

Mozambique by Rolf Wiesler

Missed Photographs

After my last Mozambique trip I pledged never to go again and certainly never in December, but as Karin stated "what is pledge, only a cleaning product for wooden surfaces", so here we go again!!

Our focus - to find the African Pitta which, according to documentation, has lustrous blue patches on the wing and rump, deep red belly, green back, golden-buff chest, pink throat, black tail and boldly striped black and yellow head. Great we were looking for a bird that looks like a head on collision between Cindy Lauper and Boy George!

Of course there were a few signs to prickle my suspicion of what could be in store:

We were flying Airlink and we know their recent reputation
Our lift to the airport arrived early and caught us "napping"
I was allocated seat 13A
One of our party stocked up on perfume from duty free

After an uneventful flight to Beira, despite the warning signs, we proceeded to Rio Savane, a flood plane located at the mouth of the mangrove lined Savane River 30 km north of Beira. Nothing had changed since our last visit with regards to the mud we had to wade through to reach the boat that took us to our accommodation. However, before the boat trip and relaxation we had to flush birds - that's when we found out that one of our party had two right foot wellies (she kept on walking in circles) and our perfume lady had psychedelic waders that could drop a bird off a tree at 100 paces.

We managed to flush a Great Snipe and Blue Quail. Still don't know if the quail is worth the effort - surly, knowing the exertion we took to find it the bird should have given us a good view. I missed photos of both of these specials and immediately blamed the camera lens. At least the lens worked for a pair of Orange-winged Pytilia discovered eating seed at our accommodation. We subsequently found out that our leader, Graham, had located them the day before then put out seed to keep them in the area. Well done Graham!

Our next stop was Envirotrade near Gorongosa. Gorongosa Mountain is an isolated peak of 1863m in central Mozambique and the only site in Southern Africa to see the Green-headed Oriole.

With us being older, Graham took pity on us and agreed that we did not have to climb for four hours to get to the forest and arranged a heavy-duty 4x4 vehicle to get us a lot closer, i.e. after parking we walked for less than an hour. However, the road is in such bad condition that the drive up is an experience never to be forgotten, almost equal to the climb up the mountain. On the way up we saw Blue-spotted Wood-Dove, Broad-tailed Warbler and Moustached Grass-Warbler. In the forest I managed to photograph the Green-headed Oriole (spot the bird and

win a prize photo) and Livingstone's Turaco. On the way down we detoured past a magnificent waterfall, for lunch, and this walk was more strenuous than getting to the forest.

Next morning I managed to get good photographs of Arnot's Chat, Speckle-throated Woodpecker and African Emerald Cuckoo. We also had a fly past of the Thick-billed Cuckoo, but no photo.

December in Mozambique it is only for mad dogs, Englishman and birders - in fact only for mad birders. While at our next stop, Mphingwe Camp, Catapu, we were approached by a "fellow" birder who looked at Karin strangely and then asked "I think I know you, were you ever in prison?" Either this was the strangest pick up line in history or Karin needs to tell me something

The following morning, after sitting patiently in the forest, we managed to see the Lauper bird (Pitta). Although we had good views the photos look like someone dancing under a mirror ball. I, the non-birder, also found a Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo. This is a touchy subject as this bird, which will no longer be named, was not seen by all members of our party.

There is a down side to being a non-birder (only one). Karin pointed out an East Coast Akalat, I focused and then, without taking the photo, put down the camera said "that's a robin". By the time Karin pointed out my error the bird had disappeared - it would have been the perfect shot. Only consolation is that I did manage to photograph a Mangrove Kingfisher and Honey Buzzard.

By now Graham realised that my frustration levels were at an all time high, caused by trying to photograph birds in forests and that this could lead to a heart attack, decided to take us to a lake near Caia. Now, for the photographers reading this article, this is an amazing place as the birds are "tame". I managed to get good photographs of Anchieta's Tchagra, Moustached Grass-warbler, Little Bittern and Allen's Gallinule.

Next stop was Msasa Camp with the focus being a trip to Chinizua forest to find the White-chested Alethe. Chinizua was heart-breaking as the forest has all but disappeared. The trees have been burnt to create ash and mealies planted in their place. I did manage to photograph an African Broadbill trying to display in what is left of the forest.

Question: What is the fastest way to empty out a vehicle of birders while driving?
Answer: Have an Eleonora's Falcon fly past

Just after Moz/Zim the border post I heard a yell and then noticed that we did not have a driver. Was it a new way of performing a car hijacking? No, Graham had disembarked and was across the road shouting and pointing in the air. Don't want to know what the other drivers were thinking - really doesn't Graham know that I have a reputation. Anyway we all jumped out and some of us (hint, hint) also managed to see the bird.

After retrieving the vehicle we proceeded to White Horse Inn, Vumba. Amazing garden with beautiful birds, including Red-throated Twinspot.

Karin got to see Whyte's Barbet, a bird I saw on the previous trip and she missed (bone of contention for the last 2 years).

We also birded in the forest around Seldomseen, and here comes the next bone of contention

We were looking for the Buff-spotted Flufftail with our local guide wwoooooooooowing all over the forest. At one point we were single file with me at the back, standing on a large rock, trying to see over all the heads, when the guide pointed to an area and said there they are. I looked and saw the Flufftail cross a path. Karin was in front of me so I attracted her attention, gave her thumbs up and ignoring her perplexed look. As we left the forest, me still in ecstasy, one of our party started talking about the Crimsonwings. I thought that all the perfume had gone to her head as she did not know the difference between a Flufftail and a Crimsonwing. Only after discussing it with Karin did the penny drop - apparently, unbeknown to me (must have been sleeping) the focus had changed and "we" started looking for Crimsonwings. So when everyone else was looking at a party of Crimsonwings I was the only one who saw the Flufftail. Big bone of contention as the Buff-spotted Flufftail is one of the birds Karin really wants to see!

I also managed to photograph an Orange Ground-Thrush and a White-tailed Crested Flycatcher on a nest.

Last overnight stop was Threeways Safari Camp, Bubi River, approximately 80 km from the border. The highlight was a really confiding Barred Owlet. Next day was a very hot 4 ½ hour wait at the Beit Bridge border post and the trip home.

Overall a very successful trip as I photographed 36 "lifers" taking my total birds photographed to 656, and I discovered a new game to play - bite poker. If a player has two bites on two fingers this counts as two doubles, however if you have a bite on each finger it is a straight flush and a winning hand. However, one tsetse bite is equal to two mosquito bites and beats any tick bites, which all needs to be factored into the equation.