

Senegal – Birding the Sahel

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly to Dakar
Day 2/3	Richard Toll
Day 4	Podor
Day 5/6	Djoudj National Park
Day 7	Touba
Day 8	Wassadou Camp
Day 9/10	Kedougou
Day 11	Wassadou Camp
Day 12	Kaolack
Day 13/14	Saloum Delta, depart Dakar
Day 15	Arrive London

Departs

January - March

Focus

Birds

Grading

B. Flat terrain, but some long travelling days

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code SEN01) or current brochure

Highlights:

- Sahelian specialities such as Golden Nightjar, Quail-plover and Cricket Warbler
- Chance of Arabian and Savile's Bustard
- Boat trips on the River Gambia and Saloum Delta



Images from top: Golden Nightjar (Ian Curran), Scissor-tailed Kite, Cricket Warbler (Ian Curran)



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Introduction

Africa's Sahel region spans the width of Africa, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, with the Sahara Desert to the north and the rainforests of Upper Guinea to the south. Whilst it consists mostly of dry savanna and grassland, dry woodland and semi-desert, it is also home to some of West Africa's most important wetlands. Senegal is the safest and friendliest country in which to visit this unique region and to see the multitude of Sahelian and West African specialities that are hard to find elsewhere. Although Senegal surrounds The Gambia (the latter a favourite birding destination for many years), Senegal itself has only opened up to wildlife tourism much more recently; a trip here offers a wholly unique experience together with a wider variety of species.

This 15-day tour visits a broad spectrum of habitats within the Sahel, starting along the semi-desert, northern border of Senegal and the fringes of the Sahara, where we have the best chance to see Golden Nightjar together with several other nightjar species. We visit Djoudj National Park, an oasis of lakes, pools and marshes that attracts hundreds of thousands of waterbirds as well as other migratory species, with this being the last freshwater before travelling over the Sahara. This is quite an unheralded spectacle and one of the highlights of the tour. We then head south through dry scrub, stopping at a renowned location for Quail-Plover. Continuing southeast we spend a night on the River Gambia, on the edges of Niokolo-Koba National Park, before venturing down to the southern border of Senegal where the landscape is hillier and the vegetation more varied and prevalent, in search of more-localised species. Finally, we retrace our steps, stopping at a roost of scores of Scissor-tailed Kites and Lesser Kestrels, before reaching the coast and the Saloum Delta, where we can expect to see plentiful kingfishers, egrets and herons. All in all, we can expect to see over 300 species of bird across the two weeks.



Arabian Bustard

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

Fly Dakar

We depart London Heathrow mid-morning on a short flight to Madrid where we will connect with an early evening flight to Dakar. We arrive in the Senegalese capital in the late evening and make our way to a comfortable hotel nearby.

Days 2 – 3

Richard Toll

We set off early this morning, making our way north to the frontier town of Richard Toll on the banks of the Senegal River, which forms the border with Mauritania. This will provide us with our first sightings of the more common species such as Long-tailed Glossy and Chestnut-bellied



Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse

Starlings, Speckled Pigeon, Laughing and Vinaceous Doves, Piapiac and Eurasian Hoopoe. Sailing overhead will be Yellow-billed Kite and various vulture species such as Griffon, Rüppell's and White-backed. We will make several roadside stops along the way to break up the six-hour journey and are likely to see various species of migrating warblers, Western Red-billed and African Grey Hornbills and maybe our first flock of Sudan Golden Sparrows. After arriving at our hotel in Richard Toll, there should

be time to wander down to the Senegal River where we might see Spur-winged Lapwing, Goliath Heron and Pied Kingfisher, amongst others.

We spend the following day close to Richard Toll, which will include a visit to Lac de Guiers, a large freshwater lake that attracts a variety of waterbirds, waders and raptors. We will scan the lake and shoreline and can expect to see Greater Flamingo, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian and African Spoonbills and, if lucky, River Prinia - a recently described, unpretentious warbler with a very restricted range. Also found in the area are Little Ringed Plover, Senegal Thick-knee, Eurasian Stone-curlew, African Wattled Lapwing and Squacco Heron, with the chance of an Osprey flying overhead and African Palm Swifts zipping through the sky.

We will also explore the surrounding scrub and acacia groves where we will hope to find Sahelian specialities such as the localised Cricket Warbler, Sennar Penduline Tit and the hard-to-find Little Grey Woodpecker. Almost guaranteed here and elsewhere throughout the trip are Namaqua Dove, African Grey Woodpecker, Abyssinian Roller and both Beautiful and Pygmy Sunbirds, which we will see as we look for other key species that we are only likely to encounter in the north: Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Courser and maybe roosting Egyptian and Long-tailed Nightjar.



Little Grey Woodpecker (Ian Curran)

Day 4

Podor

This morning we drive east, following the river to the area around Podor and Gamadji Sare; the Sahara is within a stone's throw from here, with the landscape ever more barren. However, this is one of the best places to see Golden Nightjar, which we attempt in the afternoon and evening. Patience will be required as we make our way through the acacia scrub and, whilst doing so, will see plenty of other birds: more flocks of Sudan Golden Sparrow, Senegal Batis, Green Wood Hoopoe, Fulvous Babbler, White-rumped Seedeater, both Black and Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robins as well as Cricket Warbler. This is also a great location for European migrants and we expect to see other warblers such as Western Olivaceous, Western Orphean and Western Bonelli's, Zitting Cisticola, Woodchat and Great Grey Shrikes, Eurasian Wryneck, Western Black-eared and Northern Wheatears; there is also a chance of Atlas Wheatear, which has recently been split from the latter. Sailing overhead will be Little Swift with small numbers of Horus Swift mixed in – here at the northernmost extreme of their range, while we should see Short-toed Snake, Booted and Bonelli's Eagles and vultures circling. We spend the night in this exciting frontier zone, where seemingly anything can turn up.

Days 5 – 6

Djoudj National Park

This morning we will drive west to Djoudj National Bird Sanctuary, one of the most important wetlands in West Africa and designated a RAMSAR and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Located on



Great White Pelicans, Djoudj National Park

the southern side of the River Senegal, it is the first permanent fresh water south of the Sahara, holding vast numbers of wintering Palearctic waterfowl along with an excellent selection of West African waterbirds. It is estimated that 1.5 million birds are here during the northern winter! White-faced Whistling Duck and Garganey are likely in large numbers and the huge colony of Great White Pelicans, with some Pink-backed Pelicans mixed in, promises to be quite

the spectacle. Other waterfowl should include Marbled Duck, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Spur-winged and African Pygmy Geese, plus Knob-billed Duck. Innumerable shorebirds, cormorants, herons, egrets, ibises, spoonbills, and flamingos ensure these wetlands are teeming with birdlife!

The long grasses and reeds are full of species such as Winding Cisticola, African races of Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler and skulking Greater Swamp Warbler, the latter identified by their distinctive frog-like calls. Greater Painted-snipe hide in plain sight and Common Ringed and Kittlitz's Plovers patrol the shorelines. Enormous numbers of Sand Martins gather here, while keeping a keen eye on all activity will be African Fish Eagle, Osprey and Western Marsh, Pallid and Montagu's Harriers.

Drier areas are equally productive and here we can expect to see another Sahelian speciality, Black Crowned Crane as well as Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. We will also spend time looking for the magnificent Arabian Bustard; it is thought that there are only a handful of breeding pairs here, but it is still one of the best chances of seeing this sadly declining species. We spend two nights in the vicinity of the sanctuary, ensuring the maximum amount of time in the field.

Day 7

Touba



Quail-plover (Solomon Jallow)

We will have one last chance to explore the different environs of Djoudj, targeting anything that we may have missed so far, before we start to head south, pausing in the town of St Louis, on the banks of the Senegal River's estuary. Here there are large numbers of gulls, terns include Sandwich, Caspian and Whiskered, with shorebirds such as Marsh and Curlew Sandpiper, Whimbrel and Black-winged Stilts all present in good numbers.

We then have a 4 hour drive south, with various species of vulture soaring overhead and on the roadside, to the town of Touba, where the surrounding area is open, dry country known to be a good location for Quail-plover, one of our target species. The range of this enigmatic bird is almost exclusively across the Sahel region, but it is neither common nor regular within it. If the previous season's rainfall has been good, we have a good chance of finding one in the dry bush and savanna. However, it may require a lot of walking to locate one and, even then, it will be difficult to pin down. It is superbly camouflaged when on the ground, even mimicking the movement of swaying grass to stay hidden from view. Although fast, the undulating arc of its flight is unmistakable, with wings closed for most of the time, only being opened briefly to reveal the distinctive black-and-white pattern of the flight feathers. We spend the night in Touba.

Day 8

Wassadou

We will try again for Quail-plover if we have been unsuccessful the day before, and then it is another long drive south-east. We will make stops en-route to explore the scrub and look for species such as Savile's Bustard, another Sahelian speciality though yet another elusive one. Other species we could see today are Piapiac, Desert Cisticola, Green-winged Pytilia and Sahel Paradise Whydah, the breeding male of which has a spectacular tail – especially in flight. The whydah is a nest parasite of the Green-winged Pytilia and often imitates its call.



Sahel Paradise Whydah (Brian Small)

Our final destination today is a permanent camp at Wassadou on the banks of the River Gambia, reached after a long drive east and where we spend the night. The drive will be broken up with



Pel's Fishing Owl

birding stops along the way, seeking raptors such as Grasshopper Buzzard, Long-crested, Wahlberg's and Brown Snake Eagles, as well as Beaudouin's Snake Eagle. Close to our destination, the habitat starts to change from the drier Sudan Savanna to the wetter Guinea Savanna of the Gambia, and as such we will start to see different roadside species such as Western Grey Plantain-eater and Singing Cisticola.

Upon arrival at Wassadou, on the edge of Niokolo-Koba National Park, we should have time to explore our surroundings which will be filled with birdlife. Those who have visited the Gambia before, particularly upriver, will be familiar with many of the species here. In the immediate vicinity of the camp the trees are filled with sunbirds and finches such as Red-billed Firefinch, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu and Village Indigobird, as well as other species such as Greater Honeyguide, African Blue Flycatcher, White Helmetshrike and Grey-backed Camaroptera. Checking local doves could produce the highly localised Adamawa Turtle Dove and this is a good location for Pel's Fishing Owl, which we will listen out for in the evening, when we might also be fortunate enough to have a sighting of Northern White-faced Owl.

Days 9 – 10

Kedougou

Up early, this morning we take a boat trip on the river with the target species of Egyptian Plover and African Finfoot; with careful searching we have a very good chance of seeing both of these sought-after species. There will be a lot more besides, with Shining-blue Kingfisher just one of several kingfisher species we could see here, as well as beautiful Red-throated and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters that breed along the river banks. As we drift slowly along the river, our guides will be keeping a close eye out for Hippopotamus, which reside along this stretch of the river.

After returning to camp, we set off southeast towards the border with Guinea and Mali, travelling the road that traverses Niokolo-Koba National Park and making a birding stop or two en route. Here we might find the highly restricted Mali Firefinch, as well as several other firefinch species. We will arrive in the lively town of Kedougou, our base for the next two nights, which in recent decades has grown significantly due to gold mining activities in the region.



Mali Firefinch (Ian Curran)

The following day we head to the village of Dindéfelo, located at the base of an imposing escarpment. En route we'll be on the lookout for Fox Kestrel, Four-banded Sandgrouse and Sun Lark, while other possibilities include Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, Yellow Penduline Tit, Exclamatory Paradise Whydah and Western Violet-backed Sunbird. Upon arrival we should encounter a few new

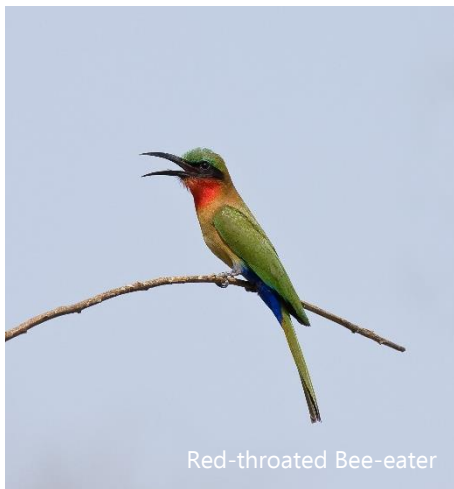


Abyssinian Ground Hornbill (Solomon Jallow)

species, including Neumann's Starling which is restricted to rocky areas in the Sahel and is hard to find in most other places. In the trees Yellow-crowned Gonolek, Violet Turaco, Narina Trogon, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Green-headed Sunbird, Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat and African Paradise Flycatcher can be expected, while Rock Martin and Pied-winged Swallow reside on the cliffs and Orange-cheeked Waxbill forages among the buildings in the village. There should also be Mali Firefinch and Pygmy Sunbird here; Gosling's Bunting inhabits these wooded and rocky slopes.

Day 11

Wassadou



Red-throated Bee-eater

This morning we return to Wassadou, arriving in time for lunch. Afterwards we will head out by boat onto the river again for a chance of seeing species that we did not see previously and more views of those we did. These could include Double-spurred Spurfowl, White-crowned and Wattled Lapwings, with their distinctive yellow wattles, and Hadaba Ibis, patrolling the banks. We are likely to see egrets and herons, which here could include Black-crowned and White-backed Night Herons, plus more Red-throated and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters. We stopover at Wassadou Camp for another one-night stay; on both occasions we should have the company of Green Monkeys, Western Red Colobus and a troop of Guinea Baboons.

Day 12

Kaolack

After another early morning walk at Wassadou, we set off westwards, re-tracing our journey of day 8. This will be a long drive of about six hours, back through Sahelian terrain and, of course, with birding stops to break up the journey.

Our destination is the town of Kaolack, on the banks of the River Saloum, where we will spend the night and where we plan to arrive in time to witness another birding highlight, unique to Senegal. Here, on an island in the river, large numbers of the exquisite Scissor-tailed Kite gather to roost unperturbed, along with an equally impressive quantity of Lesser Kestrels. As the day draws to a close these raptors circle and swoop overhead, congregating in their hundreds or even thousands. This should be an enthralling end to what will be a long but hopefully rewarding day.



Lesser Kestrel

Day 13

Saloum Delta

We set off this morning for the short drive to the Saloum Delta, as we will head straight out into the delta by boat to explore the myriad of mangroves and mudflats. Hordes of herons, egrets, cormorants and waders, include Purple and Goliath Heron, plus Black Heron, which we might see



White-crested Tiger Heron (Solomon Jallow)

in action using its fascinating fishing technique, wrapping its wings around to create an umbrella to fool the fish below. We could also see Dwarf Bittern and hopefully another target species, the elusive White-crested Tiger Heron; there are African Finfoot here as well. All the while we will be entertained by kingfishers aplenty, while Swallow-tailed and White-throated Bee-eaters float overhead, Splendid, Magnificent and Mangrove Sunbirds flit between the scrub and birds of prey such as Palm-nut Vulture, Red-necked Falcon, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Shikra and Yellow-billed Kite commonly soar overhead.

We spend the night in a simple lodge on the edge of the delta.

Day 14

Saloum Delta, depart Dakar

We spend this last morning in the delta once more, hoping for anything that we have not seen yet – perhaps the enormous Goliath Heron or tiny Pygmy Sunbird.

After lunch we will set off for Dakar airport, making roadside stops if we see anything of interest. We will arrive in plenty of time for our late evening departure from Dakar.

Day 15

Arrive London

We arrive in Madrid in the early hours of the morning, then catch our connecting flight to London Heathrow later in the morning.

Tour Grading

B. Even though the terrain is generally flat and walking distances relatively short, the weather is likely to be hot and some of the days long, with lengthy drives.

Accommodation

Senegal has yet to develop the same standard of tourist infrastructure as some other mainland Africa countries. All of the hotels, lodges and permanent camps we use are the best available in the area. Rooms all have private facilities, though the rooms can be a little spartan in nature and the food quite simple.

Weather

Generally hot and sunny with a negligible risk of rain. Daytime temperatures at this time of year average in the low 30s°C, though can reach the high 30s°C. Nights in the north will be quite cool, whereas in the south they remain warm and it can be humid too.

Your Safety & Security

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 – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/senegal> regularly prior to travel.

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