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I was fortunate and privileged to join the Cape Bird Club on their annual excursion to a foreign country. In 2013 they decided to visit Ghana, the tour running from 17 November until 2 December 2013. The overall tour and itinerary was organised by Ashanti African Tours who also provided the bus, bus driver and guide.

There was a total of 13 birders on the tour with Vernon Head (Cape Bird Club and BirdLife SA Chairman) being the Group Leader. The rest of the contingent were Mel Tripp, Simon Fogarty, Johan Schlebusch, Joy Fish, Otto and Sandy Schmidt, Klaus Hoffmann, Franz Klein, Dennis Randell, Jane Allin, Audrey Hutchings and Pieter van Oudtshoorn.

Ghana has a total of 760 birds of which the group recorded a list of 384 including those heard only. This report will mainly list those birds that were seen. A total of 3420 km was travelled. My main reason for visiting Ghana was firstly to see the only roller in Africa that I had not seen. Secondly it was to add some of my favourite birds, e.g. bee-eaters, weavers, sunbirds, hornbills and barbets, to my life-list.

17 November 2013
I took a morning flight from Windhoek to Johannesburg while the rest of the group except for Klaus Hoffman and Jane Allin flew from Cape Town to Johannesburg. I met up with the group at the boarding gate. The flight from Johannesburg arrived in Accra after 21:00.

As soon as we got off the plane we were hit by the heat and humidity. Passing through passport and customs control took over an hour. The drive to our hotel (Alexis Hotel in Tema) took another 30-45 minutes. We eventually got to bed at about 11pm after a nice warm shower. We were soon to learn that hot water appears to be a scarce commodity in Ghana.

18 November 2013
Breakfast was at 5:00am. All the meals we had were basically the same every day. Breakfasts consisted of an omelette and two slices of toast. One could have either instant coffee or Milo. Most of the breakfasts, for the rest of the tour, were at 5:00am. Lunches and suppers consisted of soup as a starter, for the main meal either beef or chicken with two varieties of rice, fish, chips, pieces of fried plantain, and some salad. For the vegetarians there was usually some form of extra salad. For dessert it was usually either pineapple slices and pawpaw or water melon or a combination of pawpaw and water melon.

While waiting for the last few of the tour group to get on the bus some of us managed to do a bit of birding in the front garden. We had poor views of Brown Babblers and Northern Grey-headed Sparrow because of the early morning light. Unfortunately we never saw any Brown Babblers again.

Our destination for the morning was the Shai Hills Resource Reserve where the vegetation is mostly savanna woodland interrupted by small gneiss hills.

Along the way we viewed from the
bus, Pied Crows and Cattle Egrets, and stopped for a few Bronze-tailed Starlings that were sitting next to the road. Once at the reserve we left the bus and walked for the next 3-4 hours along the main dirt road of the reserve.

The list of birds seen on our walk is as follows:

At a large cliff we searched in vain for the Mocking Cliff-Chat, a sub-species that is soon going to be split-off as a separate species. While looking for the bird we were being observed from the top of the cliff by a troop of Olive Baboons. Other primates seen were Callithrix Monkeys and Lesser Spotted Monkeys. A bird of prey on one occasion flashed past, too fast for most of us to identify it, but the guide and group leader identified it as a Black Goshawk.

As it started getting hot we got onto the bus again and continued our tour of the reserve, for the next hour birding from the bus. Birds seen from the bus included Long-crested Eagle, Hooded Vulture, Violet Turaco, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Blue-bellied Roller, Lanner Falcon, White Helmetshrike, Whinchat, Siffling Cisticola and Splendid Sunbird.

At about 11:00 am we returned to have lunch at our hotel and in the ½ hour before lunch some of the group walked around the hotel gardens and had good views of Northern Grey-headed Sparrows and Bronze Mannikins. As we sat down to lunch and started ordering some drinks we received some good news - for the rest of the tour we were going to be given a beer at lunch and two beers at super all paid for by Ashanti African Tours. The reason for this kind gesture was that Ashanti African Tours had slightly messed up our hotel bookings. Instead of staying for 4 nights at the Rain Forest Lodge, we stayed 3 nights at the Hans Cottage Botel and 1 night at Rain Forest Lodge.

In terms of beer there are 4 different brands available in Ghana: Star, Club, Stone and Gulder. For the group the most popular brand was Star. Even better was that the beer came in 625ml bottles. After lunch we packed up our luggage and left at 2:00pm for our next night’s accommodation. Before we went west we first did a detour to visit the Sukomona Lagoon.

On the way to the lagoon we passed what seemed to be the harbour. All around there were trucks of various sizes, shapes, age and state of repair. I guesstimated there to have been
easily 1000 trucks. It seems that in Ghana no trailers are allowed so the trucks, which are marked "Long Truck", were always piled extra high. Along all the roads and through all the villages and towns that we travelled there were always some abandoned or broken-down trucks next to the road or even in the road. What was amazing was that some of the trucks even had their engines lying next to them, opened and it appeared that these engines were being overhauled right there in the middle of nowhere.

After driving west for about 2 hours we eventually reached our next birding stop: Winneba Plains. Nothing special was spotted from the bus on our way to the plains, the only birds seen were the ever present Pied Crow and Yellow-billed Kite.

Conditions on the plains were overcast and windy. Unfortunately there were not a lot of birds. We saw a harrier-like bird-of-prey flying around but couldn't determine the exact type. We also had glimpses of a pipit, but couldn't see enough detail to identify it. For most of the walk we didn't see any birds except for a few Black-billed Wood-doves. One of the group, Mel Tripp, wandered off on his own and was fortunate to see a Common Quail. On the way back to the bus the rest of us came across a Yellow-throated Longclaw and everybody was able to get good scoped views of it. Our last birds on the plains were White-throated Bee-eaters, which we would come to realise were as common as Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters are in Namibia.

After another two hour's drive we eventually arrived at around 7:30pm at the Hans Cottage Botel where we would spend the next 3 nights. Before supper we did the bird list and ticked off all the birds we had seen that day. The group voted the Stone Partridge as Bird-of-the-Day.

19 November 2013
After having arrived at the Hans Cottage Botel in the dark the previous night, we left again in the dark after an early 5:00 am breakfast. After driving for about 45 minutes, with Pied Crow the only bird seen along the way, we arrived at the outskirts of the Abrafo Forest, turned off the main road at the Natilla School Complex and stopped at the corner on the dirt road. Within a minute or two the guide began calling
out birds. There were Bronze Manikins, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, a Northern Fiscal, a pipit that was just too far away for any proper identification. On a power-line quite close by there were a number of swallows which on closer examination produced a mixture of Barn Swallows, Ethiopian Swallows, Lesser-striped Swallows and Preuss’ Swallows. A Pin-tailed Whydah appeared and then it was time for a flock of Black-and-white Mannikins. Overhead there were a number of swifts - Alpine Swift, Little Swift and African Palm-Swift.

Also present was the Common Bulbul, the one bird we would see every single day while we were in Ghana. We continued walking along the dirt road passing agricultural fields and wooded areas, seeing along the way African Harrier-Hawk, African Cuckoo-Hawk, Hooded Vulture, Red-chested Goshawk and Yellow-billed Kite in the sky. In the trees were Red-eyed Dove, Laughing Dove, Blue-spotted Dove, White-throated Bee-eater, African Pied Hornbill, Common Bulbul, Violet-backed Starling, Vieillot’s Black Weaver, Western Olive Sunbird, Collared Sunbird, Superb Sunbird and African Firefinch.

We came across one open area that had a dead tree near one end. The tree had perched in it a Speckled Tinkerbird and a Red-faced Prinia. The surrounding area produced sightings of Red-winged Prinia and Black-winged Bishop. While we had a short rest before continuing I noticed a bird with some blue fly into a tall tree nearby and called out to the group leader and guide. It was a Black-Bee-eater and everybody was able to get good scoped views of it. Continuing we passed some forest where the guide heard a Forest Scrub-Robin calling. We unfortunately never got to see it even with playing its call which was very frustrating as one could hear every time it responded that it was getting closer. We got into the bus and drove on for a short while until we reached a school where we stopped but didn’t get out. The guide pointed us in the direction of a couple of Rosy Bee-eaters perched in a tree. Unfortunately it was misty and against the sun so we couldn’t see them in detail. After a minute or so we continued to the actual forest edge.

![Figure 3: Abrafo Forest Edge. – © 2013 Franz Klein](image)

Before we entered the forest we had good views of Splendid Glossy-Starling and a Melancholy Woodpecker (which has very recently been split-off from the Gabon Woodpecker). We walked along a track were quite a few of us had a painful introduction to soldier ants. Birding in forests is hard work. The best way to see the birds is to look for any sign of movement and immediately focus in on that area. However, sometimes the movement is made by a large butterfly. Also it was quite dark in some of the forests that we visited, so it was difficult to make out some of the colours. Even worse was trying to see any distinguishing features on birds when they were silhouetted against the sky at the top of some tall tree. Our walk through the forest produced a few greenbuls
namely Slender-billed Greenbul, Golden Greenbul, Common Bristlebill and Little Greenbul; and two Flycatchers: Pale and Ussher’s. We continued until the track ran out in a circular clearing in the forest. Here we saw a Buff-throated Sunbird and a Yellowbill. At 11:00 am we walked back to the bus and returned to Hans Cottage Botel for lunch. Still on the dirt road passing a small group of farm huts we spotted a Senegal Coucal.

Seeing the Hans Cottage Botel in daylight we were pleasantly surprised by the large number of trees around the restaurant complex which could only bode well for the presence of birds. The restaurant/lounge area is 75% surrounded by a lake that is filled with Nile Crocodiles.

When one faces the restaurant complex from the main road, the right-hand side has a narrow dirt mound that forms the wall around the lake on one side and separates the large lake from another smaller lake which is covered with water lilies and also contains some Nile Crocodiles. There is a path that one can walk along which takes one all around the larger lake. After lunch some of us proceeded to walk along the path and managed to see a Grey Heron and Striated Heron. One of the group had one of his after-lunch walks along this path cut short by the presence of a large crocodile lying across the path. Hans Cottage Botel was the best of the hotels that we stayed at during our tour even though it was not the most modern. Other birds seen in the surroundings of the hotel included Bronze Mannikins, Laughing Doves and Vinaceous Doves.

At 3:00 pm we headed off again to the edge of the Abrafo Forest but this time instead of turning left off the main road where we turned off in the morning, we continued for another 20 minutes and once we reached Abrafo village turned off to the right at the sign “International Stingless Bee Center”. The International Stingless Bee Center was two basic houses that had a fresher coat of paint than the surrounding buildings. We were to find out later that stingless bees were actually sweat bees. As we started down the dirt road, somebody (I believe it was Sandy Schmidt), shouted out that they had just seen pink chicks. This brought about laughter and the usual question as to what medication was she on or what had she eaten/drank. We finally stopped past the last house of the village. The first bird seen as we got out of the bus was the Simple Greenbul. As we walked along the

Right next to the area where we would have lunch and dinner there was a small tree which had a few weaver's nests in it and fortunately two of the builders - Orange Weaver. The rest of the various trees around the restaurant were full of Village Weaver and Cattle Egret nests. Other birds seen in these trees included Woodland Kingfishers, Splendid Starlings and Squacco Heron.

The grounds around the lake had Long-tailed Cormorants, Great Egrets, African Pygmy-Kingfishers and Intermediate Egrets.
dirt road we saw European Honey Buzzard, White-breasted Nigrita, Grey-headed Nigrita, Tit-hyilia, Vieillot's Black Weaver, Blue-headed Coucal and Orange-cheeked Waxbill. We attempted to call out a Sooty Boubou but didn't have any luck. Soon our attention was diverted by the appearance of a Swamp Greenbul. As the sun started going down we returned to the bus to begin the hour drive back to the hotel.

Just as we got to the main road somebody else shouted out that they too had seen the pink chicks. This time there was no laughter, this was getting serious, more and more people were seeing pink chicks.

The Black Bee-eater was voted as Bird-of-the-Day by the group.

20 November 2013

After the usual early breakfast we left for the Canopy Walk in the Kakum National Park. We arrived at the visitor's centre before it actually opened and so were spared the hordes of tourists. At the back of the restaurant a very few of the group were able to glimpse a Black-throated Coucal amongst a thick vine growing up a tree. We walked up a steep hill and through some forest before reaching the canopy walk all of which took about twenty minutes.

As the viewing platforms were very small the group was split in two, which I was glad of as the platforms seemed to be precariously attached to the trees. For an hour there was no sight or sound of any birds. Then the first group started seeing quite a number of birds while the second group who had gone to the furthest point along the canopy walk hardly saw anything. Birds that the first group saw included Palm-nut Vulture, Yellow-billed Turaco, Laughing Dove, Red-eyed Dove, African Green-Pigeon, African Pied Hornbill, Speckled Tinkerbird, Red-rumped Tinkerbird, West African Batis, Velvet-mantled Drongo, Honeyguide Greenbul, Swamp Greenbul, Common Bulbul, Lemon-bellied Crombec, Chestnut-capped Flycatcher, Rufous-crowned Eremomela, African Forest-Flycatcher, Little Green Sunbird, Green-headed Sunbird, Collared Sunbird, Green-headed Sunbird, Buff-throated Sunbird, Tiny Sunbird, Johanna's Sunbird, Red-headed Malimbe, Grey-headed Nigrita, Chestnut-breasted Nigrita and White-breasted Nigrita. Only some of the first group managed to see the Maxwell's Black Weaver, a bird I tried in vain to see for the rest of the tour as I missed this viewing but never got to see it.

The second group saw Yellow-mantled Weaver. The two groups then swapped positions and were able to add Gray Longbill, Willow Warbler, Wood Warbler, Sharpe's Apalis and Violet-backed Hyliota to our day and trip list. On the way back to the visitor's center, about 200m from it, there was a Yellowbill in the canopy of a low tree allowing for an excellent view.

Instead of returning to have lunch at the Hotel we drove to Cape Coast and had lunch in a 'restaurant' next to

![Figure 5: Kakum National Park. - © 2013 Otto Schmidt](image)
Cape Coast Castle, a slave castle. After lunch we had a guided tour of the castle. The castle was used by the British to keep slaves before they were shipped out to the west, e.g. the Americas and Caribbean islands. The castle has been in existence in some form or other since about 1652.

After the tour around the castle we immediately left for the Canopy Walk in the Kakum National Park again, stopping at a river just outside Cape Coast. Here we saw the usual Great Egret, Intermediate Egret, Little Egret and African Jacana. On telephone lines we saw Barn Swallow and Ethiopian Swallow. On the way to Kakum National Park we stopped for an hour at the Hans Cottage Botel, as some of the group didn't want to do the canopy walk again and got off the bus. At the Botel we once again saw the Orange Weaver, Village Weaver and Malachite Kingfisher.

Unfortunately the forest around the Canopy Walk was very quiet and most of the hoped-for birds, e.g. Hornbills, Wood-Hoopoes didn't appear. In the end we only saw 5 species namely, Shrike Flycatcher, Splendid Glossy-Starling, Yellow-billed Turaco, Fire-bellied Woodpecker and Black-casqued Wattled Hornbill; although we had good views of all of them except for the Shrike Flycatcher which was a bit too far off. One of the group, Dennis, stayed near to solid ground which resulted in him seeing a White-crested Hornbill. At the end of the day after most of the group was on solid ground again two members caught a glimpse of a pair of Brown-cheeked Hornbills.

The group voted the Red-headed Malimbe as Bird-of-the-Day.

**21 November 2013**

After the usual early rise and breakfast we again left for that part of the Abrafo Forest Edge that is reached via the dirt road going past the International Stingless Bee Centre. On the way we picked up the owner of Ashanti who would be accompanying us for the next three days. As we turned off the tar road onto the dirt road everybody was on the lookout for the pink chickens and this time everybody saw them. So it was not a case of individuals hallucinating. Our guide explained to us that the chickens were dyed in that colour to protect them from birds-of-prey, especially the very common Yellow-billed Kite. Whether this actually worked or not no-one could say. As we passed the International Stingless Bee Centre and started up a slight incline in the road, the guide drew our attention to a small bird, a Bar-breasted Firefinch, in the road. For most of us the bird was too far away to see anything in detail. Some of us spotted an African Jacana in a small lily-covered pond next to the road.

We got off at the same place as we had last time. The road from here took a steep decline, at the bottom of which were some large bushes which
provided us with views of a Yellow-browed Camaroptera and Green Hylia. A small bird perched on the top of a tall tree turned out to be a Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird. Just past the point where we had seen the Swamp Bulbul, on the opposite side of the road, we had an excellent view of a Red-chested Goshawk. On three occasions we went into the dense bush that surrounded the dirt road on either side. The first occasion was to find a target-bird, namely the White Spotted Flufftail. The guide took us down an incline at the bottom of which ran a tiny stream, which according to him was the best place to see the flufftail. He had a recording of the call on his smartphone which he proceeded to play. Within a few minutes he had a response and a few minutes later he was trying to point out the flufftail to us but with the dense grass around the stream it was very difficult to see the bird. Most of the group were looking too far into the grass for the bird while it was actually just a few feet in front of us. Slowly but surely a few of the group began to spot movement and were able to hone in on the Flufftail. Eventually after some time everybody had views of the Flufftail. The other two detours into the dense bush brought about sightings of an Olive-Green Camaroptera, Brown Illadopsis, Tambourine Dove and Buff-spotted Woodpecker.

As I hadn’t had a good view of the Rosy Bee-eaters a couple of days earlier I asked the owner of Ashanti whether there was a chance of us seeing them again. Fortunately he replied in the affirmative as it was one of three bee-eaters I was hoping to see in Ghana. The three were Black Bee-eater, Rosy Bee-eater and Blue-headed Bee-eater. A few minutes later as we turned a corner in the road, to the right there was a dead tree which had between 7 and 10 Rosy Bee-eaters perched in its branches. We were able to enjoy the sight to our heart’s content with excellent scoped views. After this excellent sighting we turned around and headed back to the bus and Hans Cottage Botel for the usual lunch.

Within the Abrafo village but still on the outskirts we once again came upon a palm-oil production facility which we had passed two days ago. This time we stopped and our guide was able to get the owner to provide us with a small tour of the facility. The owner wouldn’t allow us to take any photos but once some cash exchanged hands we could take as many photos as we would like. There were no walls, just a thatched roof under which palm seeds were being heated in pots over fire where after the seeds were put through a machine that loosened up the fibre surrounding the kernel. Two women seated on the ground then separated the fibre from the kernel. The kernels where then crushed to extract the palm oil. This palm oil was then placed in a large dish over a fire to allow thickening and letting any water evaporate. The kernel is hard and has a white interior and once cracked open looks like a very mini coconut and even nearly tastes like coconut.

Figure 7: Palm Oil Production. – © 2013
Otto Schmidt

While others were taking photos and asking questions, some of us spotted a firefinch which turned out to be a Bar-breasted Firefinch and this time we had excellent views which made up for the far-off view we had earlier that morning. Other birds that we saw while walking along the dirt road included Laughing Dove, Blue-spotted Wood-Dove, African Green-Pigeon, Western Plantain-eater, White-throated Bee-eater, African Pied Hornbill, Naked-faced Barbet, Speckled Tinkerbird, Vieillot’s Barbet, Simple Greenbul, Red-tailed Greenbul, Plain Greenbul, Collared Sunbird, Olive-bellied Sunbird and Copper Sunbird.

After lunch we packed our bags ready for the next part of our tour. Our destination was the Ankasa Reserve where we would spend the next two and a half days. During the lunch break we were able to view Long-tailed Cormorant, Great Egret, Intermediate Egret, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Striated Heron, Malachite Kingfisher, Woodland Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher, Orange Weaver, and Village Weaver.

The whole of the afternoon was taken up driving to the Ankasa Reserve and the birding was done from the bus. The sighting of an African Harrier-Hawk brought some relief from the usual Pied Crows, Yellow-billed Kites and Common Bulbuls although there were often White-throated Bee-eaters perched on telephone lines. Along the way we came across quite a few police/customs road blocks. The road blocks were an everyday experience throughout our tour where we luckily didn’t experience any problems. One stop at a police road block in a village on our way to the Ankasa Reserve nearly became problematic. We had just gone through the road block when Vernon at the back drew everybody's attention to a Roller perched high up in a tree behind some houses in a village. We all lifted our binoculars to take a look when the guide and Ashanti owner urgently requested that we put our binoculars down. He told us that any indication of cameras and other equipment always made the police suspicious and often resulted in the vehicle and occupants being subjected to questioning and a luggage search that could take a couple of hours. We stopped a few metres from the road block to allow the guide to buy some bananas and pineapples when a nasty-looking policeman came walking from the road block to the bus. One could feel the tension in the air as he wondered up and down the bus. Fortunately he didn’t do anything and once the guide had bought the fruit we continued on our journey.

Late in the afternoon the bus finally pulled onto a dirt road where two Land Rovers were parked and stopped immediately. We had been informed the previous day or so that due to heavy rains the road to the Ankasa Reserve was impassable for the bus. Thus we would have to transfer our entire luggage to the Land Rovers which would take us into the reserve. While the guides and drivers transferred our luggage across to the Land Rovers we took a walk further down the dirt road. We managed to see a Grey Falcon but due to the overcast skies and resulting poor light it took us some time to identify it. Further down the road I spotted a bird flying between branches overhanging a bank next to the road. Unfortunately the daylight was so poor that we couldn’t identify it other than it being a greyish flycatcher. We arrived at the reserve in the dark and discovered that our
accommodation for the next three nights would be tents. There was another tour group already there (also led by Ashanti African Tours) so the immediate area around the old ranger’s quarter was filled with tents.

We later joined this group when they were shown a Lord Derby’s Anomalure (flying squirrel) in a tree in the middle of the camping area.

The White Spotted Flufftail was voted the Bird-of-the-Day.