

Birding in Somaliland: A Somaliland Trip Report, April, 2011.

Richard Fleming of New York City spent two days birding with us east of Hargeisa. Here are his impressions:

Birdwatchers come in all shapes and sizes, from grannies who venture no further than the bay window view of their garden feeder to list-crazed maniacs who will risk bullets, kidnappings and divorce in their quest for new species.



In February, in northern Vietnam, I met one of the latter, a florid brit named Hugh Buck. He is third on the list of world listers, having seen upwards of 8500 species of birds out of a recognized world total of between 10 and 11,000. A staggering percentage, but he seemed intent on seeing the rest.

One evening in Cuc Phuong National Park, as the mosquitos buzzed in our ears, we shared a revolting bottle of Vietnamese plum wine. Hugh explained that he was leading a tour showcasing Vietnam's rarest species, largely in order to defray the ever-mounting "cost-per-bird" of his own list. Cost-per-bird is an unofficial mental calculation of how much the desperate birder is spending per new species added. If one flies to South-east Asia for the first time and ticks off hundreds of "lifers," the CPB is comparatively low, but Buck was looking for just a small handful of birds he hadn't already seen in Vietnam, or elsewhere: Blue-naped pitta, chestnut-eared laughingthrush, a night-heron so rare and obscure that I can't remember its name.

"Our last trip," he announced, "was to Somaliland."

I had never heard of such a country, but the name alone was redolent of adventure. Technically speaking, it is part of Somalia, that ultimate failed state, a region of maximum concern to the world's anti-terror analysts, a lawless desert wasteland of

trigger-happy warlords and Indian Ocean pirates. Hardly anyone's idea of a vacation paradise.

But the horn of Africa is home to many endemics. Buck told me that a couple of years earlier he had led one of the first tours to the region in years, adding numerous local and isolated species to his list in the process. What are a few landmines and the risk of years stuck in a pirate's holding cell compared with the chance to see the Warsangli linnet?

I'm willing to go to a lot of places, but I had never considered a birding excursion in Somalia. "It sounds pretty crazy, to me," I said.

A few weeks later, back in New York, I got a call for a sound recording job. "We'll be filming in Somaliland, are you okay with that? Don't worry, though, we're getting kidnap insurance."

I emailed Hugh: "By a strange coincidence...."

Never mind that the breakaway, independent north has not been recognized by a single other government: the people who live there will give you dirty looks if you suggest that they are residents of Somalia. They have their own currency, the Somaliland shilling, unexchangeable, except perhaps in neighboring Djibouti; their own license plates, with which you are unable to cross any borders; their own leaders and security apparatus. In Hargeisa, the self-proclaimed capital, there are Somalilander traffic police who stop you and ask you who you are and where you are going, all without attempting to extort any money.

There is exactly one nature-tour operator in Somaliland, and Hugh was glad to put me in touch with him. From a business point of view, the good news is that Abdi Jama has a monopoly. The bad news for him is his country's gigantic image problem, but I am glad to be able to report that you will not be defying death by going on safari in Somaliland. Abdi Jama is a splendid fellow and a first-rate outfitter, and has a personal story so fascinating that while he is telling it you may even let a few birds slide unidentified past the windows of his Toyota Landcruiser ragtop.

Hargeisa is usually reached by air from Nairobi, Addis or Djibouti. Our happy film crew flew up from Nairobi on Jetlink. Once lodged at the Ambassador Hotel, on a slope above the city quite near the airport, I called Abdi. He promptly drove over in his splendid vehicle and had dinner with me at the Ambassador, and asked whether his car would be sufficient, or if I would prefer that he rent something with air-conditioning. I announced that I wouldn't dream of going in anything other than his olive bomber, with its tattered canvas roof. "It drips when it rains," Abdi warned. Given Somalia's terrible drought, and the horrifying famine currently

being suffered in the south, rain seemed sadly unlikely. We planned a very short safari, with departure scheduled for the moment the film shoot was complete.

Don't be in a hurry to leave Hargeisa. A few days before the completion of filming the Jetlink return flight to Nairobi was cancelled without explanation, and the production went into a full-on scramble to change a dozen Hargeisa-Nairobi-Dubai-NY tickets. For a few minutes, I gloated. I was booked on the next flight out, allowing for a three day trip with Abdi. But soon we learned that in the few days since our arrival in Hargeisa Jetlink had entirely eliminated all service from Nairobi. Suddenly a very short safari was to be even shorter. The only flight available was on East African Airways, a day earlier than I had planned to leave.

The result was that the three days I had planned to spend with Abdi were divided up into a day off from work spent birding in and around Hargeisa, and a two-day, two-night trip into the bush, after we had completed filming. I've also included here a very few species which I saw only to the south of Hargeisa, around Baligubadle, on the Ethiopian border, and on a half-day trip to the excellent rock art site at Las Gaal (see map, below). These were seen in some brief moments (lunch break, primarily) snatched away from the busy filming schedule.

In two days, on dirt roads, it is impossible to reach many of the habitats which hold some of Somalia's most exciting species, but Abdi showed me some fabulous birds, and you will search for a very long time anywhere in the world before you will find anyone as knowledgeable, interesting, outspoken and informed as Mr. Jama with whom to share your time.



A typical village main street in rural Somaliland. Women are wrapped and often veiled in the Islamic way; the country essentially follows Shariah law. In contrast to countries I've visited in the Gulf, however, women here wear all sorts of bright and spectacular color combinations. Goats are a staple of the diet and the economy. Birds are eaten not

at all, which accounts for the comparative abundance of large game species like bustards, of which we quite easily saw three species.



Deforestation is not just a problem in moist tropical jungles like the Brazilian rainforest. Here bags of charcoal for sale sit along the paved main road east of Hargeisa. My preconceptions of Somaliland included vast tracks of dry desert and thorn scrub, but the country was once thick with a vast acacia forest, the largest on the continent. These woodlands have been savaged by charcoal cutters and clearance for pasture. Everywhere we went Abdi despaired that just in the few months since his last travels that way the forests had been visibly denuded. Evidence of fresh cutting of trees and the black scars of the charcoal pits was everywhere.



The recreational use of khat seems to be almost universal among adult Somalilander men, and khat stands like the one above, often showing an asparagus-like bundle of leaves floating in a pastoral landscape, line the main streets of Hargeisa. The drug is said to have mild amphetamine-like effects. It is common to see men standing on street-corners fondling bundles of leaves and discussing the merits of various shipments and strains, as if the stuff were fine french wine, or coffee beans. It diverts huge percentages

of the average household daily income. Alcohol is illegal in Somaliland, whereas khat is not, underlining the fact that just about every culture needs to have access to its daily intoxicant. Abdi has no time for it. He bemoans its negative influence on productivity and the Somaliland family, so I abandoned my plans to buy some and chew it while we were on Safari. I did have some once, back in 1992, with some Yemenis who ran my corner bodega on the lower east side, but I don't remember noting much of an effect other than my gums turning green.



The giant leopard tortoise is abundant across the dry, rocky landscape.



The truly awful offal dump outside Hargeisa, a Dante's inferno of dumped, stinking blood, cartilage and bone, worth a visit if you want to see hundreds of hooded vultures, marabou storks, and jackals. As I held my nose and coughed back the acrid ammoniac fumes, Abdi tried to claim that a visit to this place has wonderful immune-system enhancing homeopathic effects on the human organism. I was highly skeptical. What is certain is that this is the only place we saw Rüppell's griffon vulture, now exceedingly rare across much of Africa [because of furadan poisoning](#).



Abdi Jama. Reach him at [abdi \[DOT\] jama \[AT\] ymail \[DOT\] com](mailto:abdi.jama@gmail.com) for all of your Somaliland adventure travel needs.



More like a small automobile than a bird, the kori bustard, although by no means a Somali endemic, was a trip highlight. It is said to be the heaviest flying bird. We saw several, stalking the plains, including an enraged male, its feathers bristling as it marched away from an unsuccessful confrontation with a rival.



Nothing wrong with the car, we're just cooling the engine at a lunch stop. Abdi's team includes a young cousin who took care of setting up tents and cooking meals while Abdi and I were birding, and an armed security guard. Having a guy with a loaded AK-47 stretched out on the luggage behind me as we bounced along the rutted desert roads took some getting used to, but the Somaliland government requires all foreigners to have such an escort along when traveling east of Hargeisa. Ultimately I felt this poor guy had the most boring job imaginable, as everywhere the people were friendly and curious; there wasn't a moment on the trip when I felt remotely threatened.



A beautiful, archetypal acacia vista. Unfortunately, there should be a lot more acacias.



The tiny, beautiful village mosque on the Tuuyo plains.



The Tuuyo plains hold some of the best endemics within close reach of Hargeisa. As Abdi put it during our planning meeting: "larks, larks and larks...." Lesser hoopoe lark is common here, as is Somali lark and Desert cisticola.



Our camp near the Tuuyo plains. Heuglin's courser and Buff-crested bustard called incessantly at dusk, providing the soundtrack for the evening meal. Abdi likes to sleep on a platform on top of the truck, which was his home in Botswana and Tanzania for six years.



A juvenile darter in a tree on the edge of Baligubadle village. There is no open water or darter habitat for perhaps two hundred miles, so this bird is probably a confused victim of its own post-breeding dispersal urge, when young leave the nest to go out and find their own way in the world. I've included this here because Abdi suspects this is a new record for Somaliland.



Somalia was engulfed in civil war for much of the 1980s, with the result that there are still many minefields, junked tanks and artillery scattered across the landscape. Painted rocks indicate the possible presence of mines. It makes for worrisome birding, although at every turn herds of camel and goats are grazing the parched earth, and I think you would have to have very bad luck to detonate anything. Nonetheless, it would be the last bit of bad luck you would ever have. If Abdi suggests you shouldn't walk there, take his advice.



Khat is not permitted in the departure lounge of the airport, just so you know.



Here's a snapshot from Google Earth of my Somaliland travels with and without Abdi. The jaunt south from Hargeisa ending in the triangle on the Ethiopian border was for our film shoot in Baligubadle. The figure-8 loop to the east plots the two-day safari with Abdi. Click on the map to see a larger version. If you want more specific GPS data leave a comment with your contact details.

SPECIES LIST Most birding was on April 30th, May 3 and 4, 2011

- dartar (*Baligubadle only, as noted above*)
- hamerkop (*One only, a couple hours east of Hargeisa on our first day out*)
- abdim's stork (*A dozen or so at the Hargeisa offal dump*)
- marabou stork (*Hundreds at the Hargeisa offal dump, often overhead in Hargeisa*)
- sacred ibis (*Offal dump*)
- egyptian goose
- hooded vulture (*Hundreds at the Hargeisa offal dump, often overhead in Hargeisa*)
- rüppell's griffon (*One at the Hargeisa offal dump*)
- eastern chanting goshawk (*the common raptor of rural Somaliland*)
- gabar goshawk (*One, Baligubadle*)

crested francolin (*Numerous near Hargeisa*)
yellow necked spurfowl / yellow necked francolin (*Near the main wadi in Hargeisa*)
kori bustard (*Noted on the map, also seen at Quoryaale Plains*)
little brown bustard (*widespread east of Hargeisa*)
buff crested bustard (*perhaps the commonest bustard, widespread*)
spotted thick knee (*on day off spent near Hargeisa*)
cream colored courser (*or "Somali courser"*)
double banded courser
three banded courser / heuglin's courser (*one very vocal pair at our Tuuyo plains camp*)
crowned lapwing / crowned plover
common ringed plover (*one, obviously migrating, on stony desert, was a Somaliland first for Abdi*)
chestnut bellied sandgrouse (*common, i.e. at Tuuyo plains*)
speckled pigeon (*common around Hargeisa*)
african mourning dove
ring necked dove / cape turtle dove
laughing dove
emerald spotted wood dove / green spotted dove
namaqua dove
red bellied parrot / orange bellied parrot
white bellied go away bird
little owl (*one only, at Wadi Debis, second night's camp*)
little swift / house swift
blue naped mousebird
grey headed kingfisher / grey hooded kingfisher (*several singles, in heavier wooded wadi situations*)
little bee eater (*commonest bee eater*)
somali bee eater (*singles and pairs frequently encountered in open country*)
white throated bee eater
madagascar bee eater
european roller (*one only*)
eurasian hoopoe
abyssinian scimitarbill
red billed hornbill
eastern yellow billed hornbill (*common around Baligubadle*)
red and yellow barbet
black throated barbet (*Las Gaal cave paintings site*)
nubian woodpecker
cardinal woodpecker
singing bushlark
somali long billed lark / somali lark (*Tuuyo plains only*)
gillet's lark
lesser hoopoe lark (*Tuuyo plains only*)
chestnut headed sparrow lark / chestnut crowned sparrow lark (*Tuuyo and Quoryaale plains*)
desert lark
blanford's lark (*Quoryaale plains*)
somali short toed lark
short tailed lark (*one only, Quoryaale plains*)
thekla lark (*widespread, presumed not to be crested larks*)
barn swallow

ethiopian swallow (*widespread breeding, i.e. in Hargeisa buildings*)
red throated pipit
yellow wagtail / blue headed wagtail
common bulbul
rufous tailed rock thrush / common rock thrush
blue rock thrush
desert cisticola (*Tuuyo plains only*)
red fronted warbler
gray wren warbler
great reed warbler (*one migrant on the grounds of the Ambassador hotel*)
eastern olivaceous warbler
yellow bellied eremomela
willow warbler (*migrant, abundant at this time*)
asian desert warbler (*rather common in acacia scrub*)
banded warbler / banded parisoma
african gray flycatcher (*numerous*)
spotted flycatcher
white throated robin (*widespread migrant at this time*)
rufous tailed scrub robin / rufous bush robin
common redstart
whinchat
somalı wheatear (*found near Hargeisa, but rather more work than expected, likes rocky slopes*)
pied wheatear
blackstart (*rather scarce. one at Las Gaal*)
gray headed batis
scaly chatterer (*good stop on first day out with Abdi*)
somalı tit (*wadi debis campsite only*)
mouse colored penduline tit (*mixed flock in acacia scrub near Tuuyo plains camp*)
kenya violet backed sunbird / eastern violet backed sunbird (*Las Gaal*)
mariqua sunbird / marico sunbird
shining sunbird
variable sunbird / yellow bellied sunbird
eurasian golden oriole
red backed shrike
rufous tailed shrike / isabelline shrike
lesser grey shrike / gray
somalı fiscal (*common around Baligubadle and most of drive with Abdi*)
white rumped shrike / northern white crowned shrike (*a few, first morning in patch of acacia forest*)
brubru
slate colored boubou (*one, first morning in patch of acacia forest*)
rosy patched bush shrike (*fairly common, dryer desert situations*)
fork tailed drongo
pied crow
somalı crow / dwarf raven
wattled starling
greater blue eared glossy starling
golden breasted starling / golden bellied starling (*a few singles from the car, driving*)
superb starling

white crowned starling (*around rural human habitation, i.e. village on Tuuyo plains*)
magpie starling (*one in Baligubadle, a few near Las Gaal site*)
red billed oxpecker (*only one group of a few, on livestock*)
swainson's sparrow (*widespread*)
yellow spotted petronia
red billed buffalo weaver
white headed buffalo weaver
lesser masked weaver
rüppell's weaver (*colonial breeder at the Ambassador hotel*)
chestnut weaver (*huge roost at Ambassador hotel grounds, each evening*)
red billed quelea
black cheeked waxbill / black faced waxbill (*a few at the Las Gaal cave-paintings site*)
blue capped cordonbleu / blue headed cordonbleu (*photographed on the outskirts of Hargeisa. Abdi has seen this bird before, near Baligubadle, so there is obviously a relict population, or a range extension, as range maps show this bird's nearest range in southern Somalia*)
purple grenadier (*a single female in remnant acacia forest*)
green winged pytilia / melba finch
red billed firefinch
cut throat / cut throat finch (*in dry wadi near Hargeisa*)
eastern paradise whydah
straw tailed whydah
white bellied canary
somali bunting / somali golden breasted bunting