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20 NIGHT SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA BIRDING EXTRAVAGANZA

Addis Ababa - Debre Libanos - Jemmu Valley – Debre Birhan - Ankober – Melka Ghebdu – Afar Plains –
Awash National Park - Langano – Abiatta - Wondo Genet – Goba - Wondo Genet – Sof Omar – Bale
Mountains National Park – Awassa

Extension: Awassa – Negele - Yabello – Arba Minch - Wondo Genet – Addis Ababa



Spot-breasted Lapwing is one of the many magnificent endemics we will see on this tour

Ethiopia has been dubbed the Chessboard of the Gods, Cradle of Humanity and Roof of Africa. These superlatives however are inadequate to describe this unique and mysterious country. Some 70 million years ago these highlands fractured, initiating the splitting of Africa's Great Rift Valley. The resulting countryside is as spectacular as it is varied.

One of Africa's finest birding destinations – Ethiopia has a healthy combination of impressive forests, towering mountains and moist and arid savannas, laden with endemics, and supporting a rich assemblage of Palearctic migrants which intermingle to provide long species lists.

Depending on whose taxonomy you follow there are at least 30 endemics. Sinclair & Ryan's new treatment of Africa's birds, however, suggest that the Ethiopian highlands region may hold up to 49 endemics, with another 100 species restricted to the North-east Arid Zone. Most of Ethiopia's endemics will be seen on our 14 day tour to the country, including the bold Rouget's Rail, striking Spot-breasted Lapwing, monstrous Thick-billed Raven, and exquisite White-cheeked Turacos.

The southern extension will add the spectacular Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and the most sought after of the endemics, the curious Stressman's Bush Crow. However, it is not just the birds that are strange, Hamadryas and 'bleeding-heart' Gelada Baboons, graceful Mountain Nyala and Ethiopian Wolf are all prime targets on our trip.



Ruppell's Robin-Chat can be found right in Addis.

Day 1: Addis-Ababa

On arrival into Addis Ababa International Airport you will be met by Tracks Safaris representatives. You will then we set off by road to the famed Gefersa reservoir on the outskirts of town. Gefersa is a well-known watering hole for a suite of wintering Palearctic species. More importantly, however, it holds several Ethiopian endemics including Wattled Ibis, Blue-winged Goose, and Rouget's Rail - an extrovert of note - Abyssinian Longclaws play hide-and-seek in taller grass, and overhead fly White-collared Pigeons and Abyssinian Siskins.

The reservoir also holds good numbers of Great Crested Grebes, Egyptian Goose, African Black and Yellow-billed Ducks, Augur Buzzard, Grey-rumped Swallow, Red-breasted Wheatear, Groundscraper Thrush, Cape Crow, Red-billed Oxpecker, Yellow Bishop, Common Waxbill, African Citril and Ortolan Bunting.

Addis Ababa is perched on the slopes of the Entotto mountains. The abundance of food and the natural aerodynamics of its placement ensure a wealth of raptors including African White-backed Vulture, Hooded Vultures and countless Black Kites.

The gardens of our hotel are a great place to start and whilst enjoying a meal or a stroll it should be possible to see Nyanza Swift, Speckled Mousebird, African Dusky Flycatcher, the endemic Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher, Tacazze Sunbird, Streaky and Brown-rumped Seed-eaters and Baglafaecht Weaver.

Night in Addis Ababa on a full board basis

Swainson's Sparrow is common in towns throughout Ethiopia, including Addis Ababa.

Day 2: Addis Ababa – Debre Libanos – Ethio-Germany Hotel

Climbing over the Entotto mountains will reveal wonderful views of Addis below. The mosaic of highland pastures, meadows, ripe grain fields, seeps and channels intermingled with a smattering of idyllic Ethiopian hamlets set the scene. Crossing the colourful Sululta Plains we'll search for Wattled and Sacred Ibis, Lammergeier, Common Crane, Black-winged Plover, Erlanger's Lark (Ethiopian endemic split from Red-capped), Thekla Lark, Abyssinian Longclaw, White-collared Pigeon, Red-rumped Swallow, Moorland Chat, Red-collared Widowbird and Abyssinian Siskin.

Lunch at Debre Libanos Monastery may reveal the incomparable Gelada Baboon. Hard to believe that the terrifying grimaces we will be exposed to come from Africa's only 'vegan' baboon. Geladas are highly adapted to the hardships of rain and high altitude thermal variations; their dense shaggy pelts testify this fact. Scuffles and chases are part of the daily ritual, but unlike other baboons, Geladas can swear at each other using all the consonants and four vowels in the human alphabet, thus showing a speech prowess unrivalled amongst primates.



The birding might reveal a host of specialties including Black-winged Lovebird, White-cheeked Turaco, Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher, White-backed Tit, Banded Barbet and Black-headed Forest Oriole.

Keeping an eye on both heavens and screens below we should soon rack up more raptors including Lammergeier and Verreaux's Eagle. Mottled Swift, Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Little Rock Thrush, Rüppell's Robin-Chat, Fan-tailed Raven and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting are all found here and we should see several of these.

The afternoon may be spent birding a main tributary of the Blue Nile, the Jemmu River, which winds its way down the plains, flanked by impressive gorges. The riverbed is lined with Acacia woodland, the perfect habitat for such localised specials such as Erckel's Francolin, Abyssinian Black Wheatear, the localised endemic Rüppell's Chat and White-winged Cliff-Chat, White-billed Starling and the tricky Yellow-rumped Serin.

Overnight at Ethio-Germany Hotel on a full board basis

Day 3: Ethio-Germany Hotel – Jemmu Valley – Debre Birhan

An early start at the Jemmu River may produce the endemic Harwood's Francolin. The nearby riverine woodland is excellent for Black-billed Barbet, Foxy Cisticola, Speckle-fronted Weaver and Crimson-rumped and Abyssinian Waxbill.

As the heat builds up we venture off towards Debre Birhan where we will head again for the hills, now in search of the very localised Ankober Serin. This rare and elusive Ethiopian endemic was only discovered in 1976, and is only known to occur in a highly restricted section of scree and gorges in this section of Rift escarpment. Another species to look out for here will be the seldom recorded Somali Starling.

Overnight at Debre Birhan on a full board basis



Abyssinian Black (Mourning) Wheatear thrives in the rocky highlands around Ankober

Day 4: Debre Birhan – Ankober – Melka Ghebdu.

Leaving Debre Birhan behind, we plunge over the awe-inspiring cliffs of the Great Rift Valley into the dry thorn Acacia scrub that covers the plains below. These plains are home to one of Ethiopia's range restricted

endemics, the Yellow-throated Serin, and we will use the fresh morning hours to try find a flock of these winged gems.

Night in Ankober on a full board basis

Day 5: Ankober – Afar Plains – Awash National Park

After more birding at Melka Ghebdu we move east towards Awash National Park birding on the way and crossing a myriad of exciting habitats such as small drainage channels that often hold the Half-collared Kingfisher, a scarce bird that is tough throughout its range.

Most of the day will be spent driving through arid scrub where we may encounter Martial and Short-toed Eagles, Yellow-necked Francolin, Arabian Bustard, Black-headed Lapwing, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, and Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Lark.

Lunch and an afternoon rest shall be sought under the shade of trees near a waterhole which have a magnetic effect on Yellow-breasted Barbet, Wahlberg's Honeyguide, Blue Rock-Thrush, Boran Cisticola, Upcher's Warbler, Red-faced Warbler, Rufous Chatterer, Shining Sunbird, Black-crowned Tchagra, Southern Gray Shrike, Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, African Silverbill and House Bunting.

The people we encounter are the famed Afar tribesmen. Today they go about their daily subsistence lives, eking an existence out of this seemingly lifeless badland. Deeply entrenched in tradition and proud of their ancestral ways, Afar men and women will strut past stoically covered in fine white and colorful cotton tunics, wearing the finest jewels and sporting a wild and wooly afro hairstyle.

Overnight at Awash on a full board basis



Nile Valley Sunbird is often found in the Afar Plains and at Awash National Park

Day 6: Awash National Park

Approaching Awash we come into contact with dense bush and acacia woodland criss-crossed by bands of pitch-black lava. Awash National Park will be home for the next two days. A patchwork of savanna grasslands and acacia woodlands surrounds the imposing Fantalle volcano. Hot springs are strewn along the volcano's base giving rise to lush seeps, reeds and small wetlands amidst a barren volcanic sea. This lava sea ironically happens to be home to the near endemic lava specialist Sombre Rock Chat.

The park is also intersected by the Awash River whose waters support dense riverine forest in places, and the nearby Kirayawa gorge offers wide-open cliffs and escarpments. Our efforts will concentrate on finding the specialties including Yellow-breasted Barbet, the poorly studied Gillett's Lark and the dazzling Nile Valley Sunbird. But we will undoubtedly rack up an impressive list with species including African Swallow-tailed Kite, Egyptian and Lappet-faced Vultures, Bateleur, Dark Chanting and Gabar Goshawks, Grasshopper Buzzard, Pygmy Falcon and Crested Francolin.



Northern Crombec is a nuthatch-like species found throughout northern Ethiopia

For bustard aficionados, this has to be heaven as it is possible to encounter six bustards in one day namely Kori, Arabian, Buff-crested, White-bellied, Black-bellied and Hartlaub's Bustard.

The parade continues with other steppe and woodland specialties such as Three-banded Courser, Liechtenstein's Sandgrouse, White-bellied Go-away Bird, Blue-naped Mousebird, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Plain and Slender-tailed Nightjars, Abyssinian and Rufous-crowned Rollers, Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Von der Decken's and Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbills, Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Nubian Woodpecker, Red-winged and Singing Bush Larks, Chestnut-backed Sparrow Lark, Ethiopian Swallow, White-browed and Rufous-tailed Scrub Robins, Blackstart, Buff-bellied Warblers, Rattling, Ashy, and Zitting Cisticolas, Grey Wren-Warbler, Grey-headed Batis, White-crested Helmet-Shrike, Northern White-crowned Shrike, Rosy-patched Bush Shrike, Somali Fiscal, Eastern Violet-backed and Shining Sunbirds, Cut-throat Finch, Red-headed, Ruppell's and Vitelline Masked

Weavers, White-headed Buffalo-Weavers, Straw-tailed Whydah, Ruppell's, Superb and Wattled Starlings, and House Bunting.

On the mammal front Awash is blessed with many of Africa's wildlife icons - Lion, Leopard, Spotted and Striped Hyena, Greater and Lesser Kudu, Warthog, the stunning Beisa Oryx, the introduced Swayne's Hartebeest, Defassa Waterbuck, Soemmering's Gazelle, the striking Gerenuk, and the impressive Hamadryas Baboon. Early morning and late afternoon might produce Black-backed Jackal, African Wild Cat and Salt's Dik-dik.

Overnight at Awash on a full board basis

Day 7: Awash – Langano. Today we drive to Lake Langano stopping in at several Rift Valley lakes and at Debre Zeit, a smattering of crater lakes that often hold African Fish Eagles, Red-billed and Hottentot Teals, Pygmy Goose, Knob-billed, White-backed and Maccoa Ducks, Black Crakes and African Jacanas, Pied and Malachite Kingfishers, Whinchat, Bruce's Green Pigeon, and Marico and Beautiful Sunbirds. We will be on the lookout for Chestnut Sparrow and Chestnut Weaver.

The patches of woodland south of here hold exciting forest species such as Black-billed Woodhoopoe. Abyssinian Ground Hornbills can be commonly seen strutting on fields. Where the local Sidamo fishermen bring their catch ashore we can watch remarkably tame Marabou Storks and Hamerkops. Other birds we may find at Lake Ziway include Squacco and Purple Herons, Eurasian Marsh Harrier, Collared Pratincole and Heuglin's and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Overnight at Lake Langano.

Day 8: Langano – Abiatta

Making the most of the early morning we will try to track down Abyssinian Black Wheatear, Boran Cisticola, White-winged Black Tit and White-rumped Babbler. As the morning warms up and the yells of Yellow-spotted Hyraxes start filling the air we will leave Langano for the nearby Lake Abiata, a rather shallow soda lake enveloped by Acacia scrub.

This lake supports good numbers of birds and we will soon feast our eyes on vast flocks of flamingos, African Spoonbills, Saddle-billed Stork, and a variety of egrets, cormorants, pelicans, herons, storks, ibises, waterfowl and waders. Gull-billed terns and Grey-headed Gulls cruise transfixed on the water's surface along the lake's edge.

The lake itself holds a healthy population of Black-necked Grebe, Cape Teal and Southern Pochard. We can expect to find plenty of Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Crowned Plover and Kittlitz's Plover working the lake's muddy edges. Lilac-breasted Roller, Plain-backed Pipit, Little and Lesser Masked Weavers, and Reichenow's Seedeater abound in the surrounding woodland edge.

Overnight at Lake Langano on a full board basis

Day 9: Langano – Wondo Genet

After another morning of birding around Langano we will amble towards the serenity of the Wondo Genet Resort Hotel.

The rest of the afternoon will be spent birding in the gardens and relaxing at the resort's natural hot springs.

Overnight at Wondo Genet on a full board basis



Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike is a Wondo Genet specialty

Day 10: Wondo Genet – Goba

Few places in Africa raise a more exciting dawn chorus than the one we will be hearing at Wondo Genet. The hotel gardens and nearby forests amass an uncanny collection of forest specialties which should delight us including our prime target, screeching flocks of the rare and endemic Yellow-fronted Parrots.

Elsewhere we may find stunning White-cheeked Turaco, Banded Barbet, and the furtive Green-backed Honeyguide. Little Spotted Woodpecker, Brown Woodland-Warbler, Abyssinian Slaty-Flycatcher, Dark-headed Oriole, Slender-billed and Sharpe's Starlingss, Green-backed Twinspot, and Black-and-white Mannikin are other specialties. Several families of the exquisite Guereza Black-and-white Colobus monkeys frequent the resort's gardens and nearby forests.

After breakfast we make the trip to the well-known Bale Mountains National Park. This park hosts an impressive list of Ethiopia's endemic birds and birding the Afro-alpine moorlands and highland forests of this park is unforgettable.

As we gain height we will meet our first juniper woodland and soon after we will enter the vast moorlands of the Bale Mountains. Montane forests hold a number of our most-wanted species such as Chestnut-naped Francolin, the *simonies* race of Ground-scraper Thrush, its secretive cousin the Abyssinian Ground-Thrush, the noisy Abyssinian Catbird, and the endemic White-backed Black-Tit.



Silvery-cheeked Hornbill is a huge and spectacular species of the Ethiopian highlands

A late evening spotlighting drive should produce Montane Nightjar and African Wood Owl. On the way up we will keep a keen eye out for Mountain Nyala, which in conjunction with the endemic Abyssinian Wolf are the two main reasons for the proclamation of Bale NP. Other species in the massif we will be on the lookout include Menelik's Bushbuck and Warthog.

Overnight at Goba on a full board basis

Day 11: Goba – Sof Omar – Goba.

Today's mission is to seek out Ethiopia's most scarce, range-restricted, difficult to see and hard to locate endemic, Salvadori's Serin. Fortunately the effort is worth it as it is a tad more attractive than most serins. To achieve our goal we will need an early start and a strong stomach to handle a 1600 m descent from the Bale Mountains down to the plains of Sof Omar.

Weather wise we will swap the cool moist mists of the highlands for a possibly scorching hot and dry and hopefully breezy climate. We'll also trade the lush water-filled green of the highlands for the parched yellows and whites of the *Acacia* woodlands. The advantage however is that this diversity will provide a plethora of species throughout the day.

Species we may find today are D'Arnaud's Barbet, Northern Brownbul, Brown-tailed Chat, Somali Tit, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Rosy-patched Bushshrike and the startling Bristle-crowned Starling. Others include Orange-bellied Parrot, White-bellied Go-away-bird, Black-billed Woodhoopoe, Von der Decken's and Red-billed Hornbill, Black-throated Barbet, Nubian Woodpecker, Somali Tit, Pygmy Batis, Brubru, White Helmetsrike, Superb Starling, Dodson's Bulbul, Speke's Weaver, the distinctive local subspecies of Red-headed Weaver,

Eastern Paradise-Whydah and handsome Straw-tailed Whydah, Purple Grenadier, Cut-throat Finch, and Somali Bunting.

After lunch we will retreat to the soothing coolness of the Sof Omar caves, reputed to be among the longest caves in the world. In the afternoon, we return to Goba.

Overnight at Goba on a full board basis



Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush is one of many exciting palearctic birds that winter in Ethiopia.

Day 12: Goba – Bale Mountains National Park

Today we will drive Africa's highest road to reach Tullu Deemtu – at 4377m an impressive peak. The plains are clad with heads of giant lobelias throughout vast expanses of moorlands and are dotted by Juniper and Hagenia forest patches every now and then.

Our chances of spotting the red pelt of a bounding Abyssinian Wolf hunting for Giant Mole-rat or Starck's Hare are good during today's drive. From the edge of the escarpment, we can gaze upon the once-massive Harrena forest. This forest is known to hold Africa's last packs of forest Wild Dogs along with Leopard, Bush Duiker and Klipspringer.

On the endemic bird front, this site gives us our best chance at the rather scarce Abyssinian Woodpecker. Breaking the canopy and flying over the forest and near the cliffs we may see Long-crested, Imperial and Ayre's Hawk Eagles, Rufous-breasted and Great Sparrowhawk, Mountain Buzzard, Golden Eagle, Somali Crow, Olive Pigeon and Red-billed Chough.

The moorlands and forests may produce Moorland and Chestnut-naped Francolins, stately Wattled Cranes. Ruddy Shelduck, African Snipe, Abyssinian Ground Thrush, Cinnamon Bracken and Brown Woodland Warblers,

Brown Parisoma, Yellow-crowned Canary and Yellow-bellied Waxbill. Bohor Reedbuck can often be seen grazing placidly in this safe haven.

Overnight at Goba on a full board basis



The Simien Wolf is a highlight for even for the most hardened birders

Day 13: Goba – Awassa

After some final birding at Goba we will depart for Lake Awassa for an overnight stay. The freshwater shores of Lake Awassa are fringed by small remnant patches of forest which hold a suite of large and colourful species such as Woodland and African Pygmy Kingfisher, Black-billed Woodhoopoe, massive and noisy Silvery-cheeked Hornbills, Double-toothed Barbet, White-browed Robin-Chat, African Thrush, Black-headed Batis, the highly localized Spotted Creeper, Northern Puffback, Violet-backed Starling and Red-faced Crombec. Seeps and sedgy spots along the shore often hide Black Crake, Purple Swamphen and Blue-headed Coucal.

A visit to the famed Awassa Fish Market ranks amongst one of the most authentic Ethiopian cultural experiences on offer as the endemic and well-endowed Thick-billed Raven frantically squabble over fish scraps. The hardships of life in the lake are carved and tanned into the leathery faces of fishermen that gut and auction their catch in the early morning market.

Right behind them throngs of Marabou Storks, Great White Pelican, Great and Long-tailed Cormorant, Hamerkop, Sacred Ibis, Black-headed, Gray-headed, Heuglin's and Lesser Black-backed Gull are in attendance. The birds here could not care less about yet another human figure, their senses are trained on whatever food is discarded, making this a unique photographic experience.

Overnight at Awassa on a full board basis

Day 14: Awassa – Addis Ababa.

After some final birding we transfer by road back to Addis for a shower and a change of clothes before transferring to the international airport to check in for your international flight home.

Alternatively you can add the following southern birding extension to form a 21 night itinerary:

8-Day Southern Extension**Day 14: Awassa – Negele**

Today will be a traveling day as we move southwards to the under-explored and little visited southern Ethiopia. By late afternoon we should reach our birding destination.

Hidden upstream in a seemingly barren wadi or desert river bed grows the preferred habitat of one of Ethiopia's most colourful and spectacular endemics, Prince Ruspoli's Turaco. This bird was only re-discovered in the 1940 after many failed attempts to relocate it. Its discoverer, an Italian prince, took to his grave all the available information of its whereabouts after discovering it in the 1930s when an elephant mauled the intrepid royal. It was only in the 1970s that any research was done and new populations were discovered. Today it is still considered globally threatened, a vulnerable species.

We will concentrate on any fruiting trees and figs along the river bed and we will probably be pointed to one by the curious locals, who will be far more fascinated by our colorful clothes than the crimson red flashes and emerald plumage of this magnificent turaco.

Overnight at Negele on a full board basis**Days 15-16: Negele**

Today we set off to scour the Liben Plains. These vast open grasslands are home to the poorly known and range restricted Sidamo Lark. Finding this bird is difficult and most of the morning will be devoted to pinpointing its whereabouts.

With luck, our efforts will be rewarded by the species engaging in its obvious climb-and-glide display flight. Whilst walking these dusty plains we should come across feeding flocks of Lesser Kestrels, Somali Short-toed Lark, Plain-backed Pipit and Pectoral-patch Cisticola.

Overnight in Negele on a full board basis**Day 17: Negele – Yabello**

The road to Yabello skirts the Kenyan border and is remarkably untravelled; the driving is thus slow but birding is excellent from the car.

During this longish day we hope to catch sight of flashy flocks of Vulturine Guinea fowl, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Pale Prinia, Hunter's Sunbird, Pringle's Puffback, Three-streaked Tchagra, Magpie Starling, Chestnut Sparrow, Gray-headed and Black-capped Social-Weaver, Donaldson-Smith's Sparrow-Weaver, and White-bellied Canary.

Overnight in Yabello on a full board basis**Day 18: Yabello**

In Yabello we will search for our last two endemics. Stresemann's Bush-Crow, only discovered in 1938, has joined the ranks of the most-wanted birds in Africa. A phylogenetic conundrum, it is still highly debated what it is. Despite its starling-like appearance recent research finds a host of affinities that suggest that Choughs are its closest relatives.

Communal and possibly co-operative breeding, this starling-like crow moves in noisy parties through the outskirts of Yabello. The second star attraction is the dainty White-tailed Swallow, which likes building its nest in culverts and other human constructions.

Overnight in Yabello on a full board basis



Stresemann's Bush-Crow is one of southern Ethiopia's magnificent specialty birds.

Day 19: Yabello – Arba Minch

After a final morning of birding in Yabello, we say goodbye to the Bush-Crows and drive to Arba Minch. Birding along the way can be good. Initially, we traverse arid savanna with species similar to Yabello. Later, we enter moister areas that fringe Lake Chamo. New species come into view here, including Long-crested Eagle, African Cuckoo-Hawk, and Grey-backed Fiscal. A stop along the lakeshore will hold a plethora of wetland birds, including Saddle-billed Stork, Black Heron, and perhaps some Hippos.



Half-collared Kingfisher lives near the Nech Sar springs

Day 20: Arba Minch – Wondo Genet

After a final morning in the magnificent fig forests of Nech Sar, we drive up the rift towards Wondo Genet. We spend a leisurely afternoon seeking out whatever species eluded us on our earlier visit.

Overnight in Wondo Genet on a full board basis

Day 21: Wondo Genet – Addis Ababa

Our final morning of birding is at Wondo Genet. In mid morning, we will pack up and head back to Addis



Von der Decken's Hornbill is a northeastern Africa endemic that is found throughout Ethiopia

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