

Sao Tome & Principe 2023

Ornis Birding Expeditions



Principe Thrush (all images by Joshua Bergmark)



ORNIS

birding expeditions

1 - 9th March 2023

Tour led by Joshua Bergmark

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Principe Scops Owl, only described recently and accepted as new species in 2023!

The Gulf of Guinea holds two rarely-visited islands which between them contain no less than 28 endemic species. All seen except one heard-only on our tour this year to Sao Tome and Principe was a tough ask given the undeniable scarcity of several Critically Endangered birds, but everyone was very happy with the results after some hard work and lengthy remote hikes! Highlights ranged from extended close-encounters with the highly-threatened Sao Tome Ibis (perhaps better known as Dwarf Ibis) and Principe Thrush, the strange Sao Tome Shorttail and Sao Tome Fiscal, to both Giant Sunbird and Giant Weaver, plus the world's newest bird species in the form of Principe Scops Owl. Our unique approach to camping two nights at the best birding site on Monte Carmo and backup days for both islands to account for bad weather certainly worked strongly in our favour. Excellent food complemented our luxurious hotels, while excursions were backdropped by ancient and stunning volcanic scenery of the Cameroon Line. Although the average airline staff members from our respective departure airports were unable to point to this tiny country on a map, our bags all arrived safely on the first evening and this tour to ST&P was definitely one to remember!

We pulled up at Bom Sucesso Botanic Gardens early in the morning, excited to commence the first ever field session of Ornithology Expeditions! Our small circuit of the area produced looks at Island Bronze-naped Pigeon, Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher, Newton's Sunbird, Black-capped Speirops, and Principe Seed-eater (the latter somewhat confusingly named, as it is found on both islands). Walking up towards the forest edge, a particularly relieving find was the sometimes tricky Sao Tome White-eye, along with many creeping Sao Tome Weaver, several attractive Sao Tome Thrush, the ubiquitous Sao Tome Prinia, and a flock of Sao Tome Spinetail overhead. The highlight however was a magnificent Giant Sunbird, which posed at length in the open for excellent views, the first of many sightings we were



Newton's Sunbird



Black-capped Speirops

to enjoy of this special bird. Back at the cars we drove higher, reaching the radio towers where a chunky Sao Tome Green Pigeon was tracked down after some effort before we headed down for lunch.

Our afternoon session in grassland near the airport was focused on finding the endemic subspecies of Harlequin Quail, which we eventually obtained nice views of on the ground just before dusk. Some spectacular breeding-plumaged Golden-backed Bishops were the most appreciated introduced species, since they are normally seen wearing very drab feathers on dry season birding tours to their native Angola. Others included Black-winged Bishop, Southern Masked Weaver, Village Weaver, Red-headed Quelea, Bronze Mannikin, Blue Waxbill, Common Waxbill, and White-winged Widowbird.

Finding ourselves at a large river bridge on our way south in the morning (the vehicles piled high with camping gear and porters!), several "Sao Tome" Malachite Kingfishers put on a good show, along with Western Reef Heron, Reed Cormorant, Eurasian Whimbrel, and a surprise Peregrine Falcon. Reaching the drivable end of a muddy dirt road, our intrepid group began walking towards the edge of Obo National Park while the local team prepared everything for the coming days on the slopes of Monte Carmo. On our way, a male Giant Weaver was briefly seen feeding in the oil palms, then on entering the forest it didn't take long before we flushed up not one, but four Dwarf Ibis! Magnificent views of this Critically Endangered species were much appreciated, as were another two higher up along the trail. Different Sao Tome Scops Owls called almost constantly throughout the morning, and soon enough one was close enough that we were able to find it perched low down in a gully. Then the skulking Sao Tome Shorttail made an extended appearance singing from an open branch just below the trail. Now thought to be an aberrant rainforest-dwelling pipit, this surprisingly small bird was certainly a big tour highlight! We heard only one



Giant Weaver

Sao Tome Olive Pigeon, which remained stubbornly out of view.

Due to a mixup with the order of luggage being ported up the mountain, we arrived at the campsite an hour before the food arrived. Undeterred, everyone chose to delay lunch and continue higher, which proved a great decision as we soon found a very cooperative Sao Tome Fiscal. Relieved to have seen most of our targets so quickly, the early dinner back at camp was eaten hastily! Both morphs of Sao Tome Scops Owl were enjoyed during our pleasantly short nocturnal session, while plenty of Sao Tome Roundleaf Bats flitted through the camp lights.

At dawn, everything happened a little too quickly. Just about the first bird we saw was the rare Sao Tome Grosbeak only a five minute walk from our tents, but unfortunately it was partially blocked and only seen by the left-half of the group before disappearing deep into the forest.



The legendary Sao Tome Dwarf Ibis!

While we tried to track it down again, a "Sao Tome" Western Barn Owl flushed into an open tree but was only seen by a few before it too moved away, though this was to be rectified later... The subsequent daylight hours produced several Sao Tome Orioles, "Sao Tome" Lemon Doves and a lonely baby ibis sitting on a nest, but we eventually had to call it quits as dusk fell without even a peep from any more grosbeaks. A few bonus animals included Sao Tome Cobra, Sao Tome Brown House Snake, and an astonishing Sao Tome Giant Tree Frog.

Our last morning at the campsite did not yield any more grosbeak sightings, but some last views and photos of the forest endemics we had become familiar with over the past days were appreciated. A flock of Sao Tome White-eye in the forest was somewhat surprising on our way down, this species more typically seen in scrubby habitat. We spent some time searching for more Giant Weavers (eventually finding two females which showed well feeding in some oil palms) then it was back to our luxurious coastal hotel for cold beers and hot showers! A few people opted to go spotlighting after dinner, and were rewarded with excellent views of a "Sao Tome" Western Barn Owl.

A few spare hours before our transfer to Principe were spent giving the Sao Tome Olive Pigeon one last try, but none were even heard and it appeared this nomadic species was not really around this year in accessible areas. The morning was highlighted instead by extended views of two spectacular male Giant Weavers building nests above the road, and much improved views of "Sao Tome" Chestnut-winged Starling which had only been viewed from underneath on previous days.

In the late afternoon we arrived on Principe, transferring to our boutique accommodation at a historic cocoa plantation. Rain was bucketing down for the first time on our trip, but thankfully as the light started to fade, so too did the downpour.



"Sao Tome" Western Barn Owl!



The weird Sao Tome Shorttail, which is actually a pipit!



The surprising Sao Tome Weaver!



Sao Tome Fiscal!



Sao Tome Scops Owl



Principe Seed eater

Following a quick dinner we were prepared for our night excursion, which involved a two hour hike to the only "easily" accessible pair of a very rare species... By 9pm we had arrived in the target area, and after a short wait were treated to a magnificent encounter with Principe Scops Owl. Discovered in 2016 but only added by IOC last month, technically we can claim it as the world's newest bird species! Everyone was very relieved to crawl into bed at midnight with peace of mind that we wouldn't have to try again the next night, somewhat incredulous that we were privileged to now be amongst the extremely small contingent of people to have ever seen this Critically Endangered bird! We also saw a few endemic frogs on the return walk: Drewe's Reed Frog, Palm Forest Tree Frog, and Peters' River Frog.

After too short of a sleep, we were ready at dawn to board our boat for a transfer to the remote south. Unfortunately our lunch was accidentally dropped overboard during embarkment, so we had to wait for more and ended up arriving quite late. With the gracious help of a tiny fishing community and their smaller boat, we all safely made it ashore and began walking. A trio of the scarce Principe subspecies of Principe Seed eater were enjoyed, along with the endemic subspecies of Blue-breasted Kingfisher. Two hours later we finally heard a suspicious noise which on investigation revealed an astoundingly confiding Principe Thrush hopping around on a rocky slope! Another Critically Endangered species only known from this remote and beautifully rugged terrain, we were certainly relieved to succeed. Our walk back was culminated with a quick swim at the beach and a few brief observations of another Endangered bird, Principe White-eye. The return journey included Brown Booby and White-tailed Tropicbird, with both "Principe" Malachite Kingfisher and the scarce "Principe" Velvet-mantled Drongo back at port. Our backup day was no longer required for the hard species which we were lucky to find so easily, so everyone enjoyed relaxed birding around the hotel and nearby coastline (interspersed

with very fine dining and some particularly excellent octopus). The elegant Principe Speirops mixed in with pairs of Dohrn's Warbler, the latter now considered an aberrant Sylvia warbler stuck on a permanent tropical holiday! Principe Sunbird and Principe Starling were commonly encountered, while the noisy Principe Weavers in full breeding plumage were busy building nests adorning the palm trees. More sightings were had of the kingfishers, plus endemic subspecies of "Principe" Lemon Dove, African Green Pigeon, and the lovely Timneh Parrot. Splendid Starlings, African Emerald Cuckoos, and some final Island Bronze-naped Pigeons rounded out our list, and the next morning we returned to Sao Tome where the tour came to a close.

Principe Speirops



Principe Weaver

Thanks to this excellent group with keen attitudes, we were very successful and could truly enjoy these wonderful and rarely-visited equatorial islands. It must be mentioned in post-script that a few participants who had their departure flights the next day organised one more morning in the mountains, where an 11km (!) trek towards Pico Sao Tome finally yielded a last-minute pair of Sao Tome Olive Pigeons to complete the full endemic set.

BIRDS OF THE TOUR

- 1: Sao Tome Ibis
- 2: Principe Scops Owl
- =3: Sao Tome Fiscal
- =3: Giant Sunbird
- 5: Principe Thrush



Dohrn's Warbler, now understood to be an aberrant Sylvia warbler!

Species List

Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei*

Red-necked Spurfowl *Pternistis afer*

Sao Tome Spinetail *Zoonavena thomensis*

African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus*

Little Swift *Apus affinis*

African Emerald Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx cupreus*

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Sao Tome Olive Pigeon *Columba thomensis*

Island Bronze-naped Pigeon *Columba malherbii* (HO)

Lemon Dove *Columba larvata*

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*

African Green Pigeon *Treron calvus*

Sao Tome Green Pigeon *Treron sanctithomae*

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*

Reed Cormorant *Microcarbo africanus*

Sao Tome Ibis *Bostrychia bocagei*

Striated Heron *Butorides striata*

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*

Yellow-billed Kite *Milvus aegyptius*

Western Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

Principe Scops Owl *Otus bikegila*

Sao Tome Scops Owl *Otus hartlaubi*

Blue-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon malimbica*

Malachite Kingfisher *Corythornis cristatus*

Timneh Parrot *Psittacus timneh*

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

Sao Tome Fiscal *Lanius newtoni*

Sao Tome Oriole *Oriolus crassirostris*

Velvet-mantled Drongo *Dicrurus modestus*

Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone atrochalybeia*

Sao Tome Prinia *Prinia mollerii*

Dohrn's Warbler *Sylvia dohrni*

Principe White-eye *Zosterops ficedulinus*

Sao Tome White-eye *Zosterops feae*

Black-capped Speirops *Zosterops lugubris*

Principe Speirops *Zosterops leucophaeus*

Splendid Starling *Lamprotornis splendidus*

Principe Starling *Lamprotornis ornatus*

Chestnut-winged Starling *Onychognathus fulgidus*

Principe Thrush *Turdus xanthorhynchus*

Sao Tome Thrush *Turdus olivaceofuscus*

Principe Sunbird *Anabathmis hartlaubii*

Newton's Sunbird *Anabathmis newtonii*

Giant Sunbird *Dreptes thomensis*

Principe Weaver *Ploceus princeps*

Southern Masked Weaver *Ploceus velatus*

Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus*

Giant Weaver *Ploceus grandis*

Sao Tome Weaver *Ploceus sanctithomae*

Red-headed Quelea *Quelea erythrops*

Black-winged Red Bishop *Euplectes hordeaceus*

Golden-backed Bishop *Euplectes aureus*

White-winged Widowbird *Euplectes albonotatus*

Bronze Mannikin *Spermestes cucullata*

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis*

Sao Tome Shorttail *Motacilla bocagii*

Principe Seed eater *Crithagra rufobrunnea*

Sao Tome Grosbeak *Crithagra concolor*

Yellow-fronted Canary *Crithagra mozambica*

Mammals

Mona Monkey *Cercopithecus mona* (introduced)

Sao Tome Roundleaf Bat *Hipposideros thomensis*

Straw-coloured Fruit-bat *Eidolon helvum*

Reptiles

Greeff's Giant Gecko *Hemidactylus greeffii*

Principe Gecko *Hemidactylus principensis*

Sao Tome Brown House Snake *Boaedon bedriaggae*

Sao Tome Cobra *Naja peroescobari*

Frogs

Sao Tome Giant Tree Frog *Hyperolius thomensis*

Drewe's Reed Frog *Hyperolius drewesi*

Palm Forest Tree Frog *Leptopelis palmatus*

Peters' River Frog *Phrynobatrachus dispar*



Sao Tome Giant Tree Frog



Sao Tome Cobra !



Palm Forest Tree Frog



Drewe's Reed Frog



**Thank you to the whole group for your participation and enthusiasm !
See you next time !**

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