

Liberia Birding Trip Report, 22nd January to 3rd February, 2012, by Alan G. Johnston

Birding in and around Monrovia, Liberia

This tale about a trip to Liberia actually started with a plan to travel to Nigeria. As an avid birder I am, as they say, never not birding. So in January 2012 as I prepared to attend a health policy conference in Abuja, Nigeria I also began preparing to do a bit of birding on the weekends. A quick search on the internet for possible local bird guides was not encouraging. The first website I looked at (<http://www.camacdonald.com/birding/africanigeria.htm>) had this to say:

"Although Nigeria has one of the most diverse avifaunas in Africa, no one in their right mind would recommend birders to take a trip to this country, until violence and corruption are stamped out and the infrastructure is greatly improved." - Nigel Wheatley.

In any case, with the recent upsurge in violence in the north, the conference was cancelled. So instead I decided to accompany my wife who was scheduled at the same time for a two-week consulting assignment in Monrovia, Liberia.

Again, I was only slightly encouraged when I searched the internet for information on birding in Liberia. The African Bird Club (<http://www.africanbirdclub.org/countries/Liberia/introduction.html>) had this to say:

"At the time of writing, the advice is not to travel to Liberia .

Should you decide to travel, it is important to note that the use of binoculars and cameras can generally cause problems in Liberia."

So off we went to Monrovia, with binoculars and cameras in hand. Although this was my first trip to Liberia (other than landing once at Roberts Field back in the 1970s), my wife had actually been on 18 previous visits on various public health consulting assignments. And we both had Liberian and American friends living in Monrovia. She also knew that we should stay at the best hotel, Mamba Point Hotel, which also has what must be the best restaurant in Liberia. Although this was not an intense round-the-clock birding adventure, I did get to do some interesting birding in and around Monrovia.

Although it is just now beginning to recover from the devastating effects of two decades of civil war, Liberia has now stabilized, and it is safe for birders to begin venturing afield. Except in Monrovia, facilities (accommodations and restaurants) are very limited. But I was able to contact the Society for the Conservation of Nature in Liberia (SCNL) and spent several days in the field with a former staff member (now with UNDP) who is a trained bird guide (Moses Massah indicated that I could include his contacts in this trip report: mosesmassah@yahoo.com,

cell phone number: 231-886-558574). The SCNL office (cell phone number 231-777-778734), which is supported by BirdLife International, can also arrange contacts with local members of its site support groups at various important bird sites in Liberia. One such guide, Hussein Pusah, a member of the Lake Piso Conservation Forum, took my wife and me on a half-day tour around Robertsport.

Although it seemed perfectly safe to be out birding, I did notice that many people, especially those at the various check-points and road blocks, still seemed a bit on edge, and didn't know how to deal with a "tourist." Many other folks seemed very reluctant to have me taking any pictures. But in each case, when I showed them that my binoculars were for watching birds, not taking pictures, and then when I showed them a copy of my field guide (Nik Borrow and Ron Demey, *Birds of Western Africa*), they quickly understood and became friendly and interested. I do think it is a good idea to travel with a local guide, even if you can't locate an experienced birding guide. Moses Massah is actually one of the local guides who was trained by Ron Demey.

Even before meeting up with Moses it was easy to pick up a dozen common species in Monrovia city. Red-eyed and Laughing Doves are everywhere, and the most common sound comes from the playful Common Bulbuls. Pied Crows and Black Kites are always in the sky, but so are the graceful African Palm-Swifts. Many of the large trees in various parts of the city are filled with Village Weavers, and some have Vieillot's Black Weaver as well. And around the former US Embassy compound I frequently saw Spendid Glossy-Starlings. Along the beach I could see Sandwich and Royal Terns patrolling the ocean, and an occasional Common Sandpiper showed up on the beach. One day I saw a Eurasian Kestrel sail by the window in my hotel.

On January 24th I made my first excursion with Moses Massah to the outskirts of Monrovia. We drove a few miles to TerraVilla Gardens Farm, Mt. Barclay, Johnsonville, a private farm growing plants and flowers for sale in Monrovia. The farm has preserved quite a few acres of primary tropical forest, the largest such piece of forest within 50 miles of Monrovia. Moses had called the owner for advance permission to go birding on the farm (the farm's cell phone is 0777-720677). We immediately spotted a Lizard Buzzard, then an African Pied Hornbill and numerous White-throated Bee-eaters. On the edge of the forest we heard Yellow-whiskered Greenbul, Didric and Klaas's Cuckoo, Gray-headed Negro Finch and a persistent Western (Yellow-spotted) Nicator. The call of the Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird was a constant refrain. Looking up, I got my first life bird, a Red-necked Buzzard. Other migrants included Yellow Wagtail and many Barn Swallows. We heard a Yellow-billed Turaco, and in searching for it found Blue-headed Wood-Dove. Sun-birds included Variable, Olive-bellied, and, new for me, the Mouse-brown Sunbird, locally known as the Brown Sunbird. Also seen were Woodland and Pied Kingfishers, Little Bee-eater, Tawny-flanked Prinia, and Swamp Greenbul (Swamp Palm Bulbul). Our final bird of the morning was the most interesting. We saw a falcon swoop into the forest, then found it in a tree only 50 meters away and had a long look at a Red-footed Falcon. This was a first for Moses, and we are not aware of other records for Monrovia.

On the evening of January 25th my wife and I took a stroll past the old US Embassy Compound down the hill toward the beach and a series of quarries with small ponds. These are fenced off, but admission is granted for the small contribution of \$1 to an NGO (I think it was a small orphanage) that controls the gate. Vieillot's (Black) Weavers nest in the large bushes. Barn Swallows were everywhere, and we saw the following birds in the wetlands: a beautiful Malachite Kingfisher, Black Crake, Little Grebe, African Jacana, Common Moorhen, Common Greenshank, and Common Sandpiper. Flocks of Bronze Mannikins buzzed around.

On January 26th Moses and I drove past Robertsfield International Airport to the Marshall Wetlands, one of six Ramsar sites in Liberia. On the way we stopped at several creeks and fields. New birds for the day included Lesser Striped-Swallow, Orange Weaver, Plain-backed Pipit, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Pin-tailed Whydah, Simple Leaflove (Simple Greenbul), Senegal Coucal, Little Greenbul, and Northern Puffback. Near the shore of the wetlands we saw Carmelite Sunbird, Palm Nut Vulture, Giant Kingfisher, Tambourine Dove, Gray-headed and Blue-breasted Kingfishers, Rufous-chested Swallow, Black-crowned Tchagra, and Gray-backed Camaroptera. Looking up we were surprised and delighted to see a soaring Woolly-necked Stork. On the way back we stopped at the gate to the Firestone Plantation to check for the Preuss's Cliff Swallows reported breeding under the bridge several years ago. They are not there this year.

On Saturday, January 28th my wife and I hired a taxi to take us to Robertsport, to a well-known surfing beach. The beach was beautiful, but it was a calm day with no surf to speak of. It was a longer drive than expected, taking three hours, the last 43 km over a dusty gravel road. We stopped in the town of Latia, about 20 km from Robertsport to pick up our guide, Hussein, from the local office of the SCNL. The town is on the shore of the picturesque Lake Piso, a large bay. It was mid-day, a slow time for birding, but even still the bay seemed to have very little in the way of bird life. Perhaps at another time or season. Hovering around the woodlands near the shore we did find several African Harrier-Hawks. On the ocean shore at the next town we found one Whimbrel. The only other new birds of note on the trip were Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and Broad-billed Roller.

On January 30th we made a visit to the campus of the Liberian Institute for Biomedical Research, just past the International Airport, and added Green-headed, Superb, and Collared Sunbirds and Black-necked Weaver. On the way back to town we stopped for a soda at the RLJ Kendeja Resort & Villas and saw dozens of Sooty Terns just off the beach. Our last birding outing, on Feb. 2nd, once again with Moses, was back to the Quarries just past the old US Embassy compound. We had the same birds as on our first visit and added Black Tern, Striated (Green-backed) Heron, and Green Sandpiper.

Undoubtedly there is some exciting birding to be had in Liberia, especially if you can manage a trip to Sapo National Park or to some of the other birding sites listed on the African Bird Club website. But even in the vicinity of Monrovia you can find some enjoyable birding. Over the

course of our two-week visit I saw 87 species, and added some interesting West African specialties to my life list.

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