Sao Tome and Principe
Gulf of Guinea island endemics

A Tropical Birding Set Departure Tour
23rd – 30th July 2010

Leader: Christian Boix
All photos taken on this tour

ITINERARY

Friday 23rd July
Morning flight over to Sao Tome and PM birding at Agua Grande. Night in Sao Tome.

Saturday 24th July
Early AM Flight to Principe Island and rest of day birding forests around Bom Bom Resort.

Sunday 25th July
Full morning cleaning up on Principe endemics and noon flight to Sao Tome. PM birding at Roa Bombain. Night in Sao Tome.

Monday 26th July
Early wake up and drive south to Ribeira Peixe. Birding hike up to Monte Carvo near Cao Grande. First camping night at Monte Carvo.

Tuesday 27th July
Full day birding the higher reaches of Monte Carvo. Second camping night at Monte Carvo.

Wednesday 28th July
Birding hike descending Monte Carvo. Pelagic excursion to Sette Pedras at noon and PM driving back to Sao Tome. Night in Sao Tome.

Thursday 29th July

Friday 30th July
Full morning birding Praia das Conxas near Sao Tome, PM flight back to Libreville. Night in Libreville.
DAILY LOG

Day 1, 23rd July. Flight days in West Africa are never relaxed days in any guides’ agenda, so many things can go wrong, that time becomes your only ally, no skill or experience can ready you for the slackness of Gabonese airline idiosyncrasies. Fortunately the gods were looking after our party and before we knew it we were lifting off the tarmac from Leon Mba’s airport in Libreville and headed for Sao Tome. Once in the air a rather good looking air hostess, shuffled me to the front to get the weight right on the plane (...after taking off?) she then proceeded to take an unusual, yet genuine interest on my bird book, my job and quite admirably managed to hold back harks of laughter when I told her what we were coming to do in Sao Tome and how I earned my living. Slightly irritated with her snide reaction, my mind had become far more preoccupied with her latter chirp, “What a pity we do not have more time to explore the island….it’s the first time for us and the plane to fly to it… it would have been nice to take a look around”. FIRST TIME !?... I thought, turns out the airline we were supposed to fly in with (Air Service) had folded overnight, and we were being flown on an emergency flight, with a smaller plane and another company called La National, doing relief shifts for Air Service. Inevitably I started wondering if there would be a flight to get back to Africa a week later when our island holiday was over? And, did the pilot know that the end of Sao Tome’s runway meets the sea? Good lord...did I just hear “Cabin Screw” get ready for landing over the loudspeaker?

Clearing customs took a wee while but we were soon enjoying our first endemics at the parking lot, with a sassy Sao Tome Prinia hopping on the lawns, and our indigenous ground agent, smiling broadly and ready to go birding. We were whisked by our hotel in town for a snack lunch and promptly set off to the outskirts of town where lush forests meet Sao Tome’s town edge. One thing about birding Sao Tome and Principe that becomes immediately apparent, is that unlike most other tropical islands, densities of birds here are actually surprisingly good, this is why these islands have become such a popular add on to most of our West African birding tours. Not only do they yield a handsome set of endemics, most of which are vulnerable, near threatened or critically endangered, plus recently re-discovered, but the quality of viewing is good and the number of sightings plentiful thus you leave with a satiated sense of contentment every time you come here. Photographically it has its typical challenges posed by low light in the forests, rain and moisture. But opportunities are so good and chances so forthcoming that getting the perfect shot is often a matter of patience. We hadn’t yet stretched our tripod legs when a cry went out for the first of many Sao Tome Spinetails. Vibrating and gliding effortlessly with its stub-tailed rear. Palm Swifts soaring higher allowed for careful comparison.

Sao Tome Prinia is a common, endearing, and charismatic endemic (Christian Boix)
Spishing brought in some more Sao Tome Prinia’s and with its peculiar, undulating flight and melodic, chattering display, an endemic Newton’s Sunbird was drawn in. This nectarinid, may not be much of a stunner but it sure is an endearing one that would be seen on many occasions wherever we birded on the island.

A fallow field next to the track had attracted some seedeaters, Bronze Mannikins mostly, as well as Common Waxbill and Blue-breasted (Southern) Cordonbleu. Another endemic, Principe Seedeeater, was easy to track down as they were singing from every decent-sized tree along our walk. Oliveaceous Thrush, also known as Gulf of Guinea Thrush was seen on a multitude of occasions really well feasting on over-ripened bananas, and flushing off the paths. Suddenly a roadside hedge row came alive in song, and a mob of birds squabbled inside it nervously, a peep into the bushes revealed yet another endemic: the highly gregarious and charismatic Black-capped Speirops, also known as Sao Tome Speirops. Yet again, not quite an explosion of colors, but watch it for a few minutes and you will be well entertained by its social behavior...often making me wonder if I am looking at a flock or an organism in motion.

Crossing our first stream we soon spotted the indigo blue Sao Tome race of Malachite Kingfisher (A.c.thomensis), unfortunately suffering unreconciled taxonomic quandary, considered by some as a good endemic species but without genetic evidence to support the “hunch”. Nonetheless, the bird perched placidly for the all of us, later zipping back and forth the stream and zapping a few fry for a meal. A jet black serpentine tail flitted back and forth across the stream and after some minor playback we were all gawking at the elegance and simplicity of a stunning male Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher, what is it about black and elegance in birds? The walk along the stream produced poor brief views of Forest Dove (Sao Tome’s split of Lemon Dove), fly-over views of Sao Tome Green Pigeon and even faster views of Sao Tome Pigeon, also known as Sao Tome Bronze-naped Pigeon.

Sister islands with two completely different kingfisher species. What happened here?
Sao Tome Kingfisher- A.c.thomensis. (Christian Boix)

Back on the road as we wound down the afternoon, a pair of Red-headed Lovebirds landed above us and melted into the foliage, offering brief and protracted views. A Southern Masked Weaver building a nest offered some temporary entertainment. It is interesting to point out that this species seems treated by most books as Vitelline, despite the fact it was introduced from Angola and belongs to the southern masked race ‘peixotoi’. Soon after we spotted the nuthatch-like moves of a Sao Tome Weaver creeping up a trunk, scouring every moss tuft for hiding invertebrates.
Gritting on the road, faint-colored Yellow-fronted Canaries gathered the necessary “cutlery” for a night’s digestion. With the light dying on us and everybody happy, and a bag full of delectable endemics, we retired for a shower and delicious supper at an unpretentious local seafood restaurant.

**Day 2, 24th of July.** After Friday came, it was Fly day again, and aboard the ugliest pressurized, tinfoil cylinder you could possibly dream of, we hopped from Sao Tome to its northerly cousin island -Principe. The 45 minute flight is always studded with interesting sightings, since the height one can reach in 20 minutes after take off is quite limited, thus what may have been a Sperm Whale, a pod of Atlantic Dolphins and a morass of breeding seabirds around the islets known as Tinhosas were all squinted at during the flight. Minor squalls out at sea made interesting patterns against a jet black and angry sea. The approach to Principe is always exhilarating, not only because you need to descend in figures of eight to line up with the run way, but also because you get to see your resorts’ bungalow from the air all the while marveling at the “phallus” shaped phonoliths that emerge defiantly from the forest clad contours of this spicy and spiky-looking island.

On land, non-existing formalities allowed us to walk straight off the plane and after the *dryas* race of Blue-breasted Kingfisher, a hulking looker that favors forest edge and farm bush to hunt its keep. Nearby, the ubiquitous Principe Golden Weavers were busy stripping some grasses to produce strands of material fit to build their nests. In flight with their flailing bounty they always look like they should be better named Pennant-winged Weavers! At the colonies, males would go completely “bejitz” whenever a female even looked their way. Clasping their nests with their talons, hanging upside down, quivering and shaking with loose abandon, chittering incessantly, and showing off their golden breeding plumage which almost feels it’s about to start dripping carotenoids.

![Principe Golden Weaver](image)

The staff at Bom bom knew well our routine, so they placed us at a convenient starting point along the track and left us to walk our way back to the lodge whilst they got lunch ready for us. The walk wound down through secondary forest, past a few settlements and an old dilapidated Roça from a bygone era.
A brief glimpse of a Principe Drongo (considered by some a subspecies of Velvet-mantled Drongo, but recently lumped as Fork-tailed Drongo) sallied away and dove for cover, not to be seen for the rest of the morning. Thankfully a pair of the endemic and near-threatened Principe Sunbird came to meet our “spishings”, but its lack of color could not hold weight against a mob of African Green Pigeons and Splendid Starlings feasting on rip figs over the path. More Sao Tome Spinetails, loads of Black Kites and Little Swifts were playing on a thermal below, rising over the jungle clad slopes of Principe’s coastline.

A bit of playback roused enough interest to bring in the melodramatic Dohrn’s Thrush Babbler a smart looking “fella” of fast and fleeting approach but massively territorial. It often moves in small groups making one wonder if cooperative breeding maybe facultative in this species. Taxonomically, it has recently been discovered to be closely related to African Hill Babbler and Sylvia warblers.

Both endemics, Principe Speirops (left) and Principe Sunbird are often seen flocking together (Christian Boix)

Another flock of Principe Speirops foraged the trees along the road and this time allowed us to follow at close quarters, photographing and observing all their antics. At times they would stop for a breather, perch-huddle wing to wing along a branch and start a frantic allo-preening session for a few minutes, preening left and right with gusto and adoration, almost making me lust for a grooming session myself!

Dohrn’s Thrush Babbler, Principe’s counterpart of African Hill Babbler (Christian Boix & Ian Fulton)
Squadrons of squawking and “pinging” Gray Parrots tore the skies above us and every now and then looped down and came to perch at trees nearby allowing for some classic scope views. The taxonomy of this parrot remains undecided, but its smaller size and vocalizations seems to be different enough to grant it as a unique taxon, the Principe Gray Parrot.

A monotonous call repeated incessantly gave away a male Olive Sunbird claiming stake to its territory. Also calling was the more retiring Chestnut breasted Negrofinch and it took very little effort to get this gem come visit and shows its wares to the group. Principe’s race of Lemon Dove was also seen foraging along the road banks.

We eventually reached the lodge, merry and satisfied after a good morning birding walk. The refreshing hibiscus tea served as a welcome drink went down without touching sides and without delay we moved on to lunch. Bom Bom is birders heaven on earth, set along the edge of a tranquil beach cove, amidst rocks, secondary forest, muddy creeks and a palm grove. Accommodation is luxurious and flawless and the restaurant enjoys a paradisiacal setting that needs to be reached along a boardwalk crossing a small channel of turquoise waters. An Indian chef had prepared a selection of light and spicy dishes...only befitting to our appetite after the early start and great birding progress.

Brown Boobies and sky-high White-tailed Tropicbirds spiced up our desserts.

Strait after lunch and with no one game to indulge in a siesta, we set off to find Principe’s morph of White-bellied Kingfisher. For some reason it had moved perch from the verandah of our balconies to some other spot. But it was not much of a challenge to re-locate it, soon enough we were enjoying scope views of this smart looking bird at a muddy creek behind the lodge. It is uncanny, that this species, an offshoot of White-bellied Kingfisher, would become so tame and confiding here in Principe. Its mainland congener is the epitaph of a socio-freak, darting off and hiding in swamp forests avoiding all possible contact, even with the nicest possible birder. Striated Herons and Western Reef Egrets flew off as we tramped along the creeks’ banks; a Moorhen was seen briefly. An added bonus was to watch gigantic Robber Crab retire into their burrows for safety; these foot long beasts are so strong and dexterous with their pincers that they are able to feed on coconut meat!! One good reason to never to do a skinny bivouac in these beaches....

Principe Drongo (left) made us sweat bullets this time round, but Principe Kingfisher (A.l.nais) was as ubiquitous as ever. (Christian Boix)

The afternoon was spent at a nearby glade, searching and calling for better views of Principe Drongo. Well, the bird in question did not show up for most of the afternoon, and we ended up watching for the most, a repeat of the mornings birds. We did however get better chances to study and compare the size and vocalization differences between Principe and Splendid Starling. An unexpected Whimbrel flew over the tree-tops. A group of dark Mona Monkeys was scoped up as they fed on a Kapok tree. Mona Monkey can also be found on the island of Grenada attesting to its captive past when they were transported for bemusement or food on slave ships headed to the New World during the 18th century.
With the light waning we turned back and headed for a different drongo stakeout closer to the lodge. A small group of large Black Swifts was spotted high above us flying straight towards the island interior, all we could pick up is that they were orders of magnitude bigger than Palm Swifts and Spinetails observed throughout the day.

Their tails were longer and forked, unlike Little Swifts and their build was reminiscent of African or Eurasian Swift, however at such height and light conditions color detail was non-existent. This is the second time that this enigmatic swift has been seen on one of our tours, and I have to believe these could be a small resident population of Fernando Po Swifts or similar, that either breed or seek overnight protection at the islands rocky topography.

Meters away from Bom Bom’s entrance gate a pair of “Principe Drongo” had emerged from the forest depths to hawk insects, and at last provided long and soaking views of this prized endemic race to cap the day.

A buffet on the restaurants lawn, with the sea lapping next to our table, candle-lit tables as well as verandahs and walkways back to the lodge, a starry sky and a chilled rock shandy….was agreed to be birding in style at its best.
Day 3, 25th July. Brushing my teeth before going to sleep is normally a highlight of my day, but waking up this morning with the aftertaste of Claudio Corrallo’s chocolate was heavenly delightful. Chocolate is and has been one of Principe’s (and Sao Tome’s) main export crops for decades, in fact oil and cocoa pretty much placed these islands on the map, catalyzed its anti-slavery revolt and today continues to be a trademark of the islands most important export produce.

With all the needed birds in the bag, this morning we set off to get more second views. A flowering tree in the lodge’s complex was as far as we got. Nectar production was peaking and just about every endemic was getting fuelled up for the day. In a matter of minutes we had notched both Starlings, Principe and Olive Sunbird, Principe Speirops, Dohm’s Thrush Babbler, Principe Weaver, Principe Parrot and Principe Weaver….our tummies needed breakfast and we had few reasons to stick around any place in particular. Breakfast was sadly eclipsed by the unfortunate lethal crash of a Principe Kingfisher against one of the windows. We all watched helplessly how the bird, being chased by another male, flew into a window pane at great speed, fortunately the chasing male veered off in time and a double whack was averted.

After breakfast we decided to do a bit of snorkeling (a bad idea…very bad idea!!), sure there was plenty to see, loads of multicolored tropical fishes, corals and sponges, until some sort of gelatious “wotsit” wrapped itself around my neck and stung me senseless, making me think something was severing my head off. Fortunately a generous dose of Stingo was all that was required to fix me up. But on that note I realized our time in Principe had come to an end, and were there more birds to be seen I would not have swapped mediums and gotten myself an itchy collar.

So without further a due, or delay!, we flew back to Sao Tome and soon found ourselves bumping our way to the highlands, with a picnic packed and eager to nail down a few more Sao Tomean endemics. We had not reached our destination when the chirps of a flock of Principe White-eyes interrupted our progress. Similar looking to Zosterops but greener and daintier, a feeding flock of this often cryptic species was found and we were all enjoying as much of a soaking view as the bird could project. From nearby, fluty whistles gave away the proximity of Sao Tome’s version of Forest Chestnut-winged Starlings, which soon enough flew in and showed well. The gratings of a male Giant Weaver alerted us to another key endemic, and soon enough we were again feasting on the world’s largest weaver. Better and prolonged views of Forest Dove satiated everyone’s need to see the bird better. Similarly a calling Sao Tome Green Pigeon interrupted our picnic lunch and minutes later we were all gawking at the underside of this still and stealthy endemic.

With everything that the place had to offer under the belt we dribbled down the mountain and spent the afternoon at a fallow palm field in town that was overgrown by grass and reeds and that apparently had attracted in the past the introduced Golden-backed Bishop. Our walk did turn up a female, but no males were seen. Yellow-fronted Canaries, Common Waxbills, Bronze Manikins, Red-headed Lovebirds, Sao Tome Prinia and Sao Tome Kingfisher were seen on several occasions. A welcome sighting was a scoped up Sao Tome Pigeon (Bronze-naped) that allowed us to watch it for quite a while. Nearby in some old rice paddies several Moorhens were seen scattering away on our approach, Striated Herons were common too, and wheeling about a large flock of Western Reef Egrets and the smaller, yellow-socked, Little Egret was noticed. An early retreat was voted for, since the following day we were to set off on our camping expedition to the south of the island and re-packing our kit was needed.

Day 4, 26th July. One look at the 4x4 Prado that was meant to take us down south revealed unequivocally that the car would not be suited to take all 8 of us, our packs and food. Luckily the driver was understanding and polite and agreed to forego the booking. An hour later we had secured a larger van, and were all merrily packed and rolling south along the picturesque coastline of Sao Tome headed for Sao Joao dos Angolares and Ribeira Peixe. Driving past paradisiacal deserted beaches contoured by palm groves, and ruinous massive Roças, you are reminded of the huge investment potential the island has, how poor this country is and how desperately in need of able, entrepreneurial and “can-do” governance this island is.
On arrival our trusted ‘Sherpa’ awaited us and in his local leader style took immediate control of the expedition, even telling legendary Peter Lento (notorious re-discoverer and pathfinder of the island) what route we would be taking and who was loading up what, his jovial character kept us all amused and entertained throughout the hike. The old palm plantation from where we started our hike was busy knocking down old groves and reclaiming more forest to plant new fields of palm oil trees, a horrendous destructive sight to behold. We trudged through this mayhem and soon enough reached the edge of the proper forest. The weather was excellent, albeit hot and humid, but not a trace of rain menace anywhere and the views of Cao Grande were as always majestic! Old man Peter pointed out the topography that enveloped us naming equally impressive summits to the North such as Maria Fernanda and Monte Café. With such good weather, we wondered how few people had such a great chance to admire the jagged topography of Sao Tome in such evidence. Blazing through the palm plantation we had a few birdy encounters with a Sao Tome Weaver attending a nest and a Giant Weaver perched up in the middle of a field. Black Kites were ubiquitous everywhere we looked.

Sao Tome and Principe Islands    July 23rd – 30th, 2010

Sao Tome Weaver an accomplished tree climber and contorsionist. (Christian Boix)
Inside the cooler forests of Monte Carvo we took it slowly, climbing gradually along our trail, negotiating slippery mossy rocks, loose lava rocks, streams and logs across the path. Our ears pricked for a myriad of new endemics that abound in these reaches. The first one to fall was Dwarf Olive Ibis, an interesting split from the mainland Olive Ibis, that instead of going big due to predator pressure release, chose to become dwarf, a typical insular phenomenon brought about by character release when in new and unexploited environments such as islands. Great views of this highly coveted species were had, their shaggy crests and small size (for an ibis) being the most obvious features. Later on the day we flushed several other groups and were then able to scope them on their perches and observe them as they foraged along the track ahead of us.

Dwarf Olive Ibis are common and fascinating to watch in the highland forests of Monte Carvo (Christian Boix)

Among a boulder and log clad slope the mysterious Bocage’s Longbill was spotted effortlessly creeping away from us in no rush. Shaped like a Longbill but with the gait of a pipit, it was once believed to be a warbler but has recently found taxonomic peace among the motacillids (pipits and wagtails). A heck of an adaptation ride that only alien conditions, such as, the wooded lava fields of Sao Tome could have provided.

Reaching camp without being soaked to the core by rain and caked in mud was a new experience, hopes that the weather would hold, germinated. After lunch, having disposed of our packs and rested a bit we set off up the hill to try a few stakeouts. The forest was quiet but we managed to track down and enjoy good views of the vulnerable Sao Tome Oriole, Sao Tome Green Pigeon and many Principe Seedeaters. Day Flying Bats (Leaf-nosed Bats) amused us as we trudged uphill, but only Sao Tome Paradise Flycatchers and Sao Tome Weavers offered poor consolation for our hopes to notch one more endemic for the day. Tracks of Genets and Feral Pigs made our sherpa lick his whiskers.

Papa Figo or Sao Tome Oriole is a common endemic in the highlands (left). Giant Sunbird (right) is a highly exciting endemic to watch (Christian Boix)
Calls of a distant grosbeak got us excited for a while but our playback duel yielded no tidings, and the light dimmed on us at pace. Back at camp everyone’s weary feet screamed for an early supper and a well-earned rest, just as a nearby Sao Tome Scoops Owl started calling from several levels of leaves above us “tooting” away.

**Day 5, 27th July.** Was I dreaming or did Ian bash in my sleep last night? He confessed he did take a swing at me brought about by his dream where he was trying to get rid of someone else….Well, I could hardly get angry with him after all I do recall feeling slight guilty as I “inadvertently” flicked off, in mid-slumber, a cockroach from my shoulder but squarely onto his side of the tent…so I guess we were even.

Five o’clock had me out of my sleeping bag trying to stretch my body into some sort of erectus stance, but to no avail. The hooting Sao Tome Scops-Owl was still giving it a good tonk, and although I managed to see it on my bathroom rendezvous, the group still had to see it. Not to worry we have another day and night.

An early cup of coffee and some breakfast, we were off to higher reaches with a clear aim in mind to do everything it takes to find again the recently rediscovered and elusive Sao Tome Grosbeak and spend as much time as possible in Sao Tome or Newton’s Fiscal habitat, hoping for a chance sighting of this bizarre montane understorey shrike.

Things could not have started any better, as we bumped into an allo-preening pair of endemic Giant Sunbirds. A behemoth of his taxa, that for all the lack of color and lustre has developed into an impressively large, bulbul-sized Sunbird. Several other sightings of the species ensued and we were fortunately enough to watch them mating, preening and calling on a number of occasions and multitude of light conditions. A few hundred meters beyond, second views of Bocage’s Longbill were secured as pair called to each other across the track. Seconds later a male paraded back and forth agitatedly pacing up and down the rocks and small branches on the ground, its skinny bill, large feet and non-existent tail giving it a strange and awkward appearance. On an island with virtually no ground-based birds, this motacillid has clearly exploited this niche to the fullest.

The distinct lack of grosbeak or “Pombo” (Maroon Pigeon) calls slowly fermented into a mild anxiety within. Luckily though we reached an old stakeout of Newton’s Fiscal and we managed to keep in a positive mood. This bizarre interior forest shrike does not have a bill like a shrike and its strange call is unlike any other Lanius in the world. A few blasts of playback echoed down the valley and were followed by a deathly silence. A few more for good measure received equal treatment and just as I was packing away my gear, the distinct and clear whistle of a Fiscal shot back from the chasms of the misty and somber gulley. Playing it casual, the bird got slowly taunted up and in record time, the distinct silhouette of Newton’s Fiscal popped up in a nearby tree.

For all our efforts tracking down Newton’s Fiscal we were duly rewarded with some awesome views and mega patient birds, but if only there had been more light!! (Christian Boix)
Very aware of our presence but far more concerned by the implications of our playback, we were ogled and dismissed after a few minutes. The excitement of nailing this relatively colorful endemic had been such that everyone had cranked, twisted and balanced themselves at the edge of the ridge settling for whatever painful view they could get, rather than risking a move that would scare the bird away. A second bout of playback was agreed and this time the bird came in and perched in open view, on an eye-level branch for everyone to enjoy. During the course of the day we succeeded on tracking down another fiscal in a different gulley. The latter allowing for some photos to be taken despite the poor light conditions. In total, an estimated total of 4 different birds were recorded throughout the day, not bad at all considering that it is estimated worldwide population does not exceed 50 birds!

Still drunk in joy inside our heads, a few hundred meters along the track we walked straight into a familiar call, the birds were right above us, fading in out of sight as a low cloud scraped past the canopy, chunky, hulky, staunch billed seed eating looking.... GROSBEAKS! Everyone scrambled, stretched and squinted into the cloud hoping for a glimpse of contrast, some color, and detail. The call, the size and shape was all very good...but we all felt we deserved more of a better view...and then the birds flew off. Nothing responded to our tape for several minutes after...they were gone. Talk about an emotional roller-coaster, one minute soaring in the clouds, the next crashing down into a pit latrine of despair. Fortunately even better sightings of the fiscal, closer looks at Giant Sunbird, flocks of ST Speirops and a curious study of Sao Tome Prinia at these heights amenized the rest of the morning. With no sign of calling Maroon Pigeons and more cloud setting in, we decided to turn around for lunch.

Climbing down the mountain, a timid but familiar hoot, was heard nearby. The allergic reaction of “mobsters” such as Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher, Newton’s Sunbird and Sao Tome Prinia gave away the identity of the hooter. Somewhere very close a Sao Tome Scops Owl had just made a silly mistake. Tracking down the whereabouts of the mobsters and patiently scouring stems, trunks, hollows and somber gaps above our heads we eventually located a great looking and very confiding rufous morph of Sao Tome Scops Owl. We photographed and scoped the living daylights out of it and even watched him from a fluffed up ball-like posture into a stick-like stance, as a Black Kite flew over his perch, too close for comfort.

Owls are always great to watch, but being able to find Sao Tome Scops Owl during the day is a perk that this endemic gem allows for (Christian Boix)
Lunch met us en route, and an energizing meal was laid out and devoured, as yet another Fiscal taunted us from not too far.

Soon after lunch a false alarm for Maroon Pigeon woke up our senses, which after lunch where a wee bit lethargic, but not tired enough to lock onto the familiar whistlings of another Sao Tome Grosbeak. To all intents and purposes, some would say that it is nearly identical to Principe’s Seedeater but like they say in France “le difference...c’est le difference” and virtually a few meters off trail, perched midway up a small tree, a stunning male Sao Tome Grosbeak sang away in full view. Unfazed by our approach he sat and sang whilst we ogled at it, scoped it, and snapped away several giga's of card memory. The light was great, the distance ridiculous, and the viewing lasted as long as we had ever hoped for and could have ever dreamt. In fact, we walked away once we had satiated our senses, and the bird stayed behinf calling away in the same perch we found it. We were now truly stoked to have bagged in such style and classy views another critically endangered endemic, seldom seen, hardly ever photographed, and with a worldwide estimated population of less than 50 individuals. This was indeed Happy Hour in the Summit. My pride and record remained virgin, not having ever missed this bird on all our tours!!

Voted bird of the tour! the Critically Endangered Sao Tome Grosbeak provided the most ecstatic thrill of the trip (Christian Boix)

With just about everything under the belt and having had several great looks at everything that was up here, we tried to meet up with more Dwarf Olive Ibis in the afternoon, but these were nowhere to be seen, and eventually we heard them far away as they gathered at a roost way down the slope. Back at camp great-looking Sao Tome Orioles put on a good show and feeding Sao Tome Green Pigeons fed, pooped and bombarded us with fruit and killer views from the canopy above.

After supper we packed and got ready for an early start and descent off the mountain. Lying in my sleeping bag, resting my feet and eyes, a Sao Tome Scops-Owl call ed nearbly... boy was I glad I did not have to go chasing after him in the dark. And still no rain...Please gods keep it that way!

Day 6, 28th July. The descent was swift and uneventful stopping en route to admire botanical treasures and interesting flowers along the way. Our camp aides were gathering all sorts of plants, barks, lianas etc. as we walked out. By now most of them were carrying more forest matter on them than camping kit. Everything bore a purpose there were leaves that tasted like spinach, bulbs with onion flavors, resins that kept mozzies away and lianas that tasted peppery and were great condiments to soups and stews.

From the road and in the heat of the day we walked down to Ribeira Peixe where a boat from Sao Joao dos Angolares had been instructed to pick us up. We of little faith thought the arrangement was too good to be true and when 30 minutes later no boat had come to fetch us, faith shriveled away. But scanning the rollers, 45 minutes late,
a brave motorized “panga” type boat rode the waves, heading for us. The boatman arrived and apologized for the delay, explaining he had to change engines before leaving port. Without much thought we clambered into this floating device and set off to a nearby group of rocky outcrops known as Sette Pedras.

Trepidation and expectation had our eyes fixed on the horizon scanning for terns, tropicbirds, boobies or anything else. Then, a sheepish but very responsible thought voiced itself: “Was this a good idea” ? I guess the distance, being at sea in small boats, without a live-vests and several grand worth of photographic kit hanging of your neck was the catalyst. In retrospect it probably was not, but somehow the presence of other boats fishing about, a landwards current and the fact that the rollers were big but not choppy...tempered us all to brave the elements and plod on. As we approached the lee of the rocks the swell broke down, and we were able to bob in a more gentle manner. Above and around us several hundred Brown Boobies sailed past, perched and watched us curiously. Floating, delicate and magnificent White-tailed Tropicbirds, donning golden-tailed streamers, were omnipresent breeders on the islets. A single Bridled Tern flew past the boat much to our consternation as it never turned around, followed by a Royal Tern (a great sighting for these waters!). Closer to the rocky crags, scores and scores of Brown Noddies were perched in the shadows of the volcanic outcrops. We hugged past them, defying the sharp crags of the walls rising above us, enjoying superb views of this smart and elegant tern. A few Black Noddies were seen on the wing, but none were sighted on land. After circumnavigating this small, yet productive archipelago, we set course back to land. Setting foot on terra firma was indeed a pleasant feeling, but watching Sao Tome Island sunlit under clear skies was a sight that I will take with me to treasure for many years to come.

Our mini-pelagic to Sette Pedras offered a unique chance to truly enjoy Brown Boobies (left) and White-tailed Tropicbirds (right) as well as several noddies and terns (Christian Boix)

Lunch at Rio Grande yielded several species to the day list namely Green-backed Heron, Whimbrel, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Long-tailed Cormorant, Cattle Egret and Western Reef Heron. The drive back was uneventful, and what remained of the afternoon was used to wash clothes, catch up with our notes and enjoy an early supper and well deserved early rest.

Day 7, 29th July. The day started with a fat, domesticated Muscovy-type duck crashing into our car as we left Sao Tome town at daybreak. Fortunately it bounced off unharmed and did not add another crack to an already smashed up windscreen, which funnily enough seems to be the fashionable in Sao Tomean vehicles.

Today’s target was simple...Maroon Pigeon, or bust! For this was the last endemic we needed to wrap up this trip with flying colors. Walking the road below Bom Succeso had proven good for Maroon Pigeon in previous years but the scarcity of fruiting trees due to the long dry season locally known as “gravana” meant that our plan needed re-thinking. Birding had produced the usual suspects but we needed to reach primary forest soon, where a greater diversity of trees would raise the chances of a few trees bearing fruit. We accepted a lift to the top from the curator of the Botanical gardens at Bom Successo and with a spring in our step trudged on towards Lagoa Amelia.
En route we met up with some guides from the Monte Pico Eco guides association busy doing a refresher course with a BirdLife ornithologist. Aware of our quest they apologetically showed us pictures and share the detail of a recent sighting they had had of a Maroon Pigeon...30 minutes ago. Gutted, but encouraged we caught our breath and drank some water before continuing our hiking search.

As we were about to push on, a sixth sense raised my eyes to the canopy directly above our heads, and there sitting quietly, not even preening, eating or moving at all, our quarry perched looking down at us. What a fluke!! And the next half hour was spent digiscoping a beautiful individual that eventually woke up, walked about, fed, preened, pooped, was visited by another equally fat Maroon Pigeon and eventually flew off. Sheer elation, we wolfed our lunches watching the quizzical Lagoa Amelia, a craterlike depression covered in an introduced alien invasive plant that has silted, overgrown and obliterated any open standing water. Wholly unimpressive.

The last endemic to make it to the trip list, “Pombo” or Maroon Pigeon was easy to find once we got to the right habitat (Christian Boix)

Pombo, or Maroon Pigeon had stolen the limelight squarely, but the day still provided great views of Newton’s Sunbird, Sao Tome Speirops, Sao Tome Spinetail, Forest Dove, Sao Tome Pigeon, Principe Seedeater, Sao Tome Chestnut-winged Starling and Sao Tome Oriole.

On the way back we paid a cultural visit to the Bom Succeso Botanical gardens and when we felt that we could not digest a single more scientific name of the botanical wealth exposed we set off down the hill towards Luis Mario’s
house for a typical Sao Tomean meal. Delicious local Chorizo sausages and the crunchiest ever roasted peanuts with tapas-like, deep-fried fish known as Fala Bobo, disappeared fast with the first few chilled beers. A spicy cutlet of Sailfish served with a wide assortment of local produce, namely fried banana, manioc and tastiest green beans followed. We then took an educational gastronomic lesson sampling an array of the islands MOST WANTED rums and cane varieties, capping it up with an enlightening lesson on the difference in taste, flavor and texture of the different banana types grown in the island, all of which came from Luis Mario’s garden. A pinch of Claudio Corallo’s superb artisanal chocolate placed the cherry on top, and happy-tummied, saw us on our way back to the hotel in nearby Sao Tome.

Day 8, 30th July. With half a day to kill, we decide to drift north towards Praia das Conxas and try once more for second views of Golden-backed Bishop. The dry season had been well utilized by the local farmers and wild fires had set ablaze most of the grasslands, finding a grass patch where seedeaters may congregate proved challenging, and even when we found one in seed, the Angolan introduced bishop was nowhere to be seen. White-winged Widows were seen on several occasions and Black-winged Bishops were also in evidence. Common Waxbills, Blue-breasted Cordonbleus and Yellow-fronted Canaries were seen wherever a bit of green grass seeded. The raucous calls of Scaly Francolin were heard in the distance, and a shy Harlequin Quail call was also heard. After a long search, a group of three birds, two females and one male Golden-backed Bishop were spotted perched. Yet again donning a rather unimpressive plumage, but allowing for more prolonged views.

At this point phone calls from the airport started to reach me announcing the cancellation of our flight back to Libreville and the fact that the next flight (4 days later) was already fully booked. A phone call to our local agent in Libreville set me up with an array of options to chase. A few calls later we were booked and transferred to the next flight out of Sao Tome to Libreville with an airline called Ceiba from Equatorial Guinea, crickey and to think that minutes before I did not even know this country owned an airline, let alone that I could chat to them in my mother tongue, Spanish, to sort out the ticket transfer, sweet!! The only catch was that we had to be at the airport two hours earlier, which we managed, and before we knew it we were boarding the plane...there was just one slight glitch though, 300kgs be it people or suitcases had to stay behind. So suitcases was the choice, but not without paying one last visit to them and snatching an essential set of spare batteries, my tripod, spotlight and West African bird guide to feel fully attired the following morning, when the Gabon Mainland Tour was bound to start. The flight was smooth and arrived Libreville on time, as did our suitcases the following Monday as promised. All in all a gratifyingly eventful and most memorable visit to the islands, yet again!!

BIRD LIST
Taxonomic order and nomenclature follow Clements, 6th edition updated 2007. Birds that are marked with (GO) were seen by the guide only. Birds that are marked with (H) were only heard

| PELECANIFORMES: Phaethonitidae          |
| 1 White-tailed Tropicbird              |
| 2 Brown Booby                          |
| PELECANIFORMES: Sulidae                |
| 3 Long-tailed Cormorant                |
| PELECANIFORMES: Phalacrocoracida       |
| 4 Little Egret                         |
| 5 Western Reef-Heron                   |
| 6 Cattle Egret                         |
| 7 Striated Heron                       |
| CICONIIFORMES: Ardeida                 |
| 8 Olive Ibis                           |
| FALCONIFORMES: Accipitridae            |
| 9 Black Kite                           |

Sao Tome and Principe Islands    July 23rd – 30th, 2010
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Galliformes: Phasianidae</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Scaly Francolin (H)</td>
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<td>Francolinus squamatus</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Harlequin Quail (H, GO)</td>
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<td>Coturnix delegorguei</td>
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<td>Gruiformes: Rallidae</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Common Moorhen</td>
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<td>Gallinula chloropus</td>
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<td>Charadriiformes: Charadriida</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 Whimbrel</td>
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<td>Numenius phaeopus</td>
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<td>14 Common Sandpiper</td>
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<td>Actitis hypoleucos</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 Common Greenshank</td>
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<td>Tringa nebularia</td>
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<td>Charadriiformes: Sternidae</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16 Brown Noddy</td>
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<td>Anous stolidus</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 Black Noddy</td>
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<td>Anous minutus</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 Bridled Tern</td>
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<td>Onychoptrion anaethetus</td>
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<td>19 Royal Tern</td>
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<td>Sterna maxima</td>
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<td>20 Rock Pigeon</td>
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<td>Columba livia</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 Maroon Pigeon</td>
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<td>Columba thomensis</td>
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<td>22 São Tomé Pigeon</td>
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<td>Columba malherbii</td>
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<td>23 Lemon Dove</td>
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<td>Columba larvata</td>
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<td>24 Forest Dove</td>
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<td>Columba simplex</td>
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<td>25 Laughing Dove</td>
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<td>Streptopelia senegalensis</td>
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<td>26 São Tomé Green-Pigeon</td>
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<td>Treron sanctithomae</td>
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<td>27 African Green-Pigeon</td>
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<td>Treron calvus</td>
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<td>Psittaciformes: Psittacidae</td>
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<tr>
<td>28 Red-headed Lovebird</td>
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<td>Agapornis pullarius</td>
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<td>29 Gray Parrot</td>
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<td>30 Klaas’s Cuckoo (H)</td>
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<td>31 São Tomé Scops-Owl</td>
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<td>32 São Tomé Spinetail</td>
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<td>33 African Palm-Swift</td>
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<td>Cypsiurus parvus</td>
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<td>34 Little Swift</td>
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<td>Apus affinis</td>
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<td>35 Fernando Po Swift/African (Black) Swift</td>
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<td>Apus sladeniae</td>
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<td>Coraciiformes: Alcedinidae</td>
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<tr>
<td>36 Malachite Kingfisher</td>
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<td>Alcedo cristata</td>
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<td>37 White-bellied Kingfisher</td>
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<td>38 Blue-breasted Kingfisher</td>
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<td>passeriformes: Turdidae</td>
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<td>39 Olivaceous Thrush</td>
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<tr>
<td>41 Bocage’s Longbill</td>
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<td>42 São Tomé Paradise-Flycatcher</td>
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<td>Terpsiphone atrochalybeia</td>
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<td>43 Dohrn’s Thrush-Babbler</td>
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<td>Horizorhinus dohrni</td>
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<td>passeriformes: Nectariniida</td>
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<tr>
<td>44 Principe Sunbird</td>
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<td>Anabathmis hartlaubii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sao Tome and Principe Islands

July 23rd – 30th, 2010
Newton's Sunbird Anabathmis newtonii
São Tomé Sunbird Dreptes thomensis
Western Olive Sunbird Cyanomitra obscura

**PASSERIFORMES: Zosteropidae**

48 Black-capped Speirops Speirops lugubris
49 Principe Speirops Speirops leucophoeus
50 São Tomé White-eye Zosterops ficedulinus

**PASSERIFORMES: Oriolidae**

51 São Tomé Oriole Oriolus crassirostris

**PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae**

52 Newton's Fiscal Lanius newtoni

**PASSERIFORMES: Dicruridae**

53 Velvet-mantled Drongo Dicrurus modestus

**PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae**

54 Splendid Glossy-Starling Lamprotornis splendidus
55 Principe Glossy-Starling Lamprotornis ornatus
56 Chestnut-winged Starling Onychognathus fulgidus

**PASSERIFORMES: Ploceidae**

57 Principe Golden-Weaver Ploceus princeps
58 Vitelline Masked-Weaver Ploceus vitellinus
59 Village Weaver Ploceus cucullatus
60 Giant Weaver Ploceus grandis
61 São Tomé Weaver Ploceus sanctithomae
62 Red-headed Quelea Quelea erythrops
63 Black-winged Bishop Euplectes hordeaceus
64 Golden-backed Bishop Euplectes aureus
65 White-winged Widowbird Euplectes albonotatus

**PASSERIFORMES: Estrildidae**

66 Chestnut-breasted Negrofinch Nigrita bicolor
67 Common Waxbill Estrilda astrild
68 Blue-breasted Cordonbleu Uraeginthus angolensis
69 Bronze Mannikin Spermestes cucullatus

**PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae**

70 São Tomé Grosbeak Neospiza concolor
71 Yellow-fronted Canary Serinus mozambicus
72 Principe Seedeater Serinus rufobrunneus

MAMMAL LIST

**Sperm Whale (Physeter macrocephalus)** – Judging by size and time of year, this may have been the large cetacean picked up from the plane.

**Spinner Dolphin (Stenella longirostris)** - A pod of was seen cruising along the edge of Sao Tomes island shelf.

**Mona Monkey Cercopithecus mona**

**Black Rat (Rattus norvegicus)** – Seen in Sao Tome town and outskirts

**House Mouse (Mus musculus)** – Seen at Sao Tome airport

**Feral Pig (Sus sp)** – Tracks and scrapes of Feral Pigs “porco” in Sao Tome’s hike to Mt. Carvo.

**African Civet (Civettictis civetta)** – Tracks picked up on the trail at Mte Carvo and Obo NP.

**Leaf-nosed Bat (Hipposideridae)** - This is the daytime bat commonly seen at Mte Carvo

**São Tomé Free-tailed Bat Chaerephon tomensis** – Seen on a number of occasions in the outskirts of Sao Tome

**Straw-coloured Fruit Bat (Eidolon helvum)** - Seen several times in Sao Tome

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Tropical Birding

Sao Tome and Principe Islands

July 23rd – 30th, 2010
Principe’s jagged contours always provide an exhilarating arrival to the island.

Dense forests replete with exciting birding opportunities and great endemism cover the slopes of Principe Island (Christian Boix)
The peculiar and fascinating phonoliths of Sao Tome’s give the island an awry and mysterious feel (Christian Boix)

Dilapidated Roças scattered through the island are a constant reminder of Sao Tome’s “Golden” days and “darkest” times (Christian Boix)
São Tomé’s Capital boast with fascinating history, architecture and GREAT CHOCOLATE !!

São Tomé’s Botanical wealth ready for export (Christian Boix)