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
y 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, we had racked up a list of 436 species that information was available at the time, so West African nation. Very little tourist activity 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, the toll of having been booked and the plans graphically challenged birders – the tickets to Accra had been booked and the plan was 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 and the area 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 swollen 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

population of 6.7 million, which compares 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 tour bear this out, as we saw 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 black-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 habitat of nesting communally under rock overhangs gave rise to their alternative name of rockcrow, 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 existed.

A few years ago the news broke that picathartes had been seen at a communally 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 of our company operator, the Rockjumper Bird Conservation Fund). One of the colonies was subsequently opened to

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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.
Sweaty climb of a hundred metres or so, trees with expansive buttress roots, until for three kilometres, passing massive fields had recently replaced primary rain-forest. Huge tree stumps indicated that these fields of cocoa, corn and other crops. Friendly children, we walked through and once we had met our local guide conservation funds. is being built with the proceeds from entry and guide fees, and a school ing, the picathartes population has been proclaimed off-limits for hunt- ing, 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 rain-forest. 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, we reached the picathartes’ colony of cup-shaped mud nests that were at- tached 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 col- onies (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 pica- thartes 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.

Now that the colony has been proclaimed off-limits for hunting, the picathartes population has grown. 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 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 col- onies (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 pica- thartes 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.
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 flocks 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 fishowl, western wattled cuckoo-shrike, red-toucan antpitta, and green-tailed bristlebill 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 birds populations will be gone. 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 picachartes 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 Ateawa 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 outsiders 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 encompassed in a nationally supported conservation strategy.

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.’