

Ghana – Picathartes and Pangolins

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London and overnight Accra
Day 2/5	Rainforest Lodge, Kakum National Park
Day 6/8	Picathartes Forest
Day 9	Depart Accra
Day 10	Arrive London

Departs

November to February.

Focus

Birds and Mammals, with a special effort to look for pangolins.

Grading

Grade B - Moderate day walks, and some night walks in search of nocturnal mammals. Good general fitness required

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GHA03) or brochure

Highlights

- Search for Long-tailed & Tree Pangolins
- Visit a Yellow-headed Picathartes breeding colony.
- Africa's highest canopy walkway in Kakum NP.
- West Africa's best forest birding.
- Rufous-sided Broadbill, Chocolate-backed Kingfisher, White-crested Hornbill & Akun Eagle-Owl possible.
- Chance of other elusive forest mammals including Potto and Pel's Anomalure.
- Stay in a remote village in the heart of the rainforest.
- Led by expert local guides.



From top: Yellow-headed Picathartes, Long-tailed Pangolin, African Pitta
Images courtesy of Lucas Lombardo, Ben Chapple and Matt Roper



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Introduction

Home to over 750 species of birds, and some of the region's healthiest populations of mammals, Ghana is rapidly becoming West Africa's premiere wildlife destination. This small tropical country - known in the past as the 'Gold Coast' - is now widely recognised as a friendly and safe destination to visit and is blessed with a diverse range of exciting habitats, including the rich Upper Guinea rainforests of the south. This 10-day tour, focusing primarily on birds and mammals where possible, will take you to two of the best protected forests left in Ghana, both of which are home to a remarkable variety of exotic creatures.



Amongst an exciting range of birdlife, which may include Rosy Bee-eater, Congo Serpent Eagle, Black Dwarf Hornbill and the little-known Brown Nightjar, we will be looking for the bizarre and elusive Yellow-headed Picathartes (recently re-classified as White-necked Rockfowl). This remarkable bird – one of the world's most sought-after species – was only discovered breeding in Ghana in 2005, but the country is now the best place in the world to see it.

Alongside a diverse and fascinating avifauna, Ghana is also a stronghold for a variety of threatened mammals. Most excitingly, the country is perhaps the best place in Africa (and indeed the world) to search for wild pangolins. While these species' plight is well known (they are the most trafficked animal in the world after humans), they are still seen relatively frequently in Ghana. On this tour, we'll make a special effort to locate two species – the diurnal Long-tailed (or Black-bellied) and nocturnal Tree (or White-bellied) Pangolins. This tour will consequently involve a good deal of night walks and spotlighting, to maximise our chances of finding pangolins and a host of other exciting nocturnal mammals, such as Potto and Pel's Anomalure. While we do think the chances of success are reasonably good, it must be stressed that pangolins are highly elusive and endangered animals, and there is therefore no guarantee that we will achieve a sighting.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Depart London

We depart London's Heathrow Airport on an early afternoon British Airways scheduled service to Accra, the capital city of Ghana, arriving mid-evening. After clearing immigration and customs we will meet our local guide and transfer to a comfortable hotel for the night.

Day 2

Rainforest Lodge, Kakum NP

After an early breakfast, we will begin the tour at the Shai Hills reserve, an interesting expanse of savannah, grassland and woodland, and including, conditions permitting, a cave system that we'll visit for its roosting Egyptian Tomb Bats. Other mammals in the reserve include Olive Baboon and Kob. The birdwatching here is excellent and we will hope to find African Grey Hornbill, African Hobby, Violet Turacos, Stone Partridge, White-crowned Cliff Chat, Senegal Parrot, Croaking Cisticola, Blue-bellied Roller, White-crowned Robin-chat and many more.

After a full morning in Shai Hills, and lunch in a nearby restaurant, we'll set off towards the Upper Guinea rainforests of Kakum National Park. We will aim to arrive at our accommodation in the late afternoon, giving us the option of visiting the forest either before or after our evening meal. This will give us our first opportunities to see nocturnal mammals, including Maxwell's Duiker, West African Potto and a variety of bats and rodents. We will stay for four nights at Rainforest Lodge, a comfortable establishment located near the edge of the forest and only 10 kilometres from the national park. Finally, after a long and exciting day we can retreat to our air-conditioned rooms and retire to bed.

Day 3

Rainforest Lodge, Kakum NP

We will have an early breakfast today, in order to arrive at Kakum's world famous canopy walkway in the cool of the early hours. We will then spend the most critical wildlife-viewing hours 40 metres above the forest floor on the canopy walkway, whose platforms are large enough to support a telescope. The 607-square-kilometre Kakum National Park protects critically endangered primary Upper Guinea tropical rainforest and is home to a variety of exciting forest species. A



Canopy walkway, Kakum National Park

particular target from the canopy walkway will be Long-tailed Pangolin, which often likes to sun itself on high branches in the morning. A bewildering diversity of squirrels – African Giant, Gambian Sun, Red-legged Sun, Green, Fire-footed Rope and Slender-tailed Squirrels amongst them – is also possible.

Birding from the walkway is superb, and species to look out for include Green Hylia, Violet-backed Hyliota, Lemon-bellied Crombec, Little Grey Flycatcher, Grey-headed, White-breasted and

Chestnut-breasted Nigrita, Grey Longbill, White-headed and Forest Woodhoopoes, West African Batis, Western Bluebill, Blue Cuckoo-shrike, Red-billed Helmetshrike, Large-billed Puffback, Sharpe's Apalis, Rufous-crowned Eremomela, Brown-cheeked, Yellow-casqued, Black-casqued, Piping and Black Dwarf Hornbills, beautiful Preuss's Weaver, Red-headed and Red-vented Malimbos, Rosy Bee-eater, Yellow-spotted and Hairy-breasted Barbets, Red-fronted, Brown-necked and Grey Parrots and Velvet-mantled Drongo. Raptors may include Red-necked Buzzard, Palm-nut Vulture, African Cuckoo Hawk, Congo Serpent Eagle, Cassin's Hawk-Eagle and Long-tailed Hawk to mention just a few.

During the heat of the early afternoon, we will focus on sleeping and rest at Rainforest Lodge before a late afternoon return visit to the canopy walkway. This will offer our best opportunity for



Akun Eagle Owl, by Arthur Grosset

endangered Olive and Geoffroy's Pied Colobuses, and Lowe's and Lesser Spotted-nosed Monkeys, while Long-tailed Pangolin will again be a possibility. Various birds, including the huge Brown-cheeked, Yellow-casqued and Black-casqued Hornbills, also appear easier to see later in the day. As dusk falls, we may be rewarded with a sighting of the amazing Pel's Anomalure – a large, strikingly patterned flying squirrel – or

perhaps the poorly known Brown Nightjar. Other possible nocturnal creatures include several owls – Fraser's Eagle-Owl, African Wood Owl, and the near-mythical Akun Eagle-Owl – alongside elusive mammals such as West African Potto, and Emin's Forest Giant Pouched Rat.

Days 4 & 5

Over the next two full days, we will dedicate our time to exploring the remarkable forests of Kakum and the surrounding area. Your guides will happily point out some of the fascinating bird species you encounter. Birds that we should see during our walks include Little, White-throated, Rosy and Black Bee-eaters, Blue-throated Roller, Piping Hornbill, Red-rumped Tinkerbird, White-spotted Flufftail, Cassin's Spinetail, Sabine's Spinetail, Diederik Cuckoo, Melancholy and Buff-spotted Woodpeckers, Vieillot's Black and Black-necked Weavers, Kemp's and Grey Longbills, Western Nicator, Western Bluebill, Olive-bellied, Superb and Johanna's Sunbirds, Copper-tailed Glossy and Violet-backed Starlings, Northern Yellow White-eye, Bronze Mannikin and Orange-cheeked Waxbill, while the more difficult species include Yellow-billed Barbet, Rufous-sided Broadbill, Forest Penduline Tit, Ayres's Hawk Eagle and Ahanta Francolin.

Amongst the mammals we hope to see are Long-tailed and Tree Pangolins, West African Potto, Demidoff's Galago, Common Cusimanse (a rainforest mongoose), Pel's and Lord Derby's Anomalures and Maxwell's Duiker; these efforts will include a good deal of spotlighting, both before dawn and after dusk to maximise our chances of success (optional, and when local conditions allow). Please note that night walks in Kakum can be hard over rough terrain and dense vegetation, but they provide the better mammal viewing opportunities.



Black Bee-eater, by Dick Forsman

We will keep our precise daily itinerary flexible to allow for local conditions and the interests of the group. We will also visit locations outside of the National Park, where the edge of the forest can also yield good bird and mammal sightings, even close to human activity. Every evening, we will return to our hotel for dinner, over which we will discuss the day's sightings.

Day 6

Picathartes Forest

This morning, we will concentrate our time on the farmland scrub, forest edge and forest trails at Abrafo, a section of forest habitat near to Kakum National Park. Here, we will be hoping for a variety of new species, including anything we might have missed thus far. Pale Flycatcher, Black-and-white Mannikin, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Sooty Boubou, Puvel's Illadopsis, Olive-green Camaroptera, Red-faced and Whistling Cisticolas, Lesser Striped Swallow, Fanti Saw-wing, West African Wattle-eye, Naked-faced and Hairy-breasted Barbets, Fraser's and Little Green Sunbirds, Blue Malkoha, Red-cheeked Wattle-eye, Swamp Palm Bulbul, Northern Fiscal, Spotted Greenbul, Finsch's Flycatcher Thrush, Yellow-whiskered and Red-tailed Greenbuls, White-crested Hornbill, African Harrier Hawk and the more sought after difficult species include Long-tailed Hawk, Red-billed Helmetshrike, Rufous-sided Broadbill, Chocolate-backed Kingfisher, Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo, Congo Serpent Eagle, and Red-billed Hornbills.

We will leave Abrafo by mid-morning, and head northwards for what should be a major highlight of our time in Ghana – a visit to the Yellow-headed Picathartes nesting site. We'll stop off for lunch en-route and also make a stop at the banks of the Praa River, where we might see White-throated Blue Swallow and Rock Pratincole, before arriving in mid-afternoon at the remote village of Bonkro, which is adjacent to the rainforest. The hills here are home to more Yellow-headed Picathartes nesting sites than anywhere else in Ghana, and are part of a community forest reserve, rather than a formal protected area. Visitors to the Picathartes Forest pay into a conservation fund, which helps to protect the birds and their habitat from illegal hunting and logging activities. Our local agents in Ghana are currently sponsoring 24 community forest committee members to support these conservation activities, and your visit will help to ensure that the Yellow-headed Picathartes (and the many other species that share its home) survives long into the future. Other projects include the construction of a school, reception centre and tourist accommodation, with all proceeds going

directly to a community fund. These efforts seem to have convinced the local people of the forest's value – there has been a dramatic reduction in tree felling in recent years, and the Yellow-headed Picathartes population is happily increasing (see more below about this).



Yellow-headed Picathartes, by Stavros

There are around 13 nesting sites within this remote forest, and we will visit one of the largest colonies. As we leave the village, the forest gradually becomes denser and more mysterious, an experience which should add to the birds mythical reputation. Eventually, we will reach a large cave, where we will seat ourselves quietly on bamboo benches to await the arrival of

the birds. As dusk approaches, the Yellow-headed Picathartes should return from a day spent foraging for snails and insects, and before long we will hope to be surrounded by these primeval birds as they hop around the rocks. Seeing this wonderful bird should be amongst the most memorable of Ghana's highlights.

Once we have enjoyed good views, we will leave the birds in peace as we set off back through the forest to the village, spotlighting for mammals along the way. We will be staying in specially constructed tourist accommodation within Bonkro for the next three nights, which should be a wonderful experience and which will keep us as close as possible to the best habitat.

Days 7 & 8

Picathartes Forest

We will have two full days (and nights) to search this exciting forest. A by-product of the community conservation programme for the Yellow-headed Picathartes has been the resurgence of a variety of other vulnerable species. In particular, the Picathartes Forest is now the best area in Ghana to see both Long-tailed and Tree Pangolins. Our local agents in Ghana have a superb relationship with the remote communities around the forest, and we will enlist several locals to help us in our search for pangolins and other difficult species. Their excellent tracking skills, which once might have been used to hunt and kill these creatures, will now give us our best chance of sightings (although, once again, it is important to emphasise that nothing is guaranteed with these elusive and threatened creatures).

Of course, during our search we are likely to encounter an impressive diversity of birds, possibly including gems such as Congo Serpent Eagle, Afep Pigeon, Blue Cuckooshrike, Chestnut-winged Starling, Ussher's Flycatcher, Buff-throated Sunbird, Tit-Hylia, Shrike Flycatcher, Superb Sunbird, Sabine's Puffback, Lemon-bellied Crombec, Little Green Sunbird and even African Pitta.



We will spend our evenings back in the village with the local community. In a small way, we hope that our visit will help the local people to make a sustainable living from the forest and its wildlife, reducing the incentive for deforestation and poaching. Our local agents have already done remarkable work in this regard, and we hope the group will be excited to be a part of it (see more about this below).

Day 9

In Flight

After a final morning in the Picathartes Forest, we will sadly have to begin our return journey to Accra. On arrival in Accra we will check in to our hotel close to the airport, where we will arrange day rooms for everyone to freshen up. We will enjoy our final evening meal and checklist together, before transferring back to the airport for our evening flight home.

Day 10

Arrive London

This morning, we will arrive back at London Heathrow, where our tour will sadly come to an end.

Tour grading

We have graded this tour B - easy to moderately difficult at times. There is no major trekking on tour, but there will be plenty of walks (both during the day and at night) in a variety of habitats, including dense forest. All walks are optional and taken at a leisurely pace, but they will often be on narrow forest trails over hilly and forested terrain, and in hot, humid conditions. The walk to the Yellow-headed Picathartes generally takes around an hour at an easy pace, most of which inclines gently uphill although the last five minutes to the rocks themselves are relatively steep and slippery (especially on the return and if wet). As such, the tropical climate coupled with the basic nature of the local infrastructure and some of the accommodation (which is especially basic, although still comfortable, in Bonkro village), demand at least a good level of fitness and an adventurous spirit! There are also some longer road journeys during the tour, and early starts and late finishes are the norm, in order to maximise our time in the parks and reserves.

You will need to appreciate that mammals are largely shy and retiring, present in low densities and often crepuscular or nocturnal in nature. Although this tour spends time and effort in looking for

exciting and iconic mammal species mentioned in the itinerary, potential participants should be aware that the best chance for mammal sightings are in the early morning or evening. Your guides will offer excursions at these times during the trip, but are subject to weather conditions and the level of moonlight. Anybody wishing for and expecting a safari-type experience full of animals should consider carefully whether this is the holiday for them. Time between mammal encounters will be spent largely birdwatching (alert to mammals at all times of course), as birds are the most conspicuous members of the local fauna.

NB If you would like a mammal (or photography) focused holiday in Ghana with little or no focus on birds, then a tailor-made holiday could be right for you. Contact us for details – we'd be delighted to help.

How does this tour benefit the local community and wildlife?

We have worked with our agents in Ghana for decades now, and are very pleased to be supporting their efforts to conserve precious habitat and wildlife in the country, as well as train brilliant local guides and support local communities. One such project is at Picathartes Forest, where we visit to see this enigmatic bird. Our partners built the accommodation in Bonkro where we stay on this tour, which is now managed by locals, with profits being shared amongst the community here. As a direct result of tourists visiting the forest and staying locally, deforestation that was a problem here not that long ago has stopped, and work is underway to reforest and make this habitat larger still. Villagers accompany our groups on their visit into the forest with the aim of training quality local wildlife guides, and two schools have been built in the vicinity as well. Of course the wildlife has benefitted hugely from this, with Picathartes numbers growing and this now being the best and most reliable place in Ghana to see pangolin. The hope is that one day soon this forest will receive official protection in the form of being designated a National Park.

Weather

Ghana's climate is equatorial and tropical with hot and humid conditions prevailing throughout the year. Temperatures typically average around 22°C in the morning climbing to around 32°C in the afternoon with a high humidity. In March and November you should expect, and pack for, the occasional afternoon cloudburst. The north of the country (i.e. Mole National Park) and coastal strip tend to be drier and hotter.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the cost of the holiday along with park entrance fees, an unlimited supply of mineral water and morning pre-birding tea/coffee and biscuits. Accommodation is in comfortable, but simple, guesthouses, hotels and community lodging in Bonkro. Single rooms are available at a supplement. All rooms have private facilities, and air-conditioning, except at Bonkro, which has fans.

Extra expenses

Please note that the following expenses are excluded from the cost of the holiday and are paid locally. Any necessary visas (\$260 for UK citizens as of August 2026), the required inoculations and anti-malarial tablets, drinks, tips and all items of a personal nature.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Ghana. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website (www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/ghana) or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.