



Promoting Nature-based and Bird Training for Tour Guides along the Sierra Leone River Estuary at Tasso Island

in memory of the loss of our Tutor Kenneth Musa Gbangba and our colleague Alusine Kamara

6-10 December 2021

With support of the Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative



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Introduction

Sierra Leone was adversely affected by the COVID pandemic and has suffered in all sectors of development, especially the tourism sector. IPC Travel helped to facilitate a training course along the Sierra Leone River Estuary at Tasso Island commemorating the two lost lives of our colleagues, the tour guide Alusine Kamara and our Tutor Kenneth Musa Gbangba. Tasso Island proved a very suitable venue for the training, with accommodation, facilities for training and its proximity to the wetlands and mangroves of the estuary.

Justification

Most certified tour guides in Sierra Leone lack basic birdwatching skills. Their clients sometimes include birdwatchers and the mere fact that as tour guides they cannot fully satisfy their clients shows the importance and need for further training. Nature-based tourism was growing in Sierra Leone prior to the COVID pandemic. Building nature tourism capacity now can play an important role in strengthening a tour guide network for when international and local tourism picks up again.

Aims for a network of tour guides

The project aimed to establish / strengthen a network of committed guides who play an important role in supporting bird conservation efforts. The specific aims were:

- (1) To increase the number of birdwatchers and people interested in nature
- (2) To produce useful information on the numbers and distribution of migratory birds
- (3) To train young birdwatchers to produce reliable scientific information from bird watching

Objectives of the Training Course

- To develop the birdwatching skills of local tour guides
- To build up the skills and interest of more women in Birdwatching in Sierra Leone for gender parity reasons, as there are far less women involved in Birdwatching in Sierra Leone compared to men.
- To enlighten tour guides about Palearctic migrants and their importance.
- To enhance the easy use and maintenance of birdwatching equipment, like a pair of binoculars and a telescope.
- To increase the number of women involved in Birdwatching in Sierra Leone.

Overview of the Training

Through the engagement of two trainers from CSSL and Fourah Bay University (Charles Showers and Momoh Bai Sesay), 10 tour guides from around the country were selected. Trainees came from different institutions and from the Tassoh community to represent and partake in the training. Subjects including basic bird identification, flyways and migration, census and monitoring, and use of field guides, binoculars and telescope. The trainees were also introduced to what is a wetland and why wetlands should be protected for birds. Information was also provided about protected areas and IBAs, and the importance of local wetlands like Aberdeen Creek was conveyed. Information was also provided on the importance of wetlands for breeding and roosting.



During the course, trainees gained direct experience of the estuary and its waterbirds through boat trips along the Tassoh wetlands. There was also time for discussion about building engagement for wetland and waterbird conservation, including the the establishment of local bird clubs. Through bird clubs, people can better appreciate conservation (through monitoring), economic gain (ecotourism), citizen science and recreational value. More people can become involved and support a national bird conservation movement. Trainees also shared ideas about the most effective ways of nature-based ecotourism in the coastal zone of Sierra Leone.



Workshop Programme

Day 1

Arrival of participants on Tasso Island.

All participants travelled by boat from the Freetown Ferry Terminal to Tasso Island using the Tasso Island Ventures Gladly Gladly boat.

Day 2

We started with the introduction of participants followed by the purpose of the training, which was basically to capacitate participants on the basics of Birdwatching, the Importance of wetlands and migrant birds, and why they are monitored globally.

We also asked trainees for their expectations which were:

- 1.To be better birders after the training
2. To be able to recognize and identify different wader species
- 3.To be able to conduct birdwatching tours
- 4.To be able to pass on their knowledge to other tour guides

Day 3

Topics on which the training was emphasized included:

- *Strengthening the network for the conservation of migratory birds and their habitats along our coastal areas:*

Building birdwatching networks through capacity building in communities close to migrant bird hotspots is very vital. With knowledge on the importance of migrant birds and their habitats, protection of these species and their habitats is assured by the immediate communities.

- *Birdwatching:*

The art and science of birdwatching was introduced interactively. Different ways of identifying birds through their features, such as colour, shape, gait, silhouette and habitat type were introduced.

- *Equipment used in Birdwatching and their care:*

The use of binoculars and telescopes was practically demonstrated to the participants with some practice sessions. As such equipment is expensive and used in varied weather conditions, ultimate care is important to keep them functioning properly. The various parts of the equipment like the objective lens and the eye piece were also introduced.

Birdwatching exercise:

The team extensively covered the mudflats of Tasso Island, scanning it with pairs of binoculars, identifying bird species available. It was a worthwhile exercise as it brought trainees closer to the nature of the waterbirds. A list of waterbirds encountered can be seen on the checklist below.

Day 4

Tour of Bunce Island, birdwatching along the way:

After the intensive training on Tasso Island, the team visited Bunce Island (shown below) to continue practicing waterbird identification and assess the ecology of the renowned island with a great history of the Atlantic slave trade.



Day 5

Return to Freetown

Participants

Participants of the training workshop included students from the Osprey Nature Club on Tasso Island, Members of National Certified Tour Guides (NaCToG), a student of Limkokwing University of Science and Technology studying Tourism, a member of the Sierra Leone Museum and a student from the Freetown Teachers College. The trainees included four women. Trainers were Charles Showers (President CSSL) and Momoh Bai Sesay (CSSK & Fourah Bay University). The programme was coordinated by Ousman Kamara.

Organization

IPC Travel
Conservation Society of Sierra Leone

NACTOG
River No 2
Limkokwing University of Creative
Technology
Freetown Teacher College
Osprey Nature Club

Name

Ousman S Kamara
Charles Showers (President)
Momoh Bai Sesay, Emanualla Christiana Sowryer,
Anita Momodu, Peter Momoh Bassie
Daniel Macaulay

Adama Kadijah Thoronka, Safiatu Koroma
Fatmata Sagbay Fofanah
Momoh Parrot, Aminata S. Kargbo

Dedication to our lost tour guides

This training was done in remembrance of a professional Birdwatcher and professional tour guide Kenneth Gbengba and younger Birdwatcher and guide Alusine Kamara, who both passed away in 2020 and 2021. The training workshop was a dedication to them as avid Birdwatchers in Sierra Leone, who were also qualified guides and well known in the network.

Kenneth Gbengba

Kenneth was a regional professional Birdwatcher who mastered our West African birds when he travelled the coast of West Africa. He eventually came back home in 2003, and was a member and volunteer of the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone, before starting his National Tourist Board registered tour company called Facts Finding Tours, in Sierra Leone. This was the first ever Birdwatching Tour Company in Sierra Leone. He passed away on the 3rd of August, 2020. May his gentle soul rest in perfect peace.



Alusine Kamara



Alusine started as an amateur birdwatcher and developed his birdwatching skills pretty fast. He worked for a tour company called Visit Sierra Leone. As a member of CSSL, he also participated in annual migratory waterbird counts. He passed away on September 1st 2021. May his gentle soul rest in perfect peace.

Group actions and plans

A new tour guide bird group formed during the workshop has now been recognized by colleagues, tour guides, the National Tourism Board, NacToG and CSSL. This group has 14 members already, comprising the workshop participants and two new members - Abu Bakerr Turay and Alex, both from Milton Magai College of Education and Technology (MMCET). The group plans to register itself as an NGO, in order to be able to carry out and plan its own activities in collaboration with partners.

The group received a consignment of field guides from the WSFI, which were sent to CSSL for distribution within Sierra Leone.

The group hopes to organize birding trips often, so that members will become more familiar with birds and continue to learn how to use their new field guides to be able identify birds. A meeting is planned to organise a birding trip over the Easter period.



Recommendations

- *Organise further trainings and secure more funds so that more participants will be involved*

Further training workshops would go a long way in capacitating more birdwatchers in Sierra Leone, where professional birdwatchers as tour guides are lacking and needed.

- *More women should be trained in Birdwatching in Sierra Leone*

There are currently no professional female birdwatchers in Sierra Leone. This imbalance needs to be addressed, so that more women can be involved in Birdwatching and related tourism, which can also create jobs.

- *More practical Birdwatching exercises should be conducted*

Continued practical birdwatching is essential for trainees to improve and maintain their skills. This began already during the course through practical Birdwatching exercises, but this practice must continue, so that trainees can remember our birds and improve their knowledge.

- *Field guides, telescopes and pairs of binoculars are needed for trainees*

Without Birdwatching equipment, it will be a real challenge for trainees to continue and improve in birdwatching. This equipment encourages amateurs to become professionals.

- *More collaboration with other agencies*

If I can well remember, this collaboration started with the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone and now with IPC and I am looking forward to the day that all of these organizations will partner with other new organizations to fund such trainings.

Checklist of Waterbird Species counted on Day 3

A total of 14 waterbird species were clearly identified by all participants, which is a good start for beginners. The species and the numbers counted during the training are shown below. (These do not reflect numbers for an official bird count, but just for purposes of the training). A photo of an Osprey by Charles Showers is shown, which is suitable, noting the participation of the Osprey Bird Club.

Bird Species	Number
Whimbrel	6
Common Greenshank	4
Common Redshank	20
Common Sandpiper	15
Grey Plover	5
Grey Heron	4
Pied Kingfisher	10
Western Reef Egret	12
Giant Kingfisher	2
Little Egret	7
Intermediate Egret	3
Green-backed Heron	8
Osprey	1
Sandwich Tern	2
Total	99

