



most wanted

AFRICAN PITTA

I don't know of any birder who hasn't got African Pitta *Pitta angolensis* on his or her bucket list. It, or any pitta for that matter, is worth going the extra mile to see – in fact, there is even a recent book (*The Jewel Hunter* by Chris Goodie) about a birder who gave up his job to devote a year to pursuing pittas found around the world. Although I'd probably not give up a career for it, it has been a burning ambition of mine to see and get better acquainted with this jewel of a bird, and how this came to be fulfilled, and with whom, ranks amongst my most memorable birding experiences, writes **WARWICK TARBOTON**.

I don't remember whether the plan originated with Hugh Chittenden, Richard Peek or me, but a couple of weeks before Christmas 2010, Hugh, Richard, myself and our respective spouses packed up our photographic gear, which included scaffolding and hides, braved the dreaded Zimbabwe border posts and set off for the Zambezi valley below Mana Pools.

Hugh had Google-Earthed the area and mapped the maze of thickets along the drainage lines below the escarpment there which held the best potential for the birds, and Richard had secured a place to stay at the Marara hunting camp, 50 kilometres west of the historically known pitta site at Mashumbi Pools.

We arrived there late after some hectic negotiation with the muddy roads en route – a good sign, as the rains had commenced and that meant the pittas had arrived. Dawn the next morning couldn't arrive soon enough and from the valley below us came the unmistakable frog-like 'ffrueeep' call of a pitta. Finding the bird and a couple of their nests, putting up hides and getting photographs was going to be a walk in the park.

Well, it wasn't like that. The bird soon stopped calling and went underground, defying all our

efforts to locate it in the densely wooded valley. We also soon discovered that the place was alive with snakes: birds mobbing in the tree in front of the camp revealed the presence here of the mother of all mambas, a large, green boomslang slithered through the rafters above us at breakfast, and various smaller, unidentified species made appearances at regular intervals.

Drawing a blank in the first valley, our efforts extended on the second day into neighbouring drainage lines. Things were beginning to look bleak when, taking a shortcut back to camp through some open bush, I spotted a large, ball-like nest in the upper branches of a lone knobthorn sapling. No sign of the owners, but when I put my mirror-stick up to check it, there was a single egg, unmistakably that of a pitta, lying in the cup.

Later that afternoon we checked again and, although there was no bird present, the nest now contained two eggs, so the scaffolding and hide went up, and for the next five days the three photographers in the party rotated long hours sweating in the hide, watching the activity through the lens. We discovered that the sexes shared incubation, one bird sitting all day, the other all night, with brief change-overs early in the morning (around 05h45), and again late in the afternoon (around 18h00). So photographing the birds at the nest was restricted to a matter of seconds twice a day when the quick, silent change-overs occurred.

Each evening we downloaded the images that had been taken and compared notes, discovering that the male and female were essentially identical in plumage but could be distinguished as one had a small nick in one of its wing coverts. Our big fear was that a snake would rob the nest; this nearly happened as one egg disappeared after the first day, but, surprisingly, a day later there was again a second egg in the nest. Over



above Warwick Tarboton, well camouflaged in the hide, on pitta-watch duty in Zimbabwe.

left The pittas' large, ball-shaped nest contained two eggs.

opposite It doesn't get much better than this... the stunning African Pitta at its nest.

the following days as we got to know the birds' routine better and where they went about their business during their off-hours, we found sites, two of them more than 100 metres from the nest, where they called briefly and where they did their strange jumping-jack display. We even located one pitta foraging on the ground.

Notwithstanding searing heat, snakes, muddy roads, an attempted hijacking on the way home, and more, it was a truly memorable few days that will forever be remembered from the photographs we took, the companionship we experienced and from the paper we wrote on our observations which later appeared in *The Honeyguide*. And that's one more thing ticked off the bucket list. ♦



WARWICK TARBOTON (2)