CUANZA SUL

The heart of Angola

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER RYAN

Gabela… The name epitomises the excitement of birding in Angola – and the frustration that 27 years of civil war has largely prevented access to the region. With its own akalat, bush-shrike and helmet-shrike, Gabela lies at the centre of the Angolan scarp forest – a key endemic bird area that has been off-limits for a generation, giving it mythical status.

Now, with the war over, *Ian Sinclair* and *Peter Ryan* report on the first ornithological visits to the region.

Previous spread *Luanda Bay. Royal Terns feed along the waterfront, but Fernando Po Swifts are the star attraction.*

Below *Cliffs dominate the coastline of much of Angola due to uplifting of the coastal plain. At Porto Amboim an isolated cliff remnant shelters the port's jetty.*

We arrived in Luanda, the An-golan capital, on 22 February, the anniversary of UNITA leader Joseph Savimbi's death. Newspapers carried front-page pictures of his bloody corpse, as if to reaffirm the end of the war. Although the country still has numerous problems, not least of which is assimilating the 100 000 former soldiers, there has been a virtual cessation of fighting since Savimbi was killed. With the country starting to rebuild, we were invited to assess the birding potential of the region south of Luanda, centred on Cuanza Sul, one of Angola's 18 provinces. The offer was hard to refuse, because it gave us a chance to visit the scarp forest around Gabela.

Luanda lies on the coast of Angola, less than 1 000 kilometres from the equator. The city is bursting at the seams with five million people, almost half of this vast country's total population. Many of the colonial buildings along the picturesque waterfront are being renovated, but they are surrounded by sprawling shanty towns. Despite this, the city offers a few interesting birds. The large brown swifts breeding in buildings along the waterfront are probably Fernando Po Swifts, an extremely poorly known species recorded only from a few localities in Angola, Bioko and the highlands of south-western Cameroon. Royal Terns feed in Luanda Bay, and the vast lagoon formed by the Mussulo peninsula that extends 37 kilometres south-west of the city is worth a look for its many waders and other waterbirds, including small numbers of Gull-billed Terns.

However, we were primarily interested in the region's endemic birds, many of which have not been seen since the start of the civil war in 1974.

Quiçama National Park, some 75 kilometres south of Luanda, has been open to tourists for the past few years. The riparian forest and thicket support several Angolan endemics, including Grey-striped Francolin, Red-backed Mousebird, White-fronted Wattle-eye and small numbers of Red-crested Turacos, as well as near-endemics such as Pale Olive Greenbuls and Bubbling Cisticolas. But we drove 200 kilometres further south to Porto Amboim and Sumbe in Cuanza Sul Province. This route took us across the arid coastal plain that is home to many species often considered southern African 'endemics', such as Rüppell's Parrot, Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark, Bare-cheeked Babbler and Pale-winged Starling. However, it also supports several birds seldom encountered further south: Rufous-tailed Palm Thrushes sing from the denser thickets, Grey Kestrels perch on the few surviving telephone poles, and Angola Swallows are regular in small numbers. Palm-nut Vultures are common, having seemingly displaced crows as the chief scavengers.

One of the most abundant species is the Bubbling Cisticola, a near-endemic to Angola. It sounds very similar to Rattling Cisticola, but has a plain back and occurs in a wide range of habitats, from arid ▷

A spectacular gorge cut through the elevated coastal plain by the Cubal River, 15 kilometres south of Sumbe. The cliffs had the local race of Peregrine, and African Hobby quartered the adjacent saltmarsh.

Red-crested Turaco

scrub to forest clearings and reedbeds. The endemic Red-backed Mousebird, which clearly shows affinities to the Speckled Mousebird complex, also occupies a broad range of habitats, and is fairly easily seen. Good early rains had carpeted the usually dry coastal plain's euphorbia scrub and baobab savanna with lush grassland, which might account for the apparently unusual sighting of Black-faced Canaries at the coast. In general the ranges of many birds in Angola are poorly known and we extended the distributions of several species on the coastal plain, including northward extensions for Augur Buzzard, Rockrunner and White Helmet-Shrike, and a southward extension for Long-legged Pipit.

The river systems also provided a few surprises. The Keve (or Cuvo) River, which has a massive floodplain more than 30 kilometres long, gave us southward range extensions for Greater Swamp Warbler and the delicate Slender-billed Weaver. It also had a few Loanda Swifts (the rare dark-rumped form of Horus Swift) among the Little Swifts breeding under the main road bridge. This wetland warrants further investigation as it is likely to be of regional importance for its large populations of waterbirds, not least the huge numbers of Allen's (Lesser) Gallinule, a species that was formerly thought to be relatively uncommon in Angola.

Star of the show on the coastal plain, though, was the stunning Golden-backed Bishop. Small flocks occur in well-grassed savannas and in rank vegetation around the margins of wetlands. What sets it apart from other bishops is the almost luminescent quality of the male's golden-orange back, which contrasts starkly with the otherwise black plumage. It is endemic to Angola, but was taken by the Portuguese to the island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea. Ironically, the introduced population has been ticked by many more birders than the native population.

One of the interesting things about birding Angola (or any new area for that matter) is seeing new subspecies of familiar birds. In Angola, male Village Weavers have chestnut breasts and more extensive black heads than the supposedly conspecific 'Spotted-backed' Weavers of southern Africa. Male Thick-billed Weavers have stunning chestnut heads, and are much more striking than their dowdy southern relatives. Angola Swallows are darker below than the more familiar populations in Tanzania and Malawi, although they are not recognised as a different subspecies. Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills have mostly dark tails, browner upperparts and appear smaller than the birds in southern Africa. Given the recent splitting of hornbills, this apparently undescribed variant requires further study.

But our main objective was to bird the forests of the escarpment inland from the coastal plain. These forests have affinities to both the Congo basin to the north and the montane forests of East Africa, and are home to several extremely localised endemic birds.

Leaving Sumbe on the coast at 03h30, we headed inland, up the road to Gabela. After 26 kilometres, the road crosses the spectacular Keve River falls, where the river makes its final descent on to the coastal plain. Before dawn it was just a throaty roar as we crossed the narrow bridge. From there, the road deteriorated in proportion with the increasing rainfall and our progress slowed as we weaved between large potholes. First light found us at the foot of the scarp forest, slipping and sliding through muddy pools and dodging stranded trucks.

Many species reach their southern limits in these forests. The dawn chorus offered the promise of things to come, with the mournful whistles of Brown Illadopsises, Fraser's Rufous Thrushes and Forest Scrub Robins competing with the cheerful chuckles of Yellow-necked Greenbuls and the deep grunts of Gabon Coucals. It didn't take long before we'd seen the first of many Red-crested Turacos bounding through the tall canopy – as an Angolan endemic this has been the toughest turaco for birders to see.

Other canopy species that we encountered included the exquisite Yellow-billed Barbet, Black-throated Apalis and the local race of the decidedly ugly Naked-faced Barbet. Lower down, the middle storey has Pink-footed Puffback, Green Hylia and Green Crombec, Olive-bellied Sunbird and the striking Yellow-throated Nicator, with its fierce yellow supercilium. The diminutive Angola Batis is also fairly common, and we obtained some of the first recordings of its high-pitched song.

Ian had been up this road a few weeks previously and found the remaining forests around Gabela town to be fairly inaccessible. Accordingly, we turned south on the road to Conda, which carries less traffic and is in better shape than the Gabela road. After a few kilometres, the road recrosses the Keve River at the 'six bridges'. Our driver, a former MiG pilot in the Angolan airforce, proudly informed us that this is where the South African army's advance on Luanda had been stopped. Somehow, on such a peaceful morning, it was difficult to imagine a major battle taking place on this tiny dirt track winding through rolling hills in the middle of nowhere.

Conda, once a busy centre for coffee farming, is now a sleepy hamlet slowly awakening after the war years. Spectacular granite domes and pale quartzitic ridges punctuate the hilly terrain around the town. Most of the area is clothed in grassland and scattered bush, with larger forest patches primarily on the steeper slopes. The grassland is home to small flocks of Compact Weavers, Orange-cheeked Waxbills, and the very green endemic race of Bronze Sunbird. The forest edge and adjacent scrub supports small numbers of Grey-striped Francolins along with the more common Red-necked.

We headed seven kilometres down the Seles road to Kumbira, a small village adjoining a large patch of intact forest. The recent rains, combined with the occasional passage of banana trucks, had reduced the road to a quagmire, so we walked the last kilometres to the ▷

The road to Gabela from the coast degenerates into a slippery mud slope as it starts to climb into the scarp forests.

The falls on the Keve River, on its last descent before the floodplain.

Below the falls, the Keve River meanders across a broad floodplain, attracting a wide range of waterbirds.

village. But the road runs through degraded farmbush which is teeming with birds. The endemic Hartert's Camaroptera is common in dense thickets, where it is joined by small groups of the skulking and apparently scarce Pale Olive Greenbul – easily overlooked if you don't know its querulous song and incessant '*prrt prrt*' alarm call. More easily seen are the many African Firefinches, Grey Waxbills and Black-and-white Mannikins that forage on grass-seeds along the edge of the road. They are joined by small numbers of Red-faced Crimsonwings as well as stunning Red-headed Bluebills.

Much of the area consists of old coffee plantations. Fortunately, these were shade-coffee, so much of the forest canopy was left intact. In some places, *Grevillea* trees were planted to provide shade, but even these Australian trees are good value, because their flowers attract numerous sunbirds, including the aptly-named Superb Sunbird and the more subdued Green-headed and Carmelite sunbirds.

Two of the area's sought-after species occur in this degraded forest. Monteiro's Bush-Shrike, known only from a handful of specimens from the Angolan scarp forest and a few recent sightings from south-western Cameroon, is surprisingly common. Its call is almost identical to the closely related Grey-headed Bush-Shrike, and several could be heard calling at once each morning. In the field, it differs from Grey-headed Bush-Shrike in having a darker eye, a more extensive pale face and cold yellow underparts, lacking any orange wash on the breast or flanks.

The other endemic with broad habitat tolerances is the Gabela Bush-Shrike. Also known as the Amboim Boubou, it is closely related to Lühder's Bush-Shrike, but has crisp white underparts and a deep chestnut cap. It is easily overlooked unless it is calling, but is fairly common in farmbush as well as intact forest. The Gabela scarp forests support a remarkable diversity of bush-shrikes: in addition to these two range-restricted species, there are large numbers of Perrin's Bush-Shrikes and a few Orange-breasted Bush-Shrikes in the more open forest, and Many-coloured Bush-Shrike has been collected in the area.

Kumbira Forest, near Conda, nestled under the impressive quartzitic cliffs of Njelo Mountain.

Gabela Bush-Shrike

The Gabela Akalat is perhaps the only endemic that requires intact forest. It occurs in areas with dense understorey, and is quite secretive. We found only one bird, whose presence was given away by its soft, mournful '*tiuu tiuu tiuu tiuu*' song, descending in pitch. It was quite difficult to observe, and playback of its song seemed to stir up Forest Scrub-Robins, which have a similar but more varied song. One scrub-robin was seen to chase the akalat, and it is possible that the relative abundance of scrub-robins at Kumbira may account for the scarcity of akalats.

Gabela Akalat

There are many other good birds in the scarp forests. Bird parties move through the canopy, centred on small flocks of Dusky Tits. This highly isolated population of tits is smaller and paler than other Dusky Tits, and is recognised as a different subspecies. Joining them in the bird parties are a host of other birds, including Petit's Cuckoo-Shrikes, Grey Apalises, African Blue Flycatchers, Rufous-vented Paradise Flycatchers, both Yellow-breasted and Southern hyliotas, and Brown-capped Weavers. Strangely, some species are seemingly absent from Kumbira. There are no large hornbills and we heard no trogons or Square-tailed Drongos (although both are known from Gabela). Barbets and woodpeckers are quite well represented, however, and we recorded a range ▷

Gabela Helmet-Shrike

Pulitzer's Longbill

extension for the Hairy-breasted Barbet. Another first for Cuanza Sul was Slender-billed Greenbul, a distinctive greenbul that probably escaped the early collectors as a result of its canopy-dwelling habits.

Of the remaining localised endemics, Gabela Helmet-Shrike probably occurs in more open woodland. We didn't encounter any at Kumbira, but Ian had a small flock further down the road from Kumbira to Seles. The other endemic, Pulitzer's Longbill, apparently reaches its northern limit in Cuanza Sul, where it was collected near Seles. Known from only a handful of specimens, this species has not been seen since 1974 and virtually nothing is known about its biology.

There was no sign of the longbill at Kumbira, and unfortunately the road through to Seles was impassable. We returned to the coast and took the direct road from Sumbe to Seles, which proved to be in better shape than the Gabela road. Within minutes of stopping in a rather scrubby, degraded forest west of Seles we had located the bird by its distinctive song. Contrary to early reports, it is not particularly secretive and responds aggressively to play-back. Now that its song is known, it will be much easier to tell whether its distribution is really as restricted as the few specimens collected to date suggest. Unfortunately we didn't have much time to explore this area, which probably shares many of the species found further north at Kumbira. A bonus here was an obliging pair of White-fronted Wattle-eyes, which allowed us to make the first recordings of their buzzy song duet.

Because of the lack of knowledge of the restricted-range endemics and a perceived loss of habitat, many of the endemics of the Angolan scarp are currently listed as Endangered. Our limited observations suggest that these concerns may be overly pessimistic, at least for some species such as Gabela Bush-Shrike and Pulitzer's Longbill, which are tolerant of degraded vegetation. However, a comprehensive survey of remaining forest habitat and an assessment of the likely future rate of forest loss is needed to revise the levels of threat facing different species, and to establish a viable conservation target for the long-term persistence of these forests and their unique birds.

There remain many other challenges for birders in Angola. The higher elevation forests inland from the scarp forests support other endemics that await rediscovery, including Swierstra's Francolin, Angola Cave-Chat and Angola Slaty-Flycatcher. Further north the focus is on Braun's Bush-Shrike and White-headed Robin-Chat. Hopefully the country's troubles are now a thing of the past and it will only be a matter of time before Angola is firmly on the birding map. □

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OFF YOU GO…

VISITING AND LOGISTICS

There are currently no organised birding tours into Angola. Independent birders can fly into Luanda from Johannesburg and other major centres.

Visitors from most countries need a visa, which requires a letter of invitation, and you also need a current yellow-fever vaccination certificate. Good news for South Africans is that the Angolan and South African governments recently agreed to cancel visa requirements.

Luanda and the major coastal towns offer accommodation in hotels and pensions, but conditions are often rustic, and relatively expensive (US$40–200 per night). Most food is imported, and also expensive, although local produce is much cheaper in the countryside.

US dollars are the best currency to take, but old notes (with 'little heads') generally are not accepted. Officially, all dollars should be changed into Angolan Kwanzas through banks, but in Luanda at least most shops accept US dollars, giving change in either dollars or Kwanzas. We also heard some bad reports about changing dollars in banks.

Roads are generally poor, especially in the interior. A vehicle with high clearance is essential, and four-wheel drive is preferable, especially during the rainy season (February–April). It is best to have a driver to help you negotiate the maze of streets in Luanda, and to translate if you don't speak Portuguese. Fuel is cheap in Luanda (approximately US$ 20c per litre), but is much more costly further afield ($1.25 per litre in Sumbe). Petrol is also not always available, so take every opportunity to fill up and try to carry a jerrycan or two for insurance.

SAFETY

As in any large city, you need to be wary of theft in Luanda. Some areas apparently are best not visited after dark.

Travelling outside Luanda, it is best to notify the local authorities (police commandant or district commissioner) of your plans when you arrive in a new district.

Landmines and anti-personnel mines are a major problem in some places. Check with local people whether there are mines in an area, and don't stray off roads or well-trodden paths just in case. When mines are located, they are marked with flags prior to removal.

There are also other hazards: the forest at Kumbira has gin traps set to catch game, so think twice before chasing off trails after birds.

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