

LOGGING off

It's the Upper Guinea rainforest that makes a birding trip to Ghana so spectacular. One of the most biologically diverse ecosystems on the planet, it harbours almost 20 endemic bird species, including the white-necked picathartes. But as **Adam Riley** points out, this almost-mythical species' days are likely to be numbered if logging and bushmeat hunting continue to take their toll. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM RILEY





My connection with Ghana began rather unexpectedly more than 10 years ago. I was with a group of bird-watchers for whom I arranged and guided an annual tour to Africa and we were discussing a destination for the following year. We had already been to South Africa, Zambia and Uganda, but my clients' request came right out of left field: Ghana.

I was astonished as I had never considered Ghana as a potential birding destination and didn't even know any birders who had been there. My clients insisted that they wanted to go to Ghana as they had heard that the birding was great. The customer, of course, is king, and since we needed no excuse for exploration, adventure and an opportunity for new birds, my colleague David Hoddinott and I soon found ourselves winging our way to this West African nation. Very little tourist information was available at the time, so we hired a car and off we went, following the few tips we had managed to glean, but mostly exploring on our own.

What a trip we had. Nineteen days later we had racked up a list of 436 species that included some of Africa's least-known birds, such as Congo serpent-eagle, yellow-footed honeyguide, black-collared love-bird, yellow-bearded greenbul and Tessmann's flycatcher. We realised that we had discovered Africa's next hot birding destination.



Back at home I meticulously planned the perfect birding route based on our explorations, then made the bookings and confirmed the first commercial birding tour to Ghana. About a month before departure my clients asked me if we were going to the same sites in Ghana as those offered by another, rather upmarket birding-tour company. After some initial confusion on my part and knowing with certainty that said company did not offer tours to Ghana, it suddenly dawned on me... My clients had wanted to go to The Gambia, but had got the country name confused with Ghana.

The Gambia, an inexpensive package-holiday destination for British sunseekers, had become quite popular with birders too. It is situated outside the rainforest belt, offering mostly dry-savanna bird species, waterbirds along the Gambia River and Palearctic migrants. But the realisation came too late for these somewhat geographically challenged birders – the tickets to Accra had been booked and the plans were in motion... We ended up enjoying a highly successful trip, and since then our company has arranged and guided more than 20 birding tours to Ghana. We've logged in excess of 600 species, including several new records for the country.

What makes Ghana so special? Most importantly the Upper Guinea forest, one of Africa's two major rainforest regions (the other being the far more extensive Lower Guinea forest of the Congo Basin and surrounding areas). The Upper Guinea forest is one of the world's 25 most biologically diverse and endangered ecosystems and is classified as an Endemic Bird Area. It supports nearly 20 endemic bird species, most of which are threatened with extinction. I revisited Ghana last December after a break of more than eight years and spent most of the 12-day trip in this forested region. At the end of it I came home with very mixed emotions, and they triggered this article.

Ghana's people are as affable as ever. Experienced world travellers often leave the country stating that its citizens are the friendliest people in the world, and I agree. The problem is that there are a whole lot more Ghanaians now. The population has swelled by more than 27 per cent during the past decade and stands at over 24.2 million people (2010 census). In 1960, just three years after independence, Ghana had a



CHRISTIAN BOIX

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population of 6.7 million, which computes to an incredible 261 per cent increase in 50 years. Unsurprisingly, this sharp rise has had a devastating impact on the environment.

The birding on my latest trip was superb, even better than I remembered it. Our tours bear this out, as we see more species each time (on the most recent expedition, we garnered 505). In addition, several birds that had been considered extinct or not to occur in Ghana have been located, such as the white-necked picathartes and Nimba flycatcher, both threatened Upper Guinea endemics.

The two picathartes species are placed in their own family. The white-necked (or yellow-headed) is endemic to the Upper Guinea forest, while the grey-necked (or red-headed) is restricted to the Lower Guinea forest. They are large passerines

and research has shown them to be an ancient basal offshoot from the passerine tree. Their habit of nesting communally under rock overhangs gave rise to their alternative name of rockfowl, and in the past they have also been known as bald-headed crows.

Historically, colonies of white-necked picathartes were recorded throughout the rainforest zone of Ghana, but relentless forest clearance resulted in all known populations being destroyed. By the time I first visited the country, the species was considered extinct there. Nevertheless, we spent considerable time looking for it. Our search was unsuccessful, but I suspected that the few remaining pockets of forest harboured a colony or two. Several hunters I interviewed knew of the bird and claimed it still occurred.

A few years ago the news broke that picathartes had been seen at a community forest reserve in Ghana. Researchers explored the surrounding areas and several more colonies were discovered (some of this investigative work, including aerial surveys, was supported by an initiative our company operates, the Rockjumper Bird Conservation Fund). One of the colonies was subsequently opened to ▶

ABOVE Africa's first rainforest canopy walkway is in Kakum National Park. Although this area was logged in the past, as a national park it is now one of the few forests in Ghana that is truly protected.

OPPOSITE The blue-moustached bee-eater, a rainforest species that occurs in just a few scattered sites in Ghana, was previously considered a subspecies of the blue-headed bee-eater.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Once widespread through Ghana's forests, the white-necked picathartes was later believed to have become extinct in the country. Its subsequent rediscovery holds promise for community-benefiting ecotourism.



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tourists after researchers studying the picathartes deemed visits by birders to be non-disruptive.

We visited the colony at Bonkro, a remote village in southern Ghana. Here local hunters had been harvesting the birds for generations by simply picking the adults off their nests during the breeding season. Now that the colony has been proclaimed off-limits for hunting, the picathartes population has grown, the village is benefiting markedly from entry and guide fees, and a school is being built with the proceeds from conservation funds.

We arrived at Bonkro in the afternoon and once we had met our local guide and managed to escape the throngs of friendly children, we walked through fields of cocoa, corn and other crops. Huge tree stumps indicated that these fields had recently replaced primary rainforest. Finally we slipped into the dark forest and followed a meandering trail for three kilometres, passing massive trees with expansive buttress roots, until we reached a very steep rise. After a sweaty climb of a hundred metres or so,

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we reached the picathartes' colony of cup-shaped mud nests that were attached to the walls of a rock overhang. We sat quietly and waited.

Picathartes spend their days foraging for insects, snails and other prey deep in the forests, but little more is known of this behaviour as they are incredibly shy birds and vanish at the first hint of disturbance. However, around their colonies (to which they usually return each evening) they appear to lose their fear and will perch close to observers to preen, sometimes ignoring the onlookers and at other times displaying great curiosity. I had already seen the grey-necked picathartes in Cameroon on several occasions and had been on my way to a white-necked colony in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002 when there had been a coup and we had to reluctantly turn back. So to finally see this bird was a dream come true for me.

But all is not rosy. In my three visits, each of several hours' duration, my ears were bombarded as I waited for and then watched these amazing birds. In the background the entire time there was the roar of chainsaws and blasts from bushmeat hunters' shotguns – the two great evils that are destroying so much of Africa's rainforests and their fauna. Figures I sourced indicate that Ghana's forests have reduced significantly in extent, from 8.2 million hectares at the beginning of the 20th century to a mere 1.4 million hectares in 2007. According to the World Bank, up to 80 per cent of Ghana's forests had been destroyed by illegal logging by 2008. Official estimates suggest that logging is proceeding at about four million cubic metres per annum – four times the sustainable rate.

Ghana has the dubious distinction of being the first country to have lost a major primate species since the Convention on Biological Diversity came into force: Miss Waldron's red colobus was declared extinct in 2000 as a result of the destruction of its forest habitat. Between 1990 and 2010, Ghana lost 33.7 per cent of its forest cover (around 2.5 million hectares, nearly double what now remains). And, tragically, what remains is still being destroyed at a devastating rate. In every forest we birded (except Kakum National Park, where logging ceased in 1989), felling was clearly in evidence. All these forests are in 'protected' reserves, but at some of them logging permits are reportedly being issued for harvesting the trees. It is possible that these permits are for selective harvesting, but it is also obvious that the reserves are in fact being clear-felled.

In addition, the last remaining larger mammals and birds are being shot out by hunters to supply the insatiable demand for bushmeat, a market that in Ghana alone is estimated to generate revenues of up to US\$350-million a year. Although in many instances this hunting is illegal, it is brazenly undertaken by locals, and their victims (including endangered species) are commonly sold along the country's main roads. I have seen tree pangolins, greater cane rats, several monkey and duiker species, royal antelopes, Pel's anomalures (a giant flying squirrel), huge casqued hornbills, great blue turacos and numerous other birds and mammals for sale along the roadside.



While we were deep in Atewa Range Forest Reserve, a hunter passed us and I asked him to show us his night's catch. He opened his rucksack and inside was a tightly bound bundle that he unfastened to reveal a tree pangolin, a creature I had never seen alive in all my time birding these forests. It was completely unharmed as the hunter had climbed a tree to catch it, so we agreed to purchase the pangolin. After taking a few images and ensuring that the hunter had gone, we released it and watched with mixed emotions as it climbed high into a massive tree. What are the chances of survival for these shy forest denizens? ▶

ABOVE The West African race of Vieillot's black weaver is a stunning bird that is common at forest edges.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE Despite taking place in shattered locations, where chainsaws whine constantly in the background, forest birding in Ghana is phenomenal, with an incredible diversity and number of rare and endangered species. The rare rufous fishing-owl was one of the many species seen by this group in Nsuta Forest, a reserve that is in the process of being clear-felled and settled by subsistence farmers.

OPPOSITE, BELOW An illegal hunter in Atewa Range Forest Reserve with his catch, a tree pangolin destined for the bushmeat market.



Although the larger (that is, edible) birds have all but vanished from most of Ghana's forests, in general the birding was superb. We encountered flock after flock at all levels of the canopy, and often a mind-boggling diversity of species was present, even in seriously degraded forests that were being clear-felled. Endangered species such as rufous fishing-owl, western wattled cuckooshrike, red-fronted antpecker, green-tailed bristlebill and rufous-winged illadopsis were among the birds we saw, leading me to conclude that they are displaced survivors from forest that has been felled and are thronged in unnaturally high densities in the few pockets of forest that remain. However, they cannot and will not breed there and once these individuals' natural lifespans are over, these bird populations will be gone.

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Is there a solution? If there is, it will be complex. With an economic growth rate of more than 20 per cent, Ghana was listed as 'the world's fastest-growing economy in 2011'. This, combined with a burgeoning and increasingly affluent population, is placing unsustainable demands on the land. The supply of legal timber cannot come close to meeting the demand generated by the accelerating economy. Statistics reveal that more than three million rural Ghanaians depend on forests for their survival, and 69 per cent of all urban households utilise charcoal for cooking and heating.

A 2006 report titled 'Forest Governance in Ghana: an NGO perspective', drafted by Forest Watch Ghana, states: 'Ghana's forestry sector is in deep crisis. The timber industry-led assault on this resource is building towards ecological catastrophe. The state's failure to capture even a minimal portion of resource rent for the public and for the communities that own and depend on these forests for their livelihood has created a social catastrophe. The descent of affected communities into poverty, social decay, conflict and violence threatens a political and security catastrophe as well.'

I spoke at length with some of the villagers at Bonkro and learned that their community forest is in a reserve and they are not benefiting from the logging. It is often outsiders, who obtain permits by reportedly dubious means, who are robbing not only these communities of a large part of their livelihoods, but also the world of its biological inheritance. That being said, a section of the forest around the picathartes colony has been set aside as a non-hunting and non-logging area, and time will tell whether this 'island' will be large enough to sustain these special birds. Corruption of officials is a major issue and without the will and support of the authorities it is unlikely that any conservation effort will succeed. Nevertheless, various NGOs and other conservation bodies have had successes in Ghana and have created protected reserves, such as the Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary.

My personal opinion (bearing in mind that my professional background is not in conservation) is that if community members are given an alternative option to forest destruction and hunting, they will embrace it. I had a long conversation with the pangolin hunter at Atewa and while it was clear that he realised he and his fellow hunters are plundering the forest's resources at an unsustainable rate, he has a family to sustain and no alternative prospects exist for him.

One of the few ways to bring opportunities and income to these communities is by way of ecotourism, through employment as guides, lodge and support staff, reserve entry fees, and land rentals for lodges. And when communities see foreign visitors who have travelled across the world to enjoy their local wildlife and forests, they begin to appreciate that their natural heritage is special and should be protected. Empowering the communities, both financially and educationally, will enable them to resist any attempts by higher authorities to destroy their resources. They will also have the resolve and means to protect their natural heritage.

But ecotourism is unlikely to support very remote, isolated communities and it does have its risks and limitations, so I am not proposing that it is the sole solution. If there is to be any hope of saving Ghana's remaining rainforests, then internationally funded conservation NGOs will need to get involved in carbon-credit



schemes and programmes for poverty alleviation, education (especially for women) and family planning. The introduction of modern, intensive agricultural methods, the creation of properly protected reserves, sustainable economic development that doesn't rely primarily on natural resource extraction, and tackling corruption at a local official level are also among the factors that need to be enmeshed in a nationally supported conservation strategy.

ABOVE Another of Ghana's forest gems, the seldom-encountered Fraser's eagle-owl.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE This is one of the first published photographs of the little-known red-fronted antpecker.

OPPOSITE, BELOW The blue cuckooshrike is a highly sought-after rainforest canopy species.

