

# gone to the BIRDS

Feathered flocks of many varieties are the last thing on most people's minds when they think of reasons to visit the Okavango Delta. **John Malathronas** is clearly not like most people. And he wouldn't have it any other way. The diverse habitats of the delta host a prolific population of intriguing avifauna. Here, he explores the Okavango in search of its brightest characters. Photography by **Dale Morris**.



While the sight of so many open-billed storks filling the sky may send shivers of fear down the spine of those initiated in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, it is pure pleasure for African twitchers

“I don't like birds!” Siân was looking at me with a ‘there-I-said-it’ expression of annoyance. “Ever since I was young and saw that Hitchcock movie, birds give me the creeps,” she continued.

Siân's husband tried to laugh things off with a “That was fiction, dear,” but even he could not thaw the atmosphere. I was on a motorboat, in the middle of the Okavango Delta, and one of my companions had fired a small warning shot: “we don't care about your birds. We want to see –”

“A buffalo!” Siân shouted at the top of her voice, as several African jacanas took flight from the surrounding bulrush, awkwardly carrying their overlong, gangly legs behind them.

On the left bank of the channel, a male African buffalo was fixing us with that inscrutable, powerful gaze that has unsettled many a ranger. But on his back stood...

“An oxpecker!” I exclaimed.

Masta, our tracker and guide, put me right: “A yellow-billed oxpecker,” he said. “It's rarer than the red-billed one.”

Siân sighed.

Siân was hardly untypical. As many a reserve guide will tell you, most guests are not interested in those ‘boring’ birds. They go on safari expecting to see the Big Five – lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino – plus an assortment of hyenas, giraffes, zebras and whatever antelope is roaming in the area. Ideally they'd like to witness a chase, or even better a kill, right in front of their jeep, at a convenient angle for the obligatory handheld camcorder. Guests do not come to the pristine wilderness of the Okavango Delta – which is to safaris what the Seychelles are to beach holidays – in order to search for the reclusive Pel's fishing owl or to marvel at a hamerkop's nest (though it can bear a man's weight and measure up to six feet across). Yet, as the same reserve guide will also add rather wistfully, that is a big shame. For, if the mammal species you can tick off in a week will be 15, maybe 20, the bird species you can catch sight of are easily five times as many.

Personally, I love birds. When people ask me why, my stock response is that they fly, they sing and they dress well – what more do you want? And I am not alone. The venerable Laurens van der Post once asked



his Kalahari tracker which animal he considered the most impressive and was rather surprised with the answer that it would have to be a bird of some kind. And, with over 450 species recorded, the tracker would have a field day in the Okavango. Would he choose the bateleur eagle, which not only soars as high as any living organism but also has the sharpness of vision to dive down hundreds of metres to grab its prey. Or the self-sacrificing ostrich? Did you know that, when ostrich are confronted with a predator while in the company of their young, one parent limps off pretending to be wounded, and thus easier to catch, while the other quickly escorts the babies to safety? Perhaps it would be the obscure but theatrical blackbellied korhaan who serenades the female in a pitch that rises higher and higher until he finally reaches those high Cs, takes off and flies dramatically upwards like a Covent Garden diva?

Ah yes, I love birds, and I was advised by Expert Africa, who are, well, experts in everything African, that the Okavango Delta is one of the best places on the continent for birdwatching. They also chose the delta's three best camps to showcase it.

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It was on the Cessna six-seater flight into Xigera Camp (pronounced KHEE-jra) that I met Siân and her husband. Although choosing not to ignore the sheer amount of birdlife, leading to binocular stops and attempts at identification, did slow us down and make tracking larger game more challenging, it only added to the diversity of the safari experience.

Of course, there is much enjoyment to be had from startling the rutting impalas, watching elephant family games and tracking leopards. But I take exception to the view that birds are not as beguiling. Take the small birds at the feet of the buffalo that excited Siân so much. They were cattle egrets. They forage around grazing animals, waiting for them to disturb the



Seeing double has never been such a delight – twenty-six blacksmith plovers reflecting on life in the Okavango Delta

ground and throw up edible insects or worms. Isn't that intelligent? And what's more, their emigration history is an enigma. For thousands of years, cattle egrets were historically confined to southern Africa and Southeast Asia. Suddenly, in the mid-1800s, they decided to conquer the world. They crossed the Atlantic to Brazil in the 1880s. They reached Australia and New Zealand in the 1940s, southern Europe in the 1950s and in 1981 they were first sighted in Alaska. They are now to be found everywhere, including some isolated island archipelagos. How come?

Or take another common denizen of the Okavango Delta, the familiar black-and-white figure of a pied kingfisher that hovers in the air like an overgrown hummingbird. These kingfishers frantically flap their wings to stay absolutely still before they dive. When you take a picture of them, their beaks are totally in focus while their wings are a blur. But wait until you hear about their family life. Males outnumber females by almost two to one because more females die protecting their young from predators. So, these extra males try to make themselves useful by helping an alpha pair to feed their young. But in

order for the alpha male to accept them, they have to prove themselves unable to fertilise the female. So they lose testosterone, their testes shrivel and they effectively will themselves into becoming eunuchs.

If birds do not interest you, it's because you don't know the whole story.

Two days later at Little Vumbura, a camp set smack-dab in the centre of the delta, my safari mates were an American couple, Sean and Jennifer. They were much more interested in birdlife, if only because Sean liked hunting in the Montana woods and the easy availability of guinea fowl, francolin and sandgrouse made him whistle with excitement. "I hunt for the pleasure of it and the experience, not for trophies," he was quick to clarify. But shooting anything, even for food, was not allowed in Moremi or on any of the reserves I stayed in. As a result, animals were less afraid of humans and were more likely to allow us to come close and observe them.

"So, how does Little Vumbura compare with Xigera as far as birds go?" Sean asked.

How does it compare, indeed...

Only a few dozen kilometres north from Xigera and I was in another world. The first camp was water-based,



where the emphasis was on aquatic outings, whether by a slow dugout mokoro or by fast powerboat. The habitats were either open water covered by floating waterlilies or permanent swamps that were defined in the deeper sections by banks of magnificent papyrus sedges or by bulrush in the shallows. Everything was surrounded by riverine forest composed largely of the tall, majestic razor-sharp fronds of fan palms and cluttered copses of smaller date palms. Waterbirds were especially prolific: apart from the omnipresent African jacana, there were elegant Egyptian geese, flocks of white-faced ducks, solitary foraging green-backed herons, plus gaggles of great white – and all kinds of – egrets. Open-billed storks occasionally walked among them, cormorants stood on stones drying their wings and African darters swam immersed in the lagoons, their long thick necks protruding from the surface like watersnakes. African fish eagles perched majestically on tops of trees, while malachite kingfishers balanced on reed tops and sociable weavers' nests – always facing west to avoid the strong eastern winds – hung sturdily over the channels.

Little Vumbura was in a sense a complement to

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Xigera, situated near dry woodland. There were no palms to be seen, while baobabs, jackalberries and bushwillows abounded, sometimes giving way to savannah scrub where knobthorn and sweet-thorn acacias were dominant. Here the sunlight played on the glossy iridescence of the plumage of Burchell's starlings; the click-click hammer-on-the-anvil sound of the blacksmith plovers filled the air; coppery-tailed coucals spread their wings in the early morning sun to soak its rays; red-billed and yellow-billed hornbills watched us carefully from the trees; bearded woodpeckers advertised their presence in staccato outbursts; and those game birds I described earlier made Sean's heart race. As for kingfishers, you can >>



find species here that don't like to fish (they exist, they exist), like the grey-hooded kingfisher or his cousin, the migratory woodland kingfisher, whose arrival, marked with a loud, cockerel-like morning call, indicates the end of winter in the delta.

Big game also followed. In Xigera we were surrounded by hippos and the semi-aquatic red lechwe – we even had a glimpse of the elusive sitatunga antelope. In Little Vumbura we saw kudu, tsessebe, zebra, giraffe, wildebeest, waterbuck – even ostrich – plus elephants, hyenas and packs of African wild dogs on the prowl.

“Different ecosystems,” I replied laconically, “different birds.”

In retrospect, Xigera was my introduction to the avifauna, while Little Vumbura was my immersion course. My last stop, Tubu Tree, would be where I put my knowledge into practice.

“GO...”

I heard a sound above me.

“The Go-away bird,” said Johnny, my guide and birder extraordinaire. By then I knew that this was a local name for the rather fetching grey lourie.

## If Xigera was my introduction to the avifauna, Little Vumbura was my immersion course. Tubu Tree would be where I put my knowledge into practice

“Hmmm... it didn't actually say 'Go Away,'” I said with my newly-found expert's scepticism.

“GO 'WAY,” the bird repeated above me.

I shut up.

“What's that?” he asked me pointing at a small raptor perched on a tree.

“Ahem... a goshawk. No, a Dickinson's kestrel.”

Johnny was unimpressed. “It's a bateleur eagle. But juvenile. Page 180.”

And he pointed at a picture on page 180 of his well-thumbed *Newman's Birds of Southern Africa*, or as we call it in hushed tones, the Bible.

I felt it was a trick question as the juvenile male looks nothing like the brightly-plumed adult. “Ask me something else”.

He pointed at a large stork. >>

With the Okavango Delta hosting over 450 recorded bird species, including the regal crowned crane (pictured), you'll have plenty to focus on



“A marabou,” I said.

There it was, the ugliest bird alive, looking like a vulture after a failed facelift.

“Correct. And that one flying away?”

I couldn't possibly confuse the kaleidoscopically-plumed ambassador, Botswana's national bird, with any other.

“Easy. A lilac-breasted roller.”

We drove on through seasonally flooded grass plains, dry woodland, open savannah and riverine forest – you name the terrain, Tubu Tree has got it. I had also been given my own personal guide specially for birding, so we circled waterholes, visited observation posts and stopped at our heart's content to identify the tiniest of cisticolas and the faintest of warblers. Maybe it was the dedicated nature of the expedition, maybe it was my own sharpened senses or maybe it was the location of the camp, combining the features of both previous reserves, that led me to observe a dizzying 76 different bird species at Tubu Tree; I'd ticked 59 bird species in Xigera and 45 in Little Vumbura. My total for the week was an impressive 114 separate species. That included many a hold grail for birders: a pair of

## The peculiar, long beak of the curious and colourful saddle-billed stork seems to have been specially designed by the creator's novelty department

graceful, endemic slaty egrets; the rare, endangered wattled crane, which actually breeds in the Okavango; and the curious, colourful, saddle-billed stork whose peculiar, long beak seems to have been specially designed by the Creator's novelty department.

I tried my Laurens van der Post question on Johnny.

“Nine years a ranger,” I asked him. “What is the animal that has impressed you the most?”

He didn't have to think much. “Mostly it's birds that impress me,” he replied.

My feelings exactly. 🦶

*John Malathronas' travels in the Okavango Delta were organised by Expert Africa ([www.expertafrica.com](http://www.expertafrica.com)). With thanks to Wilderness Safaris ([www.wilderness-safaris.com](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com)) and Heathrow Express ([www.heathrowexpress.com](http://www.heathrowexpress.com)).*

Saddle-billed storks regularly attain a height of 1.5m, with almost 3m-wide wingspans. While both sexes are identically plumaged, the iris colour is a golden yellow in females and brown in males