

BIRDING IN NORTHERN BOTSWANA

From the birding perspective, northern Botswana effectively means the Chobe River and its adjoining national park and the Okavango Delta; and in these locations, many exciting species can be found. It is possible to fly into Kasane and stay in one of its excellent lodges, or to drive up from Gaborone and do your thing in a tent; both give entry to the Chobe and the profuse and highly varied birdlife there.

The Okavango Delta is best experienced at any of the luxurious camps. So here, it is essential to book ahead and fly in from Maun or Gaborone. Those visitors who come mainly to see the 'The Big Five' are often surprised by the wide diversity and staggering numbers of birds in the Delta - and they are soon converted into dedicated birdwatchers!

In these distinct locations, an astonishing myriad of birds make their homes. Amongst these are the Herons, including Egrets, numbering some 15 distinct species. They come in many guises and live wherever sufficient water is found, especially in the trees along the river banks, and in the reeds on the edges of lakes and pans.

The oddly- named and ubiquitous Squacco Heron is undistinguished in appearance and behavior, being a pale beige and white cooler when not breeding , contrasting with the black Egret which has a handsome dark grey to black plumage-a slender bird with bright yellow feet. The latter has the unique, but effective habit of spreading its wings to form a canopy on the surface of the water, to go fishing.

The fish are fatally attracted to the shade and are then easily caught.

The smallest Herons stand at roughly 43cms, but the largest at 140cms, is the Goliath Heron, an impressive bird with its rich rufous and dark grey plumage; it stalks majestically in deeper water whilst hunting, before taking to the air with slow but powerful wing beats.

The Goliath is an uncommon bird, though resident, and birders are pleased to be able to tick it off their lists when sighted.

Kingfishes abound and in summer it is possible to record nine different sub-species, from the tiny jewel-coloured Malachite and even smaller Pigmy (at only 13cms in height), to the striking black, brown and white Giant which is whopping 45cm in height.

In between are the ever-present pied, striped, Grey-Hooded and Half-Collared Kingfishers. Some Kingfishers feed exclusively on fish, but amongst the insect eaters are the Brown-Hooded and the pastel blue, black and white Woodland, which are often found quite a distance from water.

Without moving from your comfy seat on the veranda of your lodge-with binoculars in one hand and cold drink in the other-it's fascinating to watch the lively Pied Kingfisher as it hovers mid-air, before espying a fish and plunging suddenly into the water, emerging with its catch.

Another of the great fishers of inland waterways is the conspicuous and dashing African Fish Eagle.

This large archetypal bird of Africa has a wingspan of about 240cm in flight, though it can remain motionless but observant for long periods.

The first indication of its presence is often its call- mournful and far-reaching- drawing one's eyes upwards to where it perches prominently at the very top of tall trees, scanning the water below.

It's an extremely handsome bird, with its white, tan and black feathers and usually lives in pairs, mating life.

There is some disagreement about which is the smallest bird to be found in Botswana, However, some of the tiniest, and most beautiful, are the Sunbirds -within their elegant DE curved beaks and shimmering, iridescent blue/black green plumage. Feeding on nectar and insects are the white-Bellied, the Scarlet- Chested, the Black and the Marico Sunbirds.

At the other end of the spectrum- at nearly a meter and a half tall, is the Kori Bustard, Africa's

largest, heaviest flying bird. This avian giant is found all over Botswana in open bush and grasslands.

The plumage of soft brown and grey acts as an effective camouflage, and it flies reluctantly only when threatened. This bird is a 'tick' greatly prized by twitchers, as its numbers are dwindling, it is regarded as one of Botswana's endangered birds.

The Ground Hornbill produces one of the most strange and arresting birdcalls in Botswana. It is usually heard as the crimson sun rises in the morning. This bird occurs right across the north and northeast of the country and into neighboring territories. The uninitiated might think that a mammal of some sort produces the call, as it is deep, booming sound, often repeated.

These birds are heavily built, and just under a meter tall; and perhaps because of their weight, rarely take to the air. With their huge size, black feathers and red wattles, they are an unforgettable sight, but sadly are becoming increasingly rare all over Southern Africa.

There are nine owls to be seen in Botswana. They differ widely, ranging from the small African Scoops and Pear-spotted (both about 17cms tall), the middle sized March, Wood, Barn, White-faced, Barred and Spotted Eagle Owl, to the Pels fishing Owl and Giant Eagle Owl, each being up to 650mms tall. Pels is strictly nocturnal, roosting in the thick foliage of a large tree during the day and hunting only at night. Its colouring differs from that of the other Owls and it has a reddish or cinnamon tinge and very dark, large eyes.

Environmental modification, in all its many forms, is impacting on bird habits and numbers. These include habitat degradation (fire, over-grazing, cutting of trees), human encroachment, the spraying of pesticides, and climate change.

In this country, too, bird habitats-and habits-are changing and several birds are threatened or endangered. These includes: the Slaty Egret, the White backed Night Heron, the White Headed Vulture, the Lapped-faced Vulture, the Long-crested Eagle, the Martial Eagle, the Bustard, the Southern ground Hornbill, the African Skimmer and the Rosy-throated long claw.

Botswana birds are recognized as a precious heritage and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks is fully aware of potential ecological disasters. This Department actively encourages the protection of threatened species.

Birdlife Botswana, with Government acquiescence, is undertaking various research projects to determine exactly what the possible problems might be with regard to endangered species, including regular bird counts. Increasingly, Botswana's rich birdlife is attracting another type of welcome visitor - the eco-tourist - who comes to admire the country's natural wonders, but aims to have minimal impact on its environment.

Bird lovers with specialized interests do birding safaris; and these are becoming more and more popular in northern Botswana. Either as longtime birder, or a newcomer, the possibilities of a great birding experience in Botswana is boundless. Many visitors return year after year to enjoy the countryside, the friendliness of the Botswana people, the wonderful weather and, of course, the country is spectacular, and enchanting, birds.