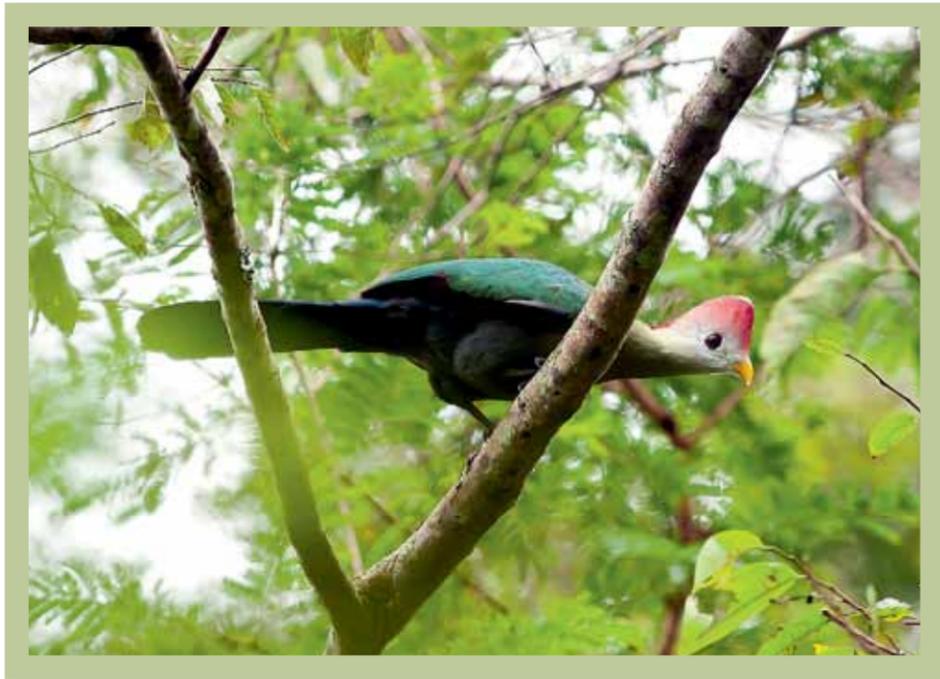


Birding Angola

BREAKING NEW GROUND



In the decade since the civil war in Angola came to an end, the face of the country has changed unrecognisably. Now the largest oil extractor in Africa, the nation is experiencing great wealth and unimaginable infrastructure developments to feed this insatiable industry. The focus is on much-needed economic growth, and environment issues have, understandably, taken a back seat. But this may be changing: Angola's reserve network has been reviewed in recent months and plans for its expansion approved. There is still a long way to go before all the country's birds are adequately protected, but at least the importance of doing so is now being recognised. ▶

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Previous spread, left The iconic Red-crested Turaco, one of the Angolan scarp endemics, is a noisy but shy forest inhabitant. The best place to see this beauty is at Kumbira Forest.

Previous spread, right One of Angola's rarest birds: a male Swierstra's Spurfowl sits on a rocky outcrop near afromontane forest edge. The largest known population is at Mount Moco, where there are about 75 pairs.

Angola lies at a biogeographical crossroads. Within its borders there are habitats that range from Africa's driest desert, the Namib, to some of the continent's wettest forests in the Congo Basin. Between these extremes lie expanses of arid savanna as well as swathes of miombo woodland that blanket most of the inland plateau and are dissected by floodplain grasslands. There are also two highly threatened ecozones that are unique to the country: the western escarpment (scarp) forests and the montane grasslands and remnant pockets of afromontane forest on the Bailundo Highlands. This impressive diversity of habitats is reflected in the bird fauna, with each environment having its own suite of specialist species; together they make up a country list exceeding 940.

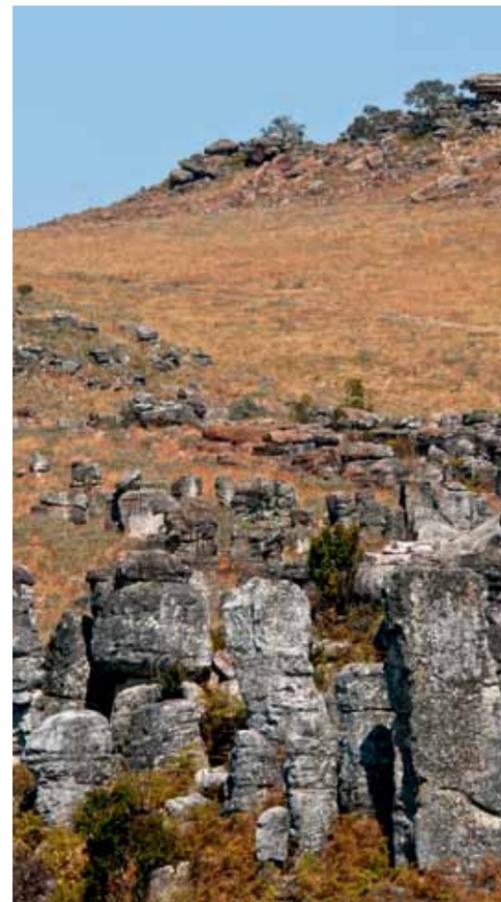
Virtually all the birds regarded as Namibian specialities occur in the south of the country, and in some cases Angola is the species' stronghold. On the arid gravel plains and welwitschia fields of Iona National Park (the northern extension of Namibia's Namib-Skeleton Coast National Park) you can see Gray's and Benguela Long-billed larks, Burchell's Courser and Ludwig's Bustard, while Damaras Terns breed in the coastal dunefields. Moving inland and away from the cold Benguela Current, slightly less arid acacia and broad-leaved savanna areas are home to White-tailed Shrike, Monteiro's and Damaras Red-billed hornbills, Rüppell's Parrot, Bare-cheeked and Black-faced babblers and Carp's Tit. In rocky sections these species are joined by Hartlaub's Spurfowl and Rockrunner, while thickets also host Cinderella Waxbill and one of southern Africa's most sought-after birds, Rufous-tailed

Anyone with a healthy measure of good sense, a thick skin and a sturdy vehicle can drive up from Namibia to look for the endemic species

Palm-Thrush. The latter occurs mainly along the coast and is even often seen in Luanda's more leafy suburbs.

Skirting around to the east of the country, the vast inland plateau is cloaked mostly in miombo woodland and grassland and holds a long list of Central African specials. Sharp-tailed is the common starling and occurs alongside miombo specialists such as Böhm's Flycatcher, Miombo Scrub-Robin, Black-necked Eremomela, Anchieta's Babbler, Red-capped Crombec, Souza's Shrike and Pale-billed Hornbill – all species that are mainly found north of the southern African subregion. Rarer birds include the enigmatic White-winged Babbling Starling, the little-known and near-endemic Black-tailed Cisticola (only in the north-east) and Bar-winged Weaver, a species that loves old-man's-beard.

The floodplain grassland and swamps are home to most of the global population of the Data Deficient Grimwood's Longclaw, as well as several so-called 'Okavango specials', like Hartlaub's Babbler, Coppery-tailed Coucal and Chirping Cisticola. There are also localised habitat specialists such as Black-and-rufous Swallow, Bocage's Sunbird and Bocage's Weaver, as well as Chestnut-headed Flufftail, which



was recently found to be locally common in the far north-east.

Another noteworthy habitat in the north-east is the more arid plateau grassland on deep Kalahari sands, which extends through the two Congo republics to south-eastern Gabon. Here, in the diamond-rich Lunda Norte province, are found the unique Congo Moor Chat, the scarce Black-chinned Weaver and the diminutive Dambo Cisticola.

To complete our armchair tour around Angola's borders we go finally to the north, where fingers of Congolese habitats creep southward to form a mosaic of moist woodland, grassland and forest. Widespread Congo forest species such as Western Nicator, Swamp Palm Bulbul, Simple Greenbul and Piping Hornbill occur here alongside specialities like Spotted Thrush Babbler and the striking and near-endemic White-headed Robin-Chat.

And let's not forget the oil-rich enclave of Cabinda, north of the Congo River, with its extensive and well-developed Congo Basin forest. It is here that Plumed Guinea fowl, Forest Francolin, Akun Eagle-Owl, Black-headed and Rosy bee-eaters and Rufous-sided Broadbill have been found, along with a plethora of hard-to-identify forest greenbuls.

Although interesting in their own right, the habitats described so far are mere additions to what is really unique about Angola. To find any of the country's 14 endemics you have to venture to the mountains and scarp in the west, which together form the core of the Western Angola Endemic Bird Area. The good news for birders is that the region is reasonably accessible, and anyone with a healthy measure of good sense, a thick skin and a sturdy vehicle can drive up from Namibia to look for the endemic species. The bad news is that the patches of afromontane and central scarp forest are small and shrinking rapidly. They lie in the moister, more fertile reaches of the country, and the widespread use of slash-and-burn farming practices by a burgeoning human population is putting them at great risk. ▷

Above The few pockets of afromontane forest at Mount Moco, the country's highest mountain, are surrounded by vast areas of grassland. The total area of afromontane forest cover here is a mere 85 hectares, the second largest such area in the country.

Left The rocky outcrops at Tundavala, near Lubango, are the most accessible site for Angola Cave Chat.

Below Most Namibian specials also occur in southern Angola and in fact many of them have their strongholds here. Benguela Long-billed Lark can be found on the coastal gravel plains in the south of the country, as far north as the city of Benguela.



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Gabela Akalat is Angola's most localised endemic and is endangered most significantly by forest loss resulting from slash-and-burn farming. Fortunately it is still common within its restricted range, although it can be hard to distinguish as it feeds unobtrusively in the forest understorey.

What is it about these areas that makes them biologically unique? To find out, we need to look at climatic conditions thousands of years ago. Congo Basin forest once extended right down into what is now Angola and the scarp forests are considered to be outliers of it, since Congo Basin species like Blue Malkoha, Yellow-throated Nicator, Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye, Black-throated Apalis and Yellow-billed Barbet supplement their own

endemic avifauna. During dry periods the Congo Basin forest contracted into the wettest refuges in Central Africa. However, the steeply rising scarp trapped moisture from the nearby Atlantic Ocean, allowing pockets of dry forest to persist on it even when, at the driest times, the surrounding areas were covered in arid savanna.

With hundreds of kilometres separating the pockets of scarp forest from the nearest similar vegetation, some resident birds evolved in isolation, slowly changing into unique, endemic species. As the area has become moister in recent times, these dry forests and thickets appear to have spread into adjacent areas along the coastal plain, with the result that species that may have evolved in them, such as Red-backed Mousebird, Pale-billed Firefinch, White-fronted Wattle-eye, Angola Batis, Golden-backed Bishop and Pale-olive Greenbul, are now more widespread. Among the true forest endemics are the striking Red-crested Turaco, the secretive Grey-striped Francolin, the unobtrusive Gabela Akalat, two dull forest warblers (Pulitzer's Longbill and Hartert's Camaroptera) and a quartet of impressive bush- and helmet-shrikes (Gabela, Braun's and Monteiro's bush-shrikes and Gabela Helmet-Shrike). These birds are the main reason for birders to visit Angola.

A similar scenario of climate-influenced fluctuations in habitat distribution is thought to have affected the Bailundo Highlands, although the vegetation that now occurs there may have been more widespread in cooler and drier epochs. Repeated cycles of warming and cooling, and the associated contraction and expansion of afromontane forest and grassland, have left a strange assemblage of birds in these, the most isolated highlands in Africa.

The avifauna here includes some montane species that appear to be identical to those of other mountainous areas, such as African Olive-Pigeon, Thick-billed Seedeater, Bar-tailed Trogon and Orange Ground-Thrush. Some birds, however, have evolved to become distinct enough to be recognised as endemic subspecies: the *koesteri* form of Ruwenzori Nightjar, the *angolensis* form of Western Green Tinkerbird, the *cinerovinacea* form of Dusky Twinspot, the *grandis* form of Grey Apalis and the *gadowi* form of Bronzy Sunbird are in this group. Although different



Above *The distinctive Angola Cave Chat is one of the country's endemics, and the only one to be placed in its own genus.*



Left *Angola Lark is one of the near-endemic birds shared with Zambia and southern Democratic Republic of Congo. It occurs in grassland on the inland plateau and is common around the base of Mount Moco, where it is most easily located by its melodious song.*

from their closest relatives in the Albertine Rift, Cameroon Highlands or Eastern Arc Mountains, they have not changed sufficiently to be considered species in their own right.

Finally, and most significantly, there is a group of endemic species that have been isolated long enough to have evolved into distinct species. It includes the Endangered Swierstra's Spurfowl, a species recorded by fewer than 20 birders, as well as Angola Slaty Flycatcher, Angola Sweet Waxbill, Ludwig's Double-collared Sunbird and the unique Angola Cave Chat, in a genus of its own. These highland specials are joined by a host of other localised species, some of which are shared with western Zambia. The local Black-collared Bulbul, Bocage's Akalat, Angola Lark and Perrin's Bush-Shrike are in this group.

Their unique evolutionary histories notwithstanding, the scarp and montane forests fall entirely outside Angola's protected area network, putting the rare endemic birds they contain in grave danger of extinction. The afromontane forest is more threatened, due to its tiny extent; until ▷



Above The isolated montane areas of Angola are separated from similar habitats by more than 2 000 kilometres and support populations of typical montane species such as this Grey Apalis.

Right Black-throated Apalis is one of the Congo forest birds that has followed the extension of Congo-type forest that runs along the Angolan escarpment. It occurs in Kumbira Forest alongside the central scarp endemics.

Below and opposite Black-collared Bulbul (below) and Bocage's Akalat (female shown opposite) inhabit highland forests and are also found in western Zambia.



LOUISE BRAINE



The contraction and expansion of afro-montane forest and grassland have left a strange assemblage of birds in these, the most isolated highlands in Africa

recently, the largest known patches of this forest type covered 85 hectares at Mount Moco, the country's highest mountain. In the past 18 months, however, new areas have been explored by means of Google Earth satellite imagery and field surveys, and significant pockets of afro-montane forest, containing all the habitat's endemic birds, have been discovered in the Namiba Mountains. These finds have trebled the known extent of afro-montane forest in Angola. While there is considerably more scarp forest, most of it is extremely degraded and under great pressure from the very high density of the local human population. Swift and decisive conservation action is vital if these areas are to be saved.

With the primary aim of safeguarding these most threatened habitats, BirdLife International and now BirdLife South Africa have been supporting research and conservation in Angola since 2009, helped by funding from organisations such as the A.P. Leventis Ornithological Research Institute, the Rufford Small Grants Foundation, the Conservation Leadership Programme and the African Bird Club. Initiatives currently under way are establishing a conservation presence at Mount Moco in the highlands and at Kumbira Forest along the central scarp, which is an even more important site for endemics.

These small-budget projects work with communities to make them aware of environmental issues and to change the way they use natural resources. It is hoped that, in the long run, income from community-based ecotourism will provide a significant incentive for people to conserve the scarp and afro-montane habitats, and that the Angolan government will afford them official protection. Another goal is to build capacity among local institutions so that they will be able to carry out this work independently. Ultimately, both initiatives aim to ensure the long-term persistence of all Angola's special birds. □



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Angola is not an easy country to visit. For most nationalities the first hurdle, and a substantial one at that, is to obtain an entry visa (luckily for Namibians, this excludes you). Contact your local Angolan embassy or consulate to find out what is required. In South Africa there is an embassy in Pretoria and consulates in Johannesburg and Cape Town (www.angola.visahq.com). Visa applications take five working days to process in South Africa, but may take up to eight weeks in other countries.

TRANSPORT

The next consideration is how to get around and the relative costs. Unless you have connections in Angola, the best option is to drive in from Namibia and be completely self-reliant, although this should be attempted only by experienced Africa travellers. Another possibility is to take a fully guided tour with an expert company such as Birding Africa (www.birdingafrica.com). A third option is to fly to Luanda and pay upward of R3 000 per day for an all-inclusive package of transport, meals and camping. (Although new hotels are opening up around the country, they are usually far from the best birding localities. At least for now, camping is the only option for serious birders.)

The good news is that road conditions have improved considerably in the past five years, with thousands of kilometres of new tar making travel much easier than before. Nevertheless, a 4x4 is essential for getting to the best birding sites, as are a GPS and good maps (try Tracks4Africa at

www.tracks4africa.co.za). And don't forget that you drive on the right in Angola.

RESOURCES

There is no field guide specifically for Angola, and the only guides that cover all the country's birds are *Birds of Africa South of the Sahara* (Sinclair & Ryan; Struik Nature) and *Illustrated Checklist: Birds of Southern Africa* (Van Perlo; Collins); neither of these is sufficient for identifying the more tricky species. *Birds of Western Africa* (Borrow & Demey; Helm) will be useful to visitors to the north of the country.

The Birds of Angola (Dean; British Ornithologists' Union) gives information on distribution, abundance and breeding; copies can be obtained from birdsangola@gmail.com

Southern African Birdfinder (Cohen, Spottiswoode & Rossouw; Struik) gives some information on where to watch birds, but the coverage is not extensive.

Some issues of *Bulletin of the African Bird Club* carry articles on birding in specific areas of Angola and on species such as Swierstra's Spurfowl, Braun's Bush-Shrike and Black-tailed Cisticola.

The websites www.birdsangola.org and www.mountmoco.org may also be useful.

For birdcalls, the country-specific *Vocalisations of Angolan Birds* (Mills; Birds Angola and Birding Africa) has recordings of most of the endemics and specials, and can be combined with *Southern African Bird Sounds* (Gibbon; Southern African Birding) and *African Bird Sounds: West and Central Africa* (Chappuis; British Library National Sound Archive) for near-complete coverage.