

Ethiopia – April 1998. Ethiopian Endemics with Naturetrek and Dave Cording.

A strange follow up from my first venture to Ethiopia was that there had been complaints about our substitute guide Tesfaye who I thought was fine even though not a trained naturalist. However we were all offered a refund of the land part (£400) of the last visit if we spent it on another trip to Ethiopia. Well I like refunds so when I was aware of the amount Dave Cording, who I had met and kept in touch with on the first trip, and myself decided to use it on Naturetrek's "Ethiopian Endemics" trip and use the extra value with a side trip to Bahar Dar to see the Blue Nile Falls and a further visit down to Awash National Park.

Striking while the Iron was still hot we booked on the trip leaving 10th April 1998.

As before we gathered at check in at LHR and met up with many others for the flight to Addis Ababa where, on arrival we checked in to the Holiday Hotel as previously. Thankfully the sleeping arrangements were better.

In the afternoon we all paid a visit to nearby Gafersa Reservoir where we collected the first of our promised "Endemics" in the form of Abyssinian Longclaw and Blue-winged Goose among others. Then it was back to Addis and the delightful Holiday Hotel.

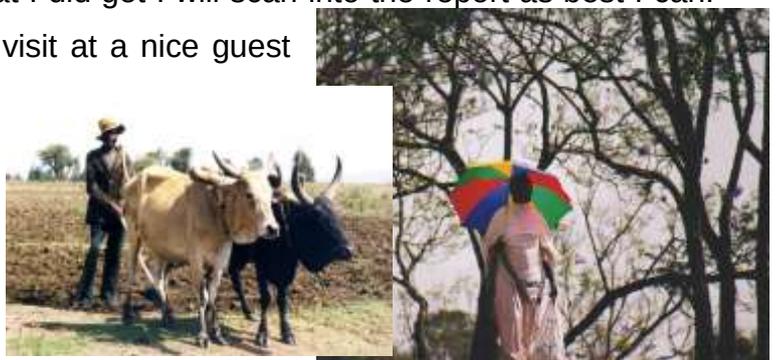
Next day we set off for the long drive to the Debre Libanos Gorge where cliffs overlook the Danakil Desert below. A long drive which was compensated by lovely scenery of huge gorges along which soared Lammergeiers and Thick-billed Ravens whilst the grasslands were home to many of the strange Gelada Baboons. All the way back to Addis Ababa again only to be repeated tomorrow as we drive even further north to seek the recently discovered (1976) Ankober Serin. This was a heck of a long way to see an LBJ, which we failed to do but that is how it goes. Back to Addis again for a third night of the cold food of Holiday Hotel.



Now another early start had us heading south for Wondo Guenet and, having passed this way only six months earlier, Dave and I amused ourselves by calling out wildlife we would shortly see (from enclosures by the road). Lakes Koka and Zwai yielded many good birds and it was at this stage that our Guide, Negussi Toye, had to remonstrate with some selfish birders for supressing sightings from others in the group. Onwards to the sterile Lake Langano for birds of the Acacia woodlands which was more my style with Barbets, Shrikes, Hornbills and even Somali Courser. Sadly my small camera was not really up to bird portraits, barely OK for Mammals, but such photos that I did get I will scan into the report as best I can.



We spent this night and all too short a visit at a nice guest house, where Dave and I had stayed the previous visit but the biring time was severely restricted so I contented myself with some local colour.



Next day was another early start and after a brief morning walk we left for a six hour drive to the Bale Mountains and Wabe Shebelle Hotel, our next hotel, in the town of Goba. The road climbed up onto moorland type terrain and we were able to see different birds at comfort stops. More local colour was gained when we met a large mounted party all heading for a wedding and I got a decent photo as they galloped by. It was just as well they were friendly.



As we went on we entered the Bale Mountains National Park and kept a sharp look out for the many endemic animals that we were told lived here such as Mountain Nyala. Some were seen at a distance but we pressed on to our hotel as, as usual, we were running late due to the attitude of an obnoxious group who

seemed to think the trip was for their sole benefit.

Next day we climbed the long road up to Sanetti Plateau in the heart of the NP where we did get within camera range of both the endangered Wattled Crane and the very localised endemic mammal the Simien Wolf.



Many other birds were sighted and enjoyed but, try as we might, we could not find the much sought after endemic the Rouget's Rail and thought we would have to return home empty handed. But next morning imagine my surprise when looking out my bedroom window here was the bird on the lawn happily posing.



That's how it goes sometimes.

Now it was time to head back and after another all too short a stay at Wondo Guenet we headed back to Addis Ababa where most of the party were planning to fly home at the end of their stay.

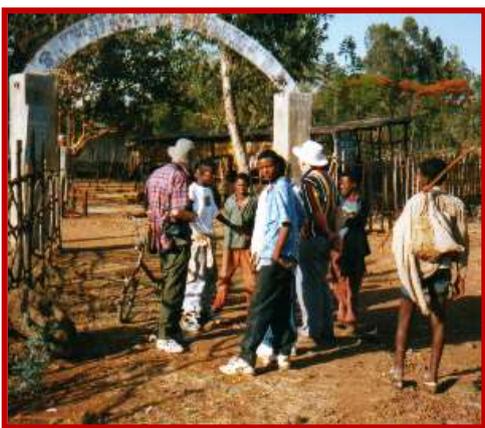


Others had booked extensions as had Dave and I.

Our Extension north and south.

We took an early flight north to Bahar Dar on the banks of Lake Tana. Sharing the flight with us were Mr and Mrs Chris and Hilary Towers who in addition to coming to see the wonders of Bahar Dar were also going on to Lalibella. Writing this with hindsight 20 years later this was to be the start of a long friendship that has endured in true Whiteknuckles tradition until the present time. Back to 1998....

Booked in to the Tana Hotel at the edge of the lake we were taken on a crazy boat trip to a nearby island upon which was located an ancient monastery. The birds were good too. The crazy art was the attempt by our guide to ram a pod of hippo on the way out and back which the hippo did not care for and let us know in no uncertain terms.



We also called at the local military barracks as depicted here by Hilary.

Next day we all set off in a small minibus to call at Emperor Haile Selassi's palace which was unfortunately closed to us so we made for the Blue Nile Falls.

This involved a walk past various vendors and touts until we gained the required views of "Tississat" which is said to be Amharic for the 'water that smokes' which is not unlike the Lozi name for the smoke that thunders

"Mosi oa Tunya" in Zambia.



Our party made our way around the foot of the falls via the ancient 'Portugese Bridge' and after the usual views and a photogenic Striped Kingfisher Chris and I found ourselves separated from the main group who had not joined us up the path to the top of the falls. I think what followed was a defining moment in the development of what was to become "Whiteknuckles Safaris".

We had temporarily 'lost' our party and I (blame me if you must) felt that the quickest way back to the bus and avoiding the touts was to continue up stream and seek a friendly fisherman to ferry us back over the river. Which we promptly did.



Our departure from Bahar Dar was a total fiasco with much of the blame squarely share by our useless guide and Ethiopian Airways. The same problem also beset our friends Hilary and Chris Towers.

We missed our booked flight and with only with difficulty did we get back on schedule for our private extension for a return trip to Awash National Park and those lovely mobile homes. Our drive there was not without problems due to the tortoise like driving of our new driver/guide who immediately tried to change the schedules. We had a dispute over the lunch stop which we had chosen from our experience the previous year. He then drove there at a snail like pace. Worse, he than insisted we had to pay despite this being an all inclusive 'Full board' trip. After lunch at the continued pace we arrived at the NP Gates and AGAIN he insisted we had to pay the entrance fees. We had not enough Birr and so he lost that round! We arrived at the caravans having first seen some Beisa Oryz and the endemic Soemering's Gazelle.



Next morning the problems continued with driver wanting to go to Foloha Hot springs, wich we had visited already and us insisting on climbing Mount Fantalle. We won again.

The views from this volcano are excellent and worth the effort especially as the trip gained us 'lifers' in the form of Hamadryas baboons and a Fox kestrel.



Our second full day was spent bush bashing which failed to produce much of interest other than burnt out tanks and some Arabian Bustards. On our return we paid a second visit to the Awash Falls. This river enters



the Danakil depression and never reaches the Indian Ocean.

Finally our return to Addis was done at high speed for reasons only known to our driver and with time to spare we enjoyed a coffee ceremony in the Crown Hotel (Ethiopia is where coffee was invented) before catching our return flight to London via Asmara in Eritrea.

Dave took the train to Lancaster and I flew home to Isle of Man with 341 species of birds on my checklist including many Ethiopian endemics. I would love to return one day but so far have not done so.