

São Tomé and Príncipe

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 22nd January 2024



Timneh Parrots on Príncipe



São Tomé Scops Owl



Pico Cao Grande, São Tomé



São Tomé

Tour report and images by Andy Smith



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Tour Participants: Andy Smith (leader), Laudino Tavares (local guide) and 8 Naturetrek Clients

Day 1

Thursday 11th January

The group assembled at Heathrow in the early afternoon and flew to Lisbon, where we spent the night in a comfortable airport hotel.

Day 2

Friday 12th January

Having made our way back to the airport terminal after an early breakfast, we checked in for our flight to São Tomé. The flight departed more or less on time and after a brief stopover in Accra, Ghana, we arrived at São Tomé airport at sunset. The flight was an interesting one if you had a window seat: first climbing out of Lisbon and circling above the broad Tagus estuary; then heading out over Cape St Vincent; next Morocco (looking unseasonably dry after the prolonged drought there) and the High Atlas; then the vast emptiness of the Sahara desert; the greening up again as we crossed the Sahel and dropped down into Ghana; and finally, after Accra, an hour and a half of sea before the cloud enshrouded peaks of São Tomé came into sight.

Once clear of the airport we met up with our local guide Laudino, made the very short transfer to our comfortable hotel, settled in, and ate a delicious, if protracted dinner out on the hotel terrace.

Day 3

Saturday 13th January

Sunny in the morning, some scattered cloud in the afternoon. Still or slight breeze. Hot and humid.

Up before dawn and away just after first light, we made our way through São Tomé town and up to Bom Sucesso on the edge of the Obo National Park. We ate a picnic breakfast by the botanical garden whilst a flock of noisy Chestnut-winged Starlings feasted on avocados in a nearby tree, then started out on a trail through some excellent farm bush country. Interesting birds came thick and fast and included Príncipe Seed eaters, Black-capped Speirops, Newton's Sunbirds, São Tomé Prinias, Common Waxbills, Southern Masked Weavers and several fly-over Island Bronze-naped Pigeons. A lengthy stop at a rather beautiful forested gully brought us good views of São Tomé Paradise Flycatchers, a São Tomé Oriole, some São Tomé Weavers, a couple of dazzling Emerald Cuckoos and, best of all, a singing male Giant Sunbird. Continuing up we found a group of São Tomé Green Pigeons posing nicely in a Cecropia tree and at the top of the trail a few of us continued on into the forest proper (tough going) and were rewarded with a close encounter with a pair of São Tomé Scops Owls, one rufous and one grey. Not a bad morning!

Also notable here this morning was a Great Reed Warbler. We heard it singing from a patch of scrub, made a sound recording and then saw it briefly as it flew across the trail. Totally unexpected, it's not unknown on São Tomé, but is only an occasional vagrant.

We were off the trail by noon and heading back down through the coffee and cocoa plantations when an impromptu stop was occasioned by the sight of several White-tailed Tropicbirds cruising around between the trees. These spectacular and graceful birds looked out of place in the forest, but they seemed to be involved in courtship

chases and as we watched they also came in to investigate cavities high up in the tall shade trees. Tree nesters, eh? Very interesting!

After lunch on the terrace of a restaurant at Rosa Saudade where we saw more Chestnut-winged Starlings, Black-capped Speirops, São Tomé Prinias, Príncipe Seedaters and our first São Tomé Thrush, we headed back down to São Tomé Town. A brief stop en route added decent views of a couple of Giant Weavers and concluded an satisfying and successful day.

Day 4

Sunday 14th January

Sunny with scattered cloud and a gentle breeze. Hot and humid.

Up at first light again. A quick look around the hotel gardens produced a nice selection of sightings including Common Waxbills, Yellow-fronted Canaries, São Tomé Prinias, Village Weavers and good numbers of Straw-coloured Fruit bats returning to roost in the tall palm trees. Breakfast followed and then we transferred to the airport and a little after 9.00am we were airborne and heading out over the sea.

Thirty minutes later we landed on Príncipe, met up with the Roca Sundy reception team and transferred along the lush leafy lanes of this very laid back island to Roca Sundy itself. We settled into our luxurious accommodation, ate a simple lunch out on the terrace with African Green Pigeons and a Príncipe Sunbird or two for avian company, and then in the mid-afternoon we set out to explore. We drove across the north of the island to Bello Monte where we enjoyed a short walk through an impressive patch of forest that brought us a further introduction to Príncipe's birds with good views of Príncipe Golden Weavers, Príncipe Glossy Starlings, Timneh Parrots, a Dohrn's Warbler (the first of many!) and a Blue-breasted Kingfisher savagely bashing a hapless cicada on a tree branch.

In the late afternoon some of the group returned to Roca Sundy for a civilized dinner, reporting a pair of Velvet-mantled Drongoes en-route, whilst others headed up to Porto Real to try to see the elusive Príncipe Scops Owl. This latter team arrived at the trail head just after 5.00pm and set off at a cracking pace into the rapidly darkening forest. The trail proved to be tougher and the distance longer than we'd been led to believe, but eventually we reached the prescribed spot. Cicada roaring blackness. Big forest trees. Sapping heat and humidity. We tried some playback without success. Changing position by a couple of hundred metres we tried again and got a response. Wow! Príncipe Scops Owl, only formally discovered in 2016, seen or heard by very few visiting birders and scientists, and there they were, three of them, calling in the canopy above us! It was exciting alright, but also frustrating because that's where they steadfastly stayed, up in the canopy. Close but unseen. Eventually we had to call it a day and begin the long walk out, but at least we'd heard them.

N.B. As we passed through the village of Gaspar this afternoon en-route to Bello Monte we stopped to pick up one of our local guides who handed me a Whinchat which had been passed to him by one of his neighbours. We never found out how or why it had been caught but it was in good condition and flew well when released. It was a first-year bird and a rare migrant here at best. Nice to see in the hand too.

Day 5

Monday 15th January

Sunny with scattered cloud and a light breeze. Hot and humid.

Up at 5.00am and breakfast at 5.30am. We saw African Green Pigeons, Príncipe Glossy Starlings and Príncipe Sunbirds from the terrace again. Away just after 6.30am to nearby Santa Rita and then a pleasant walk through some lovely forest along the road down towards Bom-Bom. Birds seen included Malachite and Blue-breasted Kingfishers, Príncipe Speirops, Príncipe Weavers, Lemon Doves, Bronze-naped Pigeons, Timneh Parrots, both species of Glossy Starlings and lots of engaging and vocal Dohrn's Warblers. A few skinks, a range of colourful butterflies and some reasonable views of a troop of Mona Monkeys added further interest, before it was time to rejoin the vehicles and move on. We visited a couple more forested spots to complete the morning, adding particularly good views of a handsome male Príncipe Weaver busy nest building, and then drove into Santo Antonio for a restaurant lunch before heading back to Roca Sundy.

An afternoon of leisure followed during which some of us explored along the entrance track and saw a number of the now familiar birds, plus some São Tomé Spinetails. These distinctive small swifts were flying into nest sites inside an old water tower and afforded us some great views as they zoomed around just above us.

After an early dinner most of the group came out on a turtling expedition. An hour's drive, bumpy in the latter stages, took us to a remote beach near Bello Monte. Dodging the myriad large Land Crabs out and about on the sand, a guide from the Príncipe Foundation (a local conservation NGO) took us to a marked nest that was ready to hatch. Using only red light he removed the stick markers around the nest and then carefully dug down a foot or so with his hands and unearthed a horde of freshly hatched baby turtles. These were then encouraged out of the nest with the torch and shepherded down to the sea. They made rapid progress and in no time they were "safely" in the water. They were Green Turtles, and there must have been over 100 of them. This careful monitoring of nests and assistance for the hatchings is part of the foundation's work here on Príncipe and is aimed at bolstering turtle survival rates in the face of a range of predators, animal and human. It was great to witness the moment and worth the late night and the crabs.

Day 6

Tuesday 16th January

Sunny with scattered cloud and a gentle breeze. Hot and humid.

The group split today, with some having a relaxed day at Roca Sundy and Sundy Praia and others heading off back to the forest. The Forester's plan to access an area where they could search for the critically endangered and ultimately elusive Príncipe Thrush was thwarted by logistical difficulties, and so they eventually settled on a hike to the rather beautiful Oque Pipi waterfall. Collectively both groups enjoyed more encounters with the various birds of Príncipe including Príncipe Weavers, Timneh Parrots, Green Pigeons, Lemon Doves, Príncipe Speirops and Sunbirds, Dohrn's Warblers, Glossy Starlings and both species of kingfisher.

Day 7

Wednesday 17th January

Sunny with scattered cloud and a fresh Breeze. Hot and humid.

A pre-breakfast walk for some along the entrance track in relatively cool conditions, after some overnight rain and pre-dawn thunder, brought lovely views of Timneh Parrots feeding on palm fruits, a quintet of male Príncipe Sunbirds singing to each other in a small tree, Dohrn's Warblers and Príncipe Weavers eating berries from a vine, and a dazzlingly bright Emerald Cuckoo.

Then, post breakfast, we set off in the vehicles to an area of mangroves at a place called Abade. We enjoyed the change of habitat and walked along a trail that wound along the edge of the creek. Along the way we found Mudskippers big and small, Fiddler Crabs waving their claws, a Western Reef Heron and a Whimbrel, both Malachite and Blue-breasted Kingfishers and a range of the now familiar forest birds.

We ate lunch back at Roca Sundy then transferred down to Sundy Praia and set out in a very comfortable boat to explore the offshore islets. It was lovely to be out on the water and to get a view of Príncipe from the sea. Wildlife interest included several Flying Fish, a few Western Reef Herons, a number of handsome Brown Boobies and the ubiquitous Yellow-billed Kites. At the end of the afternoon we returned to shore and made our way back up to Roca Sundy.

Day 8

Thursday 18th January

Sunny with scattered cloud. Hot and humid. One brief late afternoon rain shower.

After a leisurely breakfast and a last bit of Príncipe birding around the grounds of Roca Sundy, we made our way to the airport. Our mid-morning flight was on time and we touched down in São Tomé half an hour later. Connecting with our vehicles and drivers, we then drove around the north coast of the island to the town of Neves. This region of São Tomé is in something of a rain shadow and there are large tracts of open savannah country, a refreshing contrast to the lush forests and plantations that cover so much of the island.

Here, either side of an excellent restaurant lunch, we encountered a lovely selection of the typical birds of the region, many of them very colourful. At a short stop en route to Neves we marvelled at dazzling Golden-backed Bishops, Black-winged Red Bishops and White-winged Widowbirds as they displayed over the scrubby grasslands. From the lunchtime restaurant terrace, we enjoyed perfect views of Blue and Common Waxbills, Pin-tailed Whydahs, Southern Masked Weavers and São Tomé Paradise Flycatchers whilst further class was added by São Tomé Thrushes, Bronze-naped Pigeons, a distant Giant Weaver and a superb Red-headed Lovebird that spent a good while feasting on the fruit in the crown of a palm tree. We concluded the afternoon walking along the shores of a couple of lagoons near Morro Peixe and added Red-headed Quelea, Yellow-fronted Canary and Malachite Kingfisher to a satisfying list of sightings.

Day 9

Friday 19th January

Sunny with scattered cloud. Hot and humid.

Some of the group were up early again, leaving the hotel at first light for another bash up at Bom Sucesso. One of our targets was São Tomé White-eye, which we had missed on our previous visit. With these boys we were successful, enjoying great views of one and fleeting views of another: pretty little birds. An exciting supporting cast included Príncipe Seedeater, Black-capped Speirops, São Tomé Thrush, Newton's Sunbird, São Tomé Paradise Flycatcher, Emerald Cuckoo and, best of all, a fantastic close-up male Giant Sunbird. A couple of Giant Weavers on the way down rounded things off nicely and by mid-morning we were back at the hotel and re-united with the rest of the group.

Away a little later we drove through São Tomé Town and then southwards along the east coast of the island. We stopped for lunch at a sea view restaurant at Angolares and then drove on again, stopping at a river bridge where we saw Reed Cormorants, Striated Herons, Malachite Kingfishers and a couple of White-tailed Tropicbirds. As we continued south the settlements became fewer and visibly poorer, and the road deteriorated badly. We stopped for pictures of the dramatic and celebrated volcanic plug of Pico Cao Grande and then pushed on through Monte Mario and desperate Porto Allegro to our rustic beachside accommodation at Praia Inhame near the southern tip of the island. We arrived in good time to settle in and explore a little before dinner. At sunset huge numbers of Straw-coloured Fruit Bats headed out across the sound to the small offshore island of Ilheu das Rolas, the point where the Greenwich meridian intersects the equator – perhaps they knew something we didn't?

Day 10

Saturday 20th January

Overcast with sunny breaks. Hot and Humid. Torrential rain from 12 noon to 2pm.

At 4.30am an intrepid team of crack birders set forth from Praia Inhame. Our destination was the legendary forests on the slopes of Monte Carmo and our targets a quartet of rare and elusive endemics. This was our one chance and we were going for it. By 6.00am we were at the trail head and after a hasty bite of breakfast we set off. The forests of São Tomé and Príncipe are not for the faint-hearted, but the going was reasonable today (at least at first) and we encountered some nice birds in the early stages, with good views of São Tomé Weavers, Orioles, Thrushes and Paradise Flycatchers. An hour or so in our local guide for the day, the excellent Mito, drew our attention to a São Tomé Ibis sitting on its stick nest high up in one of the trees. The tree was a little down slope of us and so we had a clear view of the bird sitting high on the nest. This critically endangered species was one of our targets, so we were well pleased. As we watched the bird a movement at its flank revealed a downy youngster poking around – how about that? A little further on an astutely timed bit of playback brought in target number two in the form of a diminutive São Tomé Shorttail, an enigmatic and unobtrusive species, which posed beautifully for us for some minutes singing its shrill little song. As we watched this little marvel another one of our big targets, a São Tomé Grosbeak, put in a brief and rather frustrating appearance in the canopy above.

Moving on we saw a two more Ibis (flushed from the forest floor and then perched in the sub-canopy), a couple of Giant Sunbirds and an impressive São Tomé Cobra. Short of a better encounter with the Grosbeak, one major target remained, the almost mythical São Tomé Fiscal. For this we ascended a steep ridge, which was undeniably tough going, to a point where we were looking down into a natural amphitheatre of trees and foliage on the slope

below us. A bit of whistling from Mito and a short wait and then a response, faint at first then closer, and then there it was, expertly spotted by Hugh, perched on a branch at eye level just 30 meters away. What a beauty! Long-tailed, glossy black above, pale sulphur yellow below and with a neat white crescent on its scapulars. It hung around for some time allowing us some great views of it before it disappeared back into the forest and it was time for us to begin our descent.

No sooner had we started than it began to rain, tentatively at first, and then with biblical intensity. This was the full-on São Tomé Experience! We were soon soaked through and it was a long walk out but personally, I didn't care, we'd seen the Fiscal!

Back at Praia Inhamé we met up with the rest of the group who had all had an enjoyable and relaxing day including, for some, a trip across to Ilheu das Rolas and the zero degrees/zero degrees intersection point.

Day 11

Sunday 21st January

Sunny with scattered cloud. Hot and humid.

Hatchling turtles on the beach at dawn started the day wonderfully for some of the group and then, after a leisurely breakfast, we set off back towards São Tomé town. It was a largely uneventful journey and we arrived in good time for lunch. After this we transferred to our familiar hotel to prepare for our overnight flight, and in the late afternoon we headed up to the airport. The check-in went smoothly, the flight was on time and we all arrived safely in Lisbon in the early morning.

Day 12

Monday 22nd January

Sunny, still and cool in Lisbon (lovely!).

A cancelled flight meant we had a little more time than anticipated at Lisbon airport. Some of us took advantage of this with a walk along some nearby streets. We found some suitably quiet and leafy corners and in an enjoyable hour or so encountered a tidy little range of species headlined by a couple of Hoopoes, a Short-toed Treecreeper, two Firecrests, several Serins and a number of Spotless Starlings. Eventually we all got away and arrived safely back in the UK, later than hoped but otherwise none the worse for wear. It had been quite an adventure!

Mammals: Mona Monkey *Cercopithecus mona* (both islands), Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* (São Tomé), Least Weasel *Mustela nivalis* (São Tomé), Noack's Leaf-nosed Bat *Hipposideros ruber*, (Príncipe), African Straw-coloured Fruit Bat *Eidolon helvum* (São Tomé).

Birds: see attached checklist

Reptiles: Green Turtle *Chelonia mydas* (Príncipe), House Gecko *Hemidactylus mabouia* (both islands), São Tomé Skink *Trachylepsis thomensis* (São Tomé), Príncipe Skink *Trachylepsis principensis* (Príncipe), Guinea Lidless Skink *Panaspis africana* (Príncipe), São Tomé Leaf-litter Skink *Panaspis thomensis*, (São Tomé), São Tomé Cobra *Naja peroescobari* (São Tomé).

Other notables: Atlantic Mudskipper *Periophthalmus barbarus* (both islands)

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

E= Endemic, N= Near Endemic		January 2024								
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Harlequin Quail	<i>Coturnix delgorguei</i>						1h	2h		
White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus ascensionis</i>	7					1	2		
Sao Tome Ibis - E	<i>Bostrychia bocagei</i>								5	
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata atricapilla</i>				2	1		4		1
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	5	15	3	4	2	15	10	1	10
Western Reef Heron	<i>Egretta gularis</i>				4	5	1			
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>				2	15		1	2	
Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>		2					15		10
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius parasitus</i>	30	5	20	20	5	40	10 0	60	25
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			3	5	4		1		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				2	2	3			
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				2	1	1			
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			1						
Noddy Spp.	<i>Anous minutus/stolidus</i>							3*		
Sao Tome Olive Pigeon - E	<i>Columba thomensis</i>								1*	
Island Bronze-naped Pigeon - N	<i>Columba malherbii</i>	10	3	2	2	3	8	12	8	
Lemon Dove	<i>Columba larvata</i>	1+ 3h	8	6	12	15	3	5	10	4
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>	5	2	4	2	3	6	4	8	5
African Green Pigeon	<i>Treron calvus</i>		5	15	6	15	4			

E= Endemic, N= Near Endemic		January 2024								
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Sao Tome Green Pigeon - E	<i>Treron sanctithomae</i>	5								
African Emerald Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx cupreus</i>	1+ 2h	1h			1	1h	2+ 1h	3h	1h
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba thomensis</i>								1	
Sao Tome Scops Owl - E	<i>Otus hartlaubi</i>	2+ 1h								
Principe Scops Owl - E	<i>Scops spp.</i>		3h							
Sao Tome Spinetail - E	<i>Zoonavena thomensis</i>	5	5	5		6	5	10	10	
African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus brachypterus</i>	25	20	25	20	20	25	25	20	20
Little Swift - E	<i>Apus affinis bannermani</i>	20	3	20	30	30	30	40	25	10
Blue-breasted Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon malimbica dryas</i>		1+ 1h	3+ 2h	5	8+ 4h				
Principe Kingfisher - E	<i>Corythornis nais</i>		1	3	4	4				
Sao Tome Kingfisher - E	<i>Corythornis thomensis</i>						1	3		3
Timneh Parrot	<i>Psittacus timneh princeps</i>	3	15	20	50	20	10			
Red-headed Lovebird	<i>Agapornis pullarius</i>	1					2	1		
Sao Tome Fiscal - E	<i>Lanius newtoni</i>								1	
Sao Tome Oriole - E	<i>Oriolus crassirostris</i>	1							5+ 3h	
Velvet-mantled Drongo	<i>Dicrurus modestus modestus</i>		3	2	1	5	1			
Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher - E	<i>Terpsiphone atrochalybeia</i>	12					2	6	15	1
Sao Tome Prinia - E	<i>Prinia mollerii</i>	30	5				5	10	5	5
Dohrn's Warbler - E	<i>Sylvia dornii</i>		5	15	25	20	3			
Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	1								
Sao Tome White-eye - E	<i>Zosterops feae</i>							3		
Black-capped Speirops - E	<i>Zosterops lugubris</i>	30					6	10	12	
Principe Speirops - E	<i>Zosterops leucophaeus</i>		6	20	5	20				
Splendid Starling	<i>Lamprotornis splendidus splendidus</i>		10	15	25	35	15			
Principe Starling - E	<i>Lamprotornis ornatus</i>		10	30	25	30	5			
Chestnut-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus fulgidus fulgidus</i>	15						10	2	
Sao Tome Thrush - E	<i>Turdus olivaceofuscus</i>	4					3	4	10	
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1							
Principe Sunbird - E	<i>Anabathmis hartlaubii</i>		8	20	20	10	5			
Newton's Sunbird - E	<i>Anabathmis newtonii</i>	20					1	10	10	3
Giant Sunbird - E	<i>Dreptes thomensis</i>	1						1	3	
Principe Weaver - E	<i>Ploceus princeps</i>		8	20	40	30	20			
Southern Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>	10					25	8		
Village Weaver	<i>Ploceus cucullatus nigriceps</i>	40	20							10
Giant Weaver - E	<i>Ploceus grandis</i>	2					3	3	1h	
Sao Tome Weaver - E	<i>Ploceus sanctithomae</i>	5						1	20	2
Red-headed Quelea	<i>Quelea erythropis</i>						2			
Black-winged Red Bishop	<i>Euplectes hordeaceus hordeaceus</i>						20			
Golden-backed Bishop	<i>Euplectes aureus</i>		1				15			1
White-winged Widowbird	<i>Euplectes albonotatus asymmetrurus</i>						10			
Blue Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis angolensis</i>		1				12			1
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild jagoensis</i>	25	7			10	20	15	20	60
Bronze Mannikin	<i>Lonchura cucullata cucullata</i>	1	15	30	30	10 0	75	12	10	3
Pin-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua macroura</i>	1					4	1	2	3

E= Endemic, N= Near Endemic		January 2024									
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
Sao Tome Shorttail - E	<i>Motacilla bocagii</i>								1		
Sao Tome Grosbeak - E	<i>Crithagra concolor</i>								1		
Principe Seed eater - E	<i>Crithagra rufobrunnea</i>	20						15	6	2	
Yellow-fronted Canary	<i>Crithagra mozambica tando</i>		3				20			1h	
* denotes Leader only											

Mammals

I=Introduced		January 2024									
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
Noak's Leaf-nosed Bat	<i>Hipposideros ruber</i>			1	2	2	2		1		
Straw-coloured Fruit Bat	<i>Eidolon helvum</i>	20	25				20	300			
Mona Monkey - I	<i>Cercopithecus mona</i>	3+		25	5+				3+		
Least Weasel - I	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>	1							1		
Brown Rat - I	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>							1	1	2	

Reptiles

		January 2024									
Common name	Scientific name	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>			100 + Juvs						20	
House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus mabouia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		
Sao Tome Skink	<i>Trachylepsis thomensis</i>	✓					✓			✓	
Principe Skink	<i>Trachylepsis principensis</i>			✓	✓	✓					
Guinea Lidless Skink	<i>Panapsis africanus</i>				1	1					
Sao Tome Leaf Litter Skink	<i>Panapsis spp.</i>	1									
Sao Tome Cobra	<i>Naja peroescabari</i>								1		