



Sunrise Birding LLC
**Namibia,
Botswana
& Victoria Falls**

November 28 – December 7, 2016



Photos: Wild Dogs, Lilac-breasted Roller, Pel's Fishing Owl by Gina Nichol.



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Namibia, Botswana & Victoria Falls – TRIP REPORT

November 28 – December 7, 2016

Local Guide: Charles Rhyn

Sunrise Birding Leaders: Gina Nichol & Steve Bird & local guides

TRIP HIGHLIGHTS:

- Pel's Fishing Owl
- Southern Carmine Bee-eater
- Natal Francolin
- Violet-tipped (Bronze-winged) Courser
- Slaty Egret
- African Pygmy Goose
- Crested Barbet
- Southern Ground Hornbill
- Narina Trogon
- Racket-tailed Roller
- Red-chested Cuckoo
- Coppery-tailed Coucal
- Schalow's Turaco
- African Wood Owl
- African Barred Owlet
- Kori Bustard
- Red-crested Korhaan
- Wattled Crane
- Saddle-billed Stork
- Lesser Jacana
- Spotted Thick-knee
- White-crowned Lapwing
- Wild Dog
- Rufous-bellied Heron
- White-backed Night Heron
- Crimson-breasted Shrike
- White-crested Helmetshrike
- Souza' Shrike
- Retz's Helmetshrike
- Luapula Cisticola
- Stierling's Wren-warbler
- Bearded Scrub Robin
- White-bellied Sunbird
- Cutthroat Finch
- Northern Gray-headed Sparrow
- Rock Pratincole
- African Skimmer
- African Fish Eagle
- Lappet-faced Vulture
- White-headed Vulture
- Western Banded Snake Eagle
- Marshall Eagle
- Bateleur
- Ovambo Sparrowhawk
- Goliath Heron

Nov 28th Day 1: Maramba River Lodge, Livingstone, Zambia – Victoria Falls

All of us had arrived by mid-day and checked into the Maramba River Lodge situated on a bluff overlooking the Maramba River, a tributary of the mighty Zambezi. We settled in, enjoyed a welcome lunch and then set off in the late afternoon; we visited the world famous Victoria Falls, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Just inside the entrance we saw our first Yellow-billed and Black Kites allowing comparison of the tail shape, etc. A Hooded Vulture was also seen as we neared the gate.

We entered the trail and walked to the first viewpoint. Our expectation here was to see one of the most spectacular waterfalls in the world. Named in honor of Queen Victoria by Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone, the Falls is also known by its indigenous name, Mosi-oa-Tunya—"the smoke that thunder". The lack of rain in recent

years had impacted the “thunder” and at the beginning of the trail all we could see was a trickle. There were birds here though and we ticked our first Yellow-breasted Apalis and Red-winged Starlings. A Red-chested Cuckoo was calling nearby so we moved to an open area to try and locate it. Surveying the area we found Black-collared Barbet and a pair of Violet-backed Starlings on a distant tree.



The **Red-chested Cuckoo** (Photo: Steve Bird)

was another story and while trying to track it down we had good views of Yellow-bellied Greenbul. After a bit of a chase, Gina spotted the bird the window of a thick leaved tree. It flew to the original path and when we reached there it was sitting in the open for amazing views. We watched and photographed and then found a perched in a dead tree on the other side of the gorge.



Further on along the trail, we heard Natal Spurfowl and walked a narrow trail in search of these rare and range restricted birds. The trail brought us to an overlook where we could see the thundering falls in the distance on the Zimbabwean side. On that side, there was quite a lot of mist and we could see that views from that side would be difficult. From our elevated perch, we looked down below in the gorge and found a Long-tailed Cormorant on a rock flapping its wings and a lonely Green-backed Heron.

As we admired the view, Charles continued on and located a group of Spurfowl. As we approached the area, the birds seemed to be calling from across a

valley. We checked an overlook and found a large tree clinging to the face of the gorge which held 5-6 Schalow's Turacos. As we admired these beauties, a Trumpeter Hornbill flew across and eventually we had great views of them flying and perched. In between, we were distracted by the antics of Chacma Baboons moving down the opposite cliff face and marveled at their ability to move about the cliff face.

Further along the trail, we had a Tropical Boubou and as we walked back across a bridge we found a group of 3 Natal Spurfowl just below us offering great views. Back toward the parking lot, there were several White-browed Scrub Robins doing some kind of display and a **Bearded Scrub Robin** (Photo: Steve Bird) close to the trail giving good views.



We headed back to the lodge, enjoyed nice dinner overlooking the river and reviewed our first day of the trip.

Nov 29, Day 2: Maramba River Lodge – Chobe Safari Lodge (Kasane, Botswana)

This morning we were up and out again before breakfast to look for birds in the lodge garden. We had nice views of a Hooded Vulture perched on top of a tree as well as Crested Barbet, male and female Violet-backed Starlings, Gray-backed Cameroptera, Black-collared Barbet, Red-chested Cuckoo, Pale Flycatcher and Yellow-billed Kite. A Jameson's Firefinch was present but elusive and we had great scope views of Scarlet-chested Sunbird. A Brown-crowned Tchagra was seen on the bank across a water hyacinth filled pond. Around the pond we had several African Jacanas, Intermediate Egret, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, and a Black Crake was seen skulking in and out of the grasses at the edge. A male Black Cuckooshrike showed well perched on some bare branches just before Janet spotted a Red-faced Mousebird in the trees above our heads. On our way back for breakfast we had good views of a couple of (Holub's) Golden Weavers.

We left the lodge and headed to the local sewage ponds. Along the entry road, we had two Northern Gray-headed Sparrows showing their features as they perched on a power line. Other power lines held several Barn Swallows and our first of many Broad-billed Rollers. The sewage ponds were filled with water hyacinth and birds and here we logged Sacred Ibis, Cattle Egrets, Whiskered Terns, Black-shouldered Kite, African Purple Swamphens, Long-toed Plovers, Blacksmith Plovers, Egyptian Goose and Three-banded Plovers. A Eurasian Hobby flew over and there were Red-billed Firefinches in the grasses behind us. A lone Hippo ruled the second pond and was being harassed by some local kids. Along the embankments we had Wood Sandpiper, Hadada Ibis, Glossy Ibis, Black-winged Stilt, and Ruff were seen moving in and out of the pond vegetation. A Lilac-breasted Roller was scoped in the distance and a Honey Buzzard flew by. A Tawny-flanked Prinia emerged from the bushes behind us offering great views while Charles searched for **Lesser Jacana** (Photo: Gina Nichol) in the pools



ahead. He found one but it flew out of the edge of the pond into the middle disappearing among the vegetation. We moved away in the hopes that it would come back to its original spot and this proved a successful strategy as not one, but two Lesser Jacanas flew back over to the

bank beyond where we were standing. They offered good views and we were pleased with our obligatory birding tour sewage pond finds.

We departed the ponds and headed toward the Botswanan border picking up some species along the way including Red-breasted Swallows, Black-chested Snake Eagle, and many Black Kites. The second van saw a Steppe Eagle and Janet spotted a **Brown Snake Eagle** (Photo: Steve Bird) perched so we turned around for it and got good views.



The journey into Botswana was a short crossing of the Zambezi River via the Kazangula Ferry. The ferry “terminal” was busy with many trucks and the expected degree of chaos, but with the help of some friendly locals, we navigated the bureaucracy and were soon in Botswana ticking our first species there as we waited for the vehicles to be brought over on the ferry. Our first minutes in Botswana offered African Fish Eagle, Bataluer, Grosbeak Weaver and White-browed Sparrow Weaver.



In a few minutes, we arrived at Bakwena Lodge where we were greeted by an exuberant staff chanting a welcome song. Cold towels and a welcome drink were indeed appreciated as was the delicious lunch that was waiting for us.

After lunch we settled into our rooms and then regrouped for high tea before we departed for an afternoon cruise on the Chobe River. As we unloaded from the jeeps, we spotted Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters in the parking lot and a small group of Red-faced Mousebirds. Our first Greater Blue-eared Starlings were showy in the afternoon light as we made our way down to the shore to board the boat.

We avoided the big tourist boats and had a smaller, covered boat with a quiet engine, perfect for exploring the shallows and getting close to birds and wildlife. As we cruised the river, we saw Wire-tailed Swallows and a Reed Cormorant perched on some dead stumps in the river. Across from the dock, we beached the boat at the edge of a large island where there was Black Crake, African Darter, Sacred Ibis, African Stonechat, Coppery-tailed Coucal, and Collared Pratincole. An Abdim's Stork flew over and landed on one of the tree stumps. In another spot we had a couple of African Snipe. In one direction there were a few Ruff while in the distance we spotted our first of several Goliath Herons and beyond that an African Spoonbill. A Pin-tailed Whydah perched on some dead reed grasses and there were several African Openbills around.



On the other side of the river, we spotted a female Golden Oriole, a couple of Crowned Lapwings, **Malachite Kingfisher**

(Photo: Gina Nichol), Water Thick-knees, African Collared Doves and Common Sandpipers. A large Hippopotamus was moving in the middle of the river and it seemed to be checking us out as well.

Further along the shore there were Waterbucks,

several Impala with young, and one carrying a couple of Red-billed Oxpeckers on its back. Gray Go-away-bird and Little Green Bee-eater were seen before we headed back toward the flat green island in the middle of the river. There was a close African Buffalo (and many more in the distance) and we spotted Spur-winged Goose, Yellow-billed Stork and Blacksmith Plover on the island.

We cruised back across the river and kept a close eye on the Hippo which seemed to constantly have us in his sights. A dead tree up from the shore offered a White-backed Vulture. A pair of Crested Francolin was seen running along the top of the bank. Cruising back across, we beached the boat near an enormous **Nile Crocodile** (Photo: Gina Nichol) and admired the view of several Waterbucks and picked out one Puku among them. As we headed back toward the dock we noted some Helmeted Guineafowl and a few Greater Kudu up on the beach. We returned to the lodge and enjoyed a delicious dinner before reviewing the checklist and our fantastic day.



Nov 30, Day 3: Chobe National Park (Kasane, Botswana)

This morning we had a 5 AM wakeup call for an early breakfast overlooking the river. Several birds were having breakfast at the lodge feeders as well including Red-billed Firefinch, Brown Firefinch, and Terrestrial Brownbul.

After breakfast we set off for our first game drive of the trip in Chobe National Park, Botswana's first national park. Chobe is the third largest park in Botswana, is the most biologically diverse, and is renowned for having one of the largest concentrations of game in Africa and perhaps the highest elephant concentration of Africa.

Heading toward the park on the main highway, we saw several Magpie Shrikes and Red-billed Hornbills, and glimpsed our first African Elephants. At the Park entrance, we got out to look at some gorgeous Amethyst and Marico Sunbirds feeding in the flowering trees.

We entered the Park and soon found a group of White-crested Helmetshrikes moving across the track and further into the sandy forest. There were Fork-tailed Drongos around and a few Red-billed Queleas looking dull in bad light. We got word that Wild Dogs had been spotted in the park so we bee-lined straight for the area in the hopes of catching a glimpse of these rare, nomadic creatures. We bumped and bounced along the park roads stopping briefly for a Hippopotamus that was wallowing in a shallow mud pool. We finally arrived and over the next hour or so were witness to the best **Wild Dog**

(Photo: Steve Bird) show imaginable.



The pack of 16 Wild Dogs had just moved off the kill and one of them was regurgitating for the pups creating a feeding frenzy with the yearlings. From the safety of the jeep at 20 yards away we watched as the Dogs interacted, played in some puddles and chased each other, as a tight herd of Buffalo looked on from the other side. We spent some quality time taking in the amazing, unforgettable sight of the pack interacting and captured some incredible views on our cameras.

Meanwhile, some **Marabou Storks and White-backed Vultures** (Photo: Gina Nichol) had taken over the remains of the carcass so after the dog show, we moved up to watch them picking apart what was left



and fighting over it. A Tawny Eagle in a top of a nearby tree looked on at the commotion and we noted to stay out of range of the immense bill of the Marabou. A few African Pipits were spotted nearby and they came a little closer offering good views.

Further on, Steve pointed out four Lesser Kestrels perched on a dead tree. Next up was a large group of very busy Banded Mongoose running around and chasing each other along the ground. Swallow-tailed Bee-eater was seen as well.

We stopped for a leg stretch break and noted several vultures heading toward the kill site. We saw White-backed Vultures flying in, White-headed Vultures being mobbed by Lesser Kestrels, and Lappet-faced Vultures all moving in the direction of the kill. A Jacobin Cuckoo made an appearance and we appreciated the nice cup of coffee served by our drivers.



We started heading back and soon stopped for a group of **Arrow-marked Babblers** (Photo: Steve Bird) making a fuss at the base of a bush. There were Tropical Boubous and Red-faced Mousebirds around and a Ground Squirrel was added to the mammal list for the day. The first vehicle stopped below a tree that had a White-browed Scrub Robin that was singing like there was no tomorrow. Further on we spotted a herd of African Elephants moving toward the river and caught up with them as they protectively moved a couple of very small babies to the river.

Next up was a stop for a flock of Long-tailed Paradise Whydah in a half dead tree and eventually the male showed with its long tail feathers. On the way back we found Long-billed Crombec, Cape Glossy Starling, European Bee-eater, Spotted Thick-knee, Crested Francolins and Red-billed Spurfowl.

Back at the lodge, we enjoyed a delicious brunch and then submitted to a mid-day rest. In the afternoon, we once again enjoyed a boat cruise on the Chobe River. It was overcast, windy and threatening to rain but that never did materialize. As we set off from shore, Gina spotted a Pink-backed Pelican flying over. We beached the boat on the other side of the channel and noted several of the species we had seen the day before. In addition, there was a Black Heron, a skulky Rufous-bellied Heron seen briefly, and at least four Black Crakes in one spot. A juvenile Lanner Falcon flew over causing a stir as many of the Long-toed Plovers took flight. We moved to try and get another angle on the Rufous-bellied Heron but the grass was too high. Checking over

the grass island we saw Red-billed Teal and White-faced Whistling Ducks and as we cruised we had a few Whiskered Terns, some in nice breeding plumage.



Around the corner was an obliging **African Skimmer** (Photo: Gina Nichol) and as we were watching that, Steve spotted two Kittlitz's Plovers on the adjacent grass. Two Wire-tailed Swallows perched on the bank were well photographed and there were several Hippos both in the water and up foraging on the grass islands. There seemed to be



more African Buffalos today and many of them had their attendant Red-billed and/or Yellow-billed Oxpeckers. John spotted a Giraffe in the distance and we cruised up to get closer views of a large male and smaller female Giraffe on the beach. We toured around to a narrow channel where Gina spotted a Luapula Cisticola on some reeds. Heading back we had a very close **Slaty Egret** (Photo: Steve Bird). As we sailed back to shore, the sunset was lighting up the sky. In the evening we were treated to a show with local music before dinner. It was another wonderful day in southern Africa.

Dec 1, Day 4: Chobe Safari Lodge – Zambezi River Lodge (Namibia)

This morning we had another early breakfast so we could get into the park as early as possible for our morning game drive. On the way to the park along the main road, we had Jacobin Cuckoo, Southern Gray-headed Sparrow, and Black-shouldered Kite and as we passed the dump, the Marabou Storks were lined up ready for breakfast.

A large troupe of Chacma Baboons crossed the road just before the Park entrance and the Marico and Amethyst Sunbirds were once again feeding in the flowering trees at the check-in point.

In the park, our first stop was for a fine looking Grey-headed Kingfisher. We turned off to the Upper Trail and as we were looking at a Red-backed Shrike on top of a bush, some Swainson's Francolins scurried from under the bush. Steve spotted a Great-spotted Cuckoo ahead and that led to a pair of **Violet-backed Starlings** (Photo: Steve Bird) and we enjoyed the brilliant purple glow of the male in the morning light.



Next up was a large male Greater Kudu browsing leaves close to the road. As we watched the behemoth, a male African Paradise Flycatcher flew in with its long streamer tail flowing behind. Further on, a Yellow-throated Petronia gave us a bit of trouble and we caught up with Cape Glossy Starling and Greater Blue-eared Starling. While looking up at some Red-billed Queleas, we found a couple of close European Bee-eaters in good light. Ahead, there were two African Hoopoes relatively close to the track and just over the track we had a male Red-headed Weaver weaving a nest.

Another pull-off yielded Common Scimitarbill and Black Tit and as we moved on, we added White-backed Vulture, Spotted Flycatcher, and White-crested Helmetshrike to our day list. Just before our stretch break, we had a close Lilac-breasted Roller smashing a beetle against a branch, Red-billed Hornbills and **Bradfield's Hornbill** (Photo: Steve Bird), a group of Green Wood Hoopoes. After our stretch and cup of coffee we had some close Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters with the view of the river, Elephants, Hippos, African Openbills and others as the background. As we headed out, we had some closer Giraffes and as we watched them, a Levillant's Cuckoo emerged from the bush next to us. There were families of Warthogs with small young and all of us caught up with the Spotted Thick-knee and its chick. Some Red-faced Spurfowl stayed low as we photographed the Warthogs and the Thick-knee and eventually we made our way back to the lodge for brunch.



After brunch, we crossed the border from Botswana into Namibia passed over the Okavango River and began the long drive through the Caprivi National Park. We travelled through the Zambezi region, formerly known as the Caprivi Strip, 280-mile-long panhandle of Namibia stretching eastward toward Zambia. The road was long and straight and with the building heat it was difficult to stay alert. Nonetheless, we found a group of four **Southern Ground Hornbills** (Photo: Gina



Nichol) fairly close to the road.

They started out in the shade and while we were watching two of the birds went and lay down in the hot sun and spread out their feathers. Large black birds in the hot sun! This behavior was presumably to get rid of parasites and as we watched, another bird stepped in and looked to be picking something off the sunning bird's feathers.

Further on Gina spotted a Kori Bustard under a small tree and we turned around to get views of this massive creature. Another stop had us looking at a Stierling's Wren Warbler on the side of the road though it departed as Michael tended to some mechanical trouble with one of the vehicles.

Back on the move, we stopped for Bradfield's Hornbill that flew across and while we were working on that a Klaas's Cuckoo flew in and perched in the open. As we travelled we saw two more Southern Ground Hornbills and our first Burchell's Zebra. Six Green Wood Hoopoes provided a little excitement just before we got to Katima Mulilo and arrived at Zambezi River Lodge, set right on the mighty River.



We settled into our rooms and met back at reception to head to a nearby wood to look for **Schalow's Turaco** (Photo: Gina Nichol). A pair of Trumpeter Hornbills flew overhead as we walked through the bush and soon two Schalow's Turacos flew over and moved around the large trees above our heads. There were a few Bee-eaters including our first Southern Carmine Bee-eater as well as the universally common Black-faced Bulbul. On the other side of the track we found a typically vocal Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird and it sat singing in a small acacia and was joined by three Orange-breasted Bushshrikes. An African Paradise Flycatcher kept us entertained

and a Red-backed Shrike seemed to be watching our antics. An Eastern Nicator flew through too quickly to admire and another Schalow's Turaco came in to a large tree and watched us through the leaves. We returned to the lodge for dinner overlooking the river and reviewed our list and another fine day in southern Africa.

Dec 2, Day 5: Zambezi River Lodge – Caprivi Strip – Poppa Falls Resort (Namibia)

As we walked out of our rooms this morning, two Cape Clawless Otters were swimming in the river just below the lodge. What a greeting! We walked along the path to cabins to get closer looks at the Otters and found ourselves right under the day roost of an **African Wood Owl** (Photo: Steve Bird) as revealed by the local Bulbuls. Once we had seen the Owl, we continued our pre-breakfast bird walk noting the song and then finding some confiding Red-eyed Doves. It was a stunning morning with clear blue skies and cool for the moment. We stood overlooking the mighty Zambezi where Gina spotted a Rock Pratincole on a rock next to a Reed Cormorant. In the garden we had Black-collared Barbets and found a small group of Chinspot Batis.



After breakfast, we pack up and continued west along the Caprivi Strip. Again on the long, straight road we passed by several villages and farming areas and imagined what life might have been like here. We stopped and turned around for a Lesser Gray Shrike and found a rare Souza's Shrike that was moving around and eventually settled on the lower branches of a nearby tree.

Further on, we arrived at the Bwabwata National Park (formerly Caprivi National Park) entrance and from the parking lot we had Racket-tailed Roller, Steppe Buzzard, and Crimson-breasted Bushshrike. At our picnic lunch stop, we added Golden-tailed Woodpecker and later we added a Purple Roller that had crossed the road in front of us and then perched in the open for all to enjoy.

In late afternoon, we arrived at Poppa Falls Resort just 15 kilometers from the Mahango Game Reserve in the western Caprivi region of northeast Namibia. We settled into our rooms and reconvened for a walk around the grounds. Another lovely accommodation, the main buildings of the lodge overlooked a small side shoot of the bigger Poppa Falls. As we gathered near the restaurant, we noticed a large kettle of Yellow-billed Kites flying up into the clouds. There were several smaller birds flying closer and we identified Horus Swift, Mosque Swallow, and Barn Swallow.



A **Giant Kingfisher** (Photo: Gina Nichol) flew into

the small stream and picked up a rather large crab, beating it against a branch presumably to try and eat it. We walked down to the Falls overlook and here we had closer views of a Rock Pratincole on the rocks. Once again we could see the hundreds of Kites kittling and noted that a Marabou Stork had joined forces with them. A raggy looking raptor flew by and through photos and observations; we identified it as Ovambo Sparrowhawk. Meanwhile a Common Sandpiper flew into a sandy bank along the river and two African Wattled Lapwings landed in an open field just below our overlook. On the way back, a Violet-backed Sunbird showed well for some of us. We met later for a nice dinner and recap of the list and the day's events.

Dec 3, Day 6: Poppa Falls Resort (Namibia)

Mahango Game Reserve is part of Bwabwata National Park which was established in 2007 when Caprivi Game Park and Mahango Game Reserve were combined. It is the western-most limit of several Okavango specialties and an international Important Bird Area. Today we did two game drives in the park and found many of the birds on our target list. In the morning, we headed toward the park stopping on the way for a Red-headed Weaver had finished his nest and was displaying at the opening to try and attract a female. During the drive we had White-crested Helmetshrike, Black-hooded Oriole, Golden-breasted Bunting, Burchell's Starling, Red-backed Shrike, and Southern Gray headed Starling.

A confiding **Lizard Buzzard** (Photo: Gina Nichol) showed well for us which is more than we can see for the African Golden Oriole and Eurasian Golden Oriole in the area. The low shrubs served as perches for Rattling Cisticola, a pair of Violet-eared Waxbills, and a handsome Kalahari Scrub Robin. Also in the mix were Marico Flycatcher, a bright red



Crimson-breasted Bushshrike, Green-winged Pytilia, and several fly over Southern Carmine Bee-eaters.

We moved along and found our first Sable Antelope lying down behind some grasses. There were many Lilac-breasted Rollers, Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, Emerald Spotted Dove, Red-billed Spurfowl, Gray Go-away-bird, a juvenile Marshal Eagle, and some Southern Pied Babbler. Woodland Kingfishers were around as were several Little Green Bee-eaters.

We stopped for a leg stretch overlooking an open area where there were Red Lechwe, Tsessebe and Reedbuck. Debby spotted a Wattle Crane which offered nice views and we found African Darter, Hamerkop, African Fish Eagle, Ruff, Collared Pratincole, Common Greenshank, Long-toed Plover, and several other herons and egrets in the grasses. A Dung Beetle burying dung was a source of fascination here while Steve pointed out Banded Martins flying by. We also had Chobe Bushbuck, a subspecies in this area, Chestnut-vented Tit Babbler, Gray-headed Kingfisher, Crested Barbet, Tawny Eagle, a female Bearded Woodpecker and a Yellow-billed Hornbill.

The next stop presented a pond full of hippos that seemed agitated by our presence, splashing and grunting and making a scene. Here there was another Rufous-bellied Heron, three more Wattled Cranes, Goliath Heron, and several White-faced Whistling Ducks.



Further on we stopped for a pair of Reedbucks looking suspicious and a White-browed Scrub Robin on top of a bush. Another stopping area held Slaty Egret, Purple Heron, several young African Fish Eagles, Hamerkops, Three-banded Plover and African Cuckoo Hawk. We passed an immense Baobab tree and just beyond it had very close views of **Hamerkops** (Photo: Gina Nichol). A Red-crested Korhaan was heard and lured in by playback for good views. On the way out, we had a

Sable Antelope close to the road and a Swamp Boubou.

After lunch and a rest, we went on an afternoon game drive. On the way into the trail we had a Steppe Buzzard perched and as we turned off the main road, a Gabar Goshawk in a large tree slipped away. There were several Leopard Tortoises around including a pair and we wondered how the small male would do as he chased a very large female. Along the track we had **Burchell's Zebra** (Photo: Gina Nichol), Roan Antelope, a perched Brown Snake Eagle, a female Shaft-tailed Whydah and an assortment of Elephants, Warthogs, Zebras, and Impalas.





At the waterhole we watch a group of male **Elephants** (Photo: Gina Nichol) drinking and cooling themselves. In the background there was a very large troupe of Chacma Baboons involved in all kinds of antics. As we moved back, a Slender Mongoose crossed the road. We stopped to admire some Southern Carmine Bee-eaters flying in the evening light. They were



stunning as the light caught the pink in their plumage. As we were watching the show, Michael spotted two **Violet-tipped Coursers** (Photo: Gina Nichol) coming out of the underbrush which thrilled Steve and cost him two bottles of wine. There were two more ahead and as we drove out to the main road, some Blue Wildebeest were moving through the grasses with the setting sun and pink clouds in the background.

Dec 4, Day 7: Poppa Falls – Xaro Lodge, Okavango Panhandle, Botswana

This morning we went to Bwabwata National Park for our morning game drive in the Buffalo Core area. It started off quiet but when we got to an area overlooking a wetland and had great views of two Saddle-billed Storks, Little Bittern, Sedge Warbler, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Hartlaub's Babbler, Lesser Masked Weaver, Woodland Kingfisher, Squacco Heron, Hadada Ibis. More distant were Lanner Falcon and Coppery-tailed Coucal.

We moved on to another area overlooking the same wetland and as we drove in, we flushed a Water Thick-knee and some Blacksmith Plovers. A Tree Squirrel was loudly scolding an eight foot Rock Python that was moving up a dead trunk. It was near the



ground so allowed close inspection while the Bearded Woodpeckers on a dead tree were virtually ignored. Further on, we had good views of some Meyer's Parrots feeding in a fruit tree and finally had our first Red-billed Buffalo Weavers on our way out. **Rock Python** (Photo: Steve Bird)

After breakfast, we packed up to head toward Botswana and the Okavango River. A quick roadside stop found us Green-capped Eremomelas, a female

White-bellied Sunbird, several Willow Warblers, and a Pale Flycatcher. We got to the border and after the formalities we noticed several Little Swifts flying over the parking lot. As we started along the road, there was a large greeting committee of **Southern Carmine Bee-eaters** (Photo: Gina Nichol) on the power lines. They were obliging for photos and there were several juveniles apparently having just left their riverside nests.



We made our way to Drotsky's Lodge and birded the grounds to find Common Swifts, White-fronted Bee-eaters, Brown-throated Weavers, Cape Wagtail, Arrow-marked Babblers, Spectacled Weavers, Lesser Striped Swallow, many Barn Swallows, a pair of Cardinal Woodpeckers and a Bennett's Woodpecker. We left our vehicles behind, boarded a boat and cruised up the papyrus-lined river to our next lodge with our local

guide Thomas. Along the way, we saw Grosbeak Weaver, Water Thick-knee, African Skimmers with chicks, Squacco Herons, Green-backed Herons and plenty of Nile Crocodiles. There was African Wattled Lapwing, Little Bee-eater, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Common Sandpiper, Reed Cormorant, Great Egret, Pied Wagtail, Pied Kingfisher, and a male Pin-tailed Whydah with long streamers.



Finally we arrived at Xaro Lodge, right on the river on the western panhandle of the Okavango Delta. We settled into our meru-styled luxury tents and were soon out with Thomas birding the grounds. Our first stop was near the generator building where an African Wood Owl was day roosting. Then we moved on to an area of forest right at the river edge where Thomas had been keeping track of a family of **Pel's Fishing Owls**

(Photo: Gina Nichol). Known by birders as the “ginger phantom”, Pel's Fishing Owl is one of the largest owls in the world and its reddish-brown plumage is a sight to behold. As its name implies, it feeds on fish and frogs and it is a very special bird to see.

Thomas searched the trees carefully with no binoculars. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers for our attention and we followed him to a spot where we could see the gigantic owl perched in a tree. We set up scopes and took photos





and videos of the bird as it sat and looked at us and away. A second bird flew out from the canopy and away. We left the bird perched and continued on the trail to find an **African Barred Owlet** (Photo: Steve Bird) and some striking **Retz's Helmetshrikes** (Photo: Steve Bird). Later on we enjoyed a delicious dinner and reviews of the day and during the night were treated to the grunts and sounds of the local Hippos behind our tents.

Dec 5, Day 8: Okavango River, Botswana

Today we explored the Okavango River and western panhandle by boat. After breakfast we boarded the boat and headed up river back toward Drotsky's. Within seconds of leaving the dock, we had two **White-backed Night Herons** (Photo: Steve Bird) in our sights as they were roosting on the river banks just below our tents. The nearby Village Weavers were busy at their nests but it was the Herons that commanded our attention.

We cruised the river on this beautiful, cool morning and found Chirping Cisticola, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, African Darter, and a Great Swamp Warbler sitting up on papyrus allowing good views. As we cruised we saw Three-banded Plover, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Purple Swamphen, and Malachite Kingfisher. An open grassy area along the river edge offered White-faced Whistling Ducks, Blacksmith Plovers, Wood Sandpiper, and there





was a large group of **Gray Go-away-birds** (Photo: Gina Nichol) on the bank apparently eating minerals from the soil. Green-backed Heron, Giant Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher were seen and eventually we docked and walked into the forest at Ashley's father's place. Here we heard Narina Trogon but could not locate perhaps due to a Black Hawk Eagle very close by. Back on the boat, we continued up the papyrus lined channels and found Banded Martins, a perched Osprey, Black-shouldered Kite and a Fan-tailed Widowbird. We noted some birds flushed from shore by an African Marsh Harrier and up by Shakawe there was a Western Banded Snake Eagle. Thomas conversed with someone on shore who told him there was a Pel's Fishing Owl but it was completely hidden from our view. Further on there was a large rookery of Cattle Egrets, as well as Gray-headed Kingfisher and Woodland Kingfisher.



We reached a spot where there were some Southern Carmine Bee-eaters in the trees above the nesting holes on the bank. We had hoped to see the birds at the nest holes but they were abandoned and we mused that the greeting committee of Bee-eaters yesterday were perhaps from this colony.

Further on we stopped at an open area of the floodplain that offered Black-crowned Night Herons, Collared Pratincole, Wattled Cranes, numerous **African Fish Eagles** (Photo: Steve Bird), African Jacanas, and Goliath Heron.

In the afternoon, we gathered in the garden and found Bennett's Woodpecker offering nice views in the trees next to the dining room. We walked to the Pel's spot finding three Green Wood Hoopoes and a Little Bee-eater. We flushed a Fiery-necked Nightjar from the trail along the way and eventually Thomas found another Pel's Fishing Owl for us.



Later on, we headed up river on the boat and found a Brown Snake Eagle perched and some White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns flying. A secret lily pad area held several **African Pygmy Geese** (Photo: Gina Nichol) which looked great in the afternoon light. Another flood plain area held Saddle-billed Storks, Sedge Warbler, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Ruff, Blacksmith Plovers with chicks, and Fan-tailed Widowbirds. As we traveled back toward the lodge, there were Brown-throated Martins around. In the late afternoon, we enjoyed another fabulous sunset over the river at the lodge.



Dec 6th Day 9: Xaro Lodge – Thamalakane River Lodge

This morning we departed Xaro Lodge and said goodbye to the stunning environs of the Okavango panhandle. We headed toward Drotsky's where our vehicles were parked.



On the way we stopped for a brightly lit Little Bittern and a Chirping Cisticola and Greater Swamp Warbler. This morning's cruise offered African Skimmer, African Fish Eagle, African Purple Swamphen, Wood Sandpiper, a juvenile Yellow Wagtail and Common Sandpiper.

We stopped again at Ashley's father's place and tried again for the trogon but the Black Sparrowhawk was still around. Consolation was another **Pel's Fishing Owl** (Photo: Gina Nichol), this time in completely open view. Stunning! We met up with a

local guide who had been monitoring a Narina Trogon. This bird required a death march through the thorn scrub and most of us got scope views of the bird before it vanished.



We returned to the vehicles and headed toward Maun on hot, straight roads through miles of the sprawling sandy scrub environment of the upper Kalahari basin. A few Crowned Lapwings were spotted in the shade of the scattered trees and there were Burchell's Starlings seen along the way. After a long journey, we stopped at the Ngami Lake, a shallow endorheic lake located at the southwest corner of the 4,000 square-mile Okavango Swamp in north-western Botswana. The lake environment was unique to say the least with hundreds dead trees and we were beginning to wonder where the water was. A multi-year drought had caused the water to disappear but eventually we reached the shoreline which was alive with fishermen and livestock coming in to drink. There

were birds were including Capped Wheatear, Buffy Pipit, Hottentot Teal, Green Sandpiper, Kittlitz's Plover, Little Stint, Three-banded Plover, Lilac-breasted Roller, Little Grebe and lots of Little Egrets.



On the way out, Charles stopped for a Chestnut-backed Sparrow Lark which led to Red-capped Lark, Scaly-feathered Finch, Black-chested Prinia, Kalahari Scrub Robin and a Rattling Cisticola panting which allowed good views of the black inside the mouth.

We continued on to Thamalakane River Lodge, situated in a grove of trees on a peaceful stretch of the Thamalakane River and settled in for one last night. From our rooms, we had a 180 degree view of the riverbanks and reed beds. Later in the evening we met for one final dinner to celebrate and review our trip and reminisce about all of the wonderful sightings and experiences we shared.

Dec 7th Day 10: Thamalakane River Lodge – Maun International Airport

Today we were out early for one last pre-breakfast walk. It was another stunning day and there were many birds to see including Senegal Coucal, Little Grebe, African Green Pigeon, African Pygmy Geese (flying by), Kurrichane and (3) Groundscraper Thrushes, and Red-billed Hornbills. We moved up to the parking lot and walked out the entrance road where we had good views of African Golden Oriole and found a sleeping Barn Swallow.

After breakfast, we drove out the entrance road and found our only Cutthroat Finches of the trip just across the main road. We birded a nearby area that held four species of Hornbill – Red-billed, Yellow-billed, African Gray, Bradfield's. Here we had good views

of Brubru, Burnt-necked Eremomela, and a female Red-headed Weaver. A Pearl-spotted Owllet appeared and had no peace from the many birds mobbing it. Here we had Southern Gray-headed Sparrow, Red-backed Shrike, Willow Warbler, Black-backed Puffback, a couple of Red-eyed Bulbuls and White-bellied Sunbird.



Later in the morning, we packed up and head to the airport. We said goodbye to our great host and guide Charles and brilliant driver Michael and left from Maun for our connecting flights back home.

This trip offered many special moments shared by a wonderful group of people. Below are some of the experiences and moments that will long be with us:

- Xaro Lodge and the sunset overlooking the river
- Bakwena Lodge – the hospitality and the food
- The variety of animals, birds and habitats
- A great group of people. Seeing old friends, making new ones
- Boat Rides
- Sewage ponds
- Experiencing Africa and seeing the exotic birds and animals
- Learning about Africa and overcoming the apprehension of traveling in Africa by experiencing it.

As far as species seen, these are some group favorites:

- Wild Dogs
- Pel's Fishing Owl
- Violet-tipped Courser
- Crimson-breasted Shrike
- Saddle-backed Stork
- Giraffe, Zebra
- Hobby buzzing Whiskered terns
- Southern Carmine Bee-eaters
- Ostrich
- Hornbills and Rollers
- Rock Python
- African Wood Owl
- Barred Owlet
- Fork-tailed Drongo
- Butterflies
- Elephants
- Lesser Jacana
- African Paradise Flycatcher
- Marshall Eagle
- Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird



Photo: Broad-billed Roller by Gina Nichol



Thanks to everyone who participated in this tour! Gina & Steve