

Ghana. My first trip to West Africa...

November 14th to December 12th.

Solo tour and 14 days seeking Elephants in the Red Volta.

This was my second project with Earthwatch and a chance to visit West Africa - Ghana. As I always try to utilise more of the necessary long hauls I booked 12 days or so for a private look around the country.

I flew with BA outbound via LGW and for some reason no doubt to do with schedules back home via Luton. This was a strange trip from the start as BA refused to post me the tickets but insisted I picked them up personally from the airport for 'security reasons'?

My good friends Paola and Marco from Bellinzona gave good advice from their experience and through them I made arrangements with Ghana Wildlife Society for my private trip. Communications were fine and very soon I had a nice itinerary to follow.

So much for the theory.

I had to apply to London for my Ghanaian Visa which was not a problem and came by almost return of post. I had to take a medical for Earthwatch but my excellent GP obliged with this in her usual friendly fashion. Prophylactics for Malaria of course and I was current with Yellow Fever. As things turned out with Earthwatch I really should have had my head examined also. More of that later.

14th November. So a very early start had me to Ronaldsway for the Red-eye 06.50 to Gatters and a leisurely transfer with National Express to Heathrow for the 14.00 BA flight to Accra and an on schedule arrival at 20.55. I was met by Gerard and transferred to Sam's Cottage for the night. Dinner and bed.

Next morning I was picked up and driven to HQ to settle the bill and meet my driver/guide Nico. I don't seem to have been too impressed with Accra as my diary notes that "it looked better last night in the dark!!"

15th-16th November. First to GWS to settle account and I am introduced to local currency, the Cedi, appropriately pronounced 'seedy', which at 9000 to the US\$ means they count them out in 'bricks' and you need a carrier bag not a wallet!! We set off along the 'Gold Coast' to our base at Hans Botel, birding on the way. The Botel bit is the floating restaurant, the rooms are on terra firma and 'reasonable!' Captured a few of the birds that are around such as Giant Kingfisher and both Striated and Black-crowned Night Herons.



At dinner it appears that the local custom is to throw your chicken bones overboard for the local crocodiles to enjoy.

Next morning we rose very early as Roger wanted to get to Kakum National Park at opening time to get on the Treetop walkway. On arrival it was not open, despite prior advice but we just entered anyway. After getting on the walkway we managed to see some forest birds such as Crested Hornbills but, because of the early hour and the canopy it was too dark to get photographs. Lose, lose. The walk took about three hours and was very interesting all the same.



Back to the Botel where we had a humungous rainstorm. After it dried in the afternoon I made them take me down to the coast to seek more birds. They seemed reluctant but we went. Did not see much until I made them get out of the car and walk when we had more success. I sense some reluctance in our man Robert to ‘be flexible’ to conditions.

17th – 18th November. We rose early to get to our next stop in Bobiri Forest Reserve near Kumasi and on the way we went to seek a nest site of the White-necked Picathartes (Rockfowl). This entailed testing my balancing skills on a rudimentary bridge which was successful and I emerged foot dry.

Sadly it was the wrong time of year for nesting but we did see the old nests and caught a glimpse of an adult bird scurrying off in the undergrowth so all was not lost.



We arrived at our digs in Bobiro to find there was no food despite my itinerary stating “Food supply to be arranged”, so we retraced our tracks back to Kumasi and ‘enjoyed’ Fried rice and chicken. Back to Bobiri, will I get breakfast? Quite a rustic place but quite OK. Up very early and into the forest which, for me, is to be endured rather than enjoyed. We had moderate success before returning for our breakfast. After the heat of the day relaxed I took myself for a short walk and then went off with Robert to the western side of the forest which was more open. Dinner was Chicken, Cabbage and Plantain. There was food but no drink so I persuaded Nicco to go to the village and get me some beer.

19th-21st November. On our drive to Mole NP the wheels came off again. I had to change more \$\$ for Cedi and despite checking most carefully I found I had been short changed. It is not the amount it is the principle. And I should not be asked to keep digging out cash. I should pay one amount and that should be it. After check in at Mole NP and paying Park fees I took a hard line with Robert over this. Bird count was now 121.

Curried Guinea fowl for dinner. I think. Or it may have been Dark Chanting Goshawk. It did have long legs.

To bed with Air-conditioning going flat out.



Sunday morning I rose at 6 and as the walk was not until 07.00 I did some birding around the 'estate' and saw a nice Violet Turaco. The walk was fine with lots of birds, some Kob and small mammals but no Ellies. Back for a breakfast of Poached Eggs with carrot? I kid you not. A large baboon came and stole the Chile Sauce bottle and deftly opened it and helped himself to a large dollop. Ha! He won't do that again.



The afternoon walk produced Waterbuck and Bushbuck and a nice Allen's Gallinule. There were two extra guests at dinner which consisted of Sweet and sour fish with fresh pineapple. Bird count 160.

Monday was much the same. Up for a walk by a different route, different birds and mammals. Robert was keeping a low profile with no plans in the afternoon so I demanded we go on a game drive. Got the usual excuses but I prevailed. Nothing new but a decent

enough time. Dinner was Chicken and chips.

22nd November. Two Ellies greeted me on the way to breakfast so I hurried down for a quick photoshoot of these rarities. I hope they stick around for when I am due to return later in the week. Breakfast and on our way to our next stop in Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary. Wildlife in Ghana is so threatened that they have to have sanctuary for Hippos? After some time on the road we arrive at the Park HQ which created some surprise as we were not expected! There was no food and if there had been there was nobody to cook it. Undeterred we proceed to the river side to see the hippos and to check out the digs. They were



'rustic' as described and would have been OK had there been any food. However I was not keen on sleeping on a clay bed with a dodgy mattress on an empty stomach.

So we 'donated' the entry fee and departed for Wa to seek accommodation and food. Briggs' Guide came up trumps and I selected the "Uplands Guesthouse" which appeared clean and had air conditioning. Robert and Nicco had the choice of several very iffy looking shoestring places so I negotiated a 'staff rate' at the Uplands to help out. A wasted

day really but the nice dinner (Chicken again) and a couple of cold beers helped. I tried to watch a film on Israel with David Suchet but half way through it switched to football. I wonder how it ended. **23rd November.** I rose at 06.00 but no breakfast until 07.30 so when Robert and Nicco arrived at 06.50 we left and proceeded to tour the town that were not explained but probably were linked to food. We then set off to our next booked destination, I am a glass half full person, which was Gbele Reserve where we arrived two hours later just before it got too hot. We went on a walk but the grass was too high making animals hard to spot. We sat by the river and watched more birds. We are told back at Park HQ that there are two guest cottages available and they can prepare food IF we had given advance warning. Robert protested that he was not aware of this. Pity as the park was nice and the staff very keen. Here is a photo of the housekeepers little girl. Cute eh?

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Thwarted once more we left for Tumu so I spring a surprise on them and tell them as we are ahead of schedule due to skipping our second day in Gbele we can press on to Tono Dam which is good for birds. If we go now we can stay overnight and be at the lake at first light instead of mid-morning. Of course I met resistance. “It is too far! We should stay here and we get there quickly in the morning?” Eh? If it is too far today how can we get there quickly tomorrow? No answer to that so “Get going!” Despite the road being rough at first we soon hit tar and arrive at Tono Guest House. After the usual kerfuffle I get a nice suite of rooms although some TLC to the plumbing and electrics would not go amiss! Food of course only on advance request. (This is probably so they can have time to go out and wring the chicken’s neck.) And how can one book ahead when they are not on the bloody telephone?? We seek sustenance in Navrongo as I have not had any breakfast. Guineafowl and Jolluf rice. Spicy and nice.

24th November. Next morning Robert really showed his colours. First he thinks waterbirds congregate at the dam wall instead of around the ‘lake’ margins so I lead from the front and we enjoy some success. Then back to the digs to check out and into Navrongo again for breakfast in the same place whilst Robert and Nicco head off on a frolic of their own. Something is bothering them. On their return we set off for Parga as ‘we’ have cancelled Gambaga for logistical reasons. After a while I get fed up with this and the heat etc., so have the car turn round and we head for Mole. Robert says there will be no problem with arriving a day ahead of schedule. There will be rooms. “Why not telephone ahead to book?” “I have no units on my phone!” he lies.

He is then heard on the phone! We pull up on Tamale Bus station and wait. And wait some more. Evidently somebody was to come out to Bolga tonight with some cash or something. She will now come here, where she lives, and two girls turn up. Then Robert goes to the Bank and we set off for Mole with Robert muttering about today being a disappointment but not elaborating. And of course our estimated time to arrive in Mole at 15.00 goes to pot and we crawl in at sunset to find the guy in front has just taken the last room. Nice one Robert!! I take a dormitory but there is nowhere for Robert. Tough! I have spare bed in my room but I don’t offer it and he won’t ask as I think he had plans for those two young ladies. Dinner was Vermicelli with spicy chicken and Hot & Sour Soup. We arrange a walk tomorrow morning with PK and some other guests. Bed is good.



25th November. The walk is scheduled for 07.00 but nothing happens. Then some loud American woman from the other party kitted out n Flip flops and bright clothing turns up. I decline to take the walk as it would be a waste of time so late. So I watch my own birds and am rewarded



with several Barbets and this nice Red-shouldered Cuckoo-shrike. I also see a family of Patas Monkeys which is nice. Back for breakfast, Tomato Omelettes, and arrange to change rooms. Evidently this proves hard for Robert to grasp as there are none free. I produce my booking voucher and tell him to sort it out. Nicco is helpful but is now complaining about Robert and the ‘disappointing day’ is revealed. As I had guessed Robert had plans to target Bolga as a nightstop with his girlfriend and my change of plan to come direct to Mole put a damper on his ardour. Am I sorry? Nicco is sleeping in the car due to Robert trying save expenses so I give Nicco his tip in advance as a loan as I doubt I will see it again. The afternoon was restful. Dinner was Sweet & Sour Fish and I meet Vivienne the Head of Ghana Wildlife. It also turns out that she is the mother of both

Robert and Jiwa, my scout in Mole, and “Uncle David” is her brother. Almost nepotism. Vivienne has not heard of the “Red Volta elephant project” and says it is nothing to do with the Ghana Government. I am requested to send her a confidential report at the end of the project. I turn in at 21.30.

26th November. Rose at usual time but declined a walk as there were too many chattering people participating. Watched two Ellies in the pool below and had breakfast with Vivienne discussing African Politics and the growing role of NGOs. We agreed that there are “too many ‘experts’, too many meetings, too much talking and too little resources where they are needed.” I ordered dinner for tonight and go for a walk. This NP is quite safe to wander around in as there are too few animals to be dangerous. It would be considered lucky to get killed as at least it would be a confirmed sighting. Robert still acting up a bit and called me for dinner early as he was hungry. He had to wait. At dinner, Fish and Yam, I met a Hungarian tour leader and we talked about trips we had done. He specialised in West Africa as his partner got the better assignments. I may use him when I get to Hungary in the future.

27th November. Took myself for a walk before breakfast and then set Robert and Nicco on their way back to Accra. Saw a Bustard and BW Paradise Flycatcher. Breakfast was disrupted when an ellie came up to drink from the swimming pool. Obviously they avoid the Lodge when



noisy with visitors. Jiwa did not show up for our planned walks but it came down hard with rain at one point so that was just as well. The Earthwatch team were due at 16.00 but no sign of them by dinner was called. They turned up at 19.30 (this lateness was to become the norm) and seemed a well balances bunch. Mainly UK City types sponsored by their employers plus one Canadian banker, a girl from Dallas and an American woman doing her postponed tour of Africa solo. We discussed our plans for tomorrow before turning into bed later than I am used to.

28th November. I am packed and breakfasted on time to get the show on the road to Widnaba with Earthwatch but I seem to be the only one to do this. We eventually get under way at noon as everyone seemed to want to settle their accounts and get receipts separately. The journey was long and hot and punctuated by repeated comfort stops and we rolled up at our new base after dark at 19.00. After introductions we were shown our Rondavels which were quite basic, Slept two on clay beds. Facilities outside behind the common Mess building.



29th November – 10th December. There is no point in a detailed day to day diary for this. Even the drawn up schedule was not kept. The trip itself was marred by disorganisation and delay

and what could and should have been a useful contribution to the conservation of Ghana's endangered wildlife seemed more about tourism development and cash generation. As an example cash had been splashed for the purchase of hand held radios and modern GPS devices. We spent a whole morning being lectured on their use after which they were put away and never used again. There were instances when our two teams got split up and time wasted trying to locate each other when a simple radio call would have had a swift result. Similarly the GPS was not used to its full potential. It was used to 'locate and record a sighting' but nobody seemed to have been shown how it could be used for navigation to that location. Such a waste. Whilst the core programme allocated SIX days to do transects through the bush to record signs of wildlife, interesting enough and I became an expert in counting cow shit, this took place on only Four days out of the eleven we were on site. Granted a day was spent sightseeing and another was political to meet the local chiefs but there was no need, in my book, to play football with the local kids. That is not what we had come to do. Coupled with the total lack of organisation and bad time keeping the project never really got off the ground. That some team members were remarkably selfish just added to the problems. Delaying everyone else whilst trying to find a supply of cigarettes 10 cedis (\$0.001) cheaper than the next shop was stupid and selfish. And so it went on but enough of that. Look on the bright side. I enjoyed the political meetings with the Chiefs. Called "Wa", hence the Wa of Widnaba to give him his title, as this gave a cultural insight into this part of the world. We also spent a day sightseeing and entered Burkina Faso and as the 'duly appointed' bird expert I added 30 species to the area checklist. Some photos to finish with:-



The Wa of Widnaba.



Paramount Chief Sakote and Patrick.



The Chief travels with his retinue.



Orange-bellied Parrot in our Camp tree.



All in all the trip was enjoyable but Earthwatch really need to get their act together and monitor the ability of their local people to manage a project. Patrick was a great help but he stood out in a crowd of time wasters and I do not like my

time wasted. No more Earthwatch for me but I would love to go back to northern Ghana.