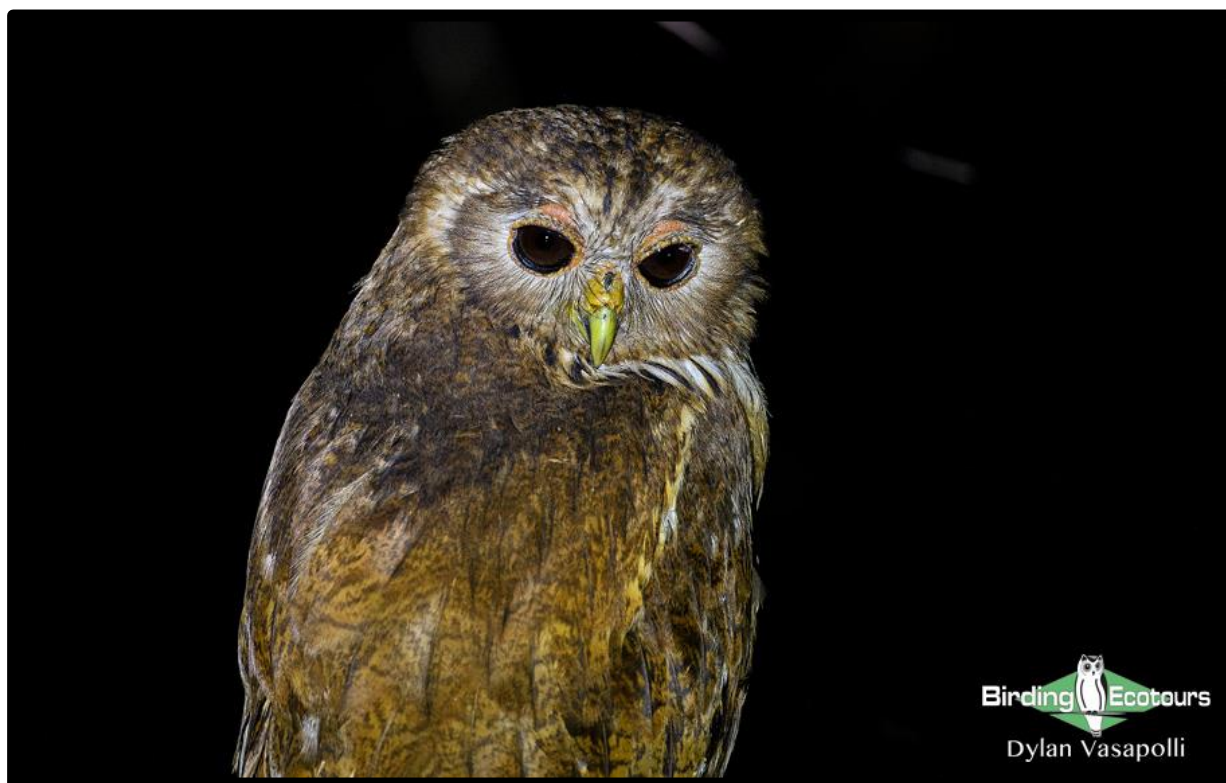




GABON:

GENERAL INFORMATION



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

INTRODUCTION

Gabon is located in west-central Africa, lining the coast, and has long been an exciting destination for birders as much of the country is preserved and vast tracts of forest still remain. This is in part due to Gabon's low population. It must be noted that Gabon, due to its oil wealth, is also a notoriously expensive destination, and birding tours are no different, and costs are high (even for extremely basic services and amenities at times). This high cost in Gabon is prohibitive and is one of the major reasons as to why infrastructure, especially tourism infrastructure, is virtually non-existent.

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.

Our tour starts and ends in the capital city, Libreville (on the coast). There are essentially two legs to the trip, with the first involving travel around the interior of the country (to sites like Leconi, Makokou and Lope National Park). This is the “difficult” leg of the trip, with long and hard travel days and basic accommodations and amenities throughout. Most of the birding (though importantly, not all) is done in forested areas, and is thus also challenging at times. The second leg of the trip is to and within the excellent Loango National Park. Here, safari lodges ensure our comfort, and boat rides are practically a daily occurrence, with an abundance of birds and mammals to keep us occupied. Loango National Park is a truly stunning area and is the perfect way to round off this tour.

*It needs to be stressed that this is a challenging tour and is designed for more dedicated birders who are prepared to spend long days out in the field, mostly in forests, looking for rare and poorly known species. There are two important mammal activities as well, **Mandrill** and **Western Gorilla** trekking, which are included, but the bulk of this tour is birding focused. You should also expect humid conditions throughout and, especially in the interior of the country, very long and difficult travel days (on 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 repellent, long trousers/jeans and long-sleeved shirts, particularly at night when malaria (*Anopheles*) mosquitoes 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°F/35°C, 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

This tour takes place in a third-world country, and roads are often narrow, potholed and very busy. Do not expect highways and quick travel between destinations.

Transportation is complex on this tour, with multiple internal flights. We will generally make use of two (or in some instances, three) 4x4 vehicles to transport the group. This is to cope with the dreadful roads, which are virtually impossible to drive on with the usual mini buses that we use on most of our other tours. These 4x4 vehicles are generally OK and mostly comfortable, but since this is rural Africa, with limited maintenance and servicing capabilities, these vehicles can be rugged.

We will spend quite a lot of time driving, as there is often a transit time to get from our hotel to the birding area. *We have three especially long travel days, where virtually the whole day will be spent driving on bad roads. A small seat cushion/back support may be useful here.

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.

Air-conditioning is available in our tour vehicles.

Some roads are dusty, so please consider bringing a scarf (or other measures) in case you are birding along an unpaved road and a car goes past putting up dust.

*Our drives within both Lopé and Loango National Parks are usually in the lodges' open-air-style safari jeeps/vehicles, commonly used in most parts of Africa. These generally have canopies overhead but are open-sided (with no windows), and sometimes require a bit of clambering to get in/out.

*We will undertake several boat cruises (on boats of varying sizes, depending on our group), especially while in Loango National Park and Omboue. Boats are the main form of transportation in Loango and when we transit to our lodges our luggage will be with us (it is usually stored in the boat's various compartments).

WALKING

We do quite a bit of walking on this tour – both for the birding, and the ape treks. We usually drive to a point, then get out the vehicle and walk around, birding on foot. Sometimes, we will be out for several hours at a time (especially when we are at Makokou, and birding in the Ipassa forests). Although we usually don't walk very far, the most tiring aspect is the time spent standing/on your feet while trying for a shy, skulking bird/similar.

*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.

There is lots of forest-birding – some of which is on interior trails, the rest of which is from roads cutting through the forest, aside from the rockfowl walk mentioned above. Sometimes, we will go off trail to track down a bird. Apart from these, all other walking for birding is not particularly “difficult” with most of the walking on level ground, or with only slight 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.
 - o 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.
 - o 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

The accommodation used on this tour ranges from ‘standard’ to ‘basic’ (and below the standard we use on virtually all our other tours, especially those we use on our southern/East African tours). Air-conditioning is available at most places (although it sometimes doesn’t work). En-suite bathroom facilities are available throughout the tour. *We do all we can to ensure that we stay at the best places possible. We do not stay at the very rustic Ipassa research station or basic Lekoni hotel. Our hotel in Libreville and our lodges within Loango National Park will be of a good standard and are usually rather comfortable.

Especially on the interior leg of the country, in the more basic places at Bongoville and Makokou and the very old La Lope Hotel, there are regular “issues”, such as hot water pumps not working, plug points not working, air-cons not working, and inadequate light in rooms, amongst other typical issues with rural African travel. Please bear with us in such situations – it is often not easy to fix such issues in rural countries like Gabon.

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 have lots of boat trips in Gabon (especially Loango National Park), but none of these are expected to be wet landing/embarkings. Sandals are usually necessary for such scenarios, since your feet may get wet.

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/Texas 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 repellent, 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.

