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Black-tailed Godwit Demographic project

Why should Black-tailed Godwits still winter in West-Africa if Southern Iberia is just as good?

Expedition report Guinea Bissau, December 2015, University of Groningen & Global Flyway Network



Photo: Hamilton Monteiro

J.C.E.W. Hooijmeijer, H. Valkema & T. Piersma
December, 2015

Funded by Global Flyway Network in cooperation with the University of Groningen

Summary

From 7-19 December we visited Guinea Bissau on a Black-tailed Godwit ring-reading expedition. We had planned our visit in December because we had hoped to get better views of the (legs of the) birds when the rice had been harvested. Last year we were here in November and it was sometimes problematic to see them well. Later in December godwits are supposed to leave towards their staging areas in Iberia before moving on to their breeding locations in NW-Europe.

Our itinerary mainly focussed on the huge rice fields along the Mansoa River. As expected, the fields near Unche and Pache Iala turned out to be the primary location for godwits (max. 1250 godwits) but we were surprised to see that nearly all other sites we visited were almost without any birds. We could not find a clear clue for that because fields were very comparable with harvest in full swing, dry fields close to the villages and wet fields towards the mangroves and plenty of rice to forage on, either on the plants, on the fields or on the dams. The birds we saw were all in excellent condition and seemed ready for migration and had an average fat score (abdominal profile) of 3,7 on a 1-5 scale (n=30).

As visiting random ricefields that looked good based on aerial pictures did not turn out to be a very fruitful strategy, we switched to visiting also the more remote sites where birds with satellite transmitters had very recently been seen like Ilha de Pecixe and the area north of the Rio Cacheu. We found some small flocks of around 200 individuals at each of these sites but we never encountered large flocks like in Unche or near Mansoa in 2014. This meant that getting resightings was troublesome and after 10 days we finished our mission with 85 sightings of 48 individuals. In the weeks before our departure the satellite tagged birds already showed quite some movements in a northerly direction and we think we were simply too late to see big numbers. As far as we can see, the reason for this departure can't be adverse conditions in Guinea Bissau where conditions were good and food was plenty.

This mission was funded by the Global Flyway network in cooperation with University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Logistically all went smoothly thanks to our excellent and ever cheerful guide Hamilton Monteiro and driver Mario. Joaozinho Sa (Wetlands Int.) helped very efficiently with the organisation and paperwork for this mission. A big thank you to all of you! (figure 1)



Figure 1. Expedition team. f.l.t.r: Mario (driver), Jos Hooijmeijer, Hamilton Monteiro (local guide), Haije Valkema

Daily report: 7 – 19 December 2015

Appendix I includes a map with all visited locations, the number of godwits seen and individual colour ring combinations read

7 December

Today was a travelling day from Amsterdam to Bissau where we arrived as scheduled at 4 am.

8 December

In the morning we met Joaozinho Sa of Wetlands International in his office in Bissau. We discussed the situation of Black-tailed Godwits in Guinea Bissau. In recent years large areas of rice fields have been lost because of lack of management. The dikes to keep the salt water out are often not maintained very well and this leads to frequent breakthroughs. As a result of that ricefields are given up and the villagers switch to the more profitable planting of cashew trees. After we updated him on the latest results of our research, we arranged the payment for their help with the logistics. The rest of the day we spent with changing money, buying food and camping equipment. In the evening we met the Portuguese team: Jose Alves, Sara Pardal, Afonso Rocha and Jaime Ramos. They were here to catch godwits for Sara's PhD project on avian diseases. In the past two weeks they had caught 6 individuals. Numbers had dropped recently and we promised them to keep an eye on potential catching locations when we are visiting the ricefields.

9 December

We started our expedition NW of Bissau in the ricefields of Quiuta near Blom. We immediately found a group of 150 birds in a rice field that was being harvested. Bundles of rice were put up in the trees to let them dry and perhaps also to keep them from being eaten by godwits (figure 2). The birds were very skittish and when approached they flew up and disappeared again in the high rice stubble. We checked about 40 birds without any luck. We moved on afoot to the south but it took us several hours before



Figure 2. *The remaining trunks from the old mangrove are used to dry harvested rice and to protect the rice against godwits.*

we saw the next group close to Reina where about 150 birds were present in a mixed flock with 75 Ruffs and 60 Collared Pratincoles. Our luck turned and we found 3 birds with colour rings in this small group. We decided to visit the Blom ricefields in the end of the afternoon and found one more colour ringed bird in a group of 30 godwits. When we entered them in the database later that night, we found out that 3 of these 4 birds were already seen by us in August 2015 in the Casamance and one of them was seen at exactly the same location in November 2014 (Blom). Our first impression of the rice fields was that about 35% had been harvested, water levels were high, crops were good but we had seen areas that have been abandoned since November 2014. Local farmers told us that heavy rains and storms in October have destroyed some of the dams. The rain season was extremely dry until October but that month completely made up for the poor rainfall earlier. That night we camped at Blom.

10 December

In the early morning we left Blom and drove to Pache Iala. During this trip we checked the ricefields of Quinta de Campelo close to Bissau, however we did not find any godwits. In the afternoon we checked the rice fields of Pache Iala. Last year we mentioned that this area was very well managed by the local farmers of the Balanta-tribe and also this year this was the case. Our impression of the rice fields was that



Figure 3. Bundles of harvested rice stored on the small dikes to dry: perfect for godwits to forage *ad libitum* on rice grains.

75% was already harvested, they were still quite wet and crops seemed to be good (figure 3). The expedition team of Sara Pardal let us know that they found 400 godwits in this area the day before. Before 16:00 we could find only small flocks of maximum 30 godwits but in the late afternoon godwits seemed to arrive from the direction of Unche. We found a flock of 400 godwits and could read 7 colour ring combinations. Unfortunately only 4 combinations belonged to the RUG scheme.

Around 17:00 we saw in the western part of Pache (N’Fante) another flock of 500 godwits. We called it a day around 17:30 in the afternoon and decided to come back in the early morning. That evening we heard stories that the local Balantas at Pache eat godwits for Christmas, when they are nice and fat for migration. We can imagine they are a good meal because many birds already have a fat score of 4 (on a 1-5 scale)!

11 December

We rose at first light and after breakfast we went to the Pache Iala ricefields. We saw again about 400 birds spread out over a large area. Ringreading was frustrating because we literally saw the birds only when they flew up at 50 meters between the high rice stubbles (figure 4). But we persisted and continued to look for scarce opportunities. Only when they flew to little ponds or bare ground in the rice fields we got a good chance to see rings. By the end of the morning we had seen most of the area and chased godwits from one end to the other. We finished the morning with a comfortable 11 ring combinations of which 9 were from the RUG scheme. We saw also one transmitter bird ‘Gargaligas’. Again we have seen birds that were previously in Casamance or last year in the same area. After lunch we checked the far west of the ricefields at Pache N’Fante. Less than 10 % had been harvested here and we left to break up our camp at Pache Iala and headed for Unche where we arrived just before sunset.



Figure 4. *Wet and harvested rice fields at Pache Iala. High rice stubbles made it hard to ready colour rings of godwits.*

12 December

After a cold night we made an early start in the Unche ricefields. Like in Pache the ricefields were in excellent condition. They were very wet and more than 95% had already been harvested. A lot of rice was still lying on the dikes and many people were carrying the crops to the village. A lot of rice was spilled on the dikes and many

birds were foraging on these leftovers. Some birds were showing aggressive behaviour and were with fighting each other. Moreover some males were already in full breeding plumage and when they moved to another rice fields they were making display calls. The birds on the dikes were our only opportunity to see rings in the morning because when they were foraging in the ricefields, they disappeared completely between the cut rice plants (figures 5&6). By the end of the morning we had only seen a handful of combinations but our luck turned when birds started to congregate in a lagoon at the edge of the mangroves. Birds came mainly from the



Figure 5. *Godwits that forage on dikes were the only possibility to read rings.*

direction of the Pache area to roost here. No surprise that some of them had already been seen previously in that area. In a few hours we saw almost 40 ring combinations of which more than 25 were of the RUG scheme in a group of 1250 godwits. Again, some of them were seen previously in the Casamance in 2015 or in Guinea Bissau in 2014. We left the ricefields at 14:00 to do some shopping in Bulla and travelled to our next site at Inquida where we arrived just before sunset.

13 December

After our successful day at Unche yesterday, we started to explore the ricefields further to the East along the Mansoa river. In the morning we explored the Inquida



Figure 6. *Godwits disappear almost completely between rice stubbles.*

“bolanha”. The fields were in good condition, dry close to the village and more wet towards the mangroves like in in most ricefields we have visited. About 80% had been harvested but there was still a lot of rice on the dams and in the fields. However, we saw only one godwit and 30 flying over, heading south. We left Inquida before noon and after a long and bad road, we arrived at Blafechuro-Ungro. We still had time to check this big rice field complex before dark. Again great ricefields, 50% harvested, nice big wetlands in the centre of the fields but again no birds. Well, we saw 4 on the ground and 6 heading southeast. There was a group of at least 700 Collared Pratincoles and 25 Ruff. We followed the harriers in the area to spot godwit flocks without any luck and had to conclude that for some reason the fields we visited today were no good for godwits. We camped at Blafechuro with a very friendly family.

14 December

We left Blafechuro early in the morning and after some shopping in Mansoa we arrived in Bissa, on the banks of the Rio Geba, at noon. After the regular negotiations and exchange of information with the local farmers we walked into this huge ricefield complex. They said that almost no godwits were present, but more birds were seen August and September. But fortunately we could make use of the coordinates where 2 birds with satellite tags had recently been seen so that we had at least some idea where to go to. When we arrived at the spot, there was no rice but a big area of grass and wasteland and no birds to be seen in miles.



Figure 7. *Godwits at Bissa, staying in a pool at the edge of the mangroves.*



Figure 8. *Almost all wet grasslands had dried up and recently two birds with transmitters left this area.*

We contacted our colleagues at Groningen University to get the most recent coordinates and found out that both birds had just left the area a few days ago! (figure 8) The reason for this was quite clear: all water in this area had completely dried up. We think that the birds might not have been foraging on rice but on seeds and tubers of wild grass species. It reminded us of the big flock we found close to Mansoa last year that was in a quite similar habitat. At the moment we decided to go back, a group of 100 birds flew over in the distance and landed on the edge of the mangroves. We found them back but unfortunately none of them was ringed (figure 7). This night we slept at Mansoa.

Box 1: Rice harvest



After cutting the rice plants, they are bundled and, awaiting transport, left to dry on the dikes (figure 3). The bundles are transported by women and children to the villages.



The rice crop was collected at places on the edge of the rice fields. A compact floor, made of a mixture of water and manure, prevents that rice gets mixed with sand.

15 December

In the early morning we arrived at Enchugal. This place was visited by transmitter-godwits until late November but they seemed to have avoided this area more recently. Our local guide gave us an extensive tour through the rice fields. Like the fields we visited in the past few days, they were in excellent condition, wet and dry parts, 50% was harvested and good ponds on the edge of the mangroves. However, we found not even a single godwit! The local guide confirmed that the birds had recently left and told us that 15 years ago there were more birds and they stayed even until February. Before noon we left the area for the next destination: Ilha de Pecixe. This is an island on the south coast of the Cacheu-peninsula. We arrived at 18 at the ferry: a hollow tree trunk that brought us safely across. After a bouncing road trip we arrived at the house of Raul, a local hunter that would show us around the next day and we slept at his house.

16 December

At daytime we saw the real beauty of Ilha de Pecixe. Small traditional houses lay amidst giant trees and small scale ricefields on the west coast between dune ridges. We readily found our first godwits but they were not in the ricefields but in small semi-dried up ponds along the western dune ridge (figure 9). One bird was seen eating a big worm. Approaching them was hard because they took us apparently for a hunting party. We had to crawl through the bushes to get them in sight. Fortunately we were rewarded with 2 birds with colour rings, a code flagged bird and Madrigalejo, one of our satellite tagged birds. It was in excellent condition and seemed ready for migration. In total we saw 200 godwits. In the late afternoon we took the ferry back and camped at the mainland.



Figure 9. Godwits on Ilha de Pecixe forage in pools, beyond this pools were rice fields where we did not observe godwits.

17 December

Just north of the Ponte Sao Vicente over the Rio Cacheu lay big saltwater mudflats, small ricefields and saltpans in vast mangroves. They can partly be overlooked from the main road between the bridge and Antotinha. We were lucky that the water level was low and birds were foraging in shallow water close to the main road. We readily found about 150 birds in 3 separate flocks and managed to read 2 rings from our scheme. One of them had been seen at this location last year as well. We moved on towards the village of Antotinha and entered the adjacent small ricefield complex. Again, harvest was in full swing and about 60 % was already cut. The fields were well-maintained and wet with some abandoned fields where godwits came to rest at mid day. We read another 4 ring combinations but unfortunately only one from our own scheme. In the afternoon we left to set up our last camp again at Unche where we had our best day.

18 December

On our final day we hoped to have a good score again at Unche. In the morning we saw only 3 colour ring combinations as birds were foraging in the ricefields and hardly visible. The rice harvest had been completed and a lot of rice had already been transported to the village. On the small dams the birds were feasting on the rice kernels that had fallen from the plants that were left there to dry before being transported. At this time of the day ringreading was very inefficient. But we made up for that around noon when birds came to roost in the lagoons in the ricefields. Around 800 birds were present and we managed to read almost 30 combinations. About 20% had not been seen on our previous visit to Unche which was by far the most productive location this year. (figure 10)

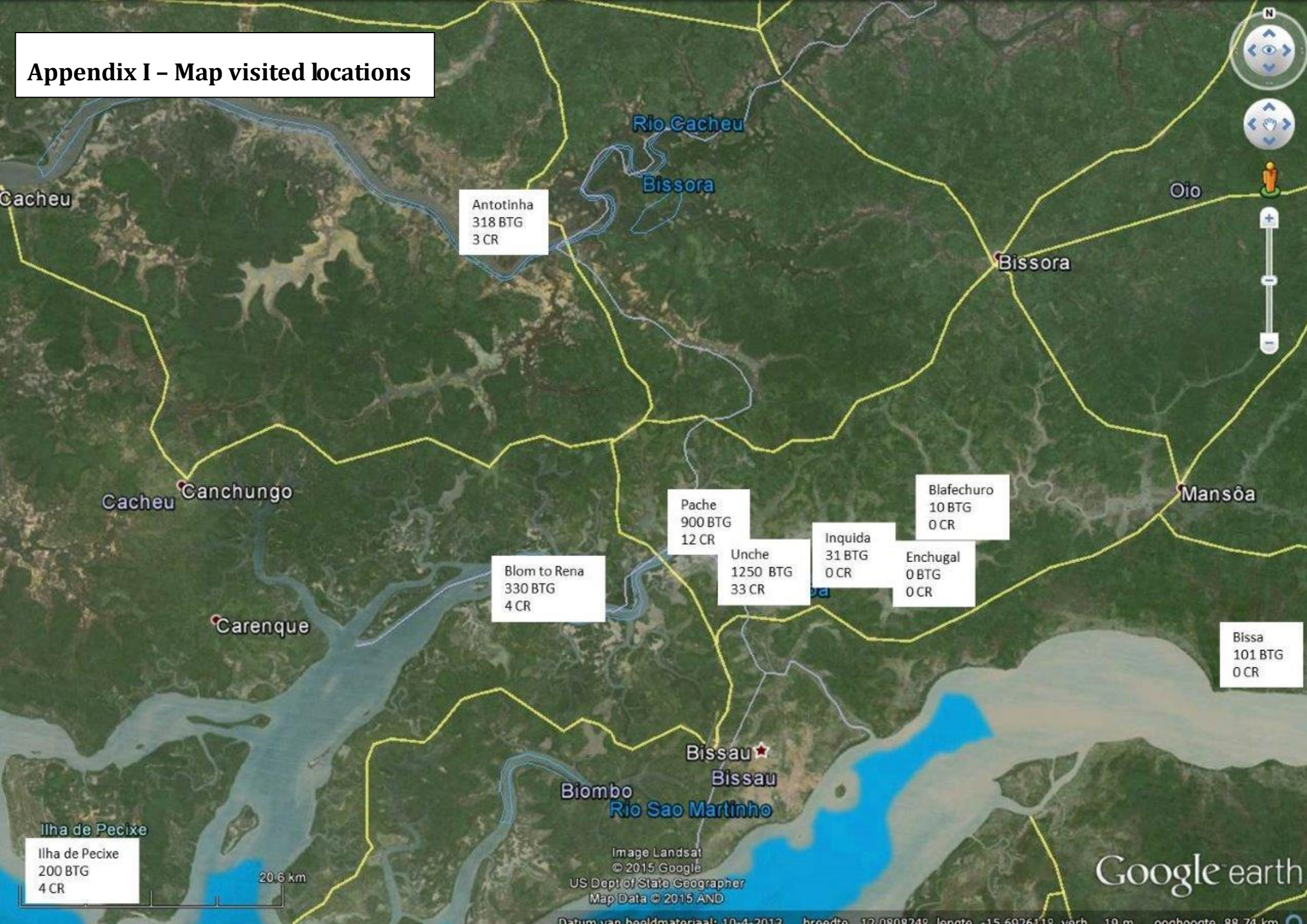


Figure 10. *During noon godwits came to rest at lagoons at Unche; 1250 godwits (12-12) and 800 godwits (18-12) were present here around 14:00.*

19 December

Traveling from Bissau to Amsterdam

Appendix I - Map visited locations



Ilha de Pecixe
200 BTG
4 CR

Antotinha
318 BTG
3 CR

Blom to Rena
330 BTG
4 CR

Pache
900 BTG
12 CR

Unche
1250 BTG
33 CR

Inquida
31 BTG
0 CR

Blafechuro
10 BTG
0 CR

Enchugal
0 BTG
0 CR

Bissa
101 BTG
0 CR