Client: River Cruise Line

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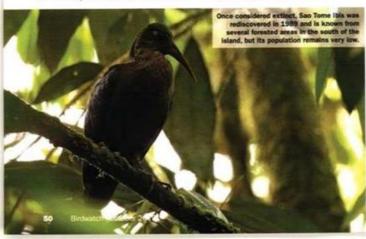




ven in one of the world's smallest nations it's possible to lose all sense of scale. After a drive of several hours down the east coast of São Tomé and another hour grinding our way along dirt roads made barely passable by heavy rain, we finally reached the drop-off point and started preparing our gear ready to camp. Here in Obō 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.

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

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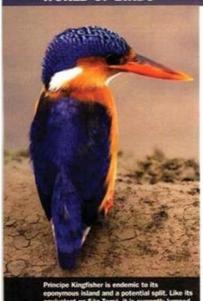
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WORLD OF BIRDS



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 flocated Praia Sundy 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, ust 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, bigge billed and shorter winged. We watched seven of these incredibly rangerestricted 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 Sao Tome Kingfisher, both being Malachite Kingfisher spinoffs) 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 crake 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

São Tomé and Príncipe

- Archipelago Choice is launching a new birding tour to São Tomé and Principe, led by Dominic Mitchell, in August 2020 contact the company on 0.1768 7.75672 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/.

- The most useful field guide, featuring plates of all the endemic species, is Birds of Wester Africa by Nik Borrow and Ron Demey (second edition, Christopher Helm, 2014) buy from £35.99 at bit.ly/2kw3w9z.
- autourn at OfLly/ZkwaW92.
 The Birds of São Tomé and Principe: a
 Protoguide by A P Leventis and Piblio Olmos
 (Aves A Fotos Editoria, 2009) is an escellent
 bilingual (Portuguese/English) photographic
 guide buy for £31.01 from Amazon at aman,
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 The definitive reference to the islands' aufauna is The Birds of São Tomé and Principe with Annocidin Islands of the Guiff of Guinea by Peter Jones and Allan Tye (BOU Checklist No. 22, 2006), though it lacks illustrations.

- ONLINE PLESCURGES

 For hot-spot details, recent checklists and other information see elliet's \$3.0 Tome and Principe pages at ebitor, eng/country/\$157.1 or The African Bird Chub's overview of the islands at www.africanbirdcub.org/countries/\$3.0 Tome-8-Principe/introduction.

 For this 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

This species is another major agrant to the Gulf of Guinea islands. Had I been lucky, or was it perhaps even breeding here, undetected in this anonymous wetland on a littlevisited 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 Hofland 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.

www.birdguides.com/birdwatch

