



# Toughing it out

## BIRDING SIERRA LEONE

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER RYAN

**B**lood diamonds and limb-lopping rebels are probably the first things that spring to mind when you mention Sierra Leone, thanks to the bloody civil war that raged there over the past decade or so. Yet today this small West African country is being hailed in the region as a model for peaceful reconciliation and, given the ongoing unrest in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, it is the safest place to see most of the birds endemic to the Upper Guinea forests, as well as some other localised West African species. Ian Sinclair, Rod Cassidy and Peter Ryan recently visited Sierra Leone to assess its birding opportunities. ▶



*Rod Cassidy cranes his neck birding in a forest on the Nimini Hills. Many of the forested areas in Sierra Leone are hilly, bringing the canopy (and the birds in it) closer, and it is thus less challenging than birding in lowland rainforest.*

**Opposite** *Stuck on the road to the Loma Mountains. The poor road infrastructure is a real handicap to birding in Sierra Leone.*



Sandwiched between Guinea and Liberia, Sierra Leone is a small coastal state on the bulge of Africa. The country is roughly square, some 300 kilometres across, and has a total area of just over 72 000 square kilometres, making it smaller than Mpumalanga. Much of the country is forested, merging into Guinea savanna in the north, with sandy beaches and mangrove swamps along the coast. Despite its relative paucity of habitats, Sierra Leone boasts a list of some 630 bird species, including all but one of the Upper Guinea endemics. The exception is the Liberian Greenbul, which is known only from two small forests in eastern Liberia.

Access is via the capital, Freetown, which nestles at the western end of the Freetown Peninsula. Unlike most of the coast, the Peninsula is mountainous, rising to almost 1 000 metres above sea level. Visible from far out to sea, it was the Peninsula that drew the attention of the first Portuguese explorers to visit the area in the 1460s. In fact, the country derives its name from the early Portuguese name Serra Lyoa (lion mountain), and it is easy to see why the British used Freetown as their administrative centre in West Africa during the 19th

century. The city is attractively situated between the sea and mountains, with flat land so scarce that the airport is situated across the broad Sierra Leone River estuary, with access to the city by helicopter, hovercraft or ferry. To drive from the airport requires a circuitous 140-kilometre trip on indifferent roads.

Although the largest diversity of forest birds is found along the eastern border with Liberia, there is plenty of good birding on the Freetown Peninsula. The Upper Guinea forests reach their western limit on the Peninsula, and several key birds are found here. Probably top of most birders' want-lists is the White-necked Picathartes, the western representative of this shy, almost mythical family. Yet in Sierra Leone it is pretty much guaranteed. Thanks to the efforts of Hazell Thompson, who worked on picathartes for his PhD prior to the civil war, and the ongoing monitoring efforts of the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone, several hundred breeding sites are known, including some that are relatively easy to reach. One near Freetown is a mere 10-minute walk from the end of a 4x4 track.

With hindsight, we probably should have birded the Peninsula first, but we

were eager to get to greener pastures and headed east to where the more range-restricted specials awaited. In doing so we got our first taste of the biggest drawback to birding in Sierra Leone – the roads. The country may be small, but the roads are for the most part appalling, and it takes a long time to cover even modest distances. To be fair, we had arrived at the start of the rainy season in a year when the rains had started several months early. As a result, we struggled more than if we had visited in the dry season. However, until the road infrastructure improves, don't plan a trip using conventional time-distance equations!

Our first destination was Tiwai Island, a 4 000-hectare island in the Moa River, near the Liberian border. Our main target was the White-breasted Guineafowl, which is scarce and elusive throughout most of its range as a result of widespread hunting. Tiwai is a community-based wildlife reserve where there has been little or no hunting for many years and as a result it is one of the best places for birds and mammals in Sierra Leone. The reserve has been used extensively by primatologists, who have created a regularly spaced network of trails through the forest. Despite these favourable conditions,

seeking out the guineafowl can be a time-consuming exercise. Fortunately, there are many other attractions.

At dawn, the harsh calls of Olive and Spot-breasted ibises ring out as they fly over the camp site. As the light improves, a dazzling array of birds and mammals vie for your attention. Among the Upper Guinea endemics, White-tailed Alethes are abundant and easily seen once you cue in to their mournful 'peeoo' whistle. Green-tailed Bristlebills are less common, but even more responsive to playback. By comparison, Western Wattled Cuckoo-shrikes are easily overlooked as they move through the canopy in bird parties, which include a rich diversity of Guinea-Congo forest species. Among the mammals, Maxwell's and yellow-backed duikers slink through the understorey, while noisy parties of exquisite Diana monkeys crash through the canopy overhead. Other monkeys commonly encountered include western red and western pied colobus, lesser spot-nosed

**Above** The West African form of Vieillot's Black Weaver has a distinctive chestnut mantle and belly, making it much more handsome than its eastern counterpart.

**Above, left** Freetown, the capital, is sandwiched between the sea and steep, forested mountains. There is plenty of good birding close to town, but commuting is complicated by the crowded roads.



Sierra Leone Prinia

Despite its relative paucity of habitats, Sierra Leone boasts a list of some 630 bird species, including all but one of the Upper Guinea endemics



JASON D. WECKSTEIN, BEN D. MARKS/NCRC

**Top** The spectacular falls at Bumbuna occur in an area of moist Guinea woodland that supports large numbers of birds, including the localised Turati's Boubou and the exquisite Emerald Starling.

**Above** The bizarre White-necked Picathartes will be high on anyone's want-list for Sierra Leone – and you're unlikely to be disappointed.

monkeys and sooty mangabeys. At night we failed to find any Rufous Fishing-Owls on the rain-swollen river, but were consoled by an obliging potto.

Leaving Tiwai we headed north to Kenema, where we visited a picathartes colony on a giant boulder overhanging a forest stream. The somewhat arduous one-hour hike to the site was forgotten in an instant as the first White-neck

materialised next to the rock. During the next hour we had at least five of these truly bizarre birds bounding around us continuously, sometimes passing within a few metres as we sat quietly opposite their colony. The White-necked Picathartes has to be one of the most thrilling birds to see in Africa, and one of the greatest passerines worldwide.

East of Kenema, the small village of Belebu is the gateway to the northern Gola region, which supports the largest tract of lowland forest remaining in Sierra Leone. Unlike Tiwai, this area is hilly, and getting about is more strenuous. During our visit, access was further restricted as exceptional winds a few weeks previously had felled large swathes of trees, which now blocked sections of the path in the forest. We birded mainly around the forest edge, where the scarce Gola Malimbe had been recorded in the past, but we had no joy; a scruffy, back-lit Yellow-mantled Weaver was the only species to cause a few flutters. But once again, we weren't too disappointed. We saw six hornbill species, ranging from the diminutive Black Dwarf to the gargantuan Yellow-casqued Wattled, as well as a fine variety of other forest species, including Forest Francolin, Ussher's

Flycatcher and Finsch's Rufous Thrush. The raucous calls of chimpanzees added an extra edge to the birding, as did the knowledge that Nimba Flycatcher has been recorded in the area.

We tried for Gola Malimbe at another likely site further north, near Koidu in the heart of the diamond-mining region, but sadly the small forest patch where a malimbe nest had been found the previous year was no longer in existence. Our first Crimson Seedcracker proved scant consolation and more disappointment was to follow, as the road to the Loma Mountains was impassable as a result of the heavy rains. This was our stake-out for Sierra Leone Prinia, as well as a chance at a mouthwatering list of other birds. The so-called prinia probably is a sister species to the inappropriately-named White-chinned Prinia (which isn't a prinia at all, but a warbler). In the event, the oppressive rainclouds prevented even a glimpse of Mount Bintumani, which at 1 945 metres is sub-Saharan Africa's highest mountain west of Mount Cameroon.

With the Loma Mountains off limits, we spent a nonetheless productive day birding the Nimini Hills a little further south. Although too low-lying to hold the prinia, they provided some of the best forest birding we had in Sierra Leone, with numerous sightings of the normally scarce Fiery-breasted Bush-Shrike, brilliant views of a displaying Rufous-sided Broadbill, and one of the more stunning birds of the trip, the Red-cheeked Wattle-eye. Nearby rivers support good numbers of Egyptian Plovers in the dry season, but none was to be found with river levels high.

We only birded the southern fringes of Guinea savanna woodland at Bumbuna on our way back to Freetown. After the relatively slow forest birding, it was refreshing to see large numbers of birds sitting out in the open. The two highlights were undoubtedly the localised Turati's Boubou, which is common at Bumbuna, and a small flock of stunning Emerald Starlings. However, there were a host of other, more widespread species, such as Double-toothed Barbet, Blackcap Babbler, Senegal Batis, Compact Weaver,



Dybowski's Twinspot and Black-bellied Firefinch. Closer to Freetown, a bonus was seeing a group of Blue-breasted Rollers, well south of their known range, feeding on termite alates.

Our last two days were spent on the Freetown Peninsula, looking for a few species we had missed elsewhere. Number 2 River, on the western coast south of Freetown, is a lovely spot, with Western Reef Herons and a large roost of Royal and Black terns at the river mouth. The adjacent mangroves had Shining Blue Kingfisher and Mangrove Sunbird, but unfortunately there was no sign of the elusive White-crested Tiger Heron. It is reported to be common in the more extensive mangroves along the Sierra Leone River, north-east of Freetown, but time constraints didn't allow us to go in search of it.

The trail to the Tacugama Chimpanzee Sanctuary above Regent Town yielded Kemp's Longbill as well as a party of Capuchin Babblers. But the highlight was watching an unlikely mix of birds feeding at a termite emergence. In addition to the more usual bulbuls and weavers at the feast, a Blue Malkoha bounded up to the top of an adjacent tree, then ▷

*Subsistence farming on the edge of Gola Forest near Belebu. This area, which holds the largest tract of Upper Guinea forest left in Sierra Leone, is the subject of a major BirdLife conservation initiative.*



Gola Malimbe

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Shelley's Eagle-Owl

glided down, grabbing alates in flight, and a stunning male Crimson Seedcracker looked distinctly out of place hawking the termites from more than 30 metres up a large cottonwood tree. The party came to an abrupt end, however, when a very pale Ayres's Eagle stooped through, narrowly missing the seedcracker.

While travelling through Freetown it is impossible to ignore Sierra Leone's fascinating history. Freetown was established in 1787 as a settlement for liberated slaves from Britain and America. The returning slaves had little in common with the local people in the area. They adopted many English customs and developed an English-based creole, which is the *lingua franca* in Sierra Leone today. After the country was formally colonised by Britain in 1808, the returnees (or Krio) tended to be preferred over native Sierra Leonians, resulting in a parallel society that persisted to some extent even after the country gained independence in 1961. Today Krio communities are still easily recognised by their distinctive style of architecture, which is more reminiscent of the Caribbean than of Africa.

We left Sierra Leone with an enviable list of birds seen, but with several good reasons to return. In addition to Sierra Leone Prinia and Gola Malimbe, we also dipped on Black-headed Rufous Warbler. Other juicy attractions include rumours of a reliable Shelley's Eagle-Owl near Pujehun in the far south-east, and pygmy hippo is a real possibility given more time at Tiwai Island. The country is not for the faint-hearted – most of the

rural population lives in grinding poverty, and conditions for tourists remain spartan. The birding is often slow, with birds thin on the ground and quite skittish in many areas, probably as a result of widespread hunting. However, it remains an exciting destination for the dedicated African birder intent on chasing the Upper Guinea endemics. □

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### LUCKY DRAW COMPETITION

Struik Publishers are offering two copies of their groundbreaking field guide *Birds of Africa south of the Sahara* by Ian Sinclair and Peter Ryan, valued at more than R320, to the first two entries drawn in our competition.

Simply send a postcard with your name, street address and daytime telephone number to: Birds of Africa Competition, Africa – Birds & Birding, P O Box 44223, Claremont 7735.



The closing date for the competition is 31 January 2006, and the first two names drawn will each win a copy.

Tourism in Sierra Leone is still in its infancy, following the civil war. There are few tourist facilities, and the presence of a United Nations peace-keeping force over the past few years has led to inflated prices. Rooms cost US\$50–100 per night for even the most basic of hotels, and culinary delights are decidedly limited beyond Freetown.

The rainy season in Sierra Leone ostensibly runs from May to October, but the rains started early in 2005, and several species had already finished breeding by the end of June. Possibly the best time to visit is December/January, when the Harmattan winds cool the country. If you are set on seeing picathartes breeding, September–November are the best months.

There are daily flights to Freetown from Senegal and Ghana as well as from several European hubs. South Africans require a visa, but there is no consulate in South Africa. With a little persuasion, the Department of Home Affairs in Pretoria will issue a visa, or your local travel agent may be able to arrange a visa on

arrival. We flew in via Accra on a package that required us to spend three nights in Ghana, which was a bonus as it allowed us time to ease into Upper Guinea forest birding with a visit to the justly renowned canopy boardwalk in Kakum that we failed to encounter elsewhere on the trip, such as Brown Nightjar, Hairy-breasted Barbet and Cassin's Honeybird. Kakum also gave us our best views of several Upper Guinea species such as Sharpe's Apalis and Copper-tailed Starling.

Probably the best way to visit Sierra Leone is on a tour organised by a local agent or a reputable tour company. We were guided by Kenneth Gbengba, who worked as a tour guide in Senegal and The Gambia for many years, but with the cessation of hostilities returned home to start an ecotourism company. He works closely with the local BirdLife partner, the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone. Contact Kenneth at [factsfinding@yahoo.com](mailto:factsfinding@yahoo.com)