



ROSE SKELTON

TAKING FLIGHT

Entranced by the beauty and mysteries of birds, Moussa Ka is determined to become one of Senegal's first ornithologists

I started working as a tour guide in Saint-Louis when I was 30 years old. If you want to work as a guide here, you have to know a bit about birds because we have the third-largest bird park in the world. After the first day of my training, I thought it was impossible to recognise all of these birds. But I was working at that time as a volunteer teacher in a primary school and I said, I need this job to feed myself and my family. So I took this difficulty on as a challenge and said, I must succeed. It became something like a passion.

I am applying to do a master's course in ornithology at the university in Saint-Louis, and I will be one of the first ornithologists in Senegal. It is the only course in all of West Africa. European scientists have been to Africa and done many studies, but there is still more to learn about African birds, like how and where they live during the different periods. We have a shortage of quality teachers and materials in Senegal, and we need to travel to other parts of the world. Birding is not only theoretical, you have to see the species for yourself. The book helps you to distinguish between two very close species, but the real work is on the ground.

I love everything about birds. I have never seen such beautiful colours anywhere else, those beaks which curve

down and up, those beautiful songs. In particular, I love the fact that birds travel a long way from Europe to Senegal every year with no break. As long as the natural environment remains intact, these birds will keep making this long journey. Can you imagine a person walking every year to Senegal and back? Sometimes birds can do things that people cannot do, and that is wonderful.

There are three different families living in my house. We are a big traditional Senegalese family. I was married but we separated in 2002 and my two children live with me. Sometimes the mothers here cannot take care of the children, and they do not always go to school. As someone who went to school, I could not have my children not having an education and that is why I took them with me. She and I are not friends, but we are neighbours so she sees them every day if she wants.

I show my kids and my nieces and nephews the bird book to try to get them interested. Every time they see a bird they call me: "Moussa, Moussa, come and see the bird," and I tell them what it is, what they eat, and if it is migratory or not. My friends in the neighbourhood wonder, how can I be interested in birds? They say: "This guy is somehow crazy." They think that birds are only there to be eaten, or else there is no use for them.

There was never a boy in my family who sang for freedom like I did. I was the first person to say no to my parents and some in my family do not appreciate that. In life I value peace. If there is peace, everything works well. But you have to be free to have peace, free to do what you want to do, to live your life as you wish. Maybe that's why I like birds. Without really knowing it, yes, maybe it is linked to that. ● Interview by **Rose Skelton**