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## Epupa

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The last time we were at Epupa the Kunene River was in full flood and the falls were nothing but spectacular. Not much scope for birding. That was May 2011. Now, end November 2013 the rainy season had just begun, the migrants had arrived and the river was at the right level for some great birding.



We stayed at Omarunga Lodge on the Kunene River no more than a 100m from Epupa Falls itself. Here the river is in a valley surrounded by rugged mountains on either side. A large number of habitats are thus available, namely campsite, the falls itself, arid hillside with boulders and lush riverine vegetation in places. What adds to the birding is that the area is sparsely populated. The dominant trees are Makalani Palms and Ana trees with dense brush and reeds in places. Open spaces are plenty allowing for driving a short distance and then walking along the river bank.

The drive to Epupa is also worth mentioning for you drive through Mopane bush surrounded by mountains with a fair amount of Baobab trees along the way. We found it worthwhile stopping at the Baobabs. Sightings included Meves' Starlings, Carp's Tit, Damara

Hornbill, Violet Wood-Hoopoes and Bare-cheeked Babblers.

On arrival at Omarunga the first bird seen was a Rufous-tailed Palm-Thrush. Just to whet the appetite. We found the Rufous-tailed Palm-Thrush to be quite common in the camp and along the entire length of the river travelled. It was also the first bird calling before sunrise, a wonderful melodious whistle, closely followed by the Woodland Kingfisher which was everywhere. The next Kunene special seen was the Cinderella Waxbill which was located the next day in the camping area. Care needs to be exercised with the waxbills for Common Waxbill also frequents the area. Interesting we found the Cinderella Waxbills in the camp away from the river whereas the Common Waxbills seem to prefer the river banks. Madagascar Bee-eater, Rosy-faced Lovebirds, African Red-eyed Bulbuls, Yellow-bellied Greenbuls, Spectacled and Golden Weavers, Red-billed and Jameson's Firefinches were also common in the camp. Raptors seen from the camp were African Fish-Eagle and African Harrier-Hawk.

What made the camp birding was the unexpected. On the second afternoon relaxing at our bungalow a three and a half metre crocodile was slowly crossing the river when out of the bush a White-backed Night-Heron crossed the river. According to the field guides it does not occur here. Then when you see the thick bush and palm trees lining the river bank the habitat is almost identical to the Okavango where we have seen it before. High fives and another of Namibia's finest were in order.



I found the most rewarding birding to be along the Kunene River east of the falls. This involved driving for a short distance and then walking to and along the river bank returning to the bakkie and repeating the procedure again and again. The first stop saw Bennett's Woodpecker perched on a Makalani palm tree. What made this one interesting was that it was of the race *capricorni* with no spots on its pale yellowish breast. Whilst admiring the woodpecker an Augur Buzzard alighted on a nearby tree affording excellent views of it. This was after all perfect Augur Buzzard habitat. The next stop produced a Giant Kingfisher devouring a crab. By now the excitement was building up. Then the mega tick. Paddling across the river, ever so casual, was a large cormorant like bird with a red bill, an African Finfoot. Again according to the field guides the Finfoot does not occur there yet the habitat is perfect for them with plenty of quiet stretches with overhanging branches. As if it could not get better, a short way from the river, a bright flash of blue and orange revealed an African Pygmy-Kingfisher, another species that is not mentioned in the field guides. Other good sightings included Madagascar and Little Bee-eaters, Monteiro's Hornbill, Rüppell's Parrot, Swamp Boubou, Pied Kingfisher and Lesser Honeyguide.

This trip reinforced my views that if the habitat and conditions are right expect to see the bird. On our way back home we met the lodge owner who mentioned that all three, namely the White-backed Night-Heron, African Finfoot and African Pygmy-Kingfisher are not that uncommon in the area. Just goes to show the importance of atlasing.

The falls itself is also good for birding. Rock Kestrels and Speckled Pigeons were as expected on the rocks. Rock pools with some reeds and trees nearby were always worth a second look. It was at one of these pools that we had an excellent view of the Malachite Kingfisher. Both Dusky and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds were common as were Red-faced Mousebirds and the ever present Grey Go-away-bird.

The birding just carried on. Whilst enjoying a sun downer on the last evening two Water Thick-knees emerged from the rocks. The farewell present was a beautiful view of a Sedge Warbler.

And so ended the Epupa birding, birding that exceeded all my expectations. One cannot help but wonder what else the Kunene River and its environs will reveal.

#### Notes

Pentads atlased: 1700\_1310 and 1655\_1315  
We found camping site 5 and bungalow 2 best for birding. Reservations for Omarunga Lodge and Camping can be made through Eden Travel Consultancy, e-mail: eden@afol.com.na

Roads were in good condition though an all-wheel drive is recommended. Caution is advised at river crossings which are not always sign-posted and sometimes seen at the last moment.