

GABON- AFRICAN RIVER MARTIN AND DIONCOPHYLLUM- TRIPREPORT FOR INDEPENDENT TRAVELLERS (2 Nov-25 Nov. 2010)

The focus of this trip was to find the **African River Martin** with the subgoal to see **Black collared Bulbul** (and also to twitch and collect the strange plant family; **Dioncophyllaceae**). This report will hopefully give you sufficient information about how to see these species on an **independent travel basis**.

I had searched the internet now and then for several years without really reaching the level of confidence to set out. But with the report from John van der Woude, who also kindly provided additional info by e-mail, I felt quite sure about finding the Martin. He had been birding the Gamba area during 14-29 Sept 2009 and found the Martin to be “common along the road to Colas and elsewhere, high in the air”.

I will share my experience in Diary-form with the logistics etc. included. The species dealt with are mostly the specialities.

2 Nov. Flight with Air France; Paris to Libreville. (Both Air France and Lufthansa have flights almost daily competing for commuting oil workers from Europe and Asia. I bought my ticket directly on the homepage of Air France, not expensive, about 700 euro from Paris) Arriving at Libreville presenting my **Yellow Fever stamp (obligatory)** and my **Visa (Obligatory)**, I e-mailed the Gabonese embassy in London and was provided with a form to print and complete. I sent the form from Sweden together with about 100 pound which also covered the retour postage, the process took 7 days. The tricky thing is that **you must affiliate an invoice of a paid hotel bill** for the first days. The only hotel who answered my e-mails was *Sunset Beach Hotel* located in La Sablier close to the airport. The manager Thierry, who speaks English, was familiar with the Visa hazels and provided the necessary papers to be included with the Visa forms. sunsetbeachhotel@hotmail.com . It was also one of the cheaper hotels; 35 euro.

4 Nov. Flight to Gamba. (bought a one way ticket the day before for about 100 euro at the airport. Daily flights to Gamba from Libreville. My impression is that you don't really have to book in advance but if you are on a tight schedule you should try to.) Gamba is an isolated town and not realistically reachable over land. I stayed in a small place called Le Nama 20 euro.

5 Nov. Taxi to Vembo a few km. outside Gamba. There is a restaurant and a rest house run by Shell, forming quite a big compound where also Smithsonian has an office and some collections. Walked around here and outside the compound and found Forbes Plover together with Lesser Black-headed Lapwing, Long Legged Pipit all around the soccer-field. Crossed the main road from the soccer-field and continued up along a gravel road. The forest patch to the left had a strategic dead- tree from where a **Black Headed Bee-eater** commanded the area. This was my only record of that species.

I presented myself to Tobi the curator at the Smithsonian. He kindly showed me 3 specimens of the River Martin, they looked larger than expected, he promised to show me the site where he found them.

In the late afternoon we went out along the road to Plage Colas (Mayonami road). This is the road that goes south-east = left from the airport entrance (right fork goes to Gamba itself).

John van der Woude reports; **African River Martin**: “Hundreds seen along asphalt rd to Colas, and sev. high in the air elsewhere...first ones only at 20 sep.”

The road is best known as the Plage Colas rd., if you say Colas people will refer to the road-maintenance company with the name “Colas”. The Plage Colas itself is about 15 km (can’t recall exact) from the airport.

Rosy Bee-eater was common and a Finfoot crossed the road. I was quite concerned though, not seeing any Martins. Tobi showed me the place where the dead specimens came from. They were apparently killed by traffic.

6 Nov. Taxi to the airport. Walked in light rain along the Plage Colas road. After four hours (km. 4-5 ?) with lots of **Rosy Bee-eaters** suddenly one **African River Martin** “came down” approaching a flock of feeding Bee-eaters. I could not see any details or colours but the wings were broad and the bill wide.!

7 Nov. Rain, rest (Sunday).

8-9 Nov. Went by taxi to the WWF office in Gamba. Met with the guide Martin who seems to be the only local person with any knowledge about Afr. Riv. M., I was quite amazed that this species was so unfamiliar to the people around here, the WWF staff included. I met with some people from an organisation somehow associated with WWF and with their staff located in the same compound. I paid about 300 euro which included transport with boat to Sette Cama, lodging with dinner and breakfast, boat excursion at the lagoon and land transport with jeep back to Gamba. (expensive ? yes but the guide Martin and also the boatman and lodge staff had to stay over night in Sette Cama).

Sette Cama is located about 40-50 km. north of Gamba. It used to be an important ? trading point but is at present just a small village with some 20-30 houses. 3 lodges are to be found on line along the lagoon in the northern part of the village. The southernmost of these is the “Casa de passage” where I stayed. 50-100 m behind this house you will find the school with its big sandy yard. Another 200 m or so to the west and you are at the sea. It is possible to reach Sette Cama with hired boat and with 4-wheeldr. You could do this trip over the day and then preferably over land.

We went at noon with the boat. The journey took less than 2 hours.

As soon as we approached Sette Cama We saw one flock of about 50 **African River Martins**. They went down to the water surface in coordinated order and then flew from the lagoon 100-200 m. to the sands at the village school. They were always together with some **Rosy Bee-eaters** both over the lagoon and on the sand. The procedure was repeated many times during the afternoon. The greatest numbers were about 300 martins and 50 Bee-eaters. While on the sandy ground in front of the school the birds were very nervous but it was possible to approach them, taking cover behind some scrubs. At one instant all the school kids went out for a break, all the Martins and Bee-eaters then took refuge in some trees behind the school building.

The next morning there was no signs of either the Martins or the Bee-eaters. But in the afternoon they appeared together again, and the same behaviour as yesterday was repeated. From the lagoon they were always coming back to the same open area in front of the school though there were many similar open sandy spots in the vicinity of the village. The only difference I could think of was that on this particular area the surface of the ground was disturbed by the playing children and also by any occasional traffic.. Neither could I figure out what the birds actually was doing on the ground. They were actually on the move all the time rather than just resting, and it seemed like they were picking something. I got the idea that they were picking salty sand particles which were easier to find here where the surface

had been disturbed (surface sand being regularly washed by heavy rains). I could not find any insects etc. I saw a few birds sand-bathing, and also some birds begging others for food ?. While at the lagoon I got the impression that the birds were drinking from the fresh water. I don't know whether the water at times got "contaminated" by tidal influx and thus creating fluctuating premises. The second day in the early afternoon I saw one big flock feeding ? over the forests in the lagoon area.

Loanga Weaver where tame and came to take scraps at the veranda of the casa de passage. Slender-billed weaver where seen from the veranda in the riverine veg. Rufous-tailed Palmthrush occurred and is probably common but I only saw one pair just to the north of the school area.

I went back to Gamba with jeep, passing sandy grassy plains in between patches of forest. If **African River Martin** is absent from the village area in Sette-cama you should try along this track. John Hornbuckle in a personal comment recalled to have seen it along this way at two places and in the Birds of Africa they say; ".. nesting..or (Gamba, Gabon) in grassy sand in plain 2-3 km from coast." which I believe must be along this track.

10 Nov. Flying back to Libreville. The airplane was not full. 100 euro one way.

11-12 Nov. Train to Franceville. (It was Friday and all airplanes were fully booked). Trains departs 3 times a week. Bought ticket to this overnight train the same morning. Not full.

13 Nov. (see appendix for info about the very special plant **Dioncophyllum** which I saw in Kessala)

14 Nov. From Franceville to Leconi with minibus (several daily) along a newly reconstructed road.

Walked from Hotel Leconi (20 euro I was the only guest) along the main road eastwards, passed the Mineral water factory after 1.5-2 km., continued past the factory for about 1 km., along the same main road that turns into a dust road after the factory. Took the left turn, towards Leconi park (no signs) branching off from the Congo road. Uphill and then flat before going downhill in to habitat (500m after the branching off from the Congo road and about 3-3.5 km. from Hotel Leconi). Shrubs and small trees, **Congo Moor Chat** was seen after a short while perching on top of small trees. I walked for about 3-400 m. but had to turn as it became late.

15 Nov. Walked to the same area as yesterday and now I saw **Black Collared Bulbul** perching on low treetops about 200 m. out to the right (east). I walked back to Leconi after seeing my target bird (also saw **Black Chinned Weaver** out here in the same habitat).

16-18 Nov. Left Franceville for Makokou via Okandja where I had to spend two nights due to lack of transport. The road up to M was sometimes just two wheel tracks which now and then had to be cleared with machete from fallen trees.

19 Nov. Went by taxi to Ipassa reserve about 10 km south west of Makokou. I found it really difficult to watch birds here, maybe because it was during the rains but also there is really only one track and it's only 1.5 km long. But if you are travelling earlier or later than sept-nov you should try this area for **African River Martin**. I assume that it can be seen at the river

close to the headquarter in Ipassa but maybe also at the jetty by the Ivindo river in Makokou. (I walked along the river just west of the jetty and found **Goslings Apalis** here)
See append. for *Afrostryax*.

Append.

Besides bird watching I have a botany “twitch-project” where I try to look out for representative species for the about 500 plant families that are recognised. For up to date details about current systematics on family level see Angiosperm Phylogeny Website.

One of the least known as well as most special of all the plant families is the **Dioncophyllaceae** of west tropical Africa. The family consists of 3 monotypic (consisting of one specie only) genera; *Triphyophyllum* and *Habropetalum* from Sierra Leone, Liberia , Ivory Coast and ***Dioncophyllum dawei*** from Gabon and Congo. They are lianas and the only plants with a double hook at the leave acumen. It was assumed from morphological evidence that they were somehow related to the *Nepenthaceae* (familiar to all Mt. Kinabalu visitors) with a mainly south-east Asian distribution. This presumption have since won further acceptance due to molecular data.

Due to information provided by the French botanist Olivier Lachenaud, ***Dioncophyllum dawei*** was found on the following locality;

Franceville, Kessala; which is a small village 53 km (1.5 hour with Jeep) south east of Franceville, passing other villages as Youlou and Mopounga. The dirt road commences above the Amogho statue in Franceville. (Scarce public transp. but 4-wheel with driver possible). *D. t.* was growing (first found by O. Lachenaud et al.) just as the road drops down in the open at Kessala, coming from Fr. in a cleared area 100 m. long on the south side of the road and even creeping out over the roadedge. (Also in the clearing about 300m before). Cleared/burned? forest. Not seen in mature vegetation. Several rosettes from bare ground, 30-50 cm wide with lowermost leaves unhocked. Shoots creeping over ground or upright to at least one meter or scrambling up over shrubs and small trees with support of the hooked leaves. Woody stem dark greenish, appears herbaceous. Some indiv. in flower.

Another African plant family with a mostly west tropical distribution is *Huaceae* which consists of the genera *Hua* and *Afrostryax* . They are considered by molecular data to qualify for a family on their own. This relation was first suspected by their mutual smell of garlic, a character that is of great importance when you are looking for them in the forest! ***Afrostryax lepidophyllum*** as follows

Makokou (by Ivindo river), Ipassa reserve (about 10 km. s.w. from town). Pump house track (jeep track commencing behind the lab building) through the forest. Take any of the few more or less overgrown trails to the left. Check saplings.

Forest with ***Thomandersia congolana*** etc. (representing another family endemic to West Africa. ***Th. Butayei*** was very common at Sette Cama.). Sapplings (50-70 cm high seen), with strong smell of garlic especially from the youngest parts. Leaves with ciliate scales beneath and on petioles and stipules. Scales appeared grayish in the field but on dry material somewhat more reddish!. Mature trees difficult to locate, Foliage high up and scales not visible with binoculars. Inner bark with garlic smell.

Warning; leaves from another tree with scales (*Euphorbiaceae* / *Sterc.* ?) commonly seen on ground has longer (1.5-5 cm.) and thinner petiole and more reddish scales (unciliated ?).

BIRDS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT.

African River Martin *Pseudochelidon eurystoma*
Black Chinned Weaver *Ploceus nigrimentus*
Black Collared Bulbul *Neolestes torquatus*
Black Headed Bee-eater *Merops breweri*
Congo Moor Chat *Myrmecocichla thollonii*
Finfoot *Podica senegalensis*
Forbes Plover *Charadrius forbesi*
Gosling's Apalis *Apalis goslingi*
Lesser Black-headed Lapwing *Vanellus lugubris*
Loanga Weaver *Ploceus subpersonatus*
Long-legged Pipit *Anthus pallidiventris*
Rosy Bee-eater *Merops malimbicus*
Rufous-tailed Palmthrush *Cichladusa ruficauda*
Slender-billed Weaver *Ploceus pelzenii*

PLANTS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

Afrostryax lepidophyllus
Dioncophyllum dawei
Thomandersia butayei
Th. Congolana

Litt.

HBV, Handbook of the birds of the world
John van der Woude, Tripreports, Gabon (internet)
The Birds of Africa

Thanks,
John van der Woude and Jon Hornbuckle

For any feedback, questions concerning this report and general questions about “plant twitching” etc. please contact me on erik.emanuelsson@nrm.se

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