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## Zambia Pitta Tour & Black-cheeked Lovebird Extension

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Photographs by Tertius Gous taken on this tour

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### Day 1:

The first day was mostly a travel day as we departed from Livingstone at noon and traveled in a westerly direction to our lodge situated along the Zambezi River. Roadside birds seen during the journey consisted of Pied Crow, Helmeted Guineafowl, Yellow-billed Kite, Knob-billed Duck, White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Meve's Starling and Hamerkop. We made a short birding stop in some well-developed mopane woodland where we recorded Southern Carmine and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Red-breasted Swallow, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Brubru and White-crested Helmet-Shrike. Our lodge was situated along a quiet backwater of the Zambezi River and late afternoon birding produced good sightings of Southern Masked-Weaver, Holub's Golden Weaver, African Jacana, African Openbill, White-faced Duck, Wire-tailed Swallow, White-winged Tern, while Little Rush Warbler and Luapula Cisticola called from the reed beds.

### Days 2 - 3:

We were woken the next morning by the melodious calls of White-browed Robin-Chats emanating from the lush riverine vegetation and gardens of the lodge. Breakfast was served on a wooden deck overlooking the river and we soon got onto a Slaty Egret foraging along the shore, while the antics of Tilapia around their nesting circles in the river was fascinating to watch. The morning was

alive with birds and our list was growing quickly with additions such as Red-billed Francolin, Swamp Boubou, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, African Mourning Dove, Common Waxbill, nesting African Paradise-Flycatcher, Southern Brown-throated Weaver, Brown and Red-billed Firefinch, White-browed and Coppery-tailed Coucal, African Green Pigeon and **Diderik Cuckoo**.





After such a great start to the day we were rearing to go and find the main target of the area, **Black-cheeked Lovebird**, a bird endemic to the mopane woodlands of southern Zambia. Recent rain resulted in many ephemeral pans in the woodland and one of these produced Dwarf Bittern. The waterlogged bush tracks made the going slow but the spring rains resulted in lots of bird activity, and we recorded Lesser Spotted Eagle, a large flock of African Openbills, Lizard Buzzard, Wood Sandpiper, Southern Ground Hornbill, Meyer's Parrot, White-bellied Sunbird, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Magpie Shrike, Spotted Flycatcher, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Levillant's and African Cuckoo, Red-footed Falcon and Amur Falcon. It was not long before we heard the unmistakable twittering of lovebirds, and soon after found a small flock of Black-cheeked Lovebirds feeding on the ground along the edge of an open agricultural field. A Dickinson's Kestrel perched in a palm tree nearby was a nice surprise, and the surrounding woodland produced Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, Barred Owl and Lesser Masked Weaver. We continued along the track and found a few more small flocks of lovebirds, and ended up with a total of about 30 birds seen during the day. On our way back to the lodge we added Black Cuckoo, Scimitarbill, Namaqua Dove and Marico Flycatcher to the list, while several Square-tailed Nightjars were calling towards dusk.

Because of our success with the lovebird on the first day of our search, we had the backup day free to explore and bird the general area. We decided to head north with frequent birding stops along the way that produced

Eastern Nicator, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Narina Trogon, Ashy Flycatcher, Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robin, Yellow-breasted Apalis and Red-chested Cuckoo in dense thicket habitat, while Violet-eared Waxbill, Cape Glossy Starling, Red-crested Korhaan, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, African Grey Hornbill, Coqui Francolin and Pallid Flycatcher were found in open woodland. Several species of orchid were found in a small patch of miombo woodland, including the delicate ***Eulophia livingstoniana***. On our way back to the lodge in the afternoon we drove into a huge termite emergence that attracted hundreds of Yellow-billed Kites. Other birds that also enjoyed the termite alate buffet were Lanner, Amur Falcon and Common Swift, while dragonflies such as Globe Skimmer (*Pantala flavescens*) joined in the feast. A lone Side-striped Jackal that made a brief appearance in the road was a mammal highlight late in the afternoon.



#### Day 4:

Traveling back to Livingstone we found Burchell's Starling en route, and a few stops in the teak and miombo woodlands around town produced Golden-breasted Bunting, Neddicky, African Golden Oriole, Southern Black Tit, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Willow Warbler and Kurrichane Thrush. The sewerage works was very productive and resulted in a long list of birds including large flocks of Glossy Ibis and Cattle Egret, Purple Swamphen, Common Moorhen, Three-banded Plover, a cracking female Greater Painted Snipe, Red-faced Cisticola and an Ayres's Hawk-Eagle flying over while being mobbed by a Pied Crow and Fork-tailed Drongo. We did a boat trip on the Zambezi River above the mighty Victoria Falls and recorded Rock Pratincole, **African Finfoot**, Hadeda and Sacred Ibis, Common Greenshank, African Skimmer, Goliath and Black Heron, and several species of kingfisher, including Giant, Pied, Brown-hooded and Malachite. We also had good sightings of Hippo and Nile Crocodile, and on our way to the lodge, found a large herd of African Buffalo along the road.



#### Day 5:

We did an early morning bird walk from our lodge near Livingstone to try and find roosting Pel's Fishing Owl in the riverine forest along the Zambezi River, but a herd of Elephants soon put a stop to our quest, but not before we had sightings of African White-backed and Hooded Vulture, White-crowned Lapwing, Half-collared Kingfisher, Spectacled and Golden Weaver, Ashy Flycatcher, African Goshawk and Eurasian Hobby. The open Acacia woodland further away from the river had Brown and Jameson's Firefinch, Green-winged Pytilia, Jacobin Cuckoo, Collared and Scarlet-chested Sunbird, and African Grey Hornbill. We departed late morning for the airport to catch a flight to Lusaka to collect another participant for the main Pitta Tour, and found White Stork at the airport. After settling in at our lodge near the airport in Lusaka, the afternoon afforded as the first real opportunity to bird some well-developed miombo woodlands, resulting in a good haul of birds such as Grey-headed Parrot, Red-backed Mannikin, Golden-breasted Bunting, Shikra, Swainson's Francolin, Schalow's Turaco, European Bee-eater, Black Cuckooshrike, Southern Black Flycatcher, Miombo Blue-eared and Wattled Starling, Yellow-throated Petronia and Yellow-fronted Canary. The evening produced Fiery-necked Nightjar and African Wood Owl, but the highlight was a male Pennant-winged Nightjar that did a fly-by with his spectacular pennants trailing behind.

#### Day 6:

Some more miombo birding early in the morning the next day resulted in us finding a female Pennant-winged Nightjar incubating two tiny chicks on the "nest". The woodland was heaving with birds and we recorded Green-backed Honeybird doing its circular aerial display flight, Greater and Lesser Honeyguide, Cardinal Woodpecker, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Long-billed Crombec, Willow and Garden Warbler, Neddicky, Pallid and Collared Flycatcher, Southern Black Tit, Spotted Creeper, Amethyst and Variable Sunbird, African and Black-headed Oriole, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Tropical Boubou, Violet-backed Starling and Red-headed Weaver.

Then it was off to the Zambezi valley stopping en route for lunch along the Kafue River where we found Black Sparrowhawk, Red-winged Starling, Lesser and Greater Swamp-Warbler, White-browed Coucal, Fan-tailed Widowbird, African Pied Wagtail and Wire-tailed Swallow. We arrived at the pitta thickets in good time and shortly afterwards an afternoon thunder shower broke the heat. We could not have asked for a more perfect cue, and as expected, the unmistakable call of a displaying **African Pitta** was heard nearby as soon as the rain stopped, and it did not take long before we had saturation views of the bird! Success at our first try!



### Day 7 - 8:

Our early success with the pitta resulted in ample time to explore the area around our lodge that included habitats such as wooded hillside, mopane and Acacia woodland, river and lake shore, and thickets and riverine forest. The pitta thickets produced more African Pitta sightings and a host of other birds such as African Broadbill, Livingstone's Flycatcher, Eastern Nicator, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robin, Terrestrial Brownbul, Sombre Bulbul, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Dark-backed Weaver, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Ashy Flycatcher, Emerald and Red-chested Cuckoo, African Pygmy Kingfisher, Crowned and Trumpeter Hornbill, African Goshawk, Natal Francolin, Crested Guinea fowl, Purple-crested Turaco and Narina Trogon. Water and shore habitats had White-breasted and Reed Cormorant, African Darter, Little Egret, Purple and Goliath Heron, African Fish-Eagle, Black Crake, African Jacana, Kittlitz's Plover, Common Greenshank, Wood and Common Sandpiper, Malachite and Giant Kingfisher and Grey-headed Gull. We found a pair of Shelley's Francolin on a rocky hillside, as well as Familiar Chat and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. The mixed mopane and Acacia woodlands contained birds such as Meyer's Parrot, Grey Go-away-bird, Red-faced Mousebird, Brown-hooded and Grey-headed kingfisher, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, Green Wood-Hoopoe, Scimitarbill, Red-billed Hornbill, Crested Barbet, Brown-backed Honeybird, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Mosque Swallow, Chinspot Batis, African Paradise-Flycatcher, White-bellied Sunbird, Black-backed Puffback, White-crested Helmet-Shrike, Meve's Starling, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Lesser Masked and Village Weaver, Red-billed Quelea, Southern Red Bishop, White-winged Widowbird, Red-billed Firefinch, Cut-throat Finch, Pin-tailed Whydah and Long-tailed Paradise-Whydah.

### Day 9 - 10:

The last few days of the tour was spent at a lodge on the Zambian plateau near the town of Choma. The main target here was the other Zambian endemic, **Chaplin's or Zambian Barbet**, which we found without too much difficulty in their preferred habitat of woodland dominated by fig trees.



The lodge was surrounded by extensive miombo woodlands and thickets that produced many good birds such as Three-banded Courser, Miombo Pied Barbet, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Racket-tailed and Broad-billed Roller, Black-eared Seed-eater, Southern Hyliota, Arnot's Chat, Cabanis's Bunting, Miombo and Greater Blue-eared Starling, Bronze and Red-backed Mannikin, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, Black-crowned Tchagra, Brubru, Red-backed Shrike, Yellow White-eye, Arrow-marked Babbler, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Rattling Cisticola, Green-capped Eremomela, White-browed Robin-Chat, Black and White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Tree and Woodland Pipit, Flappet and Rufous-naped Lark, Bennett's Woodpecker, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Common and African Palm Swift, Spotted Eagle-Owl, Klaas's and Black Cuckoo, Schalow's Turaco, Black-bellied Bustard, Red-necked and Crested Francolin, Lanner, Red-necked and Amur Falcon, Wahlberg's Eagle, Steppe and Lizard Buzzard, Little Sparrowhawk, Western Banded and Brown Snake-Eagle and African Cuckoo Hawk. One of the numerous bird feeding parties we encountered had three species of tit, including Rufous-bellied, Miombo and Southern Black.

Mammals were a highlight and we encountered **Sable Antelope**, Puku, Tsessebe, Eland, Greater Kudu, Bushbuck, Plains Zebra, Common Warthog, Slender Mongoose and a few very obliging Mauritian Tomb Bats at our lodge.

The numerous wetlands, marshes and water bodies dotted over the landscape held Cuckoo Finch, Orange-breasted Waxbill, Yellow Bishop, Croaking and Zitting Cisticola, Sooty Chat, Banded



Martin, Senegal Coucal, African Wattled and Blacksmith Lapwing, Three-banded Plover, African and Lesser Jacana, Allen's Gallinule, Purple Swamphen, Spotted Crake, African Rail, African Black Duck, African Pygmy Goose, Comb and White-backed Duck, Hamerkop, Rufous-bellied Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Little Bittern and Black Heron.

**Day 11:**

The last day of the tour was devoted mostly to travelling back to Lusaka in time for our flights, but we did manage to do some early morning birding around the lodge before our departure. This resulted in excellent views of **African Paradise-Flycatcher at the nest**, Red-throated Twinspot, Miombo Scrub-Robin and African Harrier-Hawk. En route we found Long-crested Eagle and Black-shouldered Kite, while Luapula Cisticola finally showed well along the Kafue River. Birding around Lusaka produced Brimstone Canary, Jameson's Firefinch, Black-winged Bishop, White-rumped and Little Swift and Icterine Warbler.

At the end of the tour we recorded a total of 324 bird and 26 mammal species.

