

Angola's Flying Treasures



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Angola's Star Birds:

Red-crested Turaco Perhaps the country's "top bird", found in forest along the escarpment.

Red-backed Mousebird A common endemic, found even in Luanda!

Gabela Helmetshrike Extremely rare endemic that can be seen near Luanda.

White-headed Robin-Chat Angola is the best place in the world to see this rare and beautiful bird.



A new view of natural wealth

Walking along the streets of Luanda, you probably glimpsed but never contemplated a small group of brown birds hurrying from tree to tree. You might mistake them for flying rats dragging their very long tail as they disappear into the foliage. I'll bet you never imagined that this Rabojunco, known in English as the Red-backed Mousebird, can be a key to developing tourism in Angola. This common bird is one of 15 species endemic to Angola. That means that this species cannot be found in any other country. Anyone wishing to see it must come to Angola, so it is like a magnet attracting tourists from all over the world.

In the world there are over 120 million birdwatchers, people that spend their spare time observing wild birds in their natural habitat. This group of people do not fancy aviaries or caged birds. A few million are called "listers" and they travel the entire world with a sole life mission—seeing as many of the world bird species as possible.

What are "Endemics"?

"Endemic Birds" are those restricted a certain country or region. These birds are usually the highest priority targets for travelling birders when they visit an area. Angola is blessed with over a dozen geopolitical endemic birds.



Angola Lies at a Remarkable Biological Crossroads

*Stretching from the Namibe Desert in the southwest
to the Congo Basin Rainforest in the north*

They take their sport very seriously and will do anything to add the next bird to their list. An avid birder will travel to remote corners of the planet, suffer extreme weather, climb mountains, survive on little food and sleep, and risk his life for that adrenalin rush of finding a new species and the celebration involved. Some birders have even been known to break into a victory dance on seeing a new bird, known as “lifer” or “tick” in their jargon. Both an addition to their list and a special prize – the possibility to move up in the ranking.

Swedish Bjorn Anderson is one of the top contenders in this competition and has seen over 9600 species. To achieve this immense number, he has visited over 125 countries and every continent. His goal is to break the “glass ceiling” the magical 10,000 species mark. It takes lots of traveling and he

explains “I plan my trips based on the possible additions to my life list”. Some trips are easy, but others can be very challenging, as some birds are in remote areas, physically difficult to reach, and others are so rare or elusive they require days and days of searching. “As a rule of thumb, I try to avoid areas of conflicts” he adds.

Entering this world, one quickly understands the magic. Birdwatching is a hobby but also a sport. It combines spending time in the outdoors, in the fresh air, mostly away from the crowds, often hiking or walking in parks, brush, forests, fields, deserts, or beaches, and sometimes sailing in lakes, rivers or the deep sea. Pretty much any place, even in the middle of city center, can reward the keen observer with a worthy sighting.

Birding evokes the hunting instinct and, indeed, the two have much in common. One must be

attentive and alert, spot a bird, and quickly decide if it is interesting enough to pursue. If interesting enough to pursue, then try to get a better view, considering distance, light and angle. After a pursuit, you may get a satisfying view. Essentially, you “hunted” the bird with your eyes and binoculars or camera. But what was that bird? In Angola, there are over 1000 species or close to 10% of the world’s total species. The identification requires analyzing the bird’s observed features and then classifying it as to species – a task that can be very challenging.



Birdwatching is a hobby but *also* a sport

Some groups of birds only differ in subtle ways. Some cannot be separated by sight but must be heard. Many have more than one plumage depending on whether it is a male or female, adult or young, and whether it is in or out of breeding plumage. Unfortunately, it's not always possible to gather all the necessary details to make a conclusive identification. Learning the birds leads to learning about their habitat, food, behavior, migration patterns, and many other aspects of nature. It is no wonder that most bird watchers collect books on natural history.

With all this knowledge, their appetite to travel grows. It is unusual to come across a birdwatcher who doesn't go places. The minute people began sharing their bird-list, this innocent hobby became a fierce sport: competitive birding. Birdwatching may start with a leisurely stroll to see feathered friends but can easily transform to an intense and continuing odyssey to score more ticks on the list.

Those are the hard-core birders, at one time an exclusive club of a few wealthy individuals with plenty of free time on their hands. But the doors have been opened to many new contenders and the competition is in full swing. Aided by the miracles of technology and the information superhighway, the fanatics can pinpoint with precision the location of nearly any bird. GPS locations, sounds, infrared equipment, binoculars, cameras, local guides and tour companies are but a few of the tools they use.

Most of these "athletes" come from either North America or Europe and, after a few intensive



In many cultures, birds are a good luck charm; we hope they will bring Angola the development it well deserves.

years of initiation, they discover world birding and get hooked. The initial phase is easy – a few trips to famous birding destination such as in Australia, India, Thailand, Kenya, Costa Rica, Peru, Colombia, South Africa and others. These birders will build up a significant list, but the next round begs for a strategy that includes visiting countries with a high number of endemics and range restricted species.

These birders form a community, sharing news and information about the places they visit, the birds they saw, and how they made their travel arrangements. As in every group, some are the pioneers, and as such are willing to try new ventures into new destinations. Those are the trendsetters. If they give a thumbs-up, other group members will follow. So, what will cause them to rave about a trip and make them happy? Well it's easy. These trendsetters travel to see special birds. Often, they engage local guides to assist them to find those birds more efficiently, requiring less time make the trip a success. They

also want to see healthy natural habitats, and well conserved areas that will guarantee the future of the local biodiversity. They care little about 5-star hotels or glamorous shopping centers but, like any human being, they enjoy a friendly atmosphere and are appalled by



Sites like Tundavala are not only scenically spectacular, but hold great birds as well

garbage littering the countryside.

Can we build Angola's tourism from birding fanatics? Costa Rica did just that. After the first birders went to see Costa Rica's special birds, it

became known as birders' must-go place. The first hard core-birders told their friends and family, and word of the beautiful and friendly destination spread. The birdwatchers discovered this Central American nation and opened the door to the millions of ecotourists that voted with their feet for this green and Pura Vida country.

Located in southwestern Africa, Angola boasts an impressive list of over 1000 bird species. Its escarpment runs parallel to the coast and creates an island effect that produces endemism for at least 15 species. The diverse habitats of Angola range from extreme desert to lush tropical forest, harboring a great assortment of birds, like bag full of candies for the birders.

Once we begin looking, we will notice birds everywhere but finding most of the special birds of Angola will require us going on a cross-country tour. Some birds live only in the forest in Kumbira, others in the Namibe Desert, some on the coast in Benguela, and more in the mountains in Huambo or the

jungles of Uige. To see all the country's endemics, I traveled through 11 provinces and each had something special to offer.

Not all the endemics are as widespread and easy to see as the RaboJunco. Some are very local and confined to a small area, like the beautiful Braun's Bush-Shrike that can be found only in a few patches of tropical forest near Quitexe, in Uige, or the White-bellied Barbet, so rare that it was rediscovered near Tundavala only a

few years ago. A few of the endemic species wear relatively dull plumage like the Hartret's Camaroptera, the Gabela Akalat, or the Angola Slaty-Flycatcher but others, like the Gabela Helmetshrike put on beautiful make-up complete with red eyelashes. Angola's national bird the Red-crested Turaco, is dressed for a party in a striking green, red, and blue outfit.



Birdwatching Tourism can drive both **Economic Growth** and **Conservation**

Though not endemic, some rare species can be found in only a few locations of which Angola is the most accessible. The rare and much sought-after White-headed Robin-Chat is such a bird. The robin-chat can only be found the vicinity of Kinjila, in Malanje and in a remote locality in the DRC.

There is also a great interest in migratory birds – those visiting the country only for a few months during the year. For

example, many shorebirds arrive during our summer after traveling from as far away as the arctic circle. Others, like the gorgeous African Pitta or the Damara Tern, are inter-African migrants.

Loss and degradation of habitat effects many Angolan birds. The forests are disappearing, sometimes cleared for migratory agriculture, sometimes being chopped for charcoal. Large-scale bushfires rage annually. When the forests

disappear, the birds disappear. They cannot live somewhere else. Bird populations are impacted everywhere across the country. A few of the endemic species such as the Gabela Bush-Shrike and Gabela Helmet-Shrike have suffered huge declines in population and are now classified as endangered. The endemic Swierstra's Francolin has become very rare due to heavy hunting.

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Unfortunately, Angola's protected area system harbors only a handful of the country's precious endemics and even there they are not safe. Recently, and after only a fraction of forest remained, the long-awaited Kumbira forest reserve was finally declared. Maybe bird tourism will create an important incentive for authorities to value birds and offer them effective conservation.

Recognizing the potential of birds to attract tourism the Ministry of Tourism started a project named "Apostar no Aviturismo." The aim is to develop the elements needed to activate this promising segment of the economy. The project focuses on a designed route in which all the endemic species can be seen on a typical birding tour of 18 days. Local youth from villages near birding sites along the route are training as birding guides. The project also helps the private sector identify opportunities arising from this new ecotourism, sponsors other activities to help promote Angola as a tourism destination, and seeks to welcome trend setting birders to serve as the country's "volunteer ambassadors". We expect that soon, Angola's nature will be the driver for tourism development.

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Apostar no Aviturismo

This ambitious project aims to create a "birding route" of Angola's best birding sites. At each site, local people will be trained as guides who will assist visitors in finding the special birds.



Birding as a catalyst for the growth of the tourism industry

Birders are among the most adventurous and flexible of tourists, and also the most highly motivated to visit new tourism destinations. As such, they're the perfect group to start attracting, in order to build momentum for Angola's tourism industry, and start to improve its global image as a tempting destination.

