

AFRICAN overload

ZAKOUMA NATIONAL PARK

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **KYLE DE NOBREGA**



A Defassa waterbuck makes its way past scores of Spur-winged Geese, Abdim's Storks and Black Crowned Cranes.

AS A BIRDING destination in sub-Saharan Africa, Chad is unlikely to be the first to come to mind – even though few countries can claim to be more ‘sub-Saharan’. But that’s about to change. Zakouma National Park is a wilderness unlike any other on the continent and, after being off the map for almost 30 years, it is now beginning to open up to tourism.

CHAD’S RECENT turbulent history of political instability and poaching had a crippling effect on the nation’s potential for wildlife tourism. In 2010, however, African Parks took over the management of Zakouma National Park, where it has almost brought poaching to a halt. This achievement is inspirational and provides a glimmer of hope for conservation in Africa as a whole. And for birders, photographers and naturalists, Zakouma – the only game-viewing destination in Chad with accommodation for visitors – offers a rewarding and adventure-filled safari experience.

There are three main habitat types in Zakouma: floodplains and their associated woodland fringe; diverse woodland and thickets that grow along the major rivers like the Salamat and Tinga; and a mix of dry, deciduous acacia woodland and grassland that dominates large sections of the national park. Together these major habitats host a bird count that so far is just shy of 400, and birding in any one of them will produce many different species.

Perhaps the park’s most fascinating drawcard is its floodplains and pans, which offer an abundance >



An intra-African migrant, the Abyssinian Roller is the northern counterpart of the Lilac-breasted, and is just as photogenic.



of waterbirds, raptors and seed-eaters. Among the herds of Central African buffaloes may be seen Black Crowned Crane, Great White and Pink-backed pelicans, White-faced Duck, Spur-winged

Goose and Marabou Stork, all of which occur in their hundreds, if not thousands. Look out for specials such as Black-headed and Spur-winged lapwings, Garganey, Northern Pintail, Spotted Redshank, Arabian Bustard and Little Ringed Plover, which associate with more common waders. Small flocks of Four-banded Sandgrouse come down to the water at dusk, whereas Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse prefer to drink in the morning. At night, the sight of Long-tailed Nightjars hunting over the floodplains is unforgettable, and an evening excursion may also be rewarded with a sighting of the less common Standard-winged Nightjar.

The flocks of millions of Red-billed Queleas that drink at dawn and dusk attract hundreds of birds of prey. In among the flurry of queleas are Black and Yellow-billed kites, Grasshopper Buzzard, Long-crested Eagle, Pallid and

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Montagu's harriers, Grey Kestrel and Lanner Falcon. Look harder for the more rewarding raptors of the area, such as Scissor-tailed Kite, Fox Kestrel and Western Marsh Harrier, as well as Beau-douin's and Short-toed snake eagles, which may be seen perched in the adjacent woodland.

The scrubby vegetation fringing some parts of the floodplains is good for Little Green Bee-eater, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Woodchat Shrike and the contentious

Red-tailed Shrike. Clapperton's Spurfowl, the only spurfowl in Zakouma, can also be seen in this habitat.

Massive congregations of tiang, a subspecies of topi, occur here and Defassa waterbuck are plentiful, while the large herds of elephants for which Zakouma is famous may also be seen coming down to drink.

The unusual and ancient riverbeds that hold small pools of water year round provide another great spectacle in the park. Large crocodiles guard nest sites here and are abundant along the Salamat River, where they lie ready to ambush passing antelope such as Buffon's kob or bushbuck. Scanning the water's edge can produce the highly sought-after Egyptian Plover, as well as drinking Sahel Paradise Whydah and estrildids such as Black-rumped Waxbill, Red-cheeked Cordonbleu and Red-billed Firefinch. Bee-eaters are often seen along the rivers and they include Red-throated (the northern equivalent of White-fronted) and large colonies of Northern Carmines.

An early morning stop for a cup of coffee in one of the riverbeds could yield a flyby of the elusive Bat Hawk, while Pel's Fishing Owl is another special raptor that occurs in this habitat; listen for it if you spend a night fly-camping on the riverbank after an afternoon of photographing a carmine bee-eater colony. Greyish Eagle-Owl is less specific about its preferred habitat and with luck it can be seen at night along the roadside. Large stands of borassus palms attract Palm-nut Vultures and a sharp eye may glimpse one flying overhead.

Of all the habitats, the riparian woodland is perhaps the most exciting for birders for it is here that one of Zakouma's most sought-after species occurs: Black-breasted

Barbet. Scanning the fruiting sycamore figs can be incredibly rewarding and is very likely to produce Vieillot's and White-headed barbets. But it is the uncommon Black-breasted Barbet sitting quietly among the other frugivores that will create the greatest stir. Bruce's Green Pigeon, Meyer's Parrot, Western Grey Plantain-eater

and Long-tailed Starling make the most of the fruiting figs, alongside troops of tantalus and patas monkeys. While on a barbet hunt, also keep an eye out for Eurasian Hoopoe, Black Scimitarbill, Grey-headed Batis and Northern Puffback, as well as the spectacular white morph of African Paradise Flycatcher.

below Red-throated Bee-eaters are commonly found along the rivers.

following spread A Yellow-billed Kite scythes into a cloud of Red-billed Queleas.







above *The Northern Carmine Bee-eater differs chiefly from its southern counterpart by having dark turquoise (not carmine) throat and cheeks.*

In woodland areas with good grass cover, both Singing and Red-pate cisticolas occur, while in thickets there's a chance to see the skulking but noisy Black-headed Gonolek, groups of Brown Babblers, and the highly variable

African Thrush scratching in the leaf litter. The flowering trees offer foraging opportunities for sunbirds such as Copper, Pygmy and Beautiful, although they often occur in typically confusing different plumage phases. In mixed woodland, various interesting columbids – Vinaceous, European Turtle and African Collared doves, as well as the beautiful Black-billed Wood Dove – may be seen or heard with relative ease.

During the dry season (December to May), the dry acacia woodlands hold little life, but in the adjacent grasslands there is a good chance to see the elusive Stone Partridge. The crow-like Piapiac also occurs in this habitat.

Birding in the camp itself, which is usually located near a floodplain or pan, is virtually guaranteed to be consistently good. The large acacia trees that provide shade are alive with insectivorous gleaners, and the identification challenges posed by the likes of Northern Crombec, Buff-bellied Warbler, White-shouldered Black Tit, Common Chiffchaff and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler can keep you busy for some time. Little Grey, Grey and Fine-spotted woodpeckers pose a similar challenge but can be rewarding nonetheless. From the comfort of a couch and with a cold beer in hand, you may find a 'camp local' – in the form of a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin – more entertaining than challenging.

In all, Zakouma National Park's 3 000 square kilometres create a spectacular wilderness experience, something that is hard to come by when pristine natural space is increasingly scarce. ♦

THE ZAKOUMA EXPERIENCE

One of the benefits of visiting Zakouma is that guests are hosted by a private guide for the duration of their stay. They are accommodated under canvas at the North African-style Camp Nomade, which will open for commercial use in 2016 and offer a balance between comfort and simplicity. The camp will be situated in the best location for the time of year to maximise opportunities for viewing congregations of mammals and waterbirds, especially on the floodplains, pans and rivers. Guests may explore the park whenever they choose, in the company of their private guide, and enjoy the freedom to approach game and birds on foot if they wish. For the wildlife, almost all the tourism revenue goes straight back into conservation, and every visit contributes to the park's long-term success.

C4 Photo Safaris will be taking trips to Zakouma National Park next year. For more information, contact shem@c4images-safaris.co.za

