

Client: River Cruise Line
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WORLD OF BIRDS

It is much easier to hear Sao Tome Scops Owl at night than to see it by day, but patient searching for roosting birds may be rewarded with exceptional views such as this.



Worlds apart

Dubbed the Galápagos of Africa, the endemic-rich islands of São Tomé and Príncipe are like nowhere else on Earth. **Dominic Mitchell** goes in search of the special birds of the Gulf of Guinea.

ALL PHOTOS: DOMINIC MITCHELL, WWW.BIRDCATCHER.COM

Even in one of the world's smallest nations it's possible to lose all sense of scale. After a drive of several hours down the east coast of São Tomé and another hour grinding our way along dirt roads made barely passable by heavy rain, we finally reached the drop-off point and started preparing our gear ready to camp. Here in Obô Natural Park, sweeping vistas of forested slopes and cloud-cloaked ridges extend as far as the eye can see, with impenetrable rainforest stretching all the way to the island's uninhabited west coast. You would never think this island was just three-quarters the size of Greater London.

Once in the forest, I also lost my normally dependable sense of direction – away from the campsite there was no obvious landmark or trail, just trees, vine tangles and undergrowth all around us. But Mito and Niti set off regardless, so I followed. Time wasn't on our side on this first afternoon, and I was anxious to make a start searching for some of the island's endemic birds before daylight started to fade.

After a while we veered off what had become a semblance of a trail, and worked our way into the forest proper. A barely audible flutter of wings brought us to an instant halt. "Galinhola!" exclaimed Mito in excited but hushed tones. Impressively, he had identified a Sao Tome Ibis flushing off the forest floor simply by the sound of the air displaced by its wing-beats.

This peculiar species, also known as Dwarf Olive Ibis, is a forest specialist. At one time considered extinct, it was rediscovered in 1989 but remains very rare, with perhaps as few as just 75 individuals surviving. One of them was somewhere ahead of us right now, though getting good views in this difficult terrain was not going to be easy. A game of hide-and-seek ensued as we approached cautiously; only for the bird to whirr away again unseen. Eventually this tree-dwelling oddity flew up into the canopy and was even joined by a second bird. They had every right to be wary: illegal hunting is the most serious current threat to the species.

Earning endemics
We worked our way slowly back to camp, notching up more endemics in the process, including Sao Tome Oriole, Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher, Sao Tome

Once considered extinct, Sao Tome Ibis was rediscovered in 1989 and is known from several forested areas in the south of the island, but its population remains very low.



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White-eye, Black-capped Speirops, Sao Tome Weaver and Principe Seed-eater. We'd had more than our fair share of endemics for one day, yet the icing on the cake was still to come, with two Sao Tome Scops Owls duetting as we devoured a well-earned dinner around the camp fire that evening.

After a restless night I awoke before first light, eager to begin the trek up the mountain as quickly as possible. At higher elevations this part of Obô Natural Park offers the chance of the rare Sao Tome Fiscal, the only closed-canopy forest shrike in the world, but perhaps even harder to find is Sao Tome Grosbeak. This giant finch went unseen for more than 100 years, so there seemed little chance of us having success, but Mito had other ideas and after several hours on the mountain his whistled call drew a response and, finally, a firm sighting. As the weather began to deteriorate, however, the fiscal remained elusive, and with heavy rain then stopping play we returned to camp and packed up our things.

After a largely successful rainforest adventure it was time for some more

Sao Tome Prinia is the most ubiquitous of the island's endemics, and occurs in a wide range of habitats. This is a juvenile.



Moving on

The same potential doubtless also applies to São Tomé's much smaller sibling, Príncipe.

Both are volcanic in origin, and neither has ever been connected to the mainland, nor to each other. Consequently, the avifaunas of these equatorial islands have developed through colonisation



Both islands have their own endemic species of speirops, a white-eye relative. This is Principe Speirops; on São Tomé its counterpart is Black-capped Speirops.

relaxed birding, especially as the hotel grounds offered excellent opportunities to see the likes of Sao Tome Prinia, Sao Tome Thrush and Newton's Sunbird. I also ventured out for an evening's walk nearby and found a Squacco Heron, seemingly a rare visitor with very few records on the island. The next day I was delighted to show Niti this species, which he had never seen before; we went on to find a juvenile Allen's Gallinule, another vagrant, further underlining the island's potential for extralimital wanderers.

events, either directly from mainland Africa or by island-hopping species. Isolated in their new homes, some have evolved into significantly different endemic forms. The exact number is taxonomy dependent, but in total up to 28 species are found on just one or both islands – relative to their size, the greatest density of endemic birds anywhere in the world.

That total includes one newly confirmed addition. In 2009 researchers Martin Melo and Martin Dallimer made recordings of what sounded like a scops owl, rumoured by parrot 'harvesters' to occur in primary forest in the south of Príncipe. The calls were the same frequency as other scops owls, but distinct from any known species. Seven years later Philippe Verbeelen led an expedition to search the area, and was rewarded with close-range views of at least two owls. Photographs and more recordings were obtained, and when the formal description is published a new species of scops owl will be added to the official list of Príncipe's endemic birds. My tight schedule couldn't

There are extensive and often impenetrable tracts of rainforest on São Tomé, such as this mountainside in the north-west of the island, and even tiny Príncipe has an inaccessible forested montane interior.

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Prince Kingfisher is endemic to its eponymous island and a potential split. Like its equivalent on São Tomé, it is currently lumped as a subspecies of Malachite Kingfisher.

accommodate another camping expedition – that will have to wait until next time. Instead, I focused on the more attainable Principe endemics in the north, including Dohrn's Thrush-Babbler, Principe Sunbird, Principe Speirops, Principe Starling and Principe Weaver. With perseverance many of these could be seen close to the perfectly located Praia Sundry resort, where a stream flows out from the forest and cuts through a golden beach into the warm waters of the Gulf of Guinea. Here, just metres from my accommodation, African Green Pigeons plundered fruiting trees while Western Reef Herons picked around in the stream bed.

It's worth paying special attention to subspecies on Principe. Most interesting is Principe Seedeater, the nominate form of which is rare on the main island, while there is a different subspecies on the 35-ha Ilhéu Caroço, about two miles off the south-east coast (as well as

a third widespread subspecies on São Tomé). The two Principe populations are almost isolated genetically, with the Caroço birds being heavier, bigger billed and shorter winged. We watched seven of these incredibly range-restricted seedeaters in palms at the foot of the islet's cliffs while White-tailed Tropicbirds, Brown Boobies and Little Swifts soared high overhead.

Other potential Principe splits include Principe Kingfisher (the island counterpart of São Tomé Kingfisher, both being Malachite Kingfisher spin-offs) and Principe Drongo (the larger local form of Velvet-mantled Drongo).

Wetland discoveries

I wish I'd had another couple of days on Principe, but all too soon it was time to leave. On the short flight back to São Tomé, the plane circled north out over the sea to land into the wind. As it did so I glanced out of the window and noticed several distant wetlands scattered along the coast to the west, so resolved to explore them and see what else I could find.

Driving back out to the coast, I came to a fair-sized marsh which looked promising, and the second Squacco Heron of the trip got things off to a good start. I parked close to the water's edge in the shade of a large tree and put my scope on the heron, only to notice another movement behind it. It was hard to make the bird out in the dense grasses and at range, but what seemed to be either a gallinule or crane was moving stealthily through cover. I fired off some speculative images which confirmed my general impression, but didn't reveal any meaningful detail.

The bird didn't show again, but while searching for it I found another two Squacco Herons and, far rarer, an African Pygmy Goose – perhaps only the second national record. I left during the heat of the afternoon, but returned the next day and staked out the marsh again, determined to relocate

Large areas of São Tomé and Principe are rarely, if ever, visited by ornithologists, and many interesting species must go unrecorded. This African Pygmy Goose may be only the second record for the islands.



São Tomé and Principe

VISITING

- Archipelago Choice is launching a new birding tour to São Tomé and Principe, led by Dominic Mitchell, in August 2020 – contact the company on 017687 75672 for more details.
- There are various flight options (with connections) to both islands from the UK and elsewhere in Europe.
- For general tourist information see www.turismo.gov.st/en/welcome/.

BOOKS

- The most useful field guide, featuring plates of all the endemic species, is *Birds of Western Africa* by Nik Borrow and Ron Demey (second edition, Christopher Helm, 2014) – buy from £35.99 at bit.ly/2kw3w9z.
- *The Birds of São Tomé and Principe: a Photoguide* by A P Leventis and Fábio Olmos (Aves & Fotos Editora, 2009) is an excellent bilingual (Portuguese/English) photographic guide – buy for £31.01 from Amazon at amzn.to/2ZuwmQV.
- The definitive reference to the islands' avifauna is *The Birds of São Tomé and Principe with Annobón: Islands of the Gulf of Guinea* by Peter Jones and Alan Tye (BOU Checklist No 22, 2006), though it lacks illustrations.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- For hot-spot details, recent checklists and other information see eBird's São Tomé and Principe pages at ebird.org/country/ST.
- The African Bird Club's overview of the islands is at www.africanbirdclub.org/countries/Sao-Tome-e-Principe/introduction.
- For trip reports search www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport.

the mystery bird. It took a couple of hours, but finally I managed to pin down not one but two Lesser Moorhens, both of which appeared to be greyish youngsters.

This species is another major vagrant to the Gulf of Guinea islands. Had I been lucky, or was it perhaps even breeding here, undetected in this anonymous wetland on a little-visited island? Along with the curious distribution of some of the endemics and the diversity of subspecies, it was one of several questions that I mulled over on the flight home that evening. Perhaps I'll try to start answering them when I return to these beautiful islands next year. ■

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Ian Coates of Archipelago Choice, Ricardo 'Mito' Fonseca, Arestides 'Niti' Santana Monteiro, Gabriel da Conceição and Remco Holland and friends on São Tomé, and Emmanuel Bettencourt and Yodi Santos on Principe. Philippe Verbelen and Ricardo Lima provided useful information and feedback.

• Dominic Mitchell is a well-travelled writer, editor and tour guide. Follow him on Twitter @birdingetc.

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