

## FORESTS OF GHANA

### *Picathartes Special*

**Sunday 10th April – Tuesday 19th April 2011 (10 days)**

**Leaders: Nik Borrow and a local naturalist-guide**

**Group Size Limit: 8**

**Tour Category: Easy to Moderate**



*Yellow-headed Picathartes (Nik Borrow)*

Situated in the heart of West Africa, Ghana was the first sub-Saharan colonial country to gain its independence in 1957 and is now recognized as a friendly, safe and stable African destination. Once known as the Gold Coast, its growing tourist industry has much to offer in the way of a colourful and vibrant culture and a turbulent history, including a coast lined with beautiful beaches and numerous slave forts still standing to remind visitors of a grim episode in the country's past. A European power struggle over the Gold Coast raged between the 15th and 19th centuries. The Portuguese built a castle at Elmina on the coast in 1482 and their presence was swiftly followed by the Dutch, Swedes, Danes, Prussians and British: all motivated by the lure of gold, ivory and of course slaves.

This interesting English-speaking country is now also firmly on the map for the eco-tourist with a surprising number of large mammals and over 750 species of birds. With the recent rediscovery of the Yellow-headed Picathartes (or White-necked Rockfowl) in Ghana, birders

now have the chance to see this unique bird with rather more ease and comfort than in other destinations. During this special tour, which is designed to see as many of the Upper Guinea Forest specialties as possible, we shall make a concerted effort to see the picathartes at one of its nesting colonies. Under dry overhangs, these bizarre birds attach their swallow-like, mud-cup nests to the bare faces of the granitic boulders and inselbergs that are such a feature of the landscape.

We begin our West African adventure in the capital city of Accra, but soon leave for the nearby Shai Hills, where we may well find Blue-bellied Roller and White-crowned Cliff Chat, and perhaps Chestnut Owlet.

Afterwards we shall make a stop at the Winneba Plains on the way to our base for exploring the world-famous Kakum National Park with its canopy walkway where rare butterflies can prove a colourful distraction from the wealth of birds (including many sought-after Upper Guinea Forest endemics). The prime attraction here is the little-known Brown Nightjar,

while other great birds include Congo Serpent Eagle, Long-tailed Hawk, Fraser's Eagle Owl, Brown-cheeked and Black-casqued Hornbills, Little Green, Melancholy (split from Gabon) and Fire-bellied Woodpeckers, Grey-headed Bristlebill, White-tailed Alethe, Finsch's Flycatcher-Thrush, Sharpe's Apalis, Kemp's Longbill and the gorgeous Buff-throated Sunbird.

We shall then head towards the border with Ivory Coast where the superb forest reserve at Ankasa should give us our best chance of finding scarce regional endemics such as Yellow-bearded Greenbul, Green-tailed Bristlebill and Rufous-winged Illadopsis. African Finfoot can be remarkably easy to see here and there is a good chance of Hartlaub's Duck.

Returning to the forests on the northern edge of Kakum National Park, we shall get our chance to visit a colony of Yellow-headed Picathartes, an experience that should prove to be an amazing highlight of the tour.

A visit to Bobiri Butterfly Sanctuary for Afep Pigeon is conveniently en route to our ultimate port of call, the Atewa Range, an upland area that supports remnants of upland evergreen rainforest,

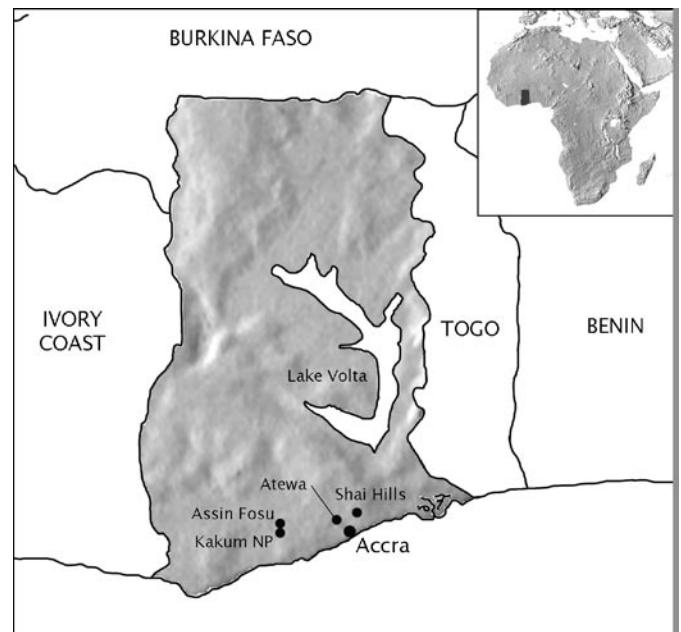
one of the most unusual and interesting habitats in Ghana. Here we will have a chance to look for Blue-headed Bee-eater and we have even seen the little-known Baumann's Greenbul and Nimba Flycatcher here.

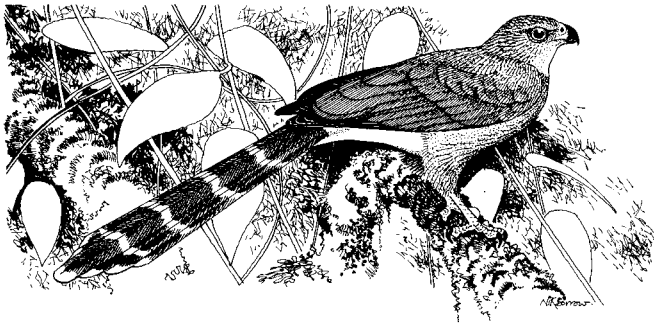
Birdquest has operated tours to Ghana since 2008.

### **Itinerary**

**Day 1** The tour begins this evening in Accra, where we will stay overnight.

**Day 2** This morning we will first drive a short distance northeast of Accra to the Shai Hills Resource Reserve. This is an area dominated by a chain of impressive inselbergs amongst dry thickets and sparsely wooded grassland. The invasive exotic Neem tree is being slowly cleared in order to return the habitat to its natural state. This interesting forest/savanna transition zone holds a rather different avifauna to the forests that we will be experiencing during the rest of the tour. Stone Partridge and White-crowned Cliff Chat (split from Mocking Cliff Chat) occur amongst the rocky outcrops, and Chestnut Owlet (split from African Barred) can often be found during the daytime. Puvél's





*Long-tailed Hawk (Nik Borrow)*

Illadopsis also occurs here and we may be fortunate enough to find one. The fascinating Oriole Warbler or Moho, the stunning Yellow-crowned Gonolek and both Green and Violet Turacos should be found, whilst Senegal Parrot and the striking Blue-bellied Roller provide further splashes of colour. Small bird parties include species such as Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrike, Senegal Eremomela, Northern Crombec, White-shouldered Black Tit and Senegal Batis.

We shall also be on the lookout for Yellow-billed Kite (split from Black), Hooded Vulture, African Cuckoo-Hawk, Shikra, Lizard Buzzard, Grey Kestrel, Double-spurred Francolin, Helmeted Guineafowl, Black-billed Wood Dove, Red-eyed and Vinaceous Doves, Western Grey Plantain-eater, Senegal Coucal, African Palm and Little Swifts, Mottled Spinetail, Woodland and African Pygmy Kingfishers, Little and Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, Broad-billed Roller, African Grey Hornbill, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Vieillot's and Double-toothed Barbets, Greater and Lesser Honeyguides, Rock Martin, Common Bulbul, Snowy-crowned Robin Chat, African Thrush, Singing, Short-winged and Zitting Cisticolas, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Northern Black, Pale and Lead-coloured Flycatchers, African Paradise Flycatcher, Common Wattle-eye, Brown and Blackcap

Babblers, Green-headed, Scarlet-chested, Copper and Splendid Sunbirds, Brown-crowned and Black-crowned Tchagras, Northern Puffback, Brubru, White Helmet-shrike, Fork-tailed Drongo, Pied Crow, Piapiac, Purple Glossy Starling and Yellow-fronted Canary. Good numbers of Kob occur in the park and other regularly seen mammals include Olive Baboon and Callithrix Monkey.

Later we shall retrace our steps to Accra, pausing briefly at the Sakumono Lagoon where we shall hope to see a selection of lingering Palearctic waders and terns, as well as some widespread African waterbird species such as Long-tailed Cormorant, Western Cattle Egret, Black Heron, Western Reef, Little, Intermediate and Great Egrets, White-faced Whistling Duck, Black-winged Stilt, Spur-winged Lapwing and Pied Kingfisher.

Once west of the traffic-clogged capital, the roads should be clearer and we will pay a late afternoon visit to the Winneba Plains. These plains are seasonally inundated grasslands and home to species such as Black-shouldered Kite, African Hobby, Black-bellied Bustard, African Wattled Lapwing, Levaillant's and African Cuckoos, Mosque Swallow, Flappet Lark, Yellow-throated Longclaw, African Moustached Warbler, Red-faced and Croaking Cisticolas, Red-winged

Warbler, Common Fiscal, Yellow-billed Shrike, Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike, Marsh Tchagra, Black-necked Weaver, Red-headed Quelea, Blue-billed Firefinch, Black-rumped Waxbill, Black-faced Quailfinch (split from African) and Yellow-mantled Widowbird. After a very full and productive day we should arrive in the early evening at the pleasantly eccentric Hans Cottage Hotel just north of Cape Coast for a three nights stay.

**Day 3** Kakum National Park is some twelve kilometres north of our hotel. The park was created in 1932, but was not officially opened to the public until 1994. It covers an area of 347 square kilometres and protects a mixture of semi-deciduous and semi-evergreen rainforest, although this has been selectively logged in the recent past. The park is perhaps most famous as the site of Africa's first and only rainforest canopy walkway, built in 1995, that is comprised of about 350 metres of bridge suspended between six tree platforms that reach the grand height of 40 metres above the forest floor! We will be allowed special access to the walkway before and after the official opening and closing times, so that we shall have the platforms peacefully to ourselves. As the dawn breaks a pair of Red-chested Goshawks (split from African) can often be seen circling overhead, our attentions drawn by the repeated "chip" display call. Velvet-mantled Drongos use the wires of the walkway as convenient perches and the tree snags provide good lookouts for the Upper Guinea endemic Ussher's Flycatcher, as well as Yellow-mantled Weaver and Red-headed Malimbe. Red-fronted and Grey Parrots screech overhead as they leave their roosts, Blue-throated Rollers and White-throated Bee-eaters adorn the treetops and Naked-faced and Bristle-nosed Barbets gather

to feed in the fruiting trees. Forest and White-headed Wood-hoopoes inspect the epiphyte-bedecked boughs and Upper Guinea endemic Melancholy (split from Gabon) and Fire-bellied Woodpeckers drum on the bare trunks and branches. We shall be on the lookout for roving canopy bird parties that may include diminutive species such as the Upper Guinea endemic Sharpe's Apalis, Rufous-crowned Eremomela, the pretty Violet-backed Hyliota, Lemon-bellied Crombec, Forest Penduline Tit and the tiny Tit-hylia. The much sought-after Congo Serpent Eagle and Long-tailed Hawk are regularly observed here, and it is fantastic to be on a level with canopy species that would normally be causing cricked necks as we stared upwards from terra firma! We can expect to find mouth-watering species such as Yellow-billed Turaco, Blue Cuckoo-shrike, Sabine's Puffback and the gorgeous Upper Guinea endemic Buff-throated Sunbird.

Other species to look out for include Palm-nut Vulture, African Harrier-Hawk, Black Sparrowhawk, Red-necked Buzzard, African Green Pigeon, African Emerald and Klaas's Cuckoos, Yellowbill (or Blue Malkoha), Sabine's, Black and Cassin's Spinetails, Bates's Swift, White-crested, African Pied, Brown-cheeked, Black-casqued and Yellow-casqued Hornbills, Cassin's Honeybird, Lesser Striped Swallow, Blue-throated Brown, Little Green, Green, Collared and Superb Sunbirds, Yellow White-eye, Black-winged Oriole, Forest Chestnut-winged and Splendid Glossy Starlings, and Grey-crowned, Chestnut-breasted and White-breasted Nigrofinches.

As the day warms up and more walkway visitors arrive, we shall move into the cooler interior of the forest and explore some of the trails



*African Finfoot (Michael Hodgson)*

that run through the park. In particular, we shall be looking for skulkers such as Upper Guinea endemic Grey-headed Bristlebill, White-tailed Alethe (split from Fire-crested), Finsch's Flycatcher Thrush and Western Forest Robin. We shall try hard to find a displaying Rufous-sided Broadbill and a confusing array of greenbuls includes Little, Little Grey, Cameroon Sombre, Slender-billed, Yellow-whiskered, Golden, Honeyguide, Spotted, Icterine, White-throated, Western Bearded and Red-tailed Greenbuls, and Red-tailed Bristlebill. Other species here include Black Cuckoo, Buff-spotted Woodpecker, Grey Longbill, Green Crombec, Green Hylia, White-tailed Ant Thrush, Olivaceous Flycatcher, Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatchers, Chestnut Wattle-eye, Brown and Blackcap Illadopsises, Fraser's, Western Olive and Olive-bellied Sunbirds, Shining Drongo and Blue-billed and Crested Malimbés. Primates include Lesser Spot-nosed Monkey, Lowe's Monkey and the rare Olive Colobus.

We shall take a mid-day break at our comfortable 'botel' that is set in attractive surroundings on a lake complete with crocodiles!

Numerous Vieillot's Black (here of the distinctive Chestnut-and-black form *castaneofuscus*), Orange and Village Weavers are a constant distraction, and other birds found in the vicinity include Black-crowned Night Heron, Striated (or Green-backed) Heron, African Jacana, Laughing Dove, Malachite and Giant Kingfishers, African Pied Wagtail, Green-headed Sunbird, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, Bar-breasted Firefinch, Bronze Mannikin and Pin-tailed Whydah.

In the late afternoon, we shall return to the walkway and stay out until dark. We stand an excellent chance of seeing the little-known Brown Nightjar and there is also the possibility of a Fraser's Eagle Owl. We may also hear other nocturnal species such as the strange-looking Nkulengu Rail and Latham's Forest Francolin. Night mammals can be a hit-and-miss affair, but we shall look for Demidoff's Galago, Potto and the stunning Pel's Anomalure.

During our stay in the Kakum area we will also visit an area of farmbrush at the northern edge of the park. The area has been cleared for cultivation and cocoa and is extremely degraded but nonetheless holds some interesting birds,

including the beautiful Black Bee-eater. Piping Hornbills and the Upper Guinea endemic Copper-tailed Glossy Starling and Red-billed Helmet-shrike are usually easy to see here. If we haven't already done so, it is also a great place to see Speckled, Red-rumped and Yellow-throated Tinkerbirds. Other species we may well see include Cassin's Hawk-Eagle, Lanner Falcon, White-spotted Flufftail, Blue-spotted Wood Dove, Tambourine Dove, Didric Cuckoo, Blue-headed Coucal, Yellow-billed Barbet, Thick-billed Honeyguide, Purple-throated Cuckoo-shrike, Simple Leaflove, Swamp Palm Bulbul, Whistling Cisticola, Yellow-browed and Olive-green Camaropteras, Dusky-blue Flycatcher, Narrow-tailed Starling, Orange-cheeked Waxbill and Black-and-white Mannikin. Not too far away we will check out some rivers and streams where we should find a colony of Preuss's Cliff Swallow, the glittering White-throated Blue Swallow, Ethiopian Swallow, Rock Pratincole and White-headed Lapwing.

**Day 5** After a final early morning session in Kakum we shall drive further west, towards the border with Ivory Coast, to the village of Nkroful for a two nights stay. Nkroful is situated near Axim, the birthplace of Kwame Nkrumah, the founder and first president of independent Ghana. The hotel is situated about an hour's drive away from Ankasa Forest Resource Reserve and we will visit the forest in the late afternoon for some initial exploration.

**Day 6** Ankasa Forest Resource Reserve is an area of superb wet evergreen forest that only suffered relatively light logging between 1960 and 1974. We have opted to stay in a hotel some distance away as the accommodation inside the reserve is very basic. The visit will certainly be worth our while for the

high forest offers our best chance for some of the more elusive Upper Guinea Forest endemics and we will be making a special effort to find Yellow-bearded Greenbul, Green-tailed Bristlebill and Rufous-winged Illadopsis. African Finfoot is remarkably easy to see here and the little forest pools hold Shining-blue Kingfisher, Hartlaub's Duck and occasionally Olive Ibis. At night, there is a chance of Akun Eagle Owl and African Wood Owl, and Sandy Scops Owl is a possibility. Even Shelley's Eagle Owl has been reported from the forest, but we would have to be incredibly lucky to see this truly 'almost mythical' species! We shall bird inside the forest on narrow trails beneath the tall trees and cathedral-like stands of giant bamboo, as well as along the main track. Other species we can expect here include Black Crake, Blue-headed Wood Dove, Great Blue Turaco, Black-throated Coucal, Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill, Yellow-spotted and Hairy-breasted Barbets, Square-tailed Saw-wing, Ansorge's Greenbul, Western Nicator, Black-capped Apalis, Fraser's Forest Flycatcher, Pale-breasted Illadopsis, Tiny and Johanna's Sunbirds, and Western Black-headed Oriole.

**Day 7** After a final morning at Ankasa we shall return to Hans Cottage Botel for an overnight stay. In the late afternoon, we shall visit an area of coastal scrub where we have a chance to catch up on anything we may have missed earlier at Winneba Plains. There should also be Yellow-crowned, Northern Red and Black-winged Red Bishops present, hopefully all acquiring their breeding dress.

**Day 8** We will spend the morning at the northern edge of Kakum National Park. This area certainly lacks the beauty of the forests of Ankasa, but nonetheless we should find some interesting



Great Blue Turaco (Nik Borrow)

species. There are chances here for the Upper Guinea endemic Little Green Woodpecker, the diminutive and seldom-seen African Piculet, Black-billed Dwarf Hornbill, the striking Yellow-throated Cuckoo, Little Grey and Black-and-white Flycatchers, West African Batis (split from Bioko), Red-vented Malimbe and Maxwell's Black and Preuss's Golden-backed Weavers. We shall also be on the lookout for the inexplicably localized Tessmann's Flycatcher (although it now seems that recent claimed sightings of the latter from Kakum may be erroneous).

In the afternoon we will visit a site where Yellow-headed Picathartes (or White-necked Rockfowl) has been relatively recently rediscovered in Ghana. By contributing to a community-based project, we shall have special permission to visit the breeding site of this rarity, thus allowing us a marvellous and intimate

opportunity to see this endangered species. Unlike many rockfowl sites, this one is easy to access. The rocks where the birds nest are about an hour's gentle uphill walk, initially through cultivation but then mainly along a narrow forest trail. Apart from a steep five minutes climb to the rocks themselves, this is a relatively easy walk by humid tropical forest standards. The birds are usually very obliging, being furtive rather than shy, and good views are often quickly obtained (although visitors should be prepared to have to sit and wait quietly for some time, and the walk back may then be in semi darkness). The experience of seeing one of just two members of this extraordinary family will certainly be *the* trip highlight. Afterwards, hopefully with everybody highly elated, we shall continue to Kumasi for an overnight stay and a celebration!

**Day 9** This morning we shall visit Bobiri Butterfly

Sanctuary. This site offers our best chance for Afep Pigeon and there is another chance here for African Piculet and for other forest species such as Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Red-chested Cuckoo, Willcocks's Honeyguide and Grey-throated Flycatcher that may have proved difficult up until now. Should the birding be slow, the spectacle of the hundreds of colourful butterflies on show should be reward enough. As the morning activity subsides we shall transfer to Koforidua for an overnight stay. This afternoon we shall begin our exploration of the Atewa Range, concentrating on the farmbrush that holds species such as the Upper Guinea endemic Kemp's Longbill and the difficult and skulking Baumann's Greenbul. Sometimes Compact and Grosbeak Weavers and also Western Bluebill can be seen.

**Day 10** The Atewa Range Forest Reserve is an IBA (Important Bird Area) containing remnant evergreen rainforest, an endangered habitat within Ghana. This hilly area reaches an altitude of 770m and, although the forest has suffered from much logging in the past, it nonetheless remains incredibly 'birdy', with the open nature of the forest facilitating viewing of canopy species. Here we have the chance of finding some very localized birds and it seems that many of the best birds here have the "if we are lucky" caveat placed upon them. We have found the rare Nimba Flycatcher here,

so we shall be inspecting the tall trees carefully for these black birds that run along the large boughs! The superb Blue-headed Bee-eater is regularly seen, there is a chance of Red-cheeked Wattle-eye, and sometimes a Yellow-footed Honeyguide is to be found. The only Ghanaian records of Lowland Akalat came from Atewa, and Ahanta Francolin and Red-fronted Antpecker also occur, although we would be very fortunate indeed to see any of these difficult species. Chocolate-backed Kingfisher on the other hand seems to be a little easier to see here than at other sites, and Many-coloured Bush-shrike is regularly observed, as are the pretty Chestnut-capped Flycatcher and Narina's Trogon. This afternoon we must head back to Accra, where the tour ends in the evening.

#### **Accommodation and Road**

**Transport:** The hotels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is mostly by small coach (but by 4x4 vehicles at Atewa), and roads are mostly good or reasonable.

**Walking:** The walking effort is mostly easy, but there are a few moderate grade walks.

**Climate:** It will be hot and often very humid. There is likely to be a mixture of sunny and overcast conditions, and rain (sometimes heavy) is possible at any time.

#### **Bird Photography:**

Opportunities are worthwhile.