

# ebb & flow

## Birding in the Okavango's Jao Reserve

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the current shape of the alluvial fan and the Okavango Panhandle, the latter being the 70-kilometre section of the Okavango River from where it enters Botswana until it spreads out into the alluvial plain of the delta.

The pattern of annual inundation and nutrient replenishment that pulses every year through this wetland system in an otherwise dry Kalahari sustains a remarkable diversity of habitats and species and provides exceptional year-round birding. Waterbirds congregate in large numbers on the first inflows of the season (usually in April) as their prey, displaced by the water, slowly percolates into the system. June and July see the height of the annual inundation as it provides critical water during Botswana's peak dry season and in some years reaches the delta's southernmost extremities. Between these inflows the water ebbs, but summer rains between October and March help to sustain life. In 2019 the entire Okavango system experienced a drier cycle than usual, but the 2020 season looks far more promising, with good summer rains in

Botswana being coupled with strong rainfall in Angola, the Okavango River's catchment.

The Jao Reserve lies on the Boro Channel in the north-west of the delta. Its vegetation and habitat matrix varies: in the east, the Jao Flats comprise an often seasonally inundated grassland mosaic dotted with island communities that include riverine tree species and palms, while at Hunda Island in the west the landscape is drier and supports acacia and mopane woodland.

The island communities with their riverine forest are bursting with bird-life and are generally productive all day. This is where you can find the likes of Western Banded Snake Eagle, Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, African Barred Owlet, Holub's Golden Weaver, Red-billed Spurfowl, Hartlaub's Babbler, Broad-billed Roller, Meyer's Parrot, Icterine Warbler, Terrestrial Brownbul, Brown Firefinch, Striped Kingfisher, Retz's Helmet-shrike, White-browed Coucal and African Mourning Dove.

The Okavango is also a recognised Important Birding and Biodiversity >



left *The Chirping Cisticola*, one of two sought-after cisticola species in the Okavango, favours areas of long grass.

above *Long-toed Lapwings* thrive in inundated and marshy parts of the Jao Reserve.

opposite *Jao* supports several owl species, including the magnificent, pink-lidded *Verreaux's Eagle-Owl*.

previous spread *The seasonally flooded Jao Flats* are a haven for wildlife, including herds of red lechwe.

The almost untouched wilderness of the Jao Reserve provides a window into the beating pulse of the Okavango Delta. I have been fortunate to visit this incredible area a number of times in the past few years as part of a bird-atlasing initiative and as a result I've come to understand a lot better how its ecosystem functions. Each of these trips has been unique, giving me insight into the region's birdlife in a different season. Yet every time, my arrival has been heralded by a Swamp Boubou duet and the day's activities have been accompanied by the lively chattering of flocks of the near-endemic Burchell's Starling.

Thanks to its abundant wildlife, the Okavango Delta is a protected area in Botswana. In 1996 it was designated a Ramsar site – a wetland of international importance – for its near-pristine state,

and in 2014 its unique biodiversity led to it being declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In a more recent and potentially exciting development, the National Geographic Society, under its Last Wild Places programme, has signed an agreement with the government of Angola to coordinate conservation of the Okavango and Kwando/Linyanti catchments over the next few years. Since the Okavango River rises in Angola before flowing 1500 kilometres through Namibia and into the delta, it is vulnerable to disturbances upstream. The National Geographic Society's initiative will thus help to protect the Okavango Delta and the nearby Linyanti region. It will also no doubt be lauded by birders, for whom the delta has long been a somewhat mythical destination, providing as it does an important refuge for more than 450 species.

As an inland delta (or, more correctly, alluvial fan), the Okavango is all the more impressive for being undammed and for following an ancient pattern of seasonal inundation. It spans 15 000 square kilometres at its peak, making it the third largest inland alluvial fan in Africa, and has formed in what would otherwise be a parched Kalahari Desert. The entire basin of the Okavango River is estimated to cover an area of 725 000 square kilometres, with more than 90 per cent of the river's flow coming from Angola.

Most fascinating is the fact that the delta was once part of an ancient superlake that covered a vast area across present-day Botswana. It owes its creation to a set of fault lines formed by tectonic movement along an extension of the East African Rift Valley. A series of further perpendicular faults created





Area, home to 17 species classified as Globally Threatened. As a result of Jao's pristine surroundings, several Vulnerable and range-restricted species occur in good numbers. The 60 000-hectare reserve provides critical habitat for important populations of Wattled Crane, Southern Ground-Hornbill, Slaty Egret, Saddle-billed Stork, Hooded and White-backed vultures and African Marsh Harrier. Wattled Cranes, for instance, congregate in impressively large flocks of 50 to 100 birds. The Okavango is one of the last strongholds for this species, with an estimated population of 1300 individuals.

The delta routinely attracts in excess of 20 000 waterbirds and 33 of the species occur in numbers that exceed 0.5 per cent of their global or regional population. The diversity of herons is particularly noteworthy: Purple and Squacco herons and the Black-crowned Night Heron are all common. This is also a stronghold – and the most important breeding site – of the Slaty Egret. A declining species with a total population of fewer than 3500, this stunning heron can still be seen at Jao.

During December, when the water supply is limited, the reserve's main channels and drying pools come alive with myriad egrets, herons, storks and other waterbird species. Visitors who spend time at such pools are amazed at the species diversity they observe: fishing Great, Little and Intermediate egrets, Black Herons, countless Marabou Storks, African Openbill, Yellow-billed Stork, Glossy Ibis, Fulvous and Knob-billed ducks, African Spoonbill, Pink-backed Pelican and even the occasional Greater Painted-snipe. African Fish Eagles are also abundant, occurring in some of the highest densities I have seen anywhere.

Jao is renowned for its scenic grasslands, which at the peak of the annual inundation are often covered by clear, shallow water and teem with life. When the water recedes in December, these verdant Jao Flats are transformed into a dry, short grassland



grazed by large herds of red lechwe. Watery channels lined by taller grass species wind through the landscape and it is here that one finds specialist species such as Rosy-throated Longclaw, Luapula Cisticola, Rufous-bellied Heron, Coppery-tailed and Black coucals and Marsh Owl. Swamp Nightjars are vocal at night, their distinctive >

above *The striking Rosy-throated Longclaw is often recorded in the wet grassland areas of Jao.*

top *The Okavango Delta, including Jao, is a breeding stronghold for Wattled Cranes.*

opposite *Roughly 85 per cent of the Slaty Egret's global population is confined to the Okavango Delta.*



thick cover of African mangosteen or Natal mahogany trees.

While atlasing at Jao we have enjoyed sightings of a number of outstanding species in a delta context. The most significant was a Narina Trogon, only the second record for the reserve and a great one of a species that typically is only reported infrequently in the Okavango Panhandle to the north of Jao. The trogon is scarce in Botswana, which lies at the western extremity of its range. Other noteworthy sightings have been of Collared Palm Thrush (at best only occasional in the Okavango Delta), Cuckoo Finch, Harlequin Quail, Lesser Moorhen, Dusky Lark, Dickinson's Kestrel (an important population in southern Africa), Sedge Warbler, Lesser Kestrel and Common Ringed Plover. Another phenomenal record was that of an out-of-range Short-toed Rock Thrush, atlased in September 2019 – the first for this species in the reserve and, in fact, the entire delta. The SABAP2 reporting rate for this rock thrush in Botswana is very low, with most records so far from the Gaborone and Lobatse areas.

Birding by *mokoro* can be an incredible experience. As you glide silently along, a myriad waterbirds are often in close proximity and from your



'chop-chop-chop' calls heard from sunset onwards. In the shorter grassed areas in summer I have also seen exciting species such as African Quail-finch, Common Buttonquail, Caspian Plover, Plain-backed Pipit, Grey-rumped Swallow, Desert Cisticola and Temminck's Courser.

A bird that everyone wants to see is Pel's Fishing Owl, a reclusive nocturnal piscivore that still finds in the Okavango the clear, pristine waters that suit its

above *It is usually worthwhile scanning groves of makalani palms for Dickinson's Kestrels.*

right *An Okavango resident, the Coppery-tailed Coucal is the largest of the coucal species in southern Africa.*

opposite, above *Lesser Jacanas thrive in the lily-filled backwaters of the Okavango and can be locally common at Jao.*

opposite, below *A brood parasite of cisticolas, the Cuckoo Finch is a frequent summer visitor to Jao.*



low-level vantage point you can observe and photograph them with ease. On one particular *mokoro* trip, large flocks of Whiskered and White-winged terns dappled the water's surface as they searched for prey in the golden light around us, while quiet backwaters filled with waterlilies and sedges were perfect for Okavango specials such as the Lesser Jacana. This species has a much more fragmented distribution than its larger relative and is frequently seen in the delta, where its density approaches one bird per hectare. On floating vegetation and along muddy margins I have also seen Long-toed Lapwing, Collared Pratincole and the migratory Western Yellow Wagtail, as well as shorebirds such as Ruff, Little Ringed Plover and Wood Sandpiper. The abundant aquatic vegetation is also perfect habitat for pairs of the colourful African Pygmy Goose. The Okavango is a major stronghold for this species too.

There is also a labyrinth of unspoilt watery channels and floating beds of

interconnected papyrus and phragmites reeds that are best accessed by small boat. It is here that you can expect to see Chirping Cisticola, Greater Swamp Warbler, Southern Brown-throated Weaver, Fan-tailed Widowbird, Little Bittern and, in summer, vocal flocks of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater.

Jao's drier western areas and the deciduous woodlands on Hunda Island are the places to look for Red-necked Falcon (an important resident population in the delta), Burnt-necked Eremomela, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Southern Black Tit, Purple Roller, Lesser Honeyguide, Brubru, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike and Swallow-tailed Bee-eater. Raptors like African Hawk-Eagle and Martial Eagle are also often seen around Hunda, while the sharp, rasping calls of Yellow-billed Oxpeckers reveal the birds' presence on larger mammal species such as Cape buffalo.

The Okavango Delta is one of my ultimate birding destinations, with



the bonus that it is set in some of the most dynamic and awe-inspiring habitats anywhere in Africa. Visiting Jao is akin to stepping into another birding realm. The birds seen are one thing; the contrast of a vibrant wetland in an arid landscape is quite something else. ♦