



The Congo Peacock that made the tour (Mark Van Beirs)

FORESTS OF THE CONGO PEAFOWL

6 – 25 SEPTEMBER 2017

LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS

We did it again! On the fourth day of our stay at the Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve, deep in the heart of Congo, we all managed to admire a splendid male Congo Peafowl on his roost! What a bird! This very special and decidedly unusual tour focused on two extremely rarely observed Congolese specialities: the truly enigmatic Congo Peafowl and our closest next of kin, the gentle Bonobo. Once one reaches the Lomako Reserve the Bonobos are not particularly difficult to see, as researchers have been habituating several groups for quite a while now. Getting to grips with the Congo Peafowl however is a totally different matter as this gamebird is easily one of the shyest and most difficult to observe species on our planet. We learned a lot about the Peafowl's behaviour on our inaugural 2015 tour and we really

thought we knew how to get to see the “holy grail of African birding”. To my surprise, none of the tactics that worked in 2015 gave any result and it was through plain hard slogging that we managed to find our target this time.

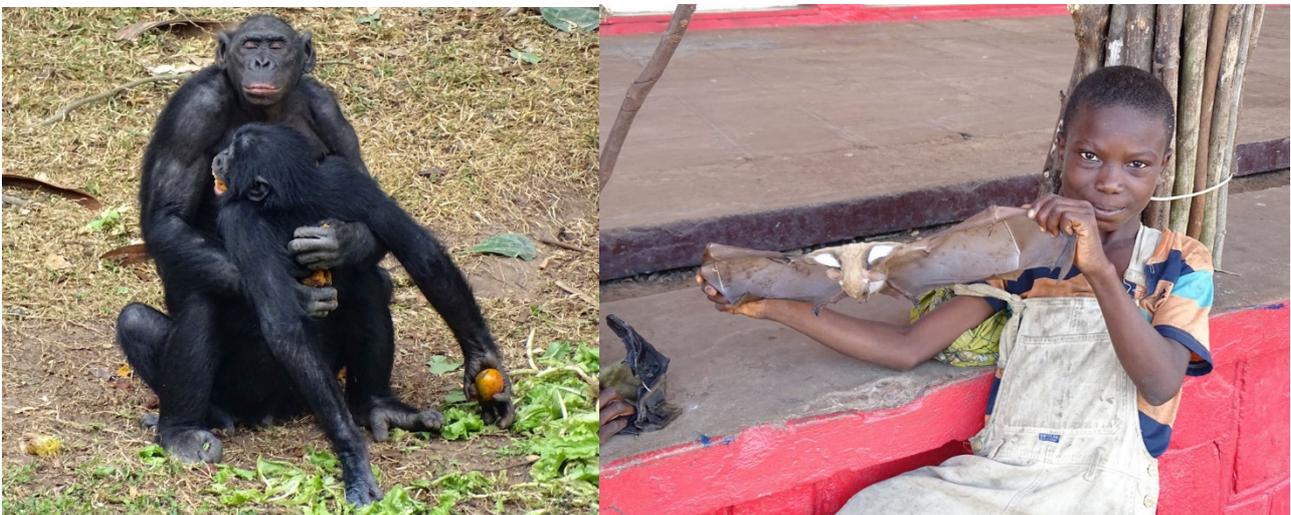
Every international birder should know the amazing story of how the Congo Peafowl was discovered in the early 20th century by the American ornithologist James Chapin. In 2015 Birdquest was the first bird tour company ever to show this truly fantastic bird to its clients. After this resounding success, we planned to repeat this feat, but with the unstable political situation in Congo, we held our breath. We were extremely lucky to be able to fit in this tour during a calm period and although the logistics went smoother than expected, the quest for the *Afropavo* was more difficult than most of us had anticipated. Congo is a rather difficult country to get into. There are some unusual visa requirements for some nationalities and, very sadly, one of our faithful clients was refused his entry visa because of the very inefficient Congolese embassy in London! It is also a very challenging and extremely expensive country to travel around in, as there is almost no road system, except around the capital Kinshasa and several other large cities. Domestic flights are decidedly rare and undependable. The long and mighty Congo river is the main artery for the huge Congo basin, but we didn't really want to spend weeks in a boat to reach our distant destination. Getting to the remote Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve involved chartering a costly airplane to take us (six Birdquesters + two Mr fix-its + luggage + lots of food) deep into the province of Equateur, chartering a boat to take us 170 kilometres upstream to the reserve and hiking a dozen kilometres to a remote clearing in the middle of a large chunk of undisturbed lowland rainforest. There is no accommodation, so camping was obviously the only option. Added to that one needs some special permits (“ordres de mission”, issued by different ministries) to be allowed to travel inland. The Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve was gazetted in 2006 and covers 3,625 km². Till the mid-nineties poaching and illegal hunting were major problems, so very few large animals have survived. Forest Elephants are now making a slow come back. Some of the best mammals seen included Bonobo, Black Mangabey, Angolan Pied Colobus, Wolf's Monkey, Red River Hog, Western Blue and Peter's Duikers, African Palm Civet and for two lucky souls a Tree Pangolin. Birding highlights of the trip next to the Congo Peafowl were Hartlaub's Duck, Congo Serpent Eagle, Forbes's Plover, Yellow-throated Cuckoo, Vermiculated Fishing Owl, African Dwarf Kingfisher, Black Bee-eater, White-crested and Black-casqued Hornbills, Sladen's Barbet, Rufous-sided Broadbill, Rufous-bellied Helmetshrike, Bates's Paradise Flycatcher, Congo Martin, Gosling's Apalis, Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush, Congo and Violet-tailed Sunbirds, Cassin's Malimbe, Bob-tailed Weaver, Woodhouse's Antpecker and the gorgeous, localized Grant's Bluebill.



Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush showed well in Kinshasa; this Lizard Buzzard allowed good looks at Lola Ya Bonobo (Mark Van Beirs)

The tour started in the evening, at a cosy guesthouse in a residential area close to the mighty Congo River in the megapolis of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. With its fifteen million people and chaotic traffic this huge conurbation sure made quite an impression. Our first bout of birding early in the morning in the small garden

gave us a selection of more widespread Central African species. Best of all was a Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush, which briefly. Overhead we noted several African Openbill Storks, African Darter, sleek African Palm Swifts, a Grey Kestrel and lots of Pied Crows. The flowering bushes attracted Speckled Mousebirds and colourful Olive-bellied Sunbirds. Red-eyed and Ring-necked Doves, Dark-capped Bulbul, Tawny-flanked Prinia, African Thrush, Slender-billed Weaver and Northern Grey-headed and House Sparrows were also about. We then drove along traffic-clogged roads and tracks to the famous Bonobo rehabilitation centre of Lola Ya Bonobo, on the outskirts of Kinshasa. We had a first look at the endearing Bonobos in their large enclosures and birded the extensive stretches of forest. Along the stream we found Striated Heron, Common Sandpiper, African Pygmy and smart Malachite Kingfishers, Lesser Striped Swallow, the lovely Cassin's Flycatcher and African Pied Wagtail. The woodland gave us a tame Lizard Buzzard, Blue-spotted Wood Dove, Broad-billed Roller, Speckled Tinkerbird, Honeyguide Greenbul, Yellow-throated Leaflove, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Black-headed, Black-necked, Village and Vieillot's Black Weavers, Grey-headed Nigrita and Bronze and Black-and-white Mannikins. A blooming tree was visited by Grey-chinned, Collared, Superb and Copper Sunbirds. A skittish Congo Rope Squirrel was the only mammal we could find. After a tasty lunch with Raphael, the French Bonobo veterinary, we had a really good look at the Bonobos that are trying to adapt to a normal life again after bouts of captivity. We could admire at first hand their "make love, not war" motto. The interactions of the orphaned babies with their human mothers were touching.



All Bonobo interactions are solved by love making; this poor Fruit Bat was sold as bushmeat (tour participant Hannes Uhlig)

Some early morning birding in the guesthouse gardens finally produced good looks at a Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush. We then transferred to the domestic airport of N'Dolo where things went much smoother than expected and definitely slicker than two years ago. Although we were only travelling to the interior of Congo our charter flight was treated like an international flight with strict passport control and security measures. But soon we found ourselves on board of a comfortable Czech built LET 410 plane. The Russian pilot took us effortlessly 700 km northeast to the small town of Basankusu in the province of Equateur. Upon arrival and after a few more formalities we drove to our simple guesthouse. After checking in we had a look in the nearby farmbrush. Some people checked out the local market where monkey bushmeat was on offer, while the others found several cute Bob-tailed Weavers and a Chattering Cisticola in the gardens, where colonies of both Village and Vieillot's Black Weavers were flourishing. Other interesting species included African Harrier Hawk, African Paradise Flycatcher, a Magpie Mannikin and Pin-tailed Whydah. After a simple lunch we boarded a dugout canoe that took us to the nearby Reserve of Ekolo Ya Bonobo, where Bonobos from the rehabilitation centre in Kinshasa are regularly being released into the wild. We were able to admire them from the boat and saw several babies, a sure sign that these apes are thriving here. We sailed further along the banks of the Lipori River, but things were extremely quiet. In late afternoon we picked up a couple of piebald Palmnut Vultures and an impressive African Crowned Eagle. In the evening we prepared ourselves for the upcoming boat trip.



Maringa River scenery; a Red-breasted Swallow about to build its nest (Mark Van Beirs)

It took us 16 hours to complete the c170km boat trip on the 300m wide Maringa and the much narrower Lomako Rivers. It should have been a fair bit faster, but continuing engine trouble forced us to slow down and sail the final four hours in the dark. Our large, not uncomfortable, dugout canoe was fully loaded and contained six Birdquesters, all of our luggage, our beer and soft drink supply for the next 12 days, all of our food (including a live goat) and several more people who were involved with the smooth running of the tour. Along the main river we passed one of Mobutu's prison camps where political opponents were banned to in the 1970s and 80s. Not many birds could be seen along the river, although we did pick up Palmnut Vulture, a pair of Cassin's Hawk Eagles, a splendid African Finfoot, Afep Pigeon, parties of Cassin's Spinetails, groups of recently arrived European Swifts, a Black Bee-eater and a pair of Grey Parrots. Late in the evening we finally arrived at the headquarters of the Lomako-Yokokala Park, where we set up the overnight camp.

While munching breakfast we could admire attractive Wolf's Monkeys and several noisy Black Mangabeys in the nearby trees. A morning walk in the farmbrush near Lingunda gave us European Honey Buzzard, Afep and African Green Pigeons, noisy Piping and White-thighed Hornbills, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Gabon Woodpecker, Spotted Greenbul, Rufous-crowned Eremomela and colourful Red-headed and Red-bellied Malimbés. Little Green, Collared, Green-throated and Superb Sunbirds were attracted to flowering bushes and a pair of smart Black-and-white Shrike-flycatchers performed beautifully. Several localized Sladen's Barbets could be scoped at their nestholes in an emergent, dead tree. In mid-morning we boarded our dugout canoe for the final two hours of sailing along the scenic, pandanus-lined Lomako River. Swamp Palm Greenbul, Square-tailed Saw-wing, lovely White-bibbed Swallows and a smart male Violet-tailed Sunbird entertained us on our journey. Upon arrival at the trailhead, the porters got organized and soon we set off on the 12 kilometre long walk along a well-laid out trail to a tiny clearing in the middle of the Congolese rainforest. The walk took us through splendid undisturbed primary forest, but as it was the middle of the day, things were very quiet, although we did see tracks of Forest Elephant. In mid-afternoon we arrived at the Iyema clearing, our home for the next 12 days. We met Alexana and Ian, the two American Bonobo researchers who would gracefully provide lots of assistance and got to know the pisteurs (trackers) and the cooks. We erected our tents and admired the delightfully cool stream and the facilities. Iyema is the local name for a white morph of the Black Mangabey, named for Belgian researcher Jef Dupain, who worked here in the 1990s.



Attractive Wolf's Monkeys were sometimes quite approachable; mushrooms abounded in the forest (Mark Van Beirs)

While Martin and Jane were experiencing their first Bonobo encounter, obtaining excellent looks at a party of 12 animals, we first birded the clearing and then started our exploration of the grid, a well laid out system of trails forming a 4 by 4 km square, crisscrossed by many other trails. Birding in the Congolese rainforest is always a tedious affair and it wasn't different this morning, though with some perseverance we encountered Black-billed Turaco, Sabine's Spintail, a pair of splendid Red-billed Dwarf Hornbills, several raucous White-thighed Hornbills, a Shining Drongo and very nice looks at a Black Mangabey with its magnificent crest. We also got to know several of the "dreaded" greenbuls. Identifying these challenging birds in the gloom of the forest was not easy, but gradually we pinned some of them down and identified Little Grey, Icterine and the ubiquitous Red-tailed Greenbuls. After a siesta in the heat of the day, we hit the trails again and obtained good looks at a Fraser's Rufous Thrush. We stayed out till long after dark, hoping to get a first audio contact with our main target, but alas.... We had to do with a calling African Wood Owl and a Grey Tit-Flycatcher on its night roost.

Next morning, all of us went for the Bonobo experience. We woke up in the middle of the night, as we had to reach the area where the Bonobos had built their nests before sun up. Just at dawn we were already looking at several of these gentle apes as they greeted the new day. We saw males, females and a couple of youngsters of our closest next of kin clamber about high in the canopy. A marvellous experience! The Bonobos didn't really like us being there as a male tried to cover us in rather liquid excrements, so we soon left to their business and the rest of the morning we slowly birded a stretch of fairly open gallery forest where we had great looks at Buff-spotted and Yellow-crested Woodpeckers, Bates's Paradise Flycatcher, Dusky Tit and Grey Longbill. A cracking, displaying Rufous-sided Broadbill performed ever so well and a mixed group of Black Mangabeys and colourful Wolf's Monkeys showed beautifully. In the quiet hours of the day a lucky soul saw a Cassin's Malimbe along the nearby stream. The afternoon walk produced good looks at a canopy inhabiting Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo. A long night walk gave us several very obliging Western Blue and Peter's (now called Weyn's) Duikers. We heard the mournful calls of Tree Hyraxes and a distant Latham's Francolin. Upon returning at the camp a pair of cute Common Palm Civets were found in a fruiting tree, allowing for excellent looks.



The Bonobos at Lomako usually kept to the canopy; we encountered several Crested Guineafowl (Mark Van Beirs)

The next morning we explored the fairly open primary forest along the rather wide entrance trail, offering good looks into the canopy. We flushed a Crested Guineafowl that flew to an open branch, allowing for brilliant scope studies. A dashing Long-tailed Hawk gave brief views as it crossed a treefall. Not much later we flushed an enormous owl, but sadly couldn't relocate it. It may have been a Shelley's Eagle Owl, but no details were seen. Several trackers were sent out to try to relocate the bird on its roost, but it was never seen spotted again. Very frustrating. A lovely Rufous-sided Broadbill showed off its splendid display and a couple of Brown Illadopsises showed uncharacteristically well. A relaxed afternoon in the camp area and along the stream only produced Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher and Purple-headed Starling. After an early dinner, we headed out for an extended nocturnal walk and eventually heard a fairly distant Congo Peafowl. We tried to get closer but the bird went mute. We waited and waited but to no avail, so we returned to camp. I had also sent out several trackers to try to find our holy grail and after we had gone to bed by 23.30, I was suddenly woken up at 00.30 by the excited, whispered words of Gedeon, one our best trackers, with the words: "monsieur Mark, monsieur Mark, j'ai trouvé un paon, pas très loin" ("mister mark, mister Mark, I found a peacock, not too far away"). We quickly got ready and 30 minutes later we were gorging ourselves on the glorious sight of a roosting male Congo Peafowl. He was sitting c14m high on an open horizontal branch of a medium-sized tree. The scope views were out of this world! The creamy-white tuft and the steel blue head showed well and although the blue and green sheen of the plumage nor the rufous throat weren't really obvious, we could discern some colour in the dim light of our torches. We savoured the sight of this exceptional bird for quite a while and returned happy and elated to camp.



Our camp in the middle of the Lomako Reserve; admiring the male Congo Peafowl through the scope in the middle of the night (Mark Van Beirs)

We remained in bed a bit later after the fabulous nocturnal experience and slowly walked one of the main trails, still in a kind of trance. A Blue-headed Wood Dove showed very nicely and a White-bellied Kingfisher only allowed glimpses. A Yellow-throated Tinkerbird was taped in and sat up for good looks. Red-tailed Ant Thrush and Olive Sunbird were other nice additions to the list. A flowering tree in the camp area yielded Collared, Green-headed and more Olive Sunbirds. In late afternoon we returned to the area where we had flushed that big owl, but not a sniff was had of this nightbird. A Black-casqued Hornbill flew noisily over. We waited till dark, and played some tapes, but only Tree Hyraxes and an unidentified Anomalure were heard.

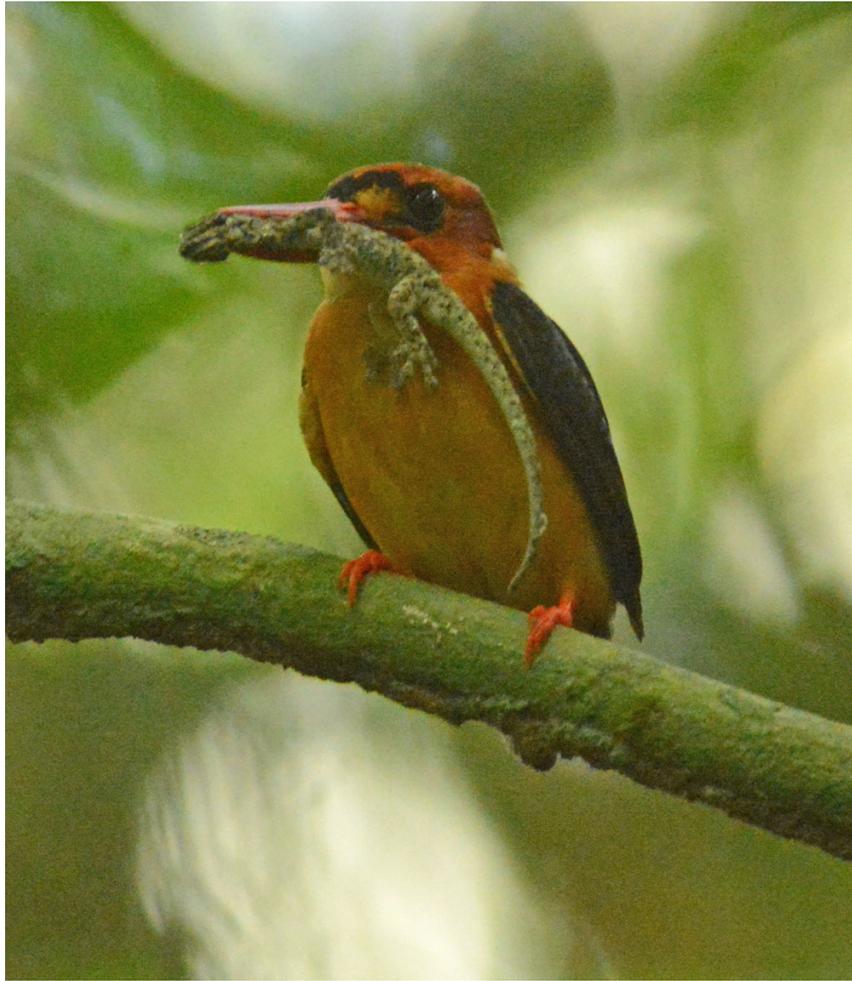


A fabulous Black-casqued Hornbill; Musanga leaves (Mark Van Beirs)

Early next morning we walked in our cool, shallow stream and followed it for a kilometre or so. We observed a Brown-eared Woodpecker, a lovely, but shy Angolan Pied Colobus, a close Red River Hog and an African Giant Squirrel and heard Western Bronze-naped Pigeon and Fire-crested Alethe. An impressive thunderstorm raged over our camp in the afternoon, producing lots and lots of rain. The temperature thankfully dropped quite a bit. After dinner a nice African Palm Civet allowed close up views in the fruiting tree at the camp.

The temperature and humidity had dropped further overnight, so on our morning walk we enjoyed a lot of bird activity. We scoped a splendid perched Congo Serpent Eagle in the subcanopy and a male Narina Trogon gave excellent views. A Blue-throated Roller showed well, as did a male Chestnut Wattle-eye and a Western Nicator. A Slender-billed Greenbul was foraging on outer twigs and after diligent observation we identified an Ansorge's Greenbul in a mixed greenbul party. A male Buff-throated Apalis and a Red-tailed Ant Thrush appeared in front of our binoculars and a flowering tree was buzzing with Chestnut-winged Starlings and Blue-throated Brown and Olive Sunbirds. Meanwhile Martin and Jane walked along a different trail where they flushed a female Congo Peafowl, found a Tree Pangolin high in a tree and observed a Red River Hog at close range. Just after lunch some of us hiked 2,5 km to a forest patch where one of the trackers had seen a small owl, which we identified from the photo he took as a Red-chested Owlet. Sadly, we couldn't find it again, but heard it call high in the canopy. The sweaty walk in the heat of the day did produce a party of Crested Guineafowl and a Great Blue Turaco. We spent the late afternoon in the camp clearing where European Honey Buzzard, Cassin's Spinetail, Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill, Black-collared Lovebird, Velvet-mantled Drongo, Spotted Greenbul and a male Tiny Sunbird showed well. Best of all was a splendidly performing Black Mangabey that fed quietly on the ripe pods of a legume tree. After dark we could admire the planet Saturn in all its glory through the scope. Wow! At 03.00 I was woken by Frederick, our ICCN (Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature) guard as he had heard a Congo Peafowl just a few hundred metres away. We quickly went to check the area, but to no avail. The bird remained quiet after its burst of calling and finding it just like that was an almost impossible task. Our morning walk took us along several trails within the grid. A Black Dwarf Hornbill was a new bird for the tour. We enjoyed marvellous eye-ball to eye-ball views of an African Dwarf Kingfisher that had just caught a small lizard. A very sneaky Forest Robin played hide and seek in the dense undergrowth and mainly remained a voice. Our afternoon session at the camp's stream was very birdy. Birds kept coming in to drink and bathe as we stood quietly in a secluded spot while goodies like Cassin's Honeybird, Green-backed and Brown-eared Woodpeckers, Blue Cuckooshrike, Western Oriole, Shining Drongo, Chestnut-capped Flycatcher, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Yellow Longbill, Buff-throated Apalis, Yellow-mantled Weaver and Cassin's Malimbe obliged. Greenbuls were especially obvious and we identified Slender-billed, Honeyguide,

Spotted, Icterine, Little Green, Eastern Bearded and Red-tailed plus an unidentified large Phyllastrephus that we saw well, but couldn't pin down...



An adorable African Dwarf Kingfisher with its prey (Mark Van Beirs)

On our walks through the Lomako forests we were always keeping our eyes open for the dreaded ants. Many different species of ant inhabit the Congolese rainforest and more than anywhere else I have been they seem to dominate the whole ecosystem. Safari Ants were often encountered and we all got bitten multiple times by the viciously aggressive soldiers, usually while trying to get better views of a skulking bird in the undergrowth. Bees were another menace in the rainforest and although they were not aggressive, most of us got stung several times as these salt or sweet searching insects got trapped in our clothes.



Black Mangabeys have a splendid hairdo (Mark Van Beirs)

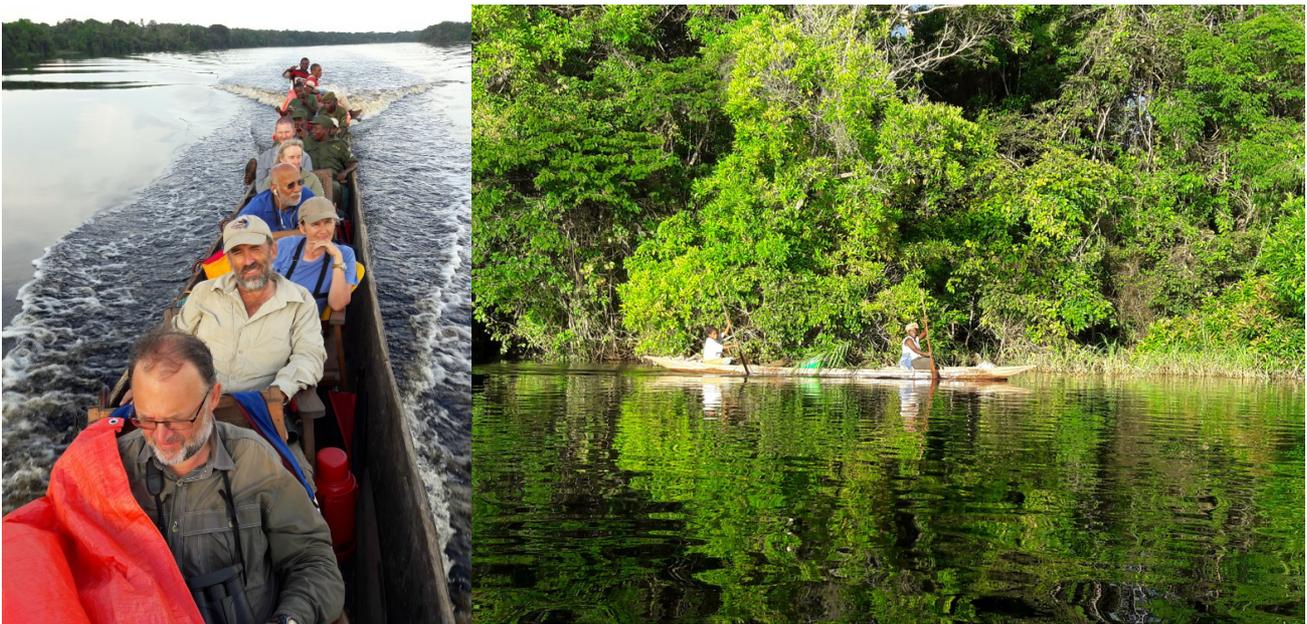
In the middle of the night a Congo Peafowl was heard from the tents and a Bates's Nightjar just before dawn. This morning we walked to the northeast corner of the grid where we wanted to explore a swampy area. It was very hot and obviously rather quiet. An African Crowned Eagle called above the canopy and a big flock of wing-lifting Spotted Greenbul travelled through the tree crowns. Hannes was lucky enough to spot a perched Vermiculated Fishing Owl, which Sue glimpsed as it took off. Sadly, our tracker was unable to relocate the bird. Meanwhile Martin and Jane went for another Bonobo experience and had great looks at the gentle apes. While enjoying the Bonobo action, a couple of Red River Hogs were getting rather too inquisitive and when they suddenly attacked the fun part was over. Everyone quickly climbed into the available surrounding trees, but one tracker got wounded at both his legs by an angry River Hog. Not a nice experience! The Red River Hogs probably had piglets and didn't want any intruders about. We had a very pleasant afternoon at the stream enjoying the comings and goings of thirsty birds. Overhead we spotted two European Honey Buzzards and an European Hobby, whilst Black-billed Turaco, Yellow-throated Cuckoo, Speckled Tinkerbird, Green-backed Woodpecker, Golden Greenbul, Fraser's Forest Flycatcher, Cassin's Malimbe (at the nest), Woodhouse's Antpecker, Grant's Bluebill and an African Giant Squirrel paraded in the riverine vegetation. Another long night walk only produced a sleeping Red-tailed Bristlebill and heard only Western Tree Hyraxes and Hammer-headed Fruit Bats.



Iyema in the rain; Cassin's Malimbres favoured the camp's stream (Mark Van Beirs)

We woke up to heavy rain, and had to wait till mid-morning before we were able to hit the trails again. A cracking White-crested Hornbill following a group of Black Mangabeys and Wolf's Monkeys saved the morning. After midday, at the camp's stream we obtained great looks at a pair of colourful Grant's Bluebills. In late afternoon we returned to the area where the Vermiculated Fishing Owl had been seen, but nothing of note was encountered. A Green-backed Woodpecker obliged beautifully. A Latham's Francolin called not too far away at dusk and the loud calls of a Nkulengu Rail reverberated through the forest. Our final nocturnal foray only gave us five sleeping Red-tailed Monkeys.

We started our last full day at Iyema with another visit to a Bonobo group. We woke early and joined researchers Alexana and Ian. Just after dawn we obtained excellent looks again at several of these handsome relatives of us. We stayed with them for 20 minutes or so and then slowly explored one of the little used trails of the grid. Nothing of note was seen, but upon our return to camp in late morning, we bumped into a substantial group of Bonobos and enjoyed splendid views of these beauties as they foraged in the canopy or climbed down very nimbly to the forest floor. What a marvelous encounter! The afternoon was very hot and humid and we had the impression that all the forest inhabitants were having an extended siesta as nothing was moving.



The return boat journey; life along the Maringa River (Mark Van Beirs)

Early next morning we broke up camp, folded our well-used tents together and packed our bags. We said goodbye to Alexana and Ian, our very hospitable and gracious hosts and thanked our cooks and skillful trackers for a good job. We

walked the 12 km to the trailhead on the Lomako River, picking up Grey-throated Barbet and Red-headed Malimbe. We also heard the distinctive hoots of a White-spotted Flufftail in a swampy area. Upon arrival at the river we boarded our well-known dugout canoe and sailed for 90 minutes to the Lomako Park headquarters at Lingunda. Several impressive Black-casqued Hornbills and elegant White-bibbed Swallows enlivened the journey. As it was extremely hot we just dozed for a while. In mid-afternoon we explored some of the surrounding farmbrush and obtained good looks at Great Blue Turaco, Sladen's Barbet, African Paradise Flycatcher, Ashy Flycatcher, a recently arrived Spotted Flycatcher, a female African Shrike-flycatcher and several Superb Sunbirds. We retired early, eager to be fit for the long boat trip.



Afep Pigeons favour the canopy; Palmnut Vultures were not uncommon along the rivers (Mark Van Beirs)

After our last night of camping, we packed up, enjoyed a tasty breakfast and had another look at the surrounding farmbrush. We couldn't find anything new, but the Sladen's Barbets and lots of attractive Wolf's Monkeys showed really well. The Park warden, our amiable guard and several of our able trackers waved us goodbye as we boarded the large canoe once again and started the long journey along the Lomako and Maringa Rivers to the distant town of Basankusu. The first three hours on the narrow Lomako were quite productive as we had great looks at Hartlaub's Duck, Sabine's Spinetail, Shining-blue Kingfisher, several huge Black-casqued Hornbills and many White-bibbed Swallows. When we reached the wide Maringa River in late morning the sun was high overhead and activity had totally died. We still saw



Several Hartlaub's Ducks were noted along the Lomako River; this Common Sandpiper must have just arrived (Mark Van Beirs)

three lovely Grey Pratincoles fly past. Just before we arrived at Basankusu a sudden local storm produced big waves on the river causing our boat to move about uncomfortably, so the final minutes of our otherwise relaxed journey were quite stressful.

A relaxed morning in the Basankusu area gave us a fine Forbes's Plover at the airstrip, a furtive Woodland Kingfisher, some nest-building Red-breasted Swallows, a singing Chattering Cisticola and scores of unusual-looking Bob-tailed Weavers. An afternoon boat trip on the Lopori River added a hyperactive Gosling's Apalis to the list as well as a nice African Harrier Hawk.

After some final birding around Basankusu, we made our way to the airstrip, where we suffered the usual bit of hassle (but not too much) from the airport officials and the DGM (Direction Generale de Migration) people. We finally boarded our charter plane, which took us southwest to the town of Mbandaka, the capital of the province of Equateur. The Ukrainian pilot, the Antillean co-pilot and the Congolese stewardess did a great job. We arrived at the town of Mbandaka, where, after quite a bit of hassle from the DGM people (why do they always want to know our professions?) we made our way to the hotel on the banks of the mighty Congo River. We checked in, got organized and for the rest of the day birded the garden overlooking the wide river. It didn't take too long to get good looks at two important specialties. A gorgeous long-tailed male and a subtle female Congo Sunbird were regularly seen foraging on the few flowers, while dingy-looking Congo Martins were flying low over the Congo River. Both these species have very restricted areas of distribution. We also noted Little Egret, Hamerkop, Barn Swallow, Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush and several Bob-tailed Weavers, while attractive Red-headed Agamas were sunning themselves on the walls. We enjoyed our final dinner as the blood-red sun died in the wide Congo river.



Children at Basankusu (Mark Van Beirs)

The last day of the tour was mainly a travel day. We had a final look at the Congo Sunbird and the Congo Martin in the garden and continued our flight to Kinshasa, where we enjoyed an excellent pizza lunch in a nice restaurant. We said goodbye to South African Sue and travelled to the international airport of Njili where formalities were decidedly, very unusually smooth and our Congo adventure ended. Congo definitely is a challenging destination for the world birder!



We enjoyed several excellent encounters with Bonobos (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>

E = Endangered, **VU** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient.

Hartlaub's Duck *Pteronetta hartlaubii* Excellent views of several along the Lomako River.
Crested Guineafowl *Guttera pucherani* Several parties flushed and scope views of one in the subcanopy.
Latham's Francolin *Peliperdix lathamii* (H) We heard the distinctive voice a few times at dusk and at night.
Congo Peafowl *Afropavo congensis* (VU) THE BIRD OF THE TRIP. Scope views of a male on his roost.
African Openbill *Anastomus lamelligerus* Four were noted in Kinshasa.
Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* A single bird was seen in Kinshasa.
Striated Heron *Butorides striata* A couple were observed at Lola Ya Bonobo, near Kinshasa.
Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* Regular in open habitat.
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* A few were seen at Mbandaka.
Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* A single bird was noted at Mbandaka.
African Darter *Anhinga rufa* Two were seen circling over our guesthouse in Kinshasa.
African Harrier-Hawk *Polyboroides typus* Four observations of this well-known bird of prey.
Palm-nut Vulture *Gypohierax angolensis* 11 sightings along the rivers.
European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* Nine observations of this northern migrant.
Congo Serpent Eagle *Circaetus spectabilis* Scope views of a perched bird at Lomako.
Crowned Eagle *Stephanoaetus coronatus* (NT) Nice looks on a couple of occasions. A splendid raptor.
Cassin's Hawk-Eagle *Aquila africana* Two were seen along the Maringa River.
Lizard Buzzard *Kaupifalco monogrammicus* Perfect scope views of one at Lola Ya Bonobo near Kinshasa.
Long-tailed Hawk *Urotriorchis macrourus* Brief looks at a flying bird at Lomako.
Red-chested Goshawk *Accipiter toussenelii* (NL) Guna saw one at close range near our camp.



Yellow-billed Kite (Mark Van Beirs)

Yellow-billed Kite *Milvus aegyptius* We only saw this well-known species at Mbandaka.

White-spotted Flufftail *Sarothrura pulchra* (H) We heard its distinctive voice along the entrance trail



The group, together with researchers and helpers at Iyema (Mark Van Beirs)

- African Finfoot** *Podica senegalensis* Good looks at one along the Maringa River.
- Nkulengu Rail** *Himantornis haematopus* (H) We heard it once at dusk at Lomako, but rather distantly.
- Forbes's Plover** *Charadrius forbesi* A single bird was seen at the Basankusu airstrip.
- Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* Two observations of this migrant wader.
- Grey Pratincole** *Glareola cinerea* We were escorted by three birds along the Maringa River.
- Rock Dove (introduced)** *Columba livia* A few were seen in towns.
- Afep Pigeon** *Columba uncinata* Excellent scope views at Lingunda. Also seen in flight along the rivers.
- Western Bronze-naped Pigeon** *Columba iriditorques* (H) We heard it a few times at Lomako.
- Red-eyed Dove** *Streptopelia semitorquata* Regular in Kinshasa and at Basankusu.
- Ring-necked Dove** *Streptopelia capicola* A few were seen in Kinshasa and at Basankusu.
- Blue-spotted Wood Dove** *Turtur afer* Regular in more open areas.
- Blue-headed Wood Dove** *Turtur brehmeri* Great looks at this smart species at Lomako. More often heard.
- African Green Pigeon** *Treron calvus* A few observations only.
- Great Blue Turaco** *Corythaeola cristata* Regularly heard at Lomako. Great looks in the Lingunda farmbush.
- Black-billed Turaco** *Tauraco schuettii* Regular observations at Lomako.
- Diederik Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx caprius* Several were heard and seen at Basankusu.
- Yellow-throated Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx flavigularis* Very nice looks at an immature bird at Lomako.
- African Emerald Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx cupreus* This beauty showed well on several occasions.
- Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo** *Cercococcyx mechowi* (H) We heard it at night at Lomako.
- Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo** *Cercococcyx olivinus* Fair looks at a responsive bird in the canopy at Lomako.
- Black Cuckoo** *Cuculus clamosus* (H) We heard it a few times at Lomako.
- Red-chested Cuckoo** *Cuculus solitarius* Regularly recorded.
- Vermiculated Fishing Owl** *Scotopelia bouvieri* (NL) Hannes saw one quite well at Lomako.
- African Wood Owl** *Strix woodfordii* (H) A regular sound on our night walks at Lomako.
- Red-chested Owlet** *Glaucidium tephronotum* (H) We heard one call in the canopy at Lomako.

Bates's Nightjar *Caprimulgus batesi* (HNL) Sue heard the distinctive voice before dawn at Lomako.
Sabine's Spinetail *Rhaphidura sabini* A handful of observations in the Lomako area.
Cassin's Spinetail *Neafrapus cassini* Regular observations at Lomako. Smart when seen well.
African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus* Common in more open areas.
Common Swift *Apus apus* Several flocks were noted over the rivers of Equateur province.
Little Swift *Apus affinis* Regular in Kinshasa and at Basankusu.
Speckled Mousebird *Colius striatus* Common in Kinshasa.



Red-billed Dwarf Hornbills posed nicely (Mark Van Beirs)

Narina Trogon *Apaloderma narina* Scope views of a male at Lomako. Often heard.

Blue-throated Roller *Eurystomus gularis* A few observations at Lomako.

Broad-billed Roller *Eurystomus glaucurus* A single bird was seen at Lola Ya Bonobo, near Kinshasa.

Chocolate-backed Kingfisher *Halcyon badia* (H) We heard a single bird at Lomako, but rather distantly.

Woodland Kingfisher *Halcyon senegalensis* Heard and seen at Basankusu.

African Dwarf Kingfisher *Ispidina lecontei* Perfect views of one holding a lizard at Lomako. Regularly heard.

African Pygmy Kingfisher *Ispidina picta* A single bird showed well at Lola Ya Bonobo.

White-bellied Kingfisher *Corythornis leucogaster* Regularly recorded along the stream at Lomako.

Malachite Kingfisher *Corythornis cristatus* Nice looks at two at Lola Ya Bonobo, near Kinshasa.

Shining-blue Kingfisher *Alcedo quadribrachys* Two sightings along the Lomako River.

Black Bee-eater *Merops gularis* A single bird was seen perched along the Maringa River.

African Pied Hornbill *Lophoceros fasciatus* Regular observations along the rivers and at Lomako.



These Piping Hornbills were found on their night roost (Mark Van Beirs)

Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill *Lophoceros camurus* Splendid looks at several at Lomako. A distinctive voice.

Piping Hornbill *Bycanistes fistulator* Fairly common at Lomako.

White-thighed Hornbill *Bycanistes albotibialis* Regular observations at Lomako.

Black-casqued Hornbill *Ceratogymna atrata* Excellent views of several along the Lomako river.

Black Dwarf Hornbill *Horizocerus hartlaubi* A single sighting at Lomako.

White-crested Hornbill *Horizocerus albocristatus* Several nice encounters at Lomako, usually following monkeys.

Grey-throated Barbet *Gymnobucco bonapartei* Just a few at one breeding tree at Lomako.

Sladen's Barbet *Gymnobucco sladeni* Several showed well in the Lingunda farmbush.

Speckled Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus scolopaceus* Several excellent observations.

Red-rumped Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus atroflavus* (H) A regular voice in the Lomako forest.

Yellow-throated Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus subsulphureus* Commonly heard at Lomako. Nice looks.

Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus bilineatus* A few observations in more open areas.

Yellow-spotted Barbet *Buccanodon duchaillui* (H) Regularly heard at Lomako.

Hairy-breasted Barbet (Streaky-throated B) *Tricholaema [hirsuta] ansorgii* (H) We heard it once at Lomako.

Yellow-billed Barbet *Trachyphonus purpuratus* (H) We heard its voice once at Lomako.

Cassin's Honeybird *Prodotiscus insignis* Nice looks at one in a bird party at Lomako.

Spotted Honeyguide *Indicator maculatus* (NL) Sue saw one at Lomako.

Green-backed Woodpecker *Campethera cailliautii* Several nice observations at Lomako.

Buff-spotted Woodpecker *Campethera nivosa* Regular observations at Lomako.

Brown-eared Woodpecker *Campethera caroli* Six observations in the Lomako forests.

Yellow-crested Woodpecker *Chloropicus xantholophus* Good looks at this distinctive species at Lomako.

Gabon Woodpecker *Dendropicos gabonensis* A few sightings, both at Lomako and at Lingunda.

Grey Kestrel *Falco ardosiaceus* A single bird flew over our guesthouse in Kinshasa.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* A single bird was catching flying insects over the clearing at Lomako.

Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus* (EN) Just a few observations at different venues.

Black-collared Lovebird *Agapornis swindernianus* Brief looks at one in swift flight over the clearing at Lomako.

Rufous-sided Broadbill *Smithornis rufolateralis* Displaying birds were regularly encountered at Lomako.



We encountered some amazing caterpillars (Mark Van Beirs)

African Shrike-flycatcher *Megabyas flammulatus* We observed a female in the Lingunda farmbush.
Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher *Bias musicus* A pair showed well in the Lingunda farmbush.
Chestnut Wattle-eye *Platysteira castanea* Several encounters with this tiny species at Lomako.
Rufous-bellied Helmetshrike *Prionops rufiventris* Several encounters with canopy-dwelling parties at Lomako.
Blue Cuckooshrike *Coracina azurea* Good looks at a male in the camp area at Lomako.
Western Oriole *Oriolus brachyrynchus* Often heard and regularly seen in the camp area at Lomako.



Pied Crows are common where people live (Mark Van Beirs)

Chestnut Wattle-eye *Platysteira castanea* Several encounters with this tiny species at Lomako.
Rufous-bellied Helmetshrike *Prionops rufiventris* Several encounters with canopy-dwelling parties at Lomako.
Blue Cuckooshrike *Coracina azurea* Good looks at a male in the camp area at Lomako.
Western Oriole *Oriolus brachyrynchus* Often heard and regularly seen in the camp area at Lomako.
Shining Drongo *Dicrurus atripennis* A regular in the bird party near our camp at Lomako.
Velvet-mantled Drongo *Dicrurus modestus* Several observations of this canopy inhabitant at Lomako.
Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone rufiventer* Regular encounters in the bird parties at Lomako.
Bates's Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone batesi* Every mixed bird party at Lomako held a pair of these.
African Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis* Several encounters at Lingunda and Basankusu.
Pied Crow *Corvus albus* Very common in Kinshasa and Mbandaka. Just a few at Basankusu.
Dusky Tit *Melaniparus funereus* A couple of sightings in the Lomako forests.
Western Nicator *Nicator chloris* A handful of observations at Lomako. An often heard voice in the forest.
Dark-capped Bulbul *Pycnonotus tricolor* Common outside the Lomako forests.
Slender-billed Greenbul *Stelgidillas gracilirostris* Just a few observations at Lomako.
Little Greenbul *Eurillas virens* Common, by voice, outside the Lomako forests.
Little Grey Greenbul *Eurillas gracilis* Regular encounters at Lomako.
Ansorge's Greenbul *Eurillas ansorgei* Two sightings only. Not easy to identify in the gloom of the forest. Voice!
Yellow-whiskered Greenbul *Eurillas latirostris* Just two observations of this easy to identify species at Lomako.
Golden Greenbul *Calyptocichla serinus* A couple of encounters in the bird party at the camp at Lomako.
Honeyguide Greenbul *Baeopogon indicator* Several encounters with this distinctive species.
Spotted Greenbul *Ixonotus guttatus* Common, both at Lomako and at Lingunda. The wing lifter!
Yellow-throated Leaflove *Atimastillas flavicollis* Good looks at Lola Ya Bonobo near Kinshasa.

Swamp Palm Bulbul *Thescelocichla leucopleura* A few observations along the Lomako River.
Icterine Greenbul *Phyllastrephus icterinus* Regular in the bird parties at Lomako.
White-throated Greenbul *Phyllastrephus albigularis* Two observations of this skulking species at Lomako.
Red-tailed Bristlebill *Bleda syndactylus* Often heard, but hard to see in the Lomako forest undergrowth.
Eastern Bearded Greenbul *Criniger chloronotus* Just a few sightings at Lomako.
Red-tailed Greenbul *Criniger calurus* One of the most regularly encountered species in the Lomako forests.
White-bearded Greenbul *Criniger ndussumensis* A single positive observation at Lomako.
Square-tailed Saw-wing *Psalidoprocne nitens* Several were seen over the Lomako river.
Congo Martin *Riparia congica* Fair views from the terrace of our hotel at Mbandaka. A speciality!
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* A few of these migrants were noted at Mbandaka.
White-bibbed Swallow *Hirundo nigrita* Common and attractive along the Lomako River.
Lesser Striped Swallow *Cecropis abyssinica* Regular around villages and towns.
Red-breasted Swallow *Cecropis semirufa* Several birds were nest-building at Basankusu.
Yellow Longbill *Macrosphenus flavicans* Two showed well along the stream near our camp at Lomako.
Grey Longbill *Macrosphenus concolor* A regular voice in the Lomako forests. Hard to see well.
Chestnut-capped Flycatcher *Erythrocerus mcallii* Two birds were noted in a bird party along the camp stream.
Green Hylia *Hylia prasina* (H) The double note is an often heard call in the forest.
Chattering Cisticola *Cisticola anonymus* Regular in the Basankusu farmbrush.
Tawny-flanked Prinia *Prinia subflava* Common in more open habitat.
Buff-throated Apalis *Apalis rufogularis* Regular encounters in the Lomako forests.
Gosling's Apalis *Apalis goslingi* Fair views of one in riverine forest near Basankusu. Several others were heard.
Grey-backed Camaroptera (Bleating Warbler) *Camaroptera brevicaudata* Regular in farmbrush and gardens.
Olive-green Camaroptera *Camaroptera chloronota* (H) We heard one in the Lingunda farmbrush.
Rufous-crowned Eremomela *Eremomela badiceps* Several nice encounters with this attractive canopy dweller.
Scaly-breasted Illadopsis *Illadopsis albipectus* (H) We heard it a few times in the Lomako forests, but no joy.
Pale-breasted Illadopsis *Illadopsis rufipennis* Perfect looks at this skulker in the Lomako forests.
Brown Illadopsis *Illadopsis fulvescens* (NL) Guna had good looks at this secretive species at Lomako.
Purple-headed Starling *Hylopsar purpureiceps* Regular observations high in the canopy or of flying birds.
Splendid Starling *Lamprotonis splendidus* Several were noted at Mbandaka.
Chestnut-winged Starling *Onychognathus fulgidus* A handful of observations in the Lomako forests.
Red-tailed Ant Thrush *Neocossyphus rufus* A couple of sightings in the Lomako forest undergrowth.
Fraser's Rufous Thrush *Stizorhina fraseri* Regular encounters at Lomako. A fine voice!
African Thrush *Turdus pelios* Fairly common in gardens and farmbrush.
Fire-crested Alethe *Alethe castanea* (H) We heard it a few times in the Lomako forests.
Fraser's Forest Flycatcher *Fraseria ocreata* Several nice observations of this well-marked species.
Grey Tit-Flycatcher *Myioparus plumbeus* Two sightings of this widespread species.
Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* A couple of observations of this northern migrant at the end of the tour.
Ashy Flycatcher *Muscicapa caeruleascens* Several showed well in the Lingunda farmbrush.
Cassin's Flycatcher (Grey) *Muscicapa cassini* Common and showy along the Lomako River.
Forest Robin (Eastern F R) *Stiphornis [erythrothorax] xanthogaster* Glimpses only of this mega skulker.
Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush *Cichladusa ruficauda* Excellent looks at Kinshasa and at Mbandaka.
Violet-tailed Sunbird *Anthreptes aurantius* This attractive species showed well along the Lomako River.
Little Green Sunbird *Anthreptes seimundi* Very nice views in the Lingunda farmbrush.
Grey-chinned Sunbird (Green S) *Anthreptes rectirostris* A male was scoped at Lola Ya Bonobo, near Kinshasa.
Collared Sunbird *Hedydipna collaris* Regular sightings of this widespread species.
Green-headed Sunbird *Cyanomitra verticalis* A couple of observations at Lomako.
Blue-throated Brown Sunbird *Cyanomitra cyanolaema* Regular in the Lomako canopy and in the nearby farmbrush.
Olive Sunbird *Cyanomitra olivacea* Fairly common within the Lomako forests.
Green-throated Sunbird *Chalcomitra rubescens* Nice looks at two in the Lingunda farmbrush.
Olive-bellied Sunbird *Cinnyris chloropygius* Regular observations in Kinshasa, Lingunda and at Lomako.
Tiny Sunbird *Cinnyris minullus* A male was scoped at the Iyema clearing.
Congo Sunbird *Cinnyris congensis* Excellent looks at two birds along the banks of the Congo River.
Superb Sunbird *Cinnyris superbus* Fairly common all along our route. A gorgeous species!
Copper Sunbird *Cinnyris cupreus* Several were noted in the Kinshasa area.



A female Congo Sunbird (Mark Van Beirs)

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Regular in Kinshasa and in Mbandaka. A recent arrival!

Northern Grey-headed Sparrow *Passer griseus* Common in town and villages.

Slender-billed Weaver *Ploceus pelzelni* A few in Kinshasa and also noted in Mbandaka.

Black-necked Weaver *Ploceus nigricollis* Identified in Kinshasa and in Lingunda.

Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus* Common and obvious.

Vieillot's Black Weaver *Ploceus nigerrimus* Quite common in Basankusu where we could observe an active colony.



Vieillot's Black Weaver & a male Bob-tailed Weaver (Mark Van Beirs)

Black-headed Weaver *Ploceus melanocephalus* Several were seen at Lola Ya Bonobo, near Kinshasa.

Yellow-mantled Weaver *Ploceus tricolor* Two were found in a mixed bird party along the camp stream.

Cassin's Malimbe *Malimbus cassini* Good looks at a nest-building pair along the camp stream.

Red-headed Malimbe *Malimbus rubricollis* Several excellent observations of this smart tree climber.

Red-bellied Malimbe *Malimbus erythrogaster* Nice looks at a male in the Lingunda farmbush.

Bob-tailed Weaver *Brachycope anomala* Common, cute and looking unusual in Basankusu and Mbandaka.

Woodhouse's Antpecker *Parmoptila woodhousei* Good looks at one along the camp stream.

Grey-headed Nigrita *Nigrita canicapillus* Two observations only.

Grant's Bluebill *Spermophaga poliogenys* It took a while, but eventually we obtained good looks at this speciality.

Orange-cheeked Waxbill *Estrilda melpoda* Quite common in the Lingunda and Basankusu farmbush.

Black-crowned Waxbill *Estrilda nonnula* Fairly common in the Basankusu farmbush.

Bronze Mannikin *Lonchura cucullata* Regular.

Black-and-white Mannikin *Lonchura bicolor* Less common than the previous species.



*Malachite Kingfisher & Erica Butterfly (*Telipna erica*) (Mark Van Beirs)*

Magpie Mannikin *Lonchura fringilloides* Good looks at one in the guesthouse gardens at Basankusu.
Pin-tailed Whydah *Vidua macroura* Regular in the Basankusu farmbrush.
African Pied Wagtail *Motacilla aguimp* Only seen in Kinshasa and Mbandaka.



Lomako-Yokokala Faunal Reserve sign & an unusual termite nest (Mark Van Beirs)



Bonobos performed very well at Lomako (Mark Van Beirs)

MAMMALS

Forest Giant Squirrel (African G S) *Protoxerus stangeri* Several observations of this not so impressive squirrel.

Congo Rope Squirrel *Funisciurus congicus* Regular sightings.

Tree Pangolin *Phataginus tricuspis* (NL) Martin & Jane saw one along the entrance track in the morning.

African Palm Civet *Nandinia binotata* Fantastic looks at two in a fruiting tree in the camp clearing.

Hammer-headed Fruit Bat (Hammer Bat) *Hypsignathus monstrosus* (H) A regular sound on the nightwalks.

Demidoff's Galago *Galagoides demidoff* (H) We heard it a few times at Lomako.

Angolan Pied Colobus *Colobus angolensis* Several nice sightings of this very shy monkey at Lomako.

Black Mangabey *Lophocebus aterrimus* Common and often quite showy at Lomako. A great voice!

Red-tailed Monkey *Cercopithecus (cephus) ascanius* A handful of observations of this widespread species.

Wolf's Monkey *Cercopithecus wolffi* Common and ever so handsome in the Lomako forests.

Bonobo (Pygmy Chimpanzee) *Pan paniscus* Regular and often excellent encounters with our closest relatives.

Red River Hog *Potamochoerus porcus* Several very nice sightings. Martin & Jane were attacked on one occasion.

Peter's Duiker *Cephalophus callipygus* Several excellent nocturnal observations.

Western Blue Duiker *Cephalophus congica* Great looks at several on our nightwalks.

Western Tree Hyrax *Dendrohyrax dorsalis* (H) A regularly heard sound in the Lomako forests.



An amazing Black Mangabey (Mark Van Beirs)



Red-tailed Monkeys & Wolf's Monkey (Mark Van Beirs)



Sunset over the mighty Congo River (Mark Van Beirs)