



*A cute Sao Tome Scops Owl.*

# SÃO TOMÉ & PRÍNCIPE

**2 – 9 MARCH 2022**

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The tiny and little-known archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe is Africa's second smallest country and is positioned almost exactly on the equator in the armpit of Africa. These two islands are basically two enormous non-active shield volcanoes, which rise from the floor of the Atlantic Ocean, and were formed along the Cameroon Line, a line of volcanoes extending from Mount Cameroon on the mainland via Fernando Po (Bioko) and ending in the southwest in the little-visited island of Annobon. On this highly successful tour we managed to observe 27 out of the 28 endemics which live on these islands. The highlight of this short trip was without a doubt the cracking observation of the only recently discovered and as yet undescribed 'Príncipe' Scops Owl, only a couple of hours after seeing the critically endangered Príncipe Thrush and the rare Príncipe White-eye! Our night of camping on São Tomé gave us excellent views of the rare Sao Tome Ibis as well as two very rarely seen endemics: São Tomé Grosbeak and Newton's (São Tomé) Fiscal. Other much appreciated endemics included São Tomé Scops Owl, Sao Tome Oriole, Dohrn's

Warbler (also known as Dohrn's Thrush-Babbler), Giant Sunbird and Giant Weaver. Both the Principe and São Tomé forms of Malachite Kingfisher showed well and the distinctive nominate race of Chestnut-winged Starling allowed nice views. Our encounter with an impressive endemic Sao Tome Cobra was memorable. We were lucky with the weather and only got rained out on our first day in Principe.



*Principe Thrush.*

Seven keen birders convened at a very nice hotel near the airport of the island of São Tomé. The birding started the following morning on the verdant northern slopes of the massive, non-active shield volcano. We walked up from the Botanical Gardens through nice farmbrush country towards the montane forests of the Obo National Park, which covers c35% of the island. Endemics came thick and fast, including Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher, the unobtrusive Principe Seedeater and Sao Tome Prinia. Flocks of attractive, endemic Black-capped Speiropses flitted from tree to tree, together with some uncommon Sao Tome White-eyes. Several unpretentious, endemic Newton's Sunbirds were seen. Beautifully marked Sao Tome Thrushes kept to the mid-canopy where Sao Tome Weavers crept along branches in a nuthatch-like manner. Good numbers of Sao Tome Spinetails darted over the patches of forest and allowed excellent looks, while Sao Tome Orioles whistled in the canopy, where they played hide and seek. A cracking male Giant Sunbird entertained us and we found a number of Chestnut-winged Starlings of the endemic, nominate race. We slowly ambled along a fairly slippery trail and spent some time trying to get proper views of the endemic Island Bronze-naped Pigeon, while some Lemon Doves flushed from the trail. A calling Sao Tome Scops Owl was found after a bit of searching and gave stunning views. On our return walk we noted several Yellow-billed Kites, Laughing Doves, African Palm Swifts, Little Swifts and Southern Masked Weavers. A couple of ruddy-coloured Noack's Roundleaf Bats were seen flying about in the middle of the day. In the afternoon we visited an area of open grassland near the airport. A Harlequin Quail was observed in flight. The seeding grasses held an excellent selection of seedeating species in breeding plumage: Red-headed Quelea, Black-winged Red Bishop, Golden-backed Bishop and White-winged Widowbird. All of these gems were in bright breeding attire and were displaying and showing off at length. The very smartly-dressed introduced Golden-backed Bishops especially held our attention as these Angolan endemics are usually only seen in their modest non-breeding plumage on Angola tours. Upon returning to the hotel we could admire dozens of African Straw-coloured Fruit-bats feeding in the flowering coconut palms.



*Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher.*

After a bit of sleeping in, we flew mid-morning from São Tomé northeast to the not very distant, much smaller island of Príncipe. From the air we could discern the almost total forest cover and the amazingly shaped mountains of this beautiful island. Upon landing we transferred to our very nice hotel built on a magnificent colonial house. Just before arriving the heavens opened, and it rained very heavily for the next few hours. However, birding from the hotel itself was rewarding, even under the rain, seeing endemic Príncipe Starling, the rare “Príncipe” Velvet-mantled Drongo, Príncipe Weaver, Príncipe Speirops, Príncipe Sunbird and Dohrn’s Warbler. It has recently been proven that this unique bird now belongs with the Sylviid Babblers and not with the regular Babblers (Timaliidae) or with the Old World Flycatchers (Muscicapidae). Grey Parrots (which were thought to be Timneh Parrots until recently) were positively common too, as were Blue-breasted Kingfishers, and we also obtained good looks at a Malachite Kingfisher (of the distinctive Príncipe race). Till recently this form was sometimes considered a separate species or a race of White-bellied Kingfisher. In the late afternoon it stopped raining, so we went on another mission: to try to see a new species of Scops Owl seen for the first time by Belgian ornithologist Philippe Verbelen in July 2016, although it had already been heard and recorded some years before by a couple of biologists. Only a handful of Western birders, including the previous Birdquest tour, and a few researchers (who collected an individual) have ever seen this undescribed nightbird. However, luck wasn’t on our side and we didn’t even hear one after a rather tiring hike. We would be back...

Early next morning we boarded a boat that took us south along the west side of the island. On the journey we could admire the fantastic scenery with the many, often virtually inaccessible tepui-like peaks and wondered what other wonders Príncipe might harbour. The famous Pico Mesa (Table Mountain) showed well and by mid morning we reached a secluded rocky beach where we disembarked. After a short walk we found a fruiting tree with a lot of bird activity, and soon found the rare Príncipe White-eye, as well as the Príncipe subspecies of the Príncipe Seedeater. Pleased with our early success, we carried on, with one other big target in mind: the critically endangered, striking and very rarely seen Príncipe Thrush. After a steep but short climb we entered good primary forest, and it didn’t take long to find a very confident thrush, which showed exceedingly well, much to everyone’s delight. We then walked back to shore, admiring some beautiful scenery on the way, and ate our picnic lunch. Afterwards we decided to circumnavigate the whole of Príncipe, making a stop at a remote offshore islet called Boné de Joquei where we easily saw the endemic

subspecies of Principe Seed eater that is confined to this tiny rock. A number of elegant White-tailed Tropicbirds were seen, together with some Brown Boobies and Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. We arrived back to the hotel in the late afternoon, had a drink and went back to the scops owl site. This time things went according to plan, and after some tense moments we finally enjoyed brilliant views of “Principe” Scops Owl. Wow, what an action-packed and highly successful day it had been!

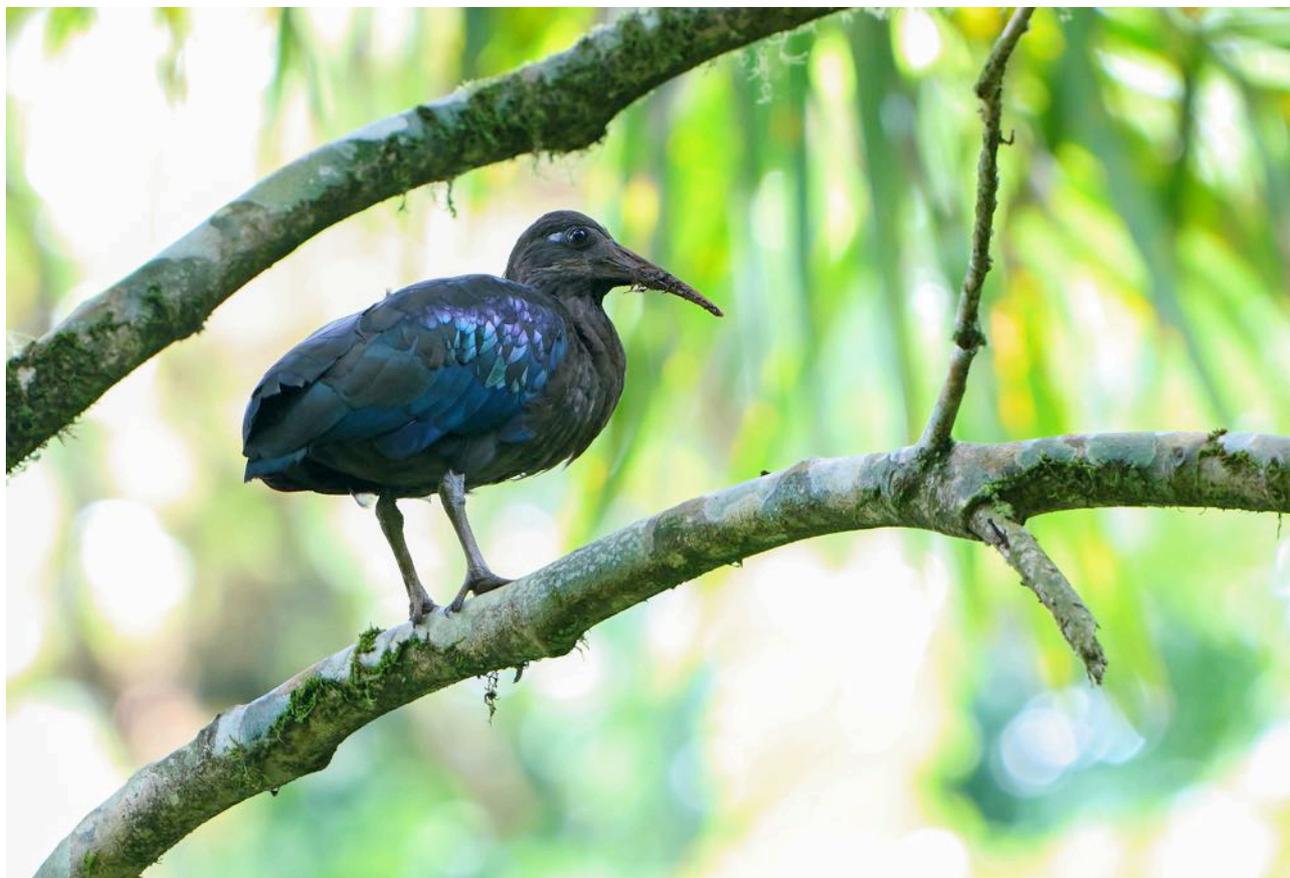


*“Principe” Scops Owl.*

Next morning we took a flight back to Sao Tome, and in the afternoon we went to another forest area. Things were quiet but we managed to get good views of Sao Tome Olive Pigeon in flight and of a Sao Tome Green Pigeon perched on a tree. Before dusk we saw a cracking Malachite Kingfisher of the distinctive São Tomé race.

After a tasty breakfast we drove to the southeast of the island of São Tomé skirting the palm-dotted coast. The scenic drive took us past beautiful bays and rocky promontories. A stop at river produced a perched Island Bronze-naped Pigeon and both white and dark morphs of Western Reef Heron, as well as Common Moorhen. Eventually we drove inland through a large oilpalm plantation till we reached the trailhead at the southern edge of the Obo National Park. In the distance we could admire the dramatic needle-shaped Pico Cão Grande, which rises to over 300 metres above the surrounding terrain. The porters and the guide got themselves organized with the tents, food and water, and we started hiking up the forested hills. It was quite hard work and rather sweaty business, but the walk took us through beautiful quite open primary forest, seeing a Sao Tome Cobra, a Giant Weaver and some Sao Tome Orioles. After a couple of hours of slogging we reached the open, flat campsite in a splendid tract of forest. We recovered from the hike, drank coffee and headed up towards the ridge. On the way up we tried hard for Sao Tome Shorttail at the usual stakeouts, but didn't even hear it. After a steep climb we reached what seemed to be a good area for the rare Newton's (Sao Tome) Fiscal, and soon heard its distinctive calls. It didn't take long before the bird was in front of us, and we enjoyed terrific views of this striking rarity, which is the only African shrike that inhabits forest interior. In the late afternoon we decided to search for Sao Tome Ibis, and eventually flushed one from a nest, which was seen briefly perched a couple of times. We tried again for shorttails, in vain, and came

back to the campsite. After a bit of an argument with the porters regarding the lack of water, which we were promised would be up next morning, we enjoyed our spaghetti dinner and then went to our tents. Throughout the night we were being serenaded by several Sao Tome Scops Owls and we also heard a Sao Tome Barn Owl, but no sign of any Band-rumped Storm Petrels.



*Sao Tome Ibis.*

Next morning, after a simple breakfast, we walked around the campsite, searching for the extremely rare Sao Tome Grosbeak. And after an hour or so we heard its call and eventually saw it perched quietly in the canopy. We were definitely very lucky to have seen this bird and the fiscal in such a short time up in the mountain! We then spent the rest of the morning searching for Sao Tome Shorttail, to no avail. A rare Sao Tome White-toothed Shrew was seen on the riverbed. We then started walking down slowly through the forest, flushing a Sao Tome Ibis that gave really good looks perched up on a branch. The magnificent views of this Critically Endangered species were very much appreciated. In the same spot another Sao Tome Grosbeak was seen low down in a tree!! We kept trying for the shorttail, but not a single call was heard. In the late afternoon we reached the trailhead, seeing a fine breeding-plumage Giant Weaver nearby, with aching legs and returned to the luxury of our hotel for a major clean up and an excellent dinner. On the way back we made a short stop and enjoyed cracking views of a pair of rare Sao Tome Barn Owls.

Sao Tome Shorttail was our only missing endemic, so we decided to give it one last try next morning, exploring the other side of the mountain. We spent several hours at prime habitat, but in spite of all of our efforts, didn't even hear one. This was very surprising, as this is normally a very vocal and rather easy bird, and wondered if they were on nests or somewhere else... The same forest area was particularly good for Sao Tome Ibis, with no less than 10 birds seen very well! It was then time to head back to the hotel, have lunch and go to the airport, where we boarded our planes back home. It sure had been a highly successful trip to these seldom visited islands!



*Newton's (Sao Tome) Fiscal.*

## SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

**CR** = Critically Endangered, **E** = Endangered, **V** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient.

## BIRDS

**Red-necked Spurfowl (introduced) *Pternistis afer*** (H) We heard this widespread species in farmbrush on São Tomé.

**Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei*** One was seen in flight in the grassland savanna near São Tomé airport.

**White-tailed Tropicbird** *Phaethon lepturus* Small numbers were noted on both islands.



*White-tailed Tropicbird.*

**Sao Tome Ibis** ◊ *Bostrychia bocagei* CR Excellent views of more than 10 in the highlands of São Tomé.

**Striated Heron (Green-backed H)** *Butorides striata* Just a few observations on São Tomé.

**Black-headed Heron** *Ardea melanocephala* One vagrant seen at Principe airport.

**Western Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* Regular encounters in the more open habitats on both islands.

**Western Reef Heron (W R Egret)** *Egretta gularis* Regular sightings of both morphs along the coasts of both islands.

**Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* Some nice encounters from the boat off Principe.

**Reed Cormorant (Long-tailed C)** *Microcarbo africanus* A few were seen along a river in southeastern São Tomé.

**Yellow-billed Kite** *Milvus aegyptius* Regular on both islands. The only bird of prey of the archipelago.

**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* A single bird was observed along a river in southeastern São Tomé.

**Whimbrel (Eurasian W)** *Numenius [phaeopus] phaeopus* Several encounters.

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* A handful of sightings.

**Rock Dove (introduced)** *Columba livia*

**Sao Tome Olive Pigeon** ◊ (Maroon P) *Columba thomensis* EN A couple of brief sightings in São Tomé's forests.

**Island Bronze-naped Pigeon** ◊ *Columba malherbii* NT Common and obvious on São Tomé, but rare on Principe.

**Lemon Dove (Cinnamon D)** *Columba larvata* Very common on Principe.

**Lemon Dove** ◊ (Sao Tome D, Forest D) *Columba [larvata] simplex* Regular in the São Tomé forests.

**Laughing Dove** *Spilopelia senegalensis* Common in the open habitats on both islands.

**African Green Pigeon** *Treron calvus* Common in the garden of our hotel in Principe.

**Sao Tome Green Pigeon** ◊ *Treron sanctithomae* VU A few seen on São Tomé.

**African African Emerald Cuckoo (Emerald C)** *Chrysococcyx cupreus* Excellent looks at this beauty on São Tomé.

**"Sao Tome" Barn Owl** ◊ *Tyto alba thomensis* Wonderful views of a pair in Sao Tome.

**Sao Tome Scops Owl** ◊ *Otus hartlaubi* VU Perfect up-close views in the highlands of São Tomé.

**'Principe' Scops Owl** ◊ *Otus sp nov* This undescribed species showed brilliantly in the primary forest on Principe.

**Sao Tome Spinetail** ◊ *Zoonavena thomensis* Common and showy on São Tomé, less so on Principe.

**African Palm Swift** *Cypsiurus parvus* Regular on both islands.

**Little Swift** *Apus affinis* Common on both islands.



Sao Tome Barn Owl, Sao Tome Green Pigeon and Island Bronze-naped Pigeon.

- Blue-breasted Kingfisher** *Halcyon malimbica* At least seven encounters with this beauty in the Principe forests.
- Malachite Kingfisher** ◊ (Principe K) *Corythornis [cristatus] nais* Several nice observations of this cracker.
- Malachite Kingfisher** ◊ (Sao Tome K) *Corythornis [cristatus] thomensis* Several excellent encounters.
- Grey Parrot** ◊ *Psittacus erithacus* Common and very vocal on Principe.
- Sao Tome Fiscal (Newton's Fiscal)** ◊ *Lanius newtoni* Great views of this rarity in the mountains of Sao Tome.
- Sao Tome Oriole** ◊ *Oriolus crassirostris* VU A handful of great sightings in the São Tomé forests. More often heard.
- Velvet-mantled Drongo** ◊ (Principe D) *Dicrurus [modestus] modestus* One was seen in our hotel at Principe.
- Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher** ◊ *Terpsiphone atrochalybeia* Regular and showy on São Tomé.
- Sao Tome Prinia** ◊ *Prinia mollerii* Regular and vocal in all habitats on São Tomé. A spectacular aerial display!
- Dohrn's Warbler** ◊ *Horizorhinus dohrni* Several very nice observations on Principe. A great songster!



Sao Tome Oriole.

- Principe Speirops** ◊ *Zosterops leucophaeus* NT A few sightings in flowering trees in northern Principe.
- Black-capped Speirops** ◊ (Sao Tome S) *Zosterops lugubris* Regular and easily observed on São Tomé.
- Sao Tome White-eye** ◊ *Zosterops feae* VU Good looks at several in flowering trees in the hills of São Tomé.
- Principe White-eye** ◊ *Zosterops ficedulinus* Great looks on the SW coast of Principe.
- Splendid Starling** *Lamprotornis splendidus* Common on Principe.
- Principe Starling** ◊ *Lamprotornis ornatus* Less common, but often found with previous species.
- Chestnut-winged Starling** ◊ (Sao Tome C-w S) *Onychognathus [fulgidus] fulgidus* Regular -São Tomé highlands.
- Sao Tome Thrush** ◊ *Turdus olivaceofuscus* NT Many excellent encounters with this subtly well-marked species.
- Principe Thrush** ◊ *Turdus xanthorhynchus* CR A splendid observation at close range in southern Principe.
- Principe Sunbird** ◊ *Anabathmis hartlaubii* Small numbers were noted on Principe.
- Newton's Sunbird** ◊ *Anabathmis newtonii* Regular encounters in all habitats on São Tomé.
- Giant Sunbird** ◊ *Dreptes thomensis* VU Great looks at foraging birds in the hills of São Tomé. Impressive endemic!
- Principe Weaver** ◊ *Ploceus princeps* Regular in more open habitat on Principe.
- Southern Masked Weaver** *Ploceus velatus* Common on São Tomé.
- Village Weaver** *Ploceus cucullatus* One seen on São Tomé.
- Giant Weaver** ◊ *Ploceus grandis* Several sightings of this São Tomé endemic, including one breeding plumaged bird.
- Sao Tome Weaver** ◊ *Ploceus sanctithomae* Regular and distinctive in the São Tomé forests.
- Red-headed Quelea** *Quelea erythrops* One male in breeding attire showed well in northern São Tomé.
- Black-winged Red Bishop** *Euplectes hordeaceus* Displaying males in resplendent breeding plumage on São Tomé.
- Golden-backed Bishop** ◊ *Euplectes aureus* Splendid males in breeding dress showed well on São Tomé.
- White-winged Widowbird (W-w Whydah)** *Euplectes albonotatus* Regular on São Tomé.
- Blue Waxbill (Southern Cordon-bleu)** *Uraeginthus angolensis* Small numbers were seen on São Tomé.
- Common Waxbill** *Estrilda astrild* Common in the São Tomé grasslands.



*Giant Sunbird, Giant Weaver, Sao Tome Weaver and Sao Tome Grosbeak.*

**Bronze Mannikin *Lonchura cucullata*** Just a few were seen.

**Principe Seedeater** ◊ *Crithagra rufobrunnea* All three subspecies seen.

**Sao Tome Grosbeak** ◊ *Crithagra concolor* Two sightings of this mega rarity up in the mountain at Sao Tome.

**Yellow-fronted Canary *Crithagra mozambica*** A few encounters only on São Tomé.

## MAMMALS

**Noack's Roundleaf Bat** *Hipposideros ruber* Regularly seen in the middle of the day in the forests of both islands.  
**African Straw-coloured Fruit-bat** *Eidolon helvum* Good nos. were living in the garden of our hotel on São Tomé.  
**Sao Tome White-toothed Shrew** *Crocidura thomensis* Great views of this rare mammal up in the Mt Carmo.

## REPTILES

**Sao Tome Cobra** *Naja peroescobari* An impressive encounter with one in southern São Tomé.  
**Sao Tome Skink** *Trachylepis thomensis* Several were living in the gardens of our São Tomé hotel.



*Principe White-eye, Sao Tome White-eye and Principe Seed eater.*



*Golden-backed Bishop and Sao Tome White-toothed Shrew*





*Grey Parrots, Principe Starlings and African Green Pigeon. White-winged Widowbird.*



