



We quadrupled the number of birders who have observed the undescribed 'Príncipe' Scops Owl on this tour (Mark Van Beirs)

SÃO TOMÉ & PRÍNCIPE AFRICAN BIRD CLUB FUNDRAISER

13 – 20 JANUARY 2018

LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS



Dohrn's Thrush-Babbler is endemic to Principe (tour participant Phil Hyde)

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 tour, which was run as an African Bird Club Conservation Fund Benefit Tour, we managed to observe 25 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. To get to grips with this beauty we had to camp for one night in the primary rainforest in the south of Príncipe. Our night of camping on São Tomé gave us excellent scope studies of the rare Sao Tome Ibis and other much appreciated endemics included Sao Tome Oriole, Dohrn's Thrush-Babbler, the very rarely-seen Príncipe Thrush, Giant Sunbird and the unique, aberrant Sao Tome Shorttail. Both the Príncipe 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 two metre long endemic Sao Tome Cobra was memorable. We were extremely lucky with the weather and experienced very little rain. But, we also heard very little bird song as most passerines were feeding young or attending nests, which resulted in virtually no response to playback. On the other hand we were able to admire the riot of colour exhibited by the breeding-plumaged, displaying weavers, bishops, whydahs and widowbirds.



The Sao Tome Prinia is one of the most common endemics (Mark Van Beirs)

Ten birders convened in the evening of January 13 at a 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 farmbush country towards the montane forests of the Obo National Park, which covers c35% of the island. Our first endemic was spotted as soon as we got out of the minibus as an unobtrusive Principe Seed eater showed well. In spite of its name this unassuming species is one of the few endemics that occurs on both islands. We slowly ambled along a fairly slippery trail and scoped several endemic Island Bronze-naped Pigeons and well-camouflaged Sao Tome Green Pigeons, while we flushed the distinctive local form of Lemon Dove off the trail. 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. Both males and females Sao Tome Paradise Flycatchers regularly showed very well in the mid storey and Sao Tome Prinias performed their distinctive aerial displays while uttering repetitive songs. Flocks of attractive, endemic Black-capped Speiropses flitted

from tree to tree, together with several unpretentious, endemic Newton's Sunbirds. Beautifully marked Sao Tome Thrushes kept to the mid-canopy where Sao Tome Weavers crept along branches in a nuthatch-like manner. We found a number of Chestnut-winged Starlings of the endemic, nominate race in the highest treecrowns and were amazed to see how heavy and long their bills were compared to the mainland birds. The distinctive calls of African Emerald Cuckoos emanated through the forest, but remained a voice for now. In late morning we entered the forest proper, but things had quieted down and we didn't really find anything different. On our return walk we noted several Yellow-billed Kites, Laughing Doves, African Palm Swifts, Little Swift 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 surrounding a brackish lagoon near the northern coast. The mud held Whimbrel, Common and Wood Sandpipers and a Common Greenshank. A Harlequin Quail was observed in flight, as were Red-headed Lovebirds. The seeding grasses held an excellent selection of seed-eating species in breeding plumage: Red-headed Quelea, Black-winged Red Bishop, Golden-backed Bishop, White-winged Widowbird and Pin-tailed Whydah. 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.



The male Golden-backed Bishop in breeding plumage is pure eye candy (Mark Van Beirs)

Next morning, just after dawn, we were walking along a wide track through farmbrush and patches of forest in the northern highlands. The highlight of our visit was our extended session at an orange flowering *Erythrina* tree, whose flowers attracted no fewer than seven of the São Tomé endemics! A pair of splendid Giant Sunbirds were flitting about from flower to flower showing off their amazing bills dwarfing several modestly-attired Newton's Sunbirds. Parties of cute Black-capped Speiropses were always present and a few Sao Tome White-eyes were feeding quietly amidst them. Sao Tome Weavers were feeding on the flowers or creeping about on the branches, a rather dull-looking immature Giant Weaver visited briefly and several Principe Seed eaters foraged on the pods. We checked and scanned lots of treetops for pigeon activity but could only find Island Bronze-naped Pigeons and Sao Tome Green Pigeons. Several introduced Red-necked Spurrows were heard and we obtained good looks at a very attractive male African Emerald Cuckoo. A Sao Tome Prinia allowed fantastic scope looks as it was preening itself in a treetop. Further along we had several nice encounters with Giant Weavers, but none of them were in breeding attire. Sao Tome Weavers allowed many good looks as they were feeding begging fledglings. In the afternoon we returned to the grassy savanna in the north of the island where we admired the riot of colour displayed by Red-headed Queleas, Black-winged Red Bishops, Golden-backed Bishops, White-winged Widowbirds and Pin-tailed Whydahs again. At sea several distant Brown Boobies were identified.



The Black-capped Speirops is a delightful São Tomé endemic (Mark Van Beirs)

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 a sandy beach produced both white and dark morphs of Western Reef Heron and a cracking Malachite Kingfisher of the distinctive São Tomé race. Not much further an impressive two metre long black snake was slithering on a muddy verge. Till recently it was thought that the “cobra preta” (black snake) had been introduced from the mainland, but herpetologists have now decided that this snake is a São Tomé endemic, bearing the name Sao Tome Cobra *Naja peroescobari*. 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. While the

porters and the guide got themselves organized with the tents, food and water, we observed several elegant White-tailed Tropicbirds overhead and noted a couple of rare Sao Tome Olive Pigeons in flight, showing off their obvious yellow bill and dark maroon plumage. We also obtained good looks at a couple of Sao Tome Orioles before we started hiking up the forested hills. It was quite hard work and rather sweaty business as there was no real trail, but the walk took us through beautiful quite open primary forest. After 2, 5 hours of slogging we reached the open, flat campsite in a splendid tract of forest. We recovered from the hike, drank coffee and paused for a while in the heat of the day. Later, while the crew started erecting the tents, we explored the surroundings. At the base of a rather steep streambed we heard the high pitched calls of the endemic Sao Tome Shorttail and soon we all managed great looks at this unusual-looking critter, which is now believed to belong in the pipit family. Its gait on the forest floor or even on low branches definitely reminded us of a pipit. We flushed a Sao Tome Ibis from the forest floor, but only obtained rather brief looks. A Sao Tome Scops Owl started calling nearby and was whistled in for excellent views. The scope revealed all the details of a rufous morph of this tiny endemic nocturnal creature. The attractive Giant Begonias which can reach three metres of height drew our attention here. We enjoyed our spaghetti dinner which we washed away with a bit of red wine and spent a rather rough and uncomfortable night as the mattresses were a bit too thin. Throughout the night we were being serenaded by several Sao Tome Scops Owls.



A cute Sao Tome Scops Owl; Impressive Giant Begonias were a feature of the higher reaches (Nik Borrow)

Next morning, after a simple breakfast, we walked further up into the hills of the Obo National Park while looking out and listening for the two remaining São Tomé endemics, the Sao Tome Fiscal and the Sao Tome Grosbeak. We looked intently, listened carefully and checked several known territories of the former, but not a sniff was heard or seen. We obtained more nice views of a Sao Tome Shorttail, but by midday had to admit defeat and after breaking up camp, started walking down slowly through the forest. We flushed a Sao Tome Ibis and had really good looks, and a bit later flushed another one which posed very well in the telescope for everyone to admire. The magnificent views of this Critically Endangered species were very much appreciated. In late afternoon we reached the trailhead with aching legs and returned to the luxury of our hotel for a major clean up and an excellent dinner.



The magnificent tepui-like mountains of Principe (Nik Borrow)

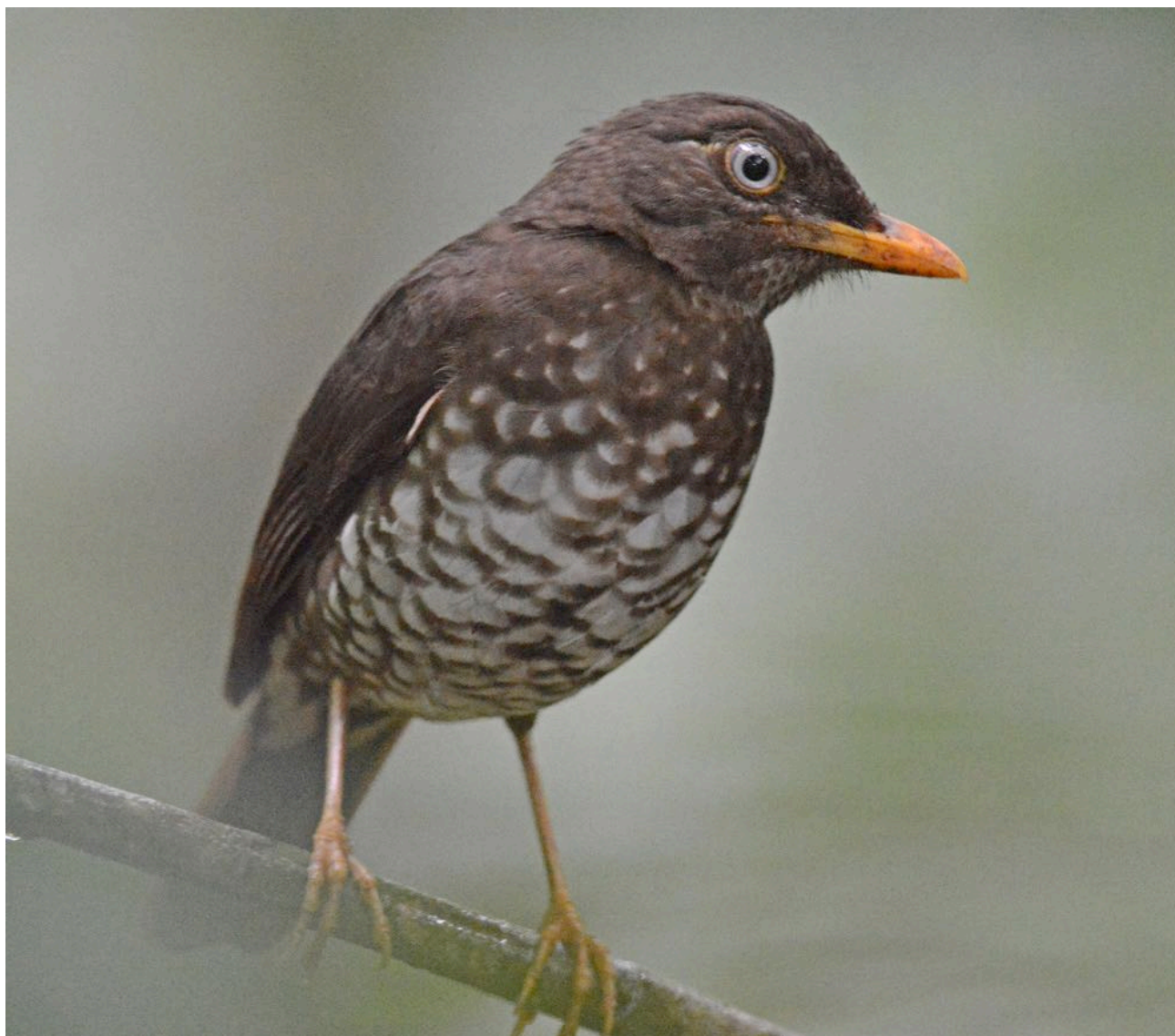
After a bit of sleeping in, we flew mid-morning from São Tomé northeast to the not very distant, much smaller island of Principe. From the air we could discern the almost total forest cover and the amazingly shaped mountains of this beautiful island. Upon landing we transferred to the famous Bom Bom Resort at the northernmost tip, where we got organized for our bout of camping in the hill forests of southern Principe. At the resort we obtained good looks at a Malachite Kingfisher (of the distinctive Principe race). Till recently this form was sometimes considered a separate species or a race of White-bellied Kingfisher. Around midday we boarded a fair-sized canoe 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 Principe might harbour. The famous Pico Mesa (Table Mountain) showed well through the haze and in mid-afternoon we reached a secluded rocky beach where we disembarked. We were met by our local guide and several porters and soon set off into the foothills of the National Park. We had to cross a fair-sized river, where slippery rocks underfoot caused a bit of a delay, but soon we walked along an old worn out track through fine-looking open primary forest. Blue-breasted Kingfishers were calling from the subcanopy and duly observed. The further inland we moved, the larger the trees became and in late afternoon we reached “Philippe’s” campsite. The main reason why we had organized this camping night here in the depth of Principe’s primary forest was the discovery of a new species of Scops Owl by Belgian ornithologist Philippe Verbelen in July 2016. Only three Western birders and a few researchers (who collected an individual) had ever seen this undescribed nightbird, so after pitching camp, we gathered a short distance away and played the only existing tape of the owl. After a few minutes we already heard a response, but the bird didn’t seem interested, so we left him alone and returned to camp for our unpretentious dinner. We tried again a while later and soon we got a strong response and eventually we all managed brilliant views of this cute-looking species perched not too far above us. Glorious moments! The bird was a rufous-brown morph and showed its bright yellow eyes well. Another two birds were heard calling nearby. We were obviously the first ever Birdtour group to lay eyes on this beauty! The bird is being described at the moment, so the official name will soon become available Tired and very happy we returned to our tents and slept well, as we had doubled the number of mattresses!



The smart Principe race of Malachite Kingfisher showed well on the coast (tour participant Phil Hyde); Blue-breasted Kingfishers favoured the forest mid storey (Mark Van Beirs)

We rose at dawn, packed the tents and other stuff and birded the surrounding forest for a while. Parties of Timneh Parrots were screeching overhead. Since the split of Grey Parrot into two forms, it has been established that the Principe birds belong with the West African Timneh Parrot. The loud, ebullient song of Dohrn's Thrush-Babblers was a major component of the dawn chorus. 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). After a bite of breakfast we started our walk down the mountain. We soon reached a beach, but as the surf was really too rough, we had to hike across a large peninsula to a quieter beach on the eastside of the island. It was a long, quite rough hike, but we were rewarded with splendid looks at very close range of a glorious, Critically Endangered Principe Thrush, which showed off its bright yellow bill. We made regular observations of Blue-breasted Kingfishers and at midday finally reached a nice sandy beach where our canoe was waiting for us. The last part of the descent had been steep and extremely muddy and we were grateful that we hadn't experienced rain. We boarded and sailed north along the east side of Principe. Several Brown Boobies enlivened the boat journey and in mid-afternoon we reached the luxury of the Bom Bom Resort. After cleaning up, we birded the gardens where several other Principe endemics soon gave themselves up. We managed great looks at several Principe Weavers building nests in the palms and Principe Sunbirds and Principe Speiropses were admired in a flowering tree. Dinner under the stars was tasty, but extremely slow.

On our final morning we observed lots of Timneh Parrots flying about in the gardens and obtained excellent scope views of endemic Principe Starlings, sitting side by side with the rather look alike Splendid Starlings. The different colour of the breast and the difference in size was quite easy discernible. We also had very nice looks at a pair of Dohrn's Thrush-Babblers. A beautifully-coloured, endemic Elegant Worm Snake (genus *Typhlops*) showed very well near the reception. Our mid-morning flight to São Tomé was delayed for several hours because of inclement weather, so it was after lunch when we finally boarded the plane. Upon arrival at São Tomé our ways parted. This successful tour yielded a nice amount of money for a conservation project of the African Bird Club.



The Critically Endangered Principe Thrush showed brilliantly (Mark Van Beirs)

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, **EN** = Endangered, **VU** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened

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 of northern São Tomé.

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

Sao Tome Ibis ♦ *Bostrychia bocagei* CR Excellent scope studies in the highlands of São Tomé.

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

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



Both dark and white morphs of Western Reef Heron obliged (tour participant Phil Hyde)

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



Brown Boobies on an offshore stack; Yellow-billed Kites favour the more open areas (Mark Van Beirs)

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* A few off São Tomé and nice encounters from the boat off Príncipe.

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.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* Five showed well at a brackish lagoon in northern São Tomé.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A single bird was noted at the same spot.

Rock Dove (introduced) *Columba livia*

Sao Tome Olive Pigeon ♦ (Maroon P) *Columba thomensis* **EN** Five all too brief encounters in São Tomé's forests.

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

Lemon Dove (Cinnamon D) *Columba larvata* Small numbers were noted on Príncipe.

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.

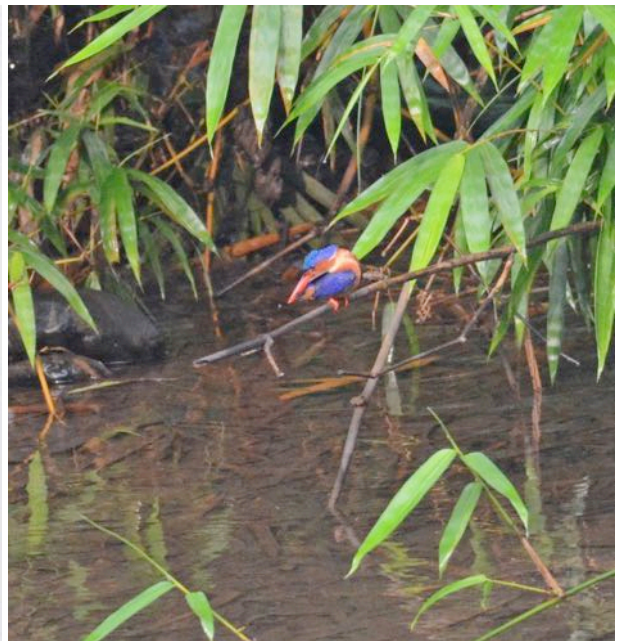
African Green Pigeon *Treron calvus* A handful of sightings on Príncipe. More often heard.

Sao Tome Green Pigeon ♦ *Treron sanctithomae* **VU** Fairly common in the farmbrush and forests of São Tomé.

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

Sao Tome Scops Owl ♦ *Otus hartlaubi* **VU** Perfect scope views in the highlands of São Tomé.

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



Sao Tome Spinetails showed well on many occasions; the attractive Sao Tome form of Malachite Kingfisher (Mark Van Beirs)

Sao Tome Spinetail ♦ *Zoonavena thomensis* Common and showy on São Tomé, but only one or two on Príncipe.

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

Little Swift *Apus affinis* Regular on both islands.

Blue-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon malimbica* At least seven encounters with this beauty in the Príncipe forests.

Malachite Kingfisher ♦ (Príncipe K) *Corythornis [cristatus] nais* Several nice observations of this cracker.

Malachite Kingfisher ♦ (Sao Tome K) *Corythornis [cristatus] thomensis* Several excellent encounters.

Timneh Parrot ♦ *Psittacus timneh* **EN** Common and very vocal on Príncipe.

Red-headed Lovebird *Agapornis pullarius* Several observations of flying birds on São Tomé.

Sao Tome Oriole ♦ *Oriolus crassirostris* **VU** A handful of great sightings in the São Tomé forests. More often heard.

Velvet-mantled Drongo ♦ (Príncipe D) *Dicrurus [modestus] modestus* (NL) One was seen in northern Príncipe.

Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher ♦ *Terpsiphone atrochalybeia* Regular and showy on São Tomé.

Sao Tome Prinia ♦ *Prinia malleri* Regular and vocal in all habitats on São Tomé. A spectacular aerial display!

Dohrn's Thrush-Babbler ♦ *Horizorhinus dohrni* Several very nice observations on Príncipe. A great songster!

Príncipe Speirops ♦ *Zosterops leucophaeus* **NT** A few sightings in flowering trees in northern Príncipe.

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.

Splendid Starling *Lamprotornis splendidus* Common on Príncipe.

Príncipe 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.



The Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher is easily found in all forested habitats on São Tomé; this is a female (Mark Van Beirs)

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.



A male Newton's Sunbird (Mark Van Beirs); an immature Giant Weaver (tour participant Phil Hyde)

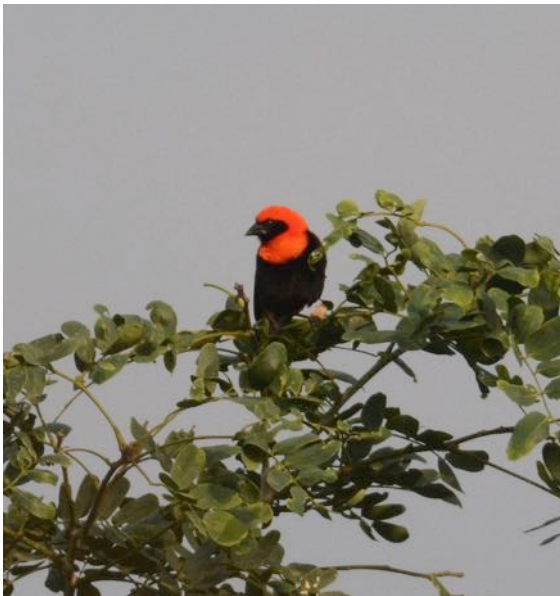
Principe Sunbird ♦ *Anabathmis hartlaubii* Small numbers were noted on Principe.

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.



Males of Black-winged Red Bishops and White-winged Widowbirds were admired while displaying (Mark Van Beirs)

Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus* Small numbers were seen on São Tomé.

Giant Weaver ♦ *Ploceus grandis* Several sightings of this São Tomé endemic, but never really of adult males.

Sao Tome Weaver ♦ *Ploceus sanctithomae* Regular and distinctive in the São Tomé forests.

Red-headed Quelea *Quelea erythrops* A few males 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.

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

Pin-tailed Whydah *Vidua macroura* Several fully plumaged males were found on São Tomé.

Sao Tome Shorttail ♦ *Amaurocichla bocagii* VU Excellent looks at this distinctive endemic in the São Tomé forests.

Principe Seedeater ♦ *Crithagra rufobrunnea* Small numbers were noted in the São Tomé farmbrush.

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



We also had good looks at male Golden-backed Bishop and Pin-tailed Whydah (Mark Van Beirs)



A colony of African Straw-coloured Fruit-bats at our hotel; the scenic coast of Principe (Mark Van Beirs)

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.



The impressive Sao Tome Cobra and the harmless Elegant Worm Snake (tour participant Sylvia Smith)

REPTILES

Sao Tome Cobra *Naja peroescobari* An impressive encounter with a 2 metre long individual in southern *São Tomé*.
Elegant Worm Snake *Typhlops elegans* This beauty showed well in the garden of the Bom Bom Resort on Principe.
Sao Tome Skink *Trachylepis thomensis* Several were living in the gardens of our *São Tomé* hotel.



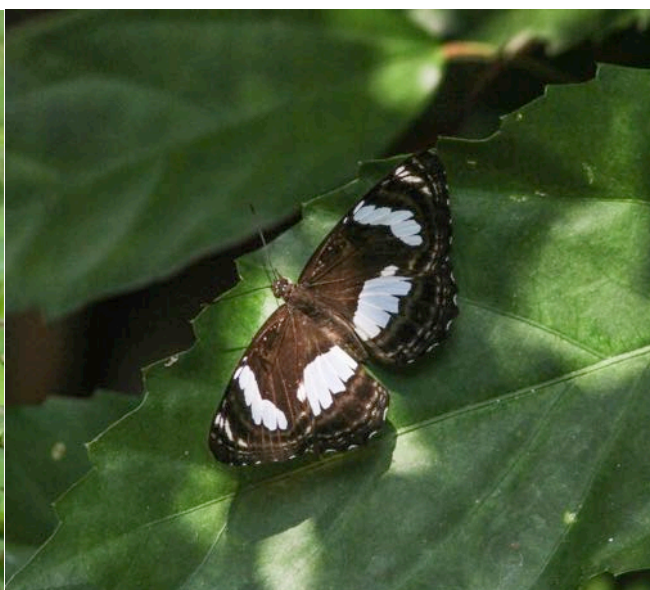
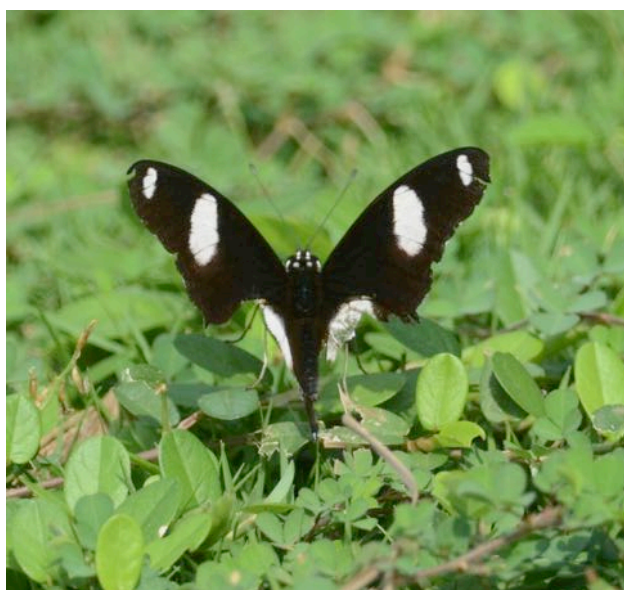
The group at the Monte Carmo campsite in southern *São Tomé* (Mark Van Beirs)



A Sao Tome Skink (*Trachylepis thomensis*); Principe scenery (Mark Van Beirs)



The Sao Tome Thrush is much easier to see than his close relative on Principe (Mark Van Beirs)



*A Danaid eggfly or Diadem (*Hypolimnas misippus*) (Mark Van Beirs); a Principe Sailer *Neptis larseni* (tour participant Phil Hyde)*