

Kenya Birding

THE NATURE KENYA MAGAZINE ISSUE 14, 2020



Dispersal of Caper Whites

The 'migration' of these butterflies is one of Africa's greatest wonders

Wondrous Mount Loima

Insights into a hidden landscape of incredible intact forest

Birding in Busia

Great tips about the different habitats to explore for epic birding in this western county



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Kenya Birding

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- South Nandi Kobujoi Eco-resource Centre
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- Taita Eco-resource centre, Taita Hills

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ABOUT NATURE KENYA

Nature Kenya (the East Africa Natural History Society) is a non-profit conservation organisation. Established in 1909 it works to promote the understanding and conservation of nature.



NatureKenya
THE EAST AFRICA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY



A bright future for the birds and you

Having spent so many years raising awareness about birding in Kenya, it pains me to hear about how devastating the COVID-19 situation has been for many guides, camps and others in tourism. For birders also, who wouldn't normally think twice about traveling to any of the many birding spots we are blessed to have around the country, it is presently 'complicated' by new considerations.

But I want to encourage us all, to look and work for a more amazing future. Nature Kenya's bold step in producing this year's issue of *Kenya Birding* is done in this vein and I'm very proud and grateful for their determination. I think it is very important to keep the flag flying high and not to give in or give up, especially not at a time when direction and vision will be needed. Our economy's heavy reliance on natural resources and agriculture will continue even as we consider how to move on from this crisis. The magazine helps us share our work and love for birds and the environment — it illustrates the reasons why we have to rally to get back and come back better, bolder and more beautiful than ever.

This issue will help remind you of the amazing places (*check out Mount Loima area by Kieran Avery pg. 16*), and birds we benefit from and are privileged to enjoy (*learn about Birding in Busia pg. 36*). We have insights from the field of ongoing conservation work that will continue to need all our support — *see pg. 28* where Darcy Ogada speaks about helping communities in Laikipia coexist with predators and preventing wildlife poisoning.

I know that for many of the wonderful people protecting sites and species around the country it is a lifelong passion and they are not easily deterred. Indeed, they show unwavering dedication even in the face of danger and a great example is in Francis Kagema's *In Pursuit of the Sokoke Scops Owl pg. 14*. It is also heartening to see tree planting efforts get a boost, with companies like Kenya Breweries Limited *doing even more* (see *Forest and Business by Paul Gacheru pg. 30*). Years of community conservation work is also starting to bear fruit in significant ways as Serah Munguti shows in *Sustainably exploiting the economic potential of the Tana Delta pg. 32*.

The sector has a rare opportunity to reset, building upon all the great things we still have to celebrate.

For your continued birding,

Catherine

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Coexistence Co-Op, bird watchers in
Yala by Emily Mateche, a show of hands
among tree planters, Mount Kenya
forest photo courtesy of OXYGÈNE MCL,
Lappet-faced Vulture and Great White
Pelicans by Lorenzo Barelli, Slender-
billed Weaver by Mustafa Adamjee.



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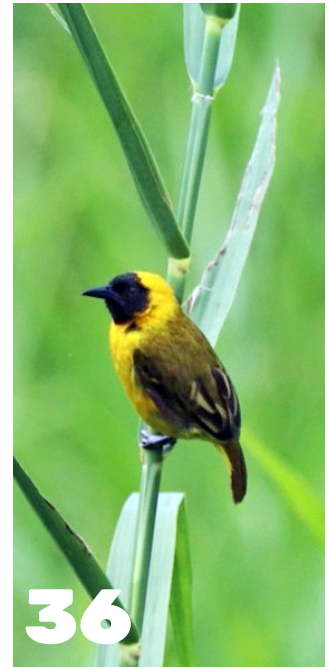
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Take action to support tree planting and save forests

Paul Matiku **Executive Director**



Trees produce wood and poles for houses, furniture, fences, paper, tools and works of art. Trees are a source of medicine, gums and resins; they provide fibre for rope, seeds for ornaments. Over 90% of rural households in Kenya depend on fire wood for cooking and timber to build homes. Some special trees are used to make products for religious or social ceremonies. In Kenya, 50% of all the different kinds of trees, shrubs and woody vines are found in forests. So too, 40% of mammals, 35% of butterflies and 30% of bird species live in forests.

Dwindling forest cover

Closed-canopy forests in Kenya cover only 2% of the land surface. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recommends a minimum of 10% forest cover for every sovereign state. In Kenya, under the Agriculture (Farm Forestry) Rules, 2009, all agriculture lands need to maintain a minimum of 10% tree canopy cover. However, this is not the case and the result is a loss of soil and fertility, siltation and sedimentation of waterbodies, flooding and landslides, and climate change. Nature Kenya aims to restore forests by protecting existing trees, restoring degraded areas and growing trees to maintain forest ecosystem services.



Declining water quantity and quality

The reduced quantity and quality of water in Kenya is due to catchment degradation. This has serious impacts on hydropower generation and irrigation and increases the cost of water treatment for urban and domestic use.

Aerial view of a section of Mount Kenya forest.

PHOTO BY JEREMY LÄ ZELLE

Nature Kenya tree growing approach

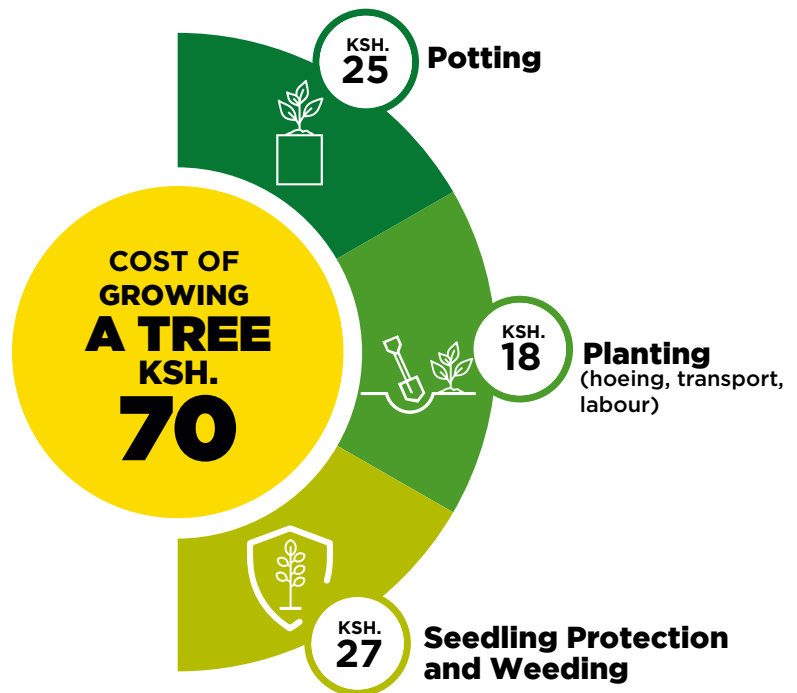
Nature Kenya works with Community Forest Associations (CFAs) — a bottom up approach in tree planting that ensures ownership from the grassroots. We provide training in establishing tree nurseries, hoeing, planting, weeding and protecting seedlings.

The tree growing process

- With CFAs Nature Kenya identifies and maps the specific areas for restoration.
- Funds raised are provided for the purchase of nursery tools, water, pumps, fuel, tanks, poly tubes and technical support.
- Indigenous seedlings are produced in nurseries managed by the local community organisations.
- A tree-planting schedule is discussed and agreed. These discussions involve the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) site officers.
- Seedlings are procured, and CFA members do the hoeing and planting.
- To enhance the survival rate, weeding of tree seedlings is also supported. The estimated cost for a period of 2 years paying casual labour twice annually is Ksh 27 per seedling. This includes monitoring and supervision to ensure an 80% survival rate.
- Nature Kenya pays the CFAs the equivalent of agreed cost per planted tree after all the planting is completed and a verification report is produced.
- The entire tree growing process takes a minimum of three years.

Tree-growing champions!

- *Kenya Breweries Limited* is leading the way planting 200,000 trees in Mount Kenya and the Aberdares (2017-2020). They are also engaging their supply chain in the exercise (*see pg. 30 for more info*).



- *Safaricom* has partnered with Nature Kenya for the planting of 50,000 trees in South Nandi, North Nandi and Kakamega forest (*see pg. 34 for more info*).
- *Coca-Cola* is considering a proposal to plant 100,000 trees in 2020.

Cost of growing a tree.

GRAPHICS BY JOHN MWACHARO

With the Kenya government pledging to restore 5.1 million ha by 2030, the tree planting opportunity is vast and requires everyone's support. There is enough work for everybody.



Join our tree-planting efforts to sustain life on earth: To join e-mail: office@naturekenya.org and/or matiku@naturekenya.org

Tree planting in Mount Kenya forest.

PHOTO COURTESY OF OXYGÈNE MCL

Most of these posts first appeared on **KENYABIRDSNET**, an email listserv where local subscribers post interesting bird sightings, observations of unusual bird behavior, and news about birding activities in the country. It is now hosted on Google Groups. To join go to: <https://groups.google.com/d/forum/kenyabirdsnet>

YOUR NATURE OBSERVATIONS

Black-rumped Waxbill in Mara Naboisho Conservancy

20 March 2020

While out and about today I came across a pair of **Black-rumped Waxbills** in the Mara Naboisho Conservancy. I am not aware of any previous records for the Mara.

Stratton Hatfield

(Western) Osprey

11 March 2020

While on a morning boat ride in Lake Baringo this morning I encountered this **Osprey** with a Finnish bird ring. A report sent to me by the University of Helsinki, Ringing Centre, says the ringing of the Osprey was done on 15 July 2019.



They calculated that the time from ringing to recovery was 240 days (7 months, 27 days) and the place of recovery was 6,769 km from the place of ringing.

Samuel Mugo

Seasonal Lake Kwenia

11 March 2020

We traveled to Kwenia with the intention of counting vultures as part of a monitoring programme. After struggling with the rough and muddy sections of the road from Kajiado to Kwenia, we arrived there a little later than we intended, at around 8 a.m. We didn't find many vultures, but the lake was full of water (almost to the foot of the vulture cliff) and had many waterbird species.

These included **Great White Pelicans** (1700+), **Yellow-billed Storks** (350+), (Western) **Cattle Egret** (200+), **Little Egret** (100+), **Greater Flamingo** (100+), as well as **Egyptian**



Yellow-billed Stork PHOTO L. BARELLI

Goose, Hottentot and Red-billed Teals, Red-knobbed Coot, Pink-backed Pelican, herons (**Squacco, Grey, Black-headed**), **Grey Crowned Crane, Black-winged Stilt, Blacksmith Plover, Wood Sandpiper, Saddle-billed Stork, Great White Egret, African Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Long-tailed** (Reed) and **Great Cormorants**.

On our way back we used the road from Kiserian and found it to be much better.

Dominic Chesire



African Bare-eyed Thrush west of the Rift

27 December 2019

This morning I observed an **African Bare-eyed Thrush** at Angama (safari lodge) in Transmara West, which some Kenyan birding historians suggest may be the first record west of the Rift.

Tyler Davis



Scaly Francolins

10 October 2019

I had a nice morning birding in the rain in Thika and I was finally able to confirm breeding of **Scaly Francolins**. The two adults had two young ones in tow. I hear and see francolins much more often and despite all the habitat destruction, both on Del Monte and elsewhere in Thika this population appears to be doing okay.

Darcy Ogada



Common Buttonquail, African Firefinch and more at the University of Nairobi, Kabete Field Station

9 October 2019

Once again the Field Station did not disappoint! The bird of the day was one that nobody expected: a **Common Buttonquail**!! It was a lifer for most of our birding group. It was also the first record of this species on the Kenya Bird Map for Nairobi (pentad 0115_3640)! The photos I got will not win any awards, but the sighting was nothing short of memorable.

Sidney Shema

Lemon Doves and more at the Nairobi Arboretum

2 October 2019

Nature Kenya's Wednesday Morning Birdwalk had an especially good walk in the Nairobi Arboretum today. "Shy" **Lemon Doves** walked down the path right in front of us! "Don't even try to find it" **Yellow-whiskered Greenbul** was seen twice. **Hartlaub's Turaco** foraged low in the bushes. A pair of **Green Sandpiper**, a pair of **African Black Duck** and a pair of **Mountain Wagtail** was seen in the river whose quality seems to have improved. And sharp-eyed observers glimpsed a **Common (Steppe) Buzzard** in the sky.

Fleur Ng'weno

Interesting Mara Sightings in July & August

Reported 1 September 2019

A leucistic **Lappet-faced Vulture** was seen (on July 30) near Black Rocks just north of the Sand River in the Maasai Mara National Reserve. This individual was seen earlier this year in Naboisho Conservancy.

A singing **Red-capped Robin Chat** was seen (on July 31) at Cottars 1920s Camp in Olderkesi.

A **Eurasian Hoopoe** was seen (on August 1) in the SE corner of the Masai Mara National Reserve. This bird was seen following an **African Hoopoe** around. They looked and acted like a pair. A pair of **White-necked Ravens** were also seen feeding on a wildebeest carcass close to Makaria Forest.

An adult male **Blue Swallow** was seen (on August 6) in the Mara Triangle feeding close to the salt lick area. A pair of **Pearl-spotted Owlets** was also found calling close to the Maji ya Ndege campsite in the Mara Triangle. I rarely see this species in the Mara. At least six **Marsh Owls** were seen quartering the grasslands in the late evening by Mara Serena Safari Lodge in the Mara Triangle.

An **African Crane** was flushed (on August 7) from wet grassland close to the Ngiro-are Ranger base in the Mara Triangle and a pair of **Black-headed Gonoleks** was heard duetting along the stream by the Ngiro-are Ranger Base. I think there are multiple pairs of gonoleks resident in this area of the Mara.

Driving grass tracks in the Mara Triangle I noted (on August 5-8) lots of **Red-winged Francolins**, **Black Coucals**, **Black-backed Cisticolas**, and **Fan-tailed Grassbird**. Seems the late rains really helped these species.

Three **African Cuckoo Hawks** (2 juveniles and 1 adult) were seen (on August 13) in Lemek Conservancy. The juveniles were feeding together like harriers out in the grassland. It was fascinating to watch them. An adult **Shikra** was also seen in Lemek Conservancy. I rarely see this species in the Mara. There were multiple pairs of **Lizard Buzzards** seen and heard in Lemek Conservancy.

The first big flocks of **Caspian Plovers** were seen (on August 15) out on the short grass plains in Naboisho Conservancy – great to have them back!

Stratton Hatfield

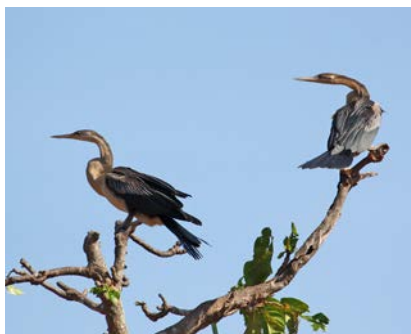


PHOTO PETER USHER

African Darters making a big comeback

20 September 2019

For over a week now the safari guides from Loldai House who visit Lake Nakuru several times a week have been reporting lots of **African Darters**. One Guide estimated that there were over 100!

Dave Richards

21 September 2019

On the 2018 and 2019 waterbird counts, we counted hundreds of African Darters on Lake Nakuru and Lake Naivasha. They nested in the flooded trees.

About a dozen African Darters nest regularly in Nairobi National Park, and darters are often seen on other small Nairobi wetlands.

Fleur Ng'weno

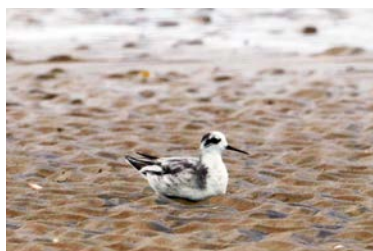
Coast Birding

Tana River Delta Waterfowl Counts 12-14 February

Reported 27 February 2020

The counts gave us a chance of seeing what the delta looks like when flooded.

Fulvous Whistling Ducks (mostly juveniles), **Yellow-billed Storks**, **Great White Pelicans**, and **Black-crowned Night Herons** were in very good numbers. However, wader numbers were relatively few and hard to see from the boat – just one **Caspian Plover** and no **Pacific Golden Plovers**.



Red-necked Phalarope



Great White Pelicans

There was an **Allen's Gallinule** with chicks, **African Jacana** floating in water and a **Pink-backed Pelican** sitting on a doum palm – all new observations for me this year. The **African Skimmers** are always a delight to see.

Our final day was spent counting birds on the main beach. Here there were good numbers of waders, terns and gulls, along with a single **Red-necked Phalarope**.

Mustafa Adamjee

Magpie Mannikin

19 January 2020

While taking part in a bird survey at Vipingo Ridge on January 15 we spotted four **Magpie Mannikins** in a flock amongst **Bronze Mannikins**.

According to the eBird website there have been 3 sightings of Magpie Mannikins in what was then referred to as Coast 'Province': at Tana River Delta (2019), at the Ngulia ringing on 11/2019 (3 birds in the net and 1 that got away) and at Vipingo Ridge on 01/2020!

Doris V. Schaule



A Rocha Nature Reserve in Dakatcha Woodland

1 October 2019

A Rocha is pushing on with purchasing land to create the A Rocha Dakatcha Nature Reserve in the centre of the Dakatcha Important Bird and Biodiversity Area. It will help protect a population of the **Sokoke Scops Owl** and **Golden-rumped Sengi** (elephant-shrew) we discovered there about 10 years ago. We've managed to secure 1,130 acres and continue to negotiate for the remaining forest that still holds the owl and sengi. Last year we managed to get images of the sengi from camera traps in three different locations around the reserve as well as a number of sight records. This is the first 100% confirmed record of the sengi north of Sabaki River. Probably the most surprising record for the five days we were surveying there last September was a displaying **Crowned Eagle**. It must have a nest somewhere, but it was very high and could have come from anywhere within 10km².

The forest is being cleared at a terrifying rate. A comparison of satellite images from 2017 to 2019 shows large tracts of forest cleared and burnt for pineapples. This land is used for three years and then abandoned for fresh forestland. It's definitely a race against time.

I was also reminded how interesting it is that while Dakatcha Woodland is basically a similar habitat to Arabuko-Sokoke Forest (being only c. 30km north), yet there are a host of species that appear not to cross north of the Sabaki River. They include **Green Barbet**, **Forest Batis**, **East Coast (Pale) Batis**, **Amani Sunbird**, **Dark-backed Weaver**, **Terrestrial Brownbul**, **Fischer's** and **Tiny Greenbul**. Even the **Olive Sunbird** was not seen or heard once in five days (though it has been recorded elsewhere in the IBA). We did have daily records of the endangered **Sokoke Pipit**.

Colin Jackson



Southern Banded Snake Eagle

Lunga Lunga - A Hidden Paradise

23 August 2019

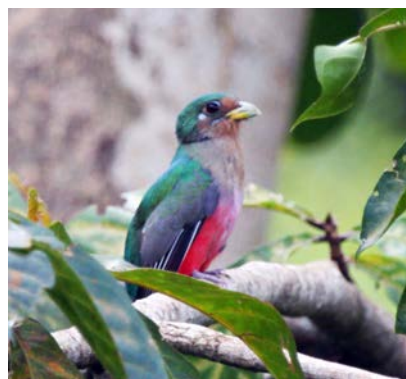
I visited Lunga Lunga twice this week, on Tuesday 20 and Friday 23 August, and there were quite a few surprises I would like to share!

I started at the lily pond, which after some good rains was full. There were about 50 **African Open-billed Storks**, **Purple Heron**, **Black Crakes**, **African Jacana**, a large flock of weavers (**Grosbeak**, **Eastern Golden**, and **Village**), and lots of **Red-billed Queleas** and **Zanzibar Red Bishops**. I was pleasantly surprised to see about 40 **Black-crowned Night Herons** roosting in the large broad-leaved trees found along the edge of the pond – they aren't usually in such big numbers in this area.

Making my way to the Uмба River, which is the highlight of Lunga Lunga, I got to see a Bateleur in flight, **Blue-naped Mousebirds** and other coastal residents like **Brown-headed Parrots** and **East Coast Boubou**, which were calling widely.

Going down a steep hill into the river valley, I noticed the river was almost dry, but the birds had gathered in good numbers to feast on fruit and get a cool drink of water. I first saw the noisy **Trumpeter Hornbills** noisily feeding on figs and on closer inspection, a **Southern Banded Snake Eagle** that was ready to chase them off its favourite tree. I carried on along the river and came across a feeding party of a variety of different species – **African Golden Orioles**, **Retz's** and **Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrikes**, **Green Wood-hoopoes**, **Brown-breasted Barbets**, **Dark-backed Weavers** and a handful of **Black-bellied Starlings**.

After enjoying all these birds I moved on to the usual spot to find **Grey-olive Greenbuls** and found them in the company of a beautiful **Narina Trogon** and a pair of **African Paradise-flycatchers**. Going further upstream I saw the resident kingfishers (**Malachite**, **Giant**, **Pied**, **Brown-hooded**, and **Striped**). As I crawled over the river's rocky boulders, I came to a large "pool" that had remained and was full of fish.



Narina Trogon



Grey-olive Greenbul

Here I saw **Woolly-necked Storks**, **Grey** and **Purple Heron**, **Long-tailed** (Reed) **Cormorant** and a pair of **African Finfoots**! I saw them briefly before they scurried away into a crocodile burrow. As I went on, I saw the resident **White-backed** and **Black-crowned Night Herons** in their usual place. After this area the river is quite heavily deforested, having shambas and livestock on both sides. While going back, I saw the **Finfoot** pair again, but they were extremely shy and fled into the forest running into a cave. Happy enough to have seen them properly I made my way back to Diani.

On my second visit to Lunga Lunga a few days later, I added to my list **Wahlberg's Eagle**, **African Wood Owl**, **Pallid Honeyguide** and **White-crested Helmetshrike**. This year's list of Lunga Lunga is at 160 species. I know there are many more birds to be found, so I'm hoping to add them pole pole!

Mustafa Adamjee

BIRDING IN Nairobi National Park 2019/2020

with Brian Finch

Excerpts and photos (unless otherwise indicated) by Brian on birds seen in the park.



Long-Billed Pipit

Seen on the ascent road towards the woodland above Hippo Pools. It had a large tick on the neck. PHOTO BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE



Orange-breasted Waxbill

Usually seen flying away over the grasslands, Orange-breasted Waxbills are a frequent sight particularly in the circuit from Hyena Dam, along the Mokoyeti and back to Nagalomon Dam. PHOTO BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE



Crimson-rumped Waxbill

There had been three in the same area, along the Mbagathi River at Ololo Lodge, for three weeks, indicating surprising site fidelity.



Chestnut Sparrow

This male was part of a flock of over thirty seen when driving towards Cheetah Gate. It is moulting into non-breeding plumage — no two males in this process look alike.



Northern Pied Babblers

So very common all over the Park, some groups get to over twenty birds.



Black-faced Waxbill

Widespread, but not common over all of the southern half of the Park, especially the south-eastern portion. This bird was seen in the woodland above Hippo Pools.



Black-winged (Black-shouldered) Kite

There must have been a major rodent population increase on this day as over twenty-five Black-winged Kites were seen and they were all over the Park (apart from the forest).



African Grey Hornbill

This is one of a pair of African Grey Hornbill seen above the Athi Basin. A study of the bill shows a remarkable structure. Very few birds have the space, known as the intermandibular gap, between the upper and lower beak. Notice also the serrations on both mandibles for a good grasp, like teeth.



Desert Cisticola

Although in non-breeding plumage, this bird shows the orange wash to the sides of the undertail-coverts and flanks, and largely blackish tail.



Lilac-breasted Roller

Two birds were at the junction of the Embakasi track; the species is only reported at the park a few times in the course of a normal year.



Curlew Sandpiper

This was the first returning bird for the season, seen at Athi Dam — an adult well into moulting its red breeding plumage, but traces remained.



Red-rumped Swallow (Rufula)

On 9 January, heading out from the Ivory Burning Site on the main road to Hyena Dam we had a pair of our blue and red resident Red-rumped Swallows (*emini*). They were nest building under a culvert, and settling on the road. They were also attacking a quite smaller third bird that was also trying to sit near them, and this bird was immediately obvious as another Red-rumped Swallow, but of the pallid northern race *rufula*.

This is only the 4th for Kenya and East Africa, since the first was trapped at Ngulia in December 2009.

PHOTO BY WASHINGTON WACHIRA



Reichenow's Seedeater

Reichenow's Seedeater was formerly known as Yellow-rumped Seedeater, and still appears as such in regional guides. The new name is a result of a split — the Yellow-rumped is now an Ethiopian endemic, the Reichenow's is endemic to Kenya and Tanzania, and from their borders westwards there is Black-throated Seedeater.

Parthenium is a noxious invasive plant, and toxic if ingested by wildlife. It is now all over the park, where the ground has been disturbed. It is now the favourite food item of Reichenow's Seedeater, and they can be found cracking the seed cases, which then fall, and eating the seed interior. It is suggested that they may be responsible for spreading the plant, but I feel this is very unlikely because every seed is cracked. The only way it can be held responsible is if the seed is dropped. Birds do not carry seeds. If the seedeaters were not consuming quantities of *Parthenium* seeds then maybe our situation would be more threatening.



Yellow-billed (Intermediate) Egret

This close up of the head shows the more benign look of this species compared to the vicious look of the much longer billed Great Egret, which shows a dagger-shaped area of bare skin extending way back beyond the eye.



Moustached Grass Warbler

The rains have brought out many, usually skulking, individuals to the surface; they seemed to be everywhere.



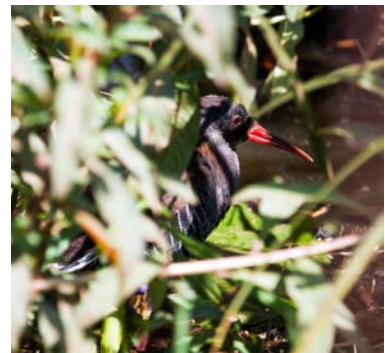
White Rhinoceroses

A mother and a very recently born offspring walking casually down the tarmac!



Grey-capped Social Weaver

The only regular place to find this species in Nairobi National Park, is on the track to Ololo through the short *Acacia brevispica* scrub. This image of an adult was taken there and it most certainly breeds nearby



African Water Rail

Presumed male of a pair at Kingfisher Swamp; they sounded as if they had chicks.

PHOTO BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE



Pink-backed Pelican

This non-breeding near adult at Athi Dam shows the intricate mottling on the back of the neck as opposed to the plain necks of Great White Pelicans. Whilst Pink-backs are almost half the size of White, they can still appear large when there is no comparison available.



Lions

Part of a very social group of four at Eland Hollow Dam



Yellow-bellied Eremomela

Always in dry acacia scrub in the south of the park.



Yellow-throated Sandgrouse

A male on the road near the Pipeline, the first in quite a while.



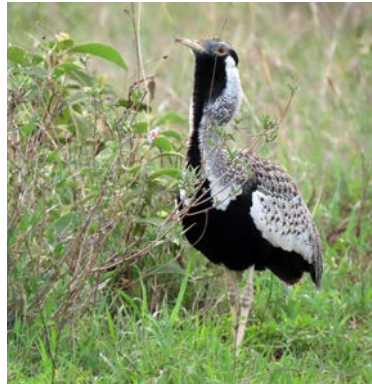
Namaqua Dove

I had only ever heard Namaqua Doves calling in the park once (on the Rhino Circuit), until we found this male calling persistently from a low bush near Ololo, although no female seemed to be around.



Water Thick-knee

This addition to Nairobi avifauna has enjoyed a residency at Athi Dam for eighteen months now.



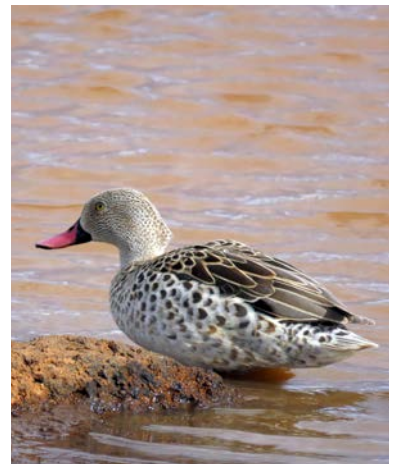
Hartlaub's Bustard

Another sign of the rain is when Hartlaub's Bustards start their vocal displays. We pulled up to watch this bird, and were soon joined by four other vehicles of presumed non-birders, but they all stayed a long time to watch and photograph it. The bird was so intent that it just ignored all its admirers and was eventually left in the same place all alone still doing its "thing."



Nairobi in the Gloom

Most of the mornings were very hazy and cold. In the afternoon it brightened up, and in the evening it rained!



Cape Teal

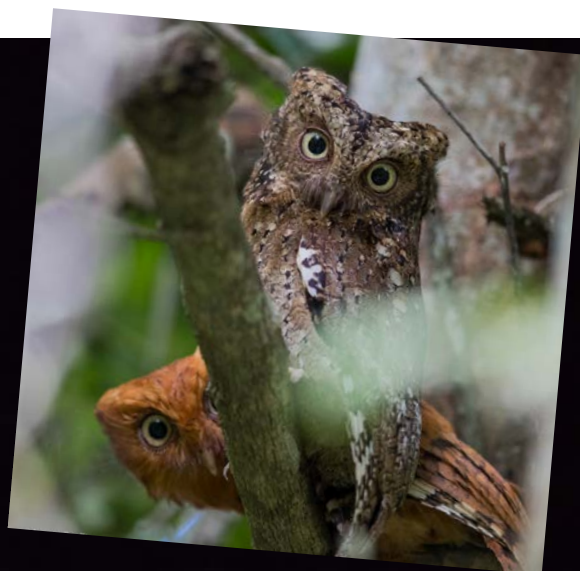
I have seen Cape Teal (Wigeon), (call is a wheezy whistle like a Wigeon, not at all like a Teal), four times in Nairobi National Park in thirty years.

This includes three times at exactly the same place on Hyena Dam in the past three years, so this is highly suggestive of the same bird returning.

Brian's prolific reports (on the Google group kenyanbirdsnet), on birds and other wildlife from the park are fun, informing and a much-anticipated feature of local birding. Brian's knowledge and skill in identifying Kenya's birds makes him one of the most sought after bird guides in the country.

In Pursuit of the **SOKOKE SCOPS OWL**

Francis Kagama



It was on a Friday, the last day of our community-led Sokoke Scops Owl survey, and my colleagues and I drove smoothly up the wide and well-surfaced Malindi-Tsavo East road towards Jilore. Our mission was to find a forest track and lay transects for the survey.

“Only three more transects to go,” I encouraged my colleagues.

We came to a stop adjacent to the famous Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, parked and locked up the vehicle. An electric fence separated us from the forest, so we crawled under. Once inside, we walked parallel to the fence, looking for a track.

After trekking for a while, we came to a clear track running deep into the forest. I, playing the role of *supervisor* this night, alerted the local forester of our presence and we ventured further inward, even as dusk was rapidly falling. Nothing could have prepared us for what was coming.

The **Endangered Sokoke Scops Owl** is one of six unique species of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. This diminutive owl is a habitat specialist. It has only been recorded in *Cynometra webberi*/*Brachylaena huillensis* forests and woodlands on the East African coast, from Dakatcha Woodland on Kenya’s north coast to the Usambara Mountains in north-eastern Tanzania.

Like the other 16 owl species found in Kenya, Sokoke Scops Owls, are predominantly nocturnal, active from dusk to dawn. Their large forward-facing eyes give them superior vision at night. This, combined with their sharp hearing, enable them to spot prey in darkness. Unlike other owls that feed on arthropods, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds, the Sokoke Scops Owl’s diet consists mainly of insects. Beetles and weevils are favorites. Grasshoppers, crickets, wasps, bees, and ants have also been identified as part of their diet.

Available data indicates that the owl’s population has remained relatively stable for the past 20 years or so.

However, the most recent data (an Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Adjacent Dwellers Association (ASFADA) survey) showed a southerly shift in the distribution of the bird’s population. Changing forest conditions in previously “preferred” habitat around Jilore and Komani were listed as probable causes.


Collecting data on the Sokoke Scops Owl is quite a daunting task. The surveys take months (November through to December), and take place at night (between 7 p.m. to 3 a.m.). Working in a forest filled with over 300 elephants is not for the faint-hearted. But to the citizen scientists or community volunteers that undertake the surveys, it is worth the risk posed by elephants to determine the status of the Sokoke Scops Owl. The volunteers involved include notable veteran guides Willy Kombe and ‘Mzee’ David Ngala, both of whom have been involved in countless research projects in this forest since 1990.

Survey teams are provided with equipment that includes datasheets, high-powered flashlights, GPS receivers, and machetes — all part of the daily routine. Every team comprises of three individuals each having a specialised task. There is an *observer* or *owl whistler*, a keen listener able to distinguish the Sokoke Scops Owl call from other forest sounds, which might be crickets, frogs, nightjars, bush babies, and other owl species. Next in line is a clerk or data recorder, followed by the *navigator-cum-security officer* tasked with reading the GPS and clearing the way for the other two.

Operations start just before dusk every day. Teams are assigned a starting point to a transect running along existing roads or old tracks, each for one kilometre. A supervisor coordinates the nightly effort and ensures the teams get to the forest and are dropped off at the right spots. Knowledge of the forest’s geography is important as a missed turn can lead to one getting lost.

Once a team is dropped off, a mark is made by cutting a twig (bush experience comes in

handy). Each group makes marks to indicate the direction they have taken. There have been a few instances where groups have not marked their movement, sending the coordinating *supervisor* on a “wild goose drive” in the night.

On this night the fear of encountering elephants lingered in everyone’s mind, but nobody talked about it as we kept busy with our tasks. We were heading for our fifth stop when a thumping sound suddenly startled us. In the darkness, we could make out a silhouette of a charging elephant. Our survival instincts immediately kicked in. We dived into a nearby bush and lay listening as the elephant crushed trees along its path. Once again, we found ourselves crawling, only that this time, it was to save ourselves. Lucky for us, two spontaneous decisions we made paid off — the first was to move away from the road as we couldn’t outrun the elephant. Secondly, we stuck together. We remained on the ground motionless for two hours, before we attempted to head back to the road. Disoriented, we found ourselves going back in the wrong direction. Our GPS receiver had gone off. Somehow, after a long struggle we managed to get back to the vehicle. How we managed to escape with just a few bruises and only lost a pair of spectacles is a miracle. 

NIGHTLY AFFAIR

Two community volunteers collect data during the Sokoke Scops Owl survey at Arabuko-Sokoke Forest (insert). PHOTOS BY LORENZO BARELLI AND FRANCIS KAGEMA



Dispersal of Caper Whites

also called Brown Veined or Pioneer Whites

One of Africa’s greatest wonders

Steve Collins ABRI (African Butterfly Research Institute)

Caper Whites (*Belenois aurota*) occur throughout sub-Saharan Africa, in West Africa (Sahel), and as far as Israel, India and Madagascar. These butterflies live and breed in the drier parts of Africa and although they are known to ‘migrate’, their movement can be better described as dispersal as the butterflies do not return.


The larvae feed on *Boscia*, a member of the Caper (*Capparaceae*) family. When good rains fall, as we had recently, the butterflies propagate an explosion of caterpillars, which denude the Caper bushes. When they hatch they ‘migrate’ usually in the direction of the winds to new breeding grounds. These explosions may last for a few weeks to a month or more and involve billions of individuals. They are carried high in the atmosphere (and have been found frozen high up on mountains). The roadsides may be littered with dead butterflies.

These butterflies are distasteful to birds, but eventually the parasitic predators (wasps, flies and spiders), which feed on the caterpillars, build up in numbers and help to reduce the population. The numbers of parasites in turn are reduced during years of drought.

These dispersals are unidirectional even blowing out to sea. Other butterfly species also join in, but in much lower numbers, sometimes for the same reasons related to the availability of food. Clouds of Caper Whites are very spectacular, and recently (2019/2020) huge explosions occurred around the continent.

In Kenya, swarms were frequently reported in the Rift Valley and on the coast where there are perhaps higher human populations to observe them. These ‘migrations’ are annual, but are more noticeable in years of plentiful rain (and higher food-plant growth).

Another interesting feature of the butterflies is that they normally

have a green pupa, but when these mass buildups occur the pupae will be black and white, maybe to blend better on the branches and stems of denuded plants. (This also occurs in locusts with the morph (colour) changing from the solitary phase to the gregarious swarming phase.) Of course marking individuals is impractical and retrieval of those individuals is virtually impossible, but these butterflies have been found hundreds of kilometres from their normal habitat, like those from the Sahel zones that have been found deep in the Congo forests. 

For more information on this and other butterfly related questions visit the Lepidopterists’ Society website at <https://www.lepsoc.org>



Caper White. Sexes similarly have white wings with dark brown-coloured veins. Females have a broader black band on the forewings.
PHOTO BY CATHERINE NGARACHU

A frequent question asked is whether these are the adults of armyworm?

ANSWER: No they are not. The armyworm is a Noctuid Moth caterpillar, which feeds exclusively on Graminae (grasses). The Caper Whites are not agricultural pests — to the contrary, they are good pollinators assisting farmers as they pass through.

An aerial photograph showing a wide, dry, sandy riverbed that meanders through a vast, dense green forest. In the background, a range of mountains is visible under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The foreground is filled with lush green trees and vegetation.

WONDROUS MOUNT LOIMA

An elephant search explores a remote part of the country — a beautiful place, which retains some extremely untouched forest cover.

KIERAN AVERY



It was in December 2019 when we flew to Mount Loima and the area to the west of the Loima Hills in search of elephants. Historically, elephants have used a corridor connecting the Kerio Valley in Kenya to Kidepo National Park in Uganda. By collaring elephants in that area, we hoped to learn about their movement patterns, to help secure the corridors they use. The collaring was to be done by a Kenya Wildlife Service veterinarian seated in a helicopter. I was flying a fixed-wing Super Cub aeroplane to scout the remote area for likely candidates.

To the north of Mount Moroto, Mount Loima is located in Turkana County, 60 kms due west of Lodwar town towards the Uganda-Kenya border. It is a set of high peaks covered in pristine cedar and olive forest surrounded by a mass of hills, which stretch down to the lowlands where there are huge sandy luggas flanked by the most intact and massive *Acacia tortilis* forests I've ever seen. One lugga in particular, the Tarach lugga, was spectacular — a truly beautiful place!

We started by flying transects around the main peaks; one of my colleagues had seen elephants there sometime within the past five years so our hopes were high. Sadly, we found no signs of elephants despite the abundance of forage and perennial water sources. So

we searched lower and lower doing transects over likely habitat — but still nothing. Finally, the darting chopper landed amongst the extremely rugged terrain and spoke

to a group of herders on the hills. Their response to our enquiries was not overly friendly and they were quite clear, stating, “No elephants remain on the mountain!” The more we talked with members of the local community the more it became clear that they are very cautious about any interactions with “outsiders”.

We regrouped at our fuelling base in Namoruputh village (20 km south of Mount Loima), and had an opportunity to talk with more of the local community who also stated, “elephants on Loima were no more”. We then decided to take our search west and north parallel to the Kenya-Uganda border, up towards Kidepo National Park where we know for sure that elephants do still exist.



This search was part of a joint collaring mission between the Northern Rangelands Trust, Save the Elephants, Kenya Wildlife Service, Masol and Pelow community conservancies and the local county governments of West Pokot and Turkana. With a concerted effort, the potential for wildlife conservation in this area is massive.

This area along the Uganda-Kenya border to the west of Loima all the way up to Kidepo is a vast wilderness with some of the most intact rangelands I have seen. The vegetation really is healthy, with no sign of charcoal burning or tree cutting and limited soil degradation. As it is a “hot-spot” area, in which there is a significant risk of stock theft and tribal clashes between the Karamoja people from Uganda and the Turkana people from Kenya, people avoid grazing here. As a result the rolling hills are thriving, having mixed perennial grasslands and bushland — it reminded me of the Chyulu Hills.

Sadly though the mammal populations are not so healthy — a history of bushmeat poaching has all but cleared out the larger mammals. In 7 hours of flying that day I only saw 2 lesser kudu, 5 warthog, some bat-eared foxes, a handful of dikdik and some olive baboons — quite a surprise given the health of the rangelands... and still no sign of elephant despite covering a huge area.

After a discussion with a final group of herders we found in the lowlands to the west of Loima, who told us “there are still elephants which pass between Moroto and Uganda” we did a final transect in the area they pointed to in the southwest, but again our search was fruitless. At this stage we decided it may be worth one last look around the forested peaks of Loima where elephants had been seen a few years

ago and this time we landed in one of the open grassy areas there to have a look for any physical signs on the ground.

Landing on the top of Loima opened

our eyes to what a spectacular place it is, and we felt so privileged to be able to experience it. We could not get over the integrity and untouched nature of the forest, being the most pristine of its kind I have seen within Kenya. The bird life was limited (as is often the case within cedar and olive forests), but we did see **White-crested Turacos!** There were fresh signs of leopard, buffalo, bush pig, duiker and we saw olive baboons, but no signs of elephant. Even alongside perennial water sources there were no characteristic muddy rub marks on the trees — not even old ones — so we left feeling a little demoralised and still unsure as to whether elephants do or don't remain on Mount Loima. A return visit is definitely needed to spend more time on the ground and explore what this hidden gem has to offer!



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Olive Thrush



Streaky Seed eater



Common Bulbul



Peter Usher

Photos by Peter Usher

BIRDING in the time of **CORONAVIRUS**

When I returned from my last game park safari to Amboseli National Park in mid-March, it was clear that it would be sometime before such an adventure might be repeated. Coronavirus (causing COVID-19) had spread from Asia to Europe and the United States with devastating effect, and now, a first case had been recognised in Kenya.

Most of my regular birding is undertaken in the city of Nairobi, a somewhat polluted city of millions of inhabitants, but yet, a wonderful venue for the dedicated and casual birder. It has parks, forests, hills, swamps, waterways, lakes and dams — an ideal environment for hundreds of local species to live and breed. It is also a stop-over for hundreds more visiting or passing through on their winter journeys

from Europe and Asia. Then, of course, there is Nairobi National Park, the unique jewel that

is set within the city boundaries and home to lion, leopard, giraffe, rhinoceros, countless antelope and other game. For birders, it is a magical place with hundreds of species to find and enjoy.

But with COVID-19 came the requirement for social distancing. A visit to the Park is not without risk as interaction with people is inevitable when buying tickets and undertaking security checks. Being elderly and so particularly susceptible to the disease, I am aware of the need for as complete separation from others as possible. Therefore, I must do my birding mainly at home where a small woodland of trees and many bushes and flowers attract birds. Ibis parade across my lawn and hungry Black Kites are familiar with my verandah lunchtime arrangements.

There are also several rewarding birding venues a short drive from my house so that, armed with a can of hand sanitizer and my camera, I can visit alone.



Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu

Birding at the Agricultural Research Station at Kabete

This is my most frequently visited area. It is situated in one of the more elevated parts of Nairobi and consists of coffee plantation, wetland, grass and woodland, and has a small residential and farming community. It is popular with local dog walkers and occasional joggers, but generally, few people are encountered and as such are easily avoided in compliance with social distancing directives. A polite nod from 20m away is sufficient for observing any social niceties that may be expected.

I tend not to use binoculars, relying instead on my camera that is equipped with a 150-600mm zoom lens, with which I first identify and then photograph the many birds I see. A resident pair of **Augur Buzzards** constantly patrols the site and **Grey Crowned Cranes** nest in the swampy wetland alongside **crakes**, **moorhens** and **herons**. The neat nests of **Grosbeak Weavers** cling to the reeds beside the untidy homes of **Speke's Weavers**. **Red-faced, Singing** and **Winding Cisticolas** compete for attention with their distinct calls. Other resident birds are thrushes, sunbirds, swallows, warblers, doves and a host of miniature mannikins, finches and waxbills that restlessly explore the undergrowth searching for seeds.

White-winged and **Red-collared Widowbirds** are numerous and it is perhaps the best place within the city to find **Jackson's Widowbird** with its impossibly plumed tail. In recent years Kabete has become the place in Nairobi to find **Hinde's Babbler**.

But, no matter how well I know Kabete, unexpected sightings or events often surprise me. On my most recent visit just before the dark days of COVID-19, I was delighted by a close-up sighting of a **Gabar Goshawk** swooping down from a power line, to catch insects in the coffee plantation. I wondered at its lack of ambition given that larger prey (striped mice) was plentiful in the vicinity.

Going further along that day, I was surprised to see a commotion of birds flitting around a wire mesh boundary fence. I was able to approach them to within metres and in a matter of about ten minutes I'd counted and photographed fourteen species of common Kabete birds. There may have been others as it was difficult to keep track of all the agitated birds that were present. There was a mixture of seedeaters and insectivores, so a bird party in a feeding frenzy was not what I was observing. I later



Rüppell's Robin-chat



Yellow-crowned Canary



White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher (juv)



Baglaffeht Weaver

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shared my pictures with a local expert who suggested that there might have been a snake close-by with intentions not compatible with the well being of the local songbirds! If so, then it would have been very close to where I stood — and I have so few serpent pictures in my portfolio!

As I write this, Coronavirus is biting hard in this country and around the world, and I'm aware that even a solitary walk as I have described may not be possible in the near future. Thanks to my photographs, I can remember and relive the many happy hours on Kabete's Loresho Ridge and wait in lockdown at home until the Coronavirus danger, like the snake, has gone away.

The Yala BIRD AMBASSADORS

Emily Mateche and Serah Munguti



Meet the birdman Ayiro Lwala

As you walk through the compound in the morning, the sweet singing of birds fills the air. White-browed Sparrow Weavers, White-browed Robin Chats, and African Thrush are just a few of the birds that congregate at the scattered makeshift birdfeeders. Welcome to Ayiro Lwala's homestead in the small village of Kanyibok, in Siaya County.

"People are curious to know why I feed birds that eventually fly away. That's my cue to initiate a conversation on the importance of protecting birds and their habitats," says Ayiro, a passionate naturalist.

Ayiro's deep-rooted love for birds developed when he was a boy. He recalls adoring the White-browed Robin Chat for its singing. "People who sang so well were referred to as *Hundhwe* (the local name for Robin Chats) back then. I was mesmerized by its singing and the sound of singing birds remains my inspiration," he says.

Ayiro's fondness of birds blossomed and now he has placed 'feeding corners' around his homestead to attract birds. He is often spotted either in the company of other birders or undertaking waterfowl counts at the mouth of River Yala. Fellow villagers have nicknamed him *the birdman*.

It is no wonder then that Ayiro was the first member of the community to be contacted by Walter Tende, a fisherman from Usalu village when he rescued an injured Osprey with a Finnish tag. Through Ayiro's efforts the Osprey was evacuated to Nairobi for treatment, making news locally and internationally. Unfortunately, the Osprey died, but Ayiro's efforts did not go unnoticed. *Kenya Birds of Prey Trust* called Ayiro to offer him a training opportunity on the handling and caring for birds of prey.

"The Osprey incident generated a lot of public interest. We took advantage of this to sensitise the community on the importance of conserving birds and their habitats. Some community members are even willing to dedicate part of their land for conservation, and this is very encouraging," he says.

Ayiro is also the Chairman of the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG). Armed with just basic skills and tons of enthusiasm, members of this group are spurring birding interest in villages within the Yala Swamp Important Bird Area (IBA). The group regularly holds bird walks, carries out biodiversity surveys, conducts school outreach, and shares bird information and photos on their social media platforms. They are also in the process of developing a bird checklist for Yala Swamp that will feature local bird names.

Meet David Marenja, an artist and a nature lover

David is another member of the group. He combines talent, skill and passion to transform waste into unique artworks. Art pieces featuring birds form a large part of his collection. But why birds?

"Our ancestors considered birds sacred. Birds were seen as diviners, predictors of seasons. They could forecast imminent disasters. In Lake Victoria, they helped fishermen and sailors in navigation. All through the ages, birds have played a significant role in human lives. Their ability to interact with humans in many ways adds to their appeal," he explains.

David has done art pieces featuring the Long-crested Eagle, Great Blue Turaco, Pied Kingfisher, Papyrus Gonolek, and other birds found in Yala. The pieces are exhibited at local, regional, national and international forums. Through his art, David occasionally attracts visitors to Yala to see the birds portrayed in his pieces.



Meet Patrick Kung'abi,

an aspiring bird guide Patrick was mentored by YESSG and has an outstanding ability to quickly spot and identify birds while giving tidbits of information about their natural history.



"The relationship between birds and humans was well manifested in our traditional festivals. For instance, it was common for the turkey-sized Southern Ground Hornbill to grace cultural occasions, having been drawn to the rhythmic drum beats. The bird would easily mingle with the dancing crowds. This close interaction with birds is part of our cultural heritage and we are striving to preserve it through bird watching," says Patrick.

Patrick can name birds in his native Bunyala dialect and is using his knowledge to help translate the bird checklists from English into the local Bunyala language.




Meet Boniface Kesa and Edwin Onyango, members of the YESSG team who run school and mentorship programmes in Bunyala, Busia county. They organise bird walks for schools, inspiring school children to take up bird watching as a hobby, something they love to do.

"Helping children look through a pair of binoculars opens up a new world of birds to them," acknowledges Boniface.

"Sharing my interest in conservation through birding encourages the community and school children, in particular, to appreciate birds," notes Edwin.

"Children enjoy listening to stories of birds of prey and waterbirds, which they can easily identify. Quite often you will see them interrupting stories to dramatise the birds' actions," adds Boniface.

The YESSG team is working with six primary schools and the popularity of the school bird watching programme, is on the rise. "During the holidays children come knocking on my door on Saturday mornings asking to go out birding," says Edwin. 




House Crows are frequently seen foraging on the exposed reef at low tide along the coast - an additional pressure our already struggling reef biodiversity does not need to cope with. PHOTO BY RAPHAËL NUSSBAUMER

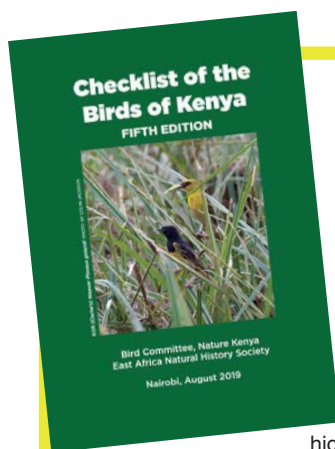
Update on control of the invasive House Crow in Kenya

Colin Jackson, A Rocha Kenya

The alien invasive House Crow (*Corvus splendens*) has become an intense menace for many residents of the coastal strip in Kenya. Some small businesses have had to shut down and many bear additional financial costs in keeping crows at bay. Those adversely affected include kiosks, shambas and even the large hotels. Over the past three years we've informed readers here about the plan to control the numbers of House Crows, but the initiatives started in 2017 have struggled to take off. The good news is that the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), in partnership with A Rocha Kenya, have taken up the project helped with funding for the first phase from the African Foundation for Endangered Wildlife (AFEW).

From February 2020, the project has gathered information while putting together a full proposal to cover a 3-5 year eradication project. A key component of the first phase that will feed into the proposal is an assessment of the overall crow distribution, including an estimate of the number of crows and their epicentre. During the same first phase of the project, the small House Crow populations that have already spread inland and threaten to reach Nairobi are being targeted for immediate eradication. In particular, House Crows in Voi (probably about 50-100 crows), Mtito Andei (11 crows counted) and, those farthest inland at Makindu (22 crows). To date, using specially designed crow traps, KWS has managed to reduce the Mtito Andei and Makindu populations by 50% and are pushing for complete eradication within two months.

If anyone is keen to help with roost counts in key urban centres along the coast, please get in touch with Lennox Kirao at A Rocha Kenya (lennox.kirao@arocha.org). Thank you to atlasers, your data is proving hugely useful! Please keep on atlassing House Crows! 



Checklist of the Birds of Kenya (5th edition)

– a different approach

Nigel Hunter nigelhunter74@gmail.com

There are some differences between the 5th edition of the *Checklist of the Birds of Kenya* and the previous edition that are worth

highlighting. Revising a checklist is not a straightforward task these days and requires some decisions that will not be universally accepted. Turner (2018)* highlighted the dilemma facing those responsible for preparing or updating checklists. He pointed out that there are four 'World Checklists' widely referenced, which may be quite similar at the family and generic levels, but have quite different approaches on the taxonomic treatment of species.

For example, the family Sylviidae (Old World warblers) was shown in the 2009 list, and it is now divided into six families in the 5th edition. Similarly, the family Phasianidae (Stone Partridge, francolins, spurfowl, quails) comprised two genera in the 2009 list, but it now comprises six genera.

The order of families in the 5th edition greatly varies from the 4th edition. It follows the order of families proposed by many based on a lot of recent scientific evidence. It mirrors the order being used by Turner & Turner in the revision of Britton's *Birds of East Africa* (1980).

At the specific level, this revision adopts an approach that acknowledges that a bird may be treated as a species rather than a subspecies as is done in some checklists; it can be recorded as an observation without forcing it to be assigned as a species or subspecies. For example, the taxonomy of Fiery-necked Nightjar and Black-shouldered Nightjar is controversial, so in the 5th edition they appear as follows:

Fiery-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus pectoralis*

- ☐ Fiery-necked Nightjar *C. pectoralis*
- ☐ Black-shouldered Nightjar *C. (p.) nigriscapularis*

It seems important to have this approach as this allows data to be kept that may be significant if and when the taxonomic issue is resolved. The checklist does not list all subspecies occurring in Kenya, although endemic subspecies are highlighted.

Finally the new edition extends its usefulness by having six columns of tick boxes, for the quick recording of sightings in the field.

*Turner, D.A. 2018. *Disarray in avian taxonomy and nomenclature: dilemmas facing authors, checklist compilers and museum curators*. *Scopus* 38 (1): 38–41

To obtain the new Checklist, please contact the Nature Kenya office located at the National Museums of Kenya.
Tel: (+254) (0) 20 3537568 or (0)780 149200
E-mail: office@naturekenya.org

Bird Love: The Family Life of Birds

Dr Wenfei Tong

Discover the amazing array of courtship techniques employed by birds around the world



Review by Dino J. Martins

An important part of bird life is of course their ability to nest, lay eggs and nurture a new generation. With over 10,000 different species of birds around the world, there are, not surprisingly, many approaches utilised by birds to find mates, build nests, lay eggs and care for their chicks. This book provides a wonderful sweeping overview of the strategies, natural history and charming ways in which birds fall in love and raise families.

Dr. Tong's exploration of this subject takes the form of seven chapters looking at ecology, courtship, nests and eggs, and raising chicks. In fascinating depth she explores the more unusual things that birds do — like when multiple individuals cooperate to raise young, as we see with many of the social weavers, and the enigma of brood parasitism in cuckoos, whydahs and honeyguides.

Her approach combines the scientific rigour of an astute animal behavioural scientist, intriguing details of a field naturalist, and the pure joy of a birder celebrating our feathered friends. The book is lavishly illustrated with photos of birds from around the world, many of them taken by Dr. Tong herself. East African readers will recognise many species and a few landscapes from the diverse array presented in the book as Dr. Tong has spent time in Kenya and Tanzania both as a researcher and birdwatcher.

This book will be useful and appealing to anyone who is fascinated in bird behaviour including guides, naturalists, students of biology and armchair adventurers. Anyone who has wondered about the leaping courtship of widowbirds, the parental burden borne by male ostriches or marvelled at the intricate structure of a weaverbird nest, will enjoy learning from this beautiful and eloquent assemblage of bird life and love.



Clarke's Weavers nesting site in Dakatcha Woodland. (Top right) Placing of nature reserve beacons. PHOTOS BY JONATHAN MWACHONGO AND EDWIN UTUMBI



Giving the Clarke's Weaver A HOME

Edwin Utumbi

Clarke's Weaver is now called Kilifi Weaver (Checklist of the birds of Kenya, 5th edition)

We've come to know the Dakatcha Woodland as synonymous with the **Clarke's Weaver**, but changing land use, encroachment and habitat destruction is making it harder for this species to survive here without direct interventions. The discovery of several breeding sites in Dakatcha since 2013, has underscored the importance of conserving this forest and its seasonal wetlands. Below are some actions that are helping stem the tide of destruction and giving hope for the future:

Kilifi County Forest Conservation and Management Act

The gazettement of the Kilifi County Forest Conservation and Management Act (December 2019) is good news as it means that the Kilifi County government now recognises the Dakatcha Woodland as a county forest. As such, the county government is mandated to safeguard and manage the forest resources.

Marketing the Kilifi Weaver

Kilifi Weaver is found only in Kilifi County and the county government has started to use the new name in its communications. This is a sign of the county government's commitment to protecting the area. As the species is endemic to the county, the new name will help in marketing Dakatcha Woodland and other sites in Kilifi.

Acquiring land for nature

Nature Kenya, with support from the World Land Trust, African Bird Club and RESOLVE, has purchased 530 ha of land in Dakatcha for conservation. This is intended to secure parts of Dakatcha Woodland by establishing nature reserves.

Setting aside land for conservation

Designating forest patches as Community Conservation Areas (CCAs) has also been ongoing. To date the community has secured 20,000 ha of forested land for the protection of biodiversity. Kibaoni CCA came


into existence when two clans from Kibaoni and Katayo villages agreed to cede part of their communal land for conservation. Kilifi Weaver has been observed foraging in the Kibaoni CCA.

"Kilifi Weaver, which is listed as **Endangered** by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), has been sighted foraging in Kibaoni, Chalalu and Kamale, showing the need for more Community Conservation Areas," says Paul Gacheru, Nature Kenya's Sites and Species Manager.

Gacheru notes that seasonal wetlands suitable as Kilifi Weaver breeding sites are scattered in other parts of Dakatcha Woodland, and Nature Kenya is looking to protecting them.

Encouraging sustainable livelihoods

By incorporating income-generating activities into the programme there is a further incentive for the local community to engage in conservation. Landowners in suitable locations are being introduced to nature-based enterprises like beekeeping. In this way landowners can see that conservation of the forests will not deny them the financial benefits they would have gained from the sale of forest products.

The journey of giving the Kilifi Weaver a home may take a while, but it will not only benefit the species, it will also provide a secure ecosystem for biodiversity to thrive while benefiting the people with sustainable access to environmental resources. 



Zebras at Hellsgate National Park. PHOTO BY PAUL GACHERU

Can Hell's Gate National Park recover its lost raptors?

Paul Gacheru

With its magnificent cliffs, nesting raptors, scenic views and wildlife, Hell's Gate National Park (including the Njorowa Gorge) has stood out as having more species diversity per square kilometre than any other non-wetland eco-system. Hell's Gate has been treasured by generations who could gain entry relatively cheaply and without the confines of a 4-wheel drive car. Yet, we are about to expose it all to tragically misplaced destruction of unimaginable proportions.

The park owes its existence to the "Main Wall" — one of the highest cliff faces in the entire Kenyan Rift Valley. It is the *maternity* ward, to

which tens of thousands of bats, swifts, swallows, falcons, eagles and vultures must go to nest. By using satellite tags, we know that vultures traverse most of Kenya, northern Tanzania, Ethiopia and Sudan before coming here to nest.

Not that long ago one of the park's chief attractions was the world famous **Lammergeier** or **Bearded Vulture**. Huge and foreboding, with a wingspan of over 3-metres, it nested on the Main Wall. With records and pioneering bird photography dating back to 1919, Hell's Gate was placed on the global ornithological map long before the Second World War.

A history of declining bird numbers

Since early in the last century, the Main Wall has had an extraordinary series of overtly catastrophic disturbances. In WWII the British Army was stationed beneath the Main Wall and they used the cliff as a backdrop for artillery fire. Concurrently to that, around 1943, a massive hyena eradication programme was undertaken with strychnine poisoning on the nearby Kinangop. This severely impacted the Main Wall colony. After WWII a munitions dump was detonated under what was then a new satellite vulture colony

that occupied what is now known as the 'Vulture Cliffs' and no doubt led to reproductive failure that season. The Main Wall was again used to fire upon during the late 1950s, and the bullet and mortar holes are still visible today. It must have caused mass desertion, high mortality and no breeding.

As to the famous Bearded Vulture, its total Kenya population was never more than 20 pairs. The loss of the Hell's Gate pair was attributed to rock climbers "who much disturbed the nest" in the mid-1970. Also after Anglia TV set a hide far too close to the nest in 1979 they didn't attempt to breed again and deserted for good. The effect by rock climbers on the other species nesting on the Main Wall was identical, though less reported.

Birds lost at Hell's Gate

Birds of prey are in many ways more sensitive to habitat changes brought about by contrary human activity than are the mega-fauna. Often subtle changes in ecology leads to declines, but in Hell's Gate the factors influencing declines are all too obvious and include geothermal expansion, increased human traffic and unrestrained tourism.

In 1979 Hell's Gate supported five species of vultures, three of which (**Rüppell's, Egyptian and Bearded**) nested on the cliffs, together with 5-7 pairs of **White-backed Vultures** in the tall yellow fever trees in the Njorowa stream, and one pair of **Lappet-faced Vultures** a stone throw off the boundary in the Kedong Ranch. But by 2004 only the Rüppell's Vulture remained within three severely threatened colonies.

Hell's Gate also lost three species of falcons, which were extirpated by 2000, a pair of **African Hawk Eagles** that were gone by 1999, one pair of **Crowned Eagles** (extirpated in 1996) and one pair of **Martial Eagle**.

Nesting cliff faces for Rüppell's Vulture

Vulture Cliff at Hell's Gate is hugely important as one of very few suitable nest sites for Rüppell's Vultures in the Rift Valley. Rüppell's Vultures need to nest on cliff faces with suitable ledges, and these are hard to come by in most of southern Kenya. Surveys done from 1986 to 1993 of the vulture colonies showed a remarkably tenacious group of some 55 to 70 Rüppell's Vultures. These had 19 nests on the Vulture Cliffs, four to five pairs on the Main Wall, and 11 pairs in the lower Gorge. The Vulture Cliff colony, bar a short disaster that took place over Christmas 2014, has remained stable.

Other Wildlife at Hell's Gate

Game counts conducted each year by the Kenya Wildlife Service show thousands of ungulates in the Hell's Gate/Kedong/ Mount Longonot ecosystem. The numbers fluctuate due to movements in and out of the adjacent well planned, but now ignored, wildlife corridors. Lion, leopard, cheetah and even wild dog were all present in the area in the 1980s, as were the occasional

elephant. Rhino were once famous in the area, kindling plans (still possible) for their re-introduction. By year 2000 all the large carnivores were still recorded, but shortly thereafter only leopard and spotted hyena were regulars. Hell's Gate is important for its numbers of Kongoni, once a common antelope, but now globally threatened.

To deny (as has been done in defense of a pop festival in the park and a safari rally event), the existence of "wildlife" in Hell's Gate is to subvert the truth. The rapid erosion of the protective status in Hell's Gate from a wildlife protecting national park to a park little different to a city park has taken Kenyans by surprise, although it began nearly two years ago.

Can Hell's Gate National Park recover its lost raptors?

There are nesting raptors at the Main Wall and there are a few Rüppell's Vultures that persist in making a comeback. In 1990 rock climbing was banned, but it has continued intermittently. The intent was to remove disturbances and allow the cliff time to recuperate and recover its lost raptors. It has never had a chance to do so. The effect of a single nesting failure due to disturbance is unappreciated — one rock climb, one wheelbarrow race, opera concert, music festival or safari rally event in the park, is well sufficient to cause nest site desertion.

Hell's Gate deserves a recovery. 



Rüppell's Vulture. PHOTO BY RALPH BUIJ

COEXISTENCE CO-OP

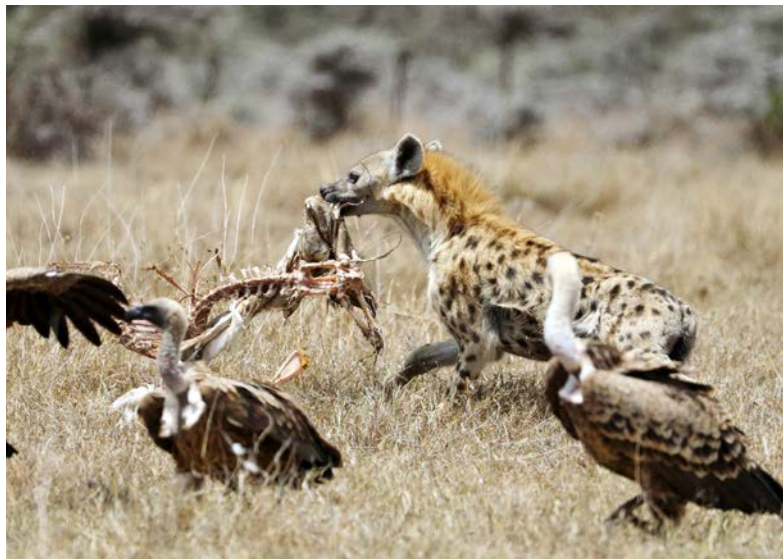
A joint project of The Peregrine Fund and Lion Landscapes, helping communities in Laikipia to coexist with predators and prevent wildlife poisoning.

Darcy Ogada

They were on a mission to kill. Their target, a pride of lions that had killed three sheep and wounded a goat the previous night. A chaotic scene ensued. In the end the pride escaped, but the economic damage was done, and the anger and resentment over carnivores intensified.

Lions and other predators (especially hyenas) are increasingly in conflict with communities. As natural habitats and the number of prey shrink, the balance of nature is upended and livestock becomes an easier target for hungry and often displaced predators. This is most evident when livestock encroaches into their territories and the barrier between predator and prey is a flimsy stick enclosure meant to keep livestock in and predators out. Such was the status quo throughout much of western Laikipia in 2017. Here where communities and livestock abut wildlife conservancies and ranches big and small, predators could kill at will. Often sheltering in the protection of conservancies during the day, but venturing into communities to forage at night, Laikipia's nocturnal predators, including lion, hyena and leopard, were in the crosshairs. Communities retaliated by sprinkling highly toxic pesticides on leftover carcasses aiming to poison predators, which often didn't return, but the vultures always did. It wasn't just the vultures, but the **Tawny Eagles**, the **Bateleurs** and the jackals as well. The result was a wildlife apocalypse and in the relative blink of an eye half of Kenya's eight vulture species were critically endangered.

Fast forward to 2020 and the **Coexistence Co-op**, a joint project of *The Peregrine Fund* and *Lion*



Vultures and a hyena feed on a carcass (above). A predator-proof boma (below). PHOTOS COURTESY OF COEXISTENCE COOP

Landscapes, has succeeded in helping communities in Laikipia, and neighbouring areas of Samburu, coexist with predators and stem the mass poisoning of wildlife. At the heart of this coexistence is the trust being built with communities and the solutions provided to tackle human-carnivore conflict. Importantly, these solutions are not about handouts, but about providing the know-how for people to effectively tackle problems impacting their livelihoods and by extension their welfare.

Since mid-2018 our weekly two-day training programme (Community Coexistence Training) has seen over 800 Laikipians embrace the knowledge to build predator-proof bomas (livestock corrals) and reduce the misuse of pesticides. To date, individuals and communities have built 350 predator-proof bomas. The bomas built have ranged in cost from Ksh5, 000-30, 000 (\$50-300), and in size from protecting one goat

to over 50 cows. The bottom line is, where they have been built, they are working. People have invested in buying materials, building using their own knowledge, and maintaining their bomas over the long term.




What is the impact?

Lorien is a community near Rumuruti that was experiencing near daily predator conflict. It had long been on Kenya Wildlife Service's radar as a conflict hotspot and as such it was part of their regular patrols. Throughout 2019 our team intensively trained nearly 50 people from this community, but we had little expectation for any immediate impact until a KWS official unexpectedly showed up. Members of the community had directed him to our training venue after KWS had taken note of reduced reports of predator conflict and an increase in new chain-link bomas. When locals mentioned that these were as a result of our trainings KWS stopped by to get a closer look at what we were doing. Ever since, @coexistencecoop has been working more closely with KWS by filling an important gap between their work and the rampant predator conflict affecting communities in Laikipia.

Similarly, creating knowledge about the hazards of pesticides has led to a

decline in their use due to the concern for the wellbeing of humans and livestock, wildlife and the environment. Nearly 50% of trainees report that poisoned carcasses (often dogs) are now being disposed of properly, 25% report a decrease in illegal grazing inside farms, 19% noted a decrease in the use of pesticides, and 16% say there is an increase in the protection of wetlands and water bodies as people have become more aware of how using pesticides indiscriminately harms the water sources that they depend on for their daily existence and livelihoods.

Our approach to vulture conservation in Kenya has shown how creating knowledge and know-how can benefit people, increase their ability to coexist with carnivores, and reduce the indiscriminate use of pesticides that harms entire ecosystems and has decimated vulture populations across Africa. The existence of vultures, carnivores and pastoralists is intricately linked. 



A Community Coexistence Training in session.

@coexistencecoop is supported by San Diego Zoo Global, Dallas Zoo, Detroit Zoological Society, National Geographic Society, Association of Zoos and Aquariums, North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, Puget Sound Chapter of the American Association of Zoo Keepers, Vulture SAFE, Lion Recovery Fund, and Tusk Trust.

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Kenya Breweries Limited staff engaged in tree planting in Aberdare forest.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF OXYGÈNE MCL

Forests & Business

Working with the Kenya Breweries Limited

Paul Gacheru

For large-scale water buyers like Kenya Breweries Limited, the link between healthy forest ecosystems and business sustainability is not far-fetched.

Water-dependent businesses are often forced to contend with irregular water supplies and additional treatment costs when forests are degraded. Kenya's forest cover is only 7.6% and the current state of our degraded water towers spells doom for many businesses that directly rely on fresh water. A few are now deploying strategies to engage in forest restoration as a means of protecting water sources.

Kenya Breweries Limited (KBL) is one such company that is taking forest restoration seriously. The company, a subsidiary of the East African Breweries Limited (EABL), is one of Kenya's largest beverage companies. EABL is a subsidiary of London based Diageo PLC and one of the world's largest producers of spirits and beers.

Through a staff-driven initiative called *Kijani* KBL is working to increase the water replenishment capacity of the forests through restoration. The motivation for this is drawn from Diageo PLC's *Water Blue Print* through which Diageo's subsidiaries employ

four water stewardship strategies. These strategies include reducing water use by half, the safe return of waste-water to the environment, and the replenishment of water in water-stressed areas.

In 2017, Kenya Breweries embarked on a mission of replenishing its water supplies through forest restoration, wetland recovery and improved farming techniques. Top on its order of business was the restoration of degraded forest areas in the Mount Kenya catchment, one of country's major catchment areas and a key supplier of water for domestic, agricultural and industrial use. The idea was to replenish an amount equivalent to the water the company uses in the manufacture of its products.


"Environmental conservation is at the core of our business and is one of our key sustainability pillars. When we neglect our ecosystems we not only destroy habitats for our wild and domestic animals, we make it harder for communities and businesses to operate. We therefore have to be more deliberate with our conservation and rehabilitation

efforts," says EABL Group Corporate Director, Eric Kiniti.

Working with Community Forest Associations (CFAs) in Mount Kenya and the Aberdares, KBL is well on its way to realising its target to restore 250 acres of degraded forest area by 2020. *Kijani* in partnership with Nature Kenya and five CFAs was able to plant 100,000 trees in different parts of the Mount Kenya forest in 2017 and 2018. In 2019 they planted 33,000 trees in Njukiiri forest in Embu County and plans are underway to plant 77,000 trees in 2020.

Financial support provided by KBL has enabled the CFAs to establish tree nurseries, and buy seeds and implements. Community members earn income by selling tree seedlings and by providing the labour for digging holes, planting, weeding and nurturing tree seedlings to maturity. Over 30,000 community members are benefiting through this engagement.

Looking ahead, KBL is working at bringing onboard suppliers within its production chain to get involved in the restoration of Kenya's water towers. Although it is still early to quantitatively gauge the impact of KBL's forest restoration efforts, the company's move to rope in its suppliers in the cause is a sign of the extent of their commitment.

To supplement KBL's efforts, Nature Kenya, through funding from the Darwin Initiative and World Land Trust, is building the capacity of the CFAs to engage many more stakeholders in forest restoration. 



The Mara Vulture Volunteers

Rebecca Ikachoi and Vincent Otieno

Twice each year residents of Narok County get to enjoy shows put on by the Maasai Mara Wildlife Ambassadors. Clad in Maasai attire, the Ambassadors have learned to weave environmental and wildlife conservation messages into their performances. The group is made up of 15 young men between the ages of 20-30 years who, by way of skits and songs in the local Maasai dialect, address issues of wildlife poisoning in the Maasai Mara.

"Our passion is driven by the fact that the Maasai Mara communities rely on tourism as their main source of revenue, but sadly, it is being negatively impacted by human-wildlife conflict. As young people we came up with an entertaining way of encouraging our people to conserve wildlife," says **Francis Muli**, the chairman of the dance group.

There are now 65 vulture volunteers and this troupe is one of many groups that have formed in Narok County and Kajiado County — areas that have been identified as human-wildlife conflict hotspots. With the support of the local administration and community leaders, the vulture volunteers have dedicated their time and resources to keep vultures alive.

Moses Kasoe is the Assistant Chief of Sekanani sub-location in Narok County. Moses is a pioneer vulture volunteer having started in 2017. Born and brought up in Narok, Kasoe says he was motivated to join the programme to help stop the decline of wildlife.

Geographically, Sekanani is sandwiched between two nature conservancies and the Maasai Mara Game Reserve, and wild animals often stray into settled areas. Knowing all too well the dangers posed by the retaliatory tactics employed by his clansmen, Kasoe is using his position to impart change in his community.



GETTING INVOLVED


Moses Kasoe attending a vulture volunteer training session.

"I felt such a huge sense of loss the first time I responded to a vulture poisoning incident. The thought that it would take years to recover the lost birds is what fanned my passion to take advantage of my position to impart change in my community. I use barazas as an opportunity to create awareness about the importance of vultures in the environment, and on the dangers of wildlife poisoning. Many don't know that the poison they use on wildlife could end up affecting the entire community and their herds, if it washes into rivers," says Kasoe.

Mr Kasoe is quick to note that there has been a positive response and that community members now proactively report poisoning incidents to him whenever they occur. Another contributing factor is the introduction of stiffer penalties for wildlife poisoning offenders. "Nobody wants to go to jail," he says.

Responding to wildlife poisoning incidents is another major function the volunteers undertake. Collecting crucial information about poisoning incidents and facilitating the securing and decontamination of a poisoning site are critical for the prevention of further wildlife deaths. Armed with knowledge, binoculars, and smart phones installed with special data collection applications, volunteers are well equipped to carry out this role.

"One of the most important skills that we got from the training Nature Kenya has provided is how to handle and immediately dispose of poisoned carcasses at the scene to avoid further contamination. Previously, the poisoned carcass would be left to decompose and we did not know that this exposed other wildlife to harm," says 43-year-old **Allan Pesi**, a village elder who joined the volunteers six months ago.

Pesi is a member of a group championing a ban on carbofuran (one of the most toxic carbamate pesticides) used to poison wildlife. "There are better ways of resolving human-wildlife conflict. Poisoning innocent wildlife is not one of them," he says. 

A pair of Lappet-faced vultures.
PHOTO BY LORENZO BARELLI





An aerial view of the Tana Delta. The delta is best described as a land of extremes as drought and floods occur dramatically from year to year. PHOTO BY JUDITH NYUNJA

Sustainably exploiting the economic potential of the **Magical Tana Delta**

Serah Munguti

Tana River Delta is a land of contrasts and extremes like nowhere else on earth. Besides being Kenya's largest wetland, the delta is a perfect mix of freshwater and marine ecosystems, which support several highly threatened mammal, bird and plant species.

In 2011, Nature Kenya successfully led 18 ministries, state agencies, two county governments and 106 villages, to agree on a Land Use Plan for the Delta. Since then a lot has changed for the better as it is being implemented.

Indigenous Community Conservation Area

The local communities and county governments of Tana River and Lamu, working with the national government, have set aside 116,000 ha as an Indigenous Community Conservation Area (ICCA). In this area people grow crops, keep livestock and engage in fishery using sustainable land management practices. It allows the Delta's biodiversity to thrive and its ecosystem services to keep flowing to support production.

The ICCA includes 48,752 ha of forest. Working with the Kenya Forest Service, County Governments of Tana River and Lamu, Kenya Forestry Research Institute and the Tana

Delta Conservation Network, Nature Kenya has helped five Community Forest Associations (CFAs) achieve formal registration. The CFAs have also prepared five participatory forest management plans.

With funding secured from both the Darwin Initiative and Global Environment Facility, communities are also piloting various means of sustainable production, which are breathing life to the once threatened Delta.

The Tana Delta Conservation Network

This network is made up of 106 community-based organisations that represent local producers of fish, honey,



A bee apiary in Tana River Delta. PHOTO BY JOHN MWACHARO

chicken and goats, and crops like rice, chili and lentils. In November 2019, TDCN received support to set up a micro-enterprise centre where members are trained on the best farming practices.

Once completed, processes like bulking, branding and marketing of farm produce will also be done here. The centre is also expected to provide micro-finance to communities to spur economic growth in line with the land use plan. If successful, it will be a model for community markets.

Growing Chili

Chili production in particular makes for good learning. In early 2019, Nature Kenya supported 30 farmers from the Harakisa Community Development Project to start growing chili in collaboration with Equator Kenya Limited. Equator Kenya agreed to purchase all the chili that the project would produce and offer agricultural support services. By October 2019, beneficiary farmers had harvested 971.67 kg of chili, and were paid Ksh53,381. Each household received Ksh3,336 following the sale of the chili. This was a 37% increase in monthly income for male-headed households and a 114% increase in monthly income for women-headed households.

Apart from helping to increase household incomes, chili has other benefits:

- It helps to reduce conflict incidents between farmers and pastoralists, and between people and wildlife, as neither livestock nor wildlife consume chili.
- Women are able to engage in more gainful activities, as with less encroachment, women who would normally stay on guard against livestock and wildlife throughout the day, no longer have to do so.
- It directly contributes to landscape restoration as it reduces the need for farmers to expand for crop production. Chili is a high value crop and at optimal production a household requires only a quarter of an acre to make Ksh180,000 per year and the chili plants last three years once planted.

Empowering women

It is worth mentioning that thanks to capacity building by the Nature Kenya team and our partners, women in Tana Delta are now taking up leadership roles in production and decision-making platforms at local and county levels. They make up 40% of the TDCN executive committee. Perhaps, by far the most significant step in women's empowerment in Tana Delta is that women have ventured into beekeeping, previously an activity solely done by men. Women applied for and received 53 out of the last 100 beehives distributed by Nature Kenya (with funding from the Darwin Initiative).



Women in the Tana Delta are engaging in poultry farming (above) and chili production (below). PHOTOS: NATURE KENYA





Elizabeth Kiogora



Dorothy Naitore

“Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.”


401,500 indigenous trees on 401 ha of degraded forest land.

Nature Kenya is also helping CFAs to establish other nature-based enterprises like beekeeping, eco-tourism and avi-tourism to supplement their livelihoods. Activities deemed as destructive to the forest are not permitted and CFAs are encouraged to diversify their sources of income by engaging in activities that promote forest conservation.

“I was lucky to secure a piece of land close to the forest where I have set up a small woodlot. After doing some research on beekeeping I decided to put up a beehive in my woodlot as an experiment. Now I have two beehives, from which I get good returns. I have taken it upon myself to start educating fellow CFA members on beekeeping,” says 52-year-old Dorothy Naitore, a member of the Meru Forest Environmental Conservation and Protection CFA.

Dorothy also points out that it was only recently that members of her CFA realised that they had very beautiful nature trails in North Imenti. She has also noticed that birds are slowly returning to the areas that the CFA have restored.

“You can only appreciate the results of all the conservation work when you walk around the forest. Our next big plan is to engage in ecotourism. I think once tourists see the transformation, they will be encouraged to join us in restoring the Mount Kenya forest,” says Dorothy.

Both Dorothy and Elizabeth say that the fear of losing the glorious forest was what pushed them into conservation despite their advanced age. As if reading from the same script, the two agree that it should not take bad experiences like drying rivers for people to start conserving forests. 

For the love of **Forests**

Milka Musyoki and Charles Kiama

For many forest adjacent communities living around Mount Kenya the forest is their lifeline. It provides them with many products including water, firewood and timber. But, they have witnessed chunks of this once vast expanse of indigenous trees fall prey to over-exploitation and have felt the subsequent negative impacts - a constant reminder of the need to conserve the forest.

Drawing strength from their unity, communities have come together to form Community Forest Associations (CFAs), which are spread across Nyeri, Meru, Tharaka-Nithi, Embu and Kirinyaga counties. Nature Kenya is currently working with 27 CFAs around Mount Kenya with a cumulative membership of 67,500, including women, youth and persons living with disabilities.

Initially, the only focus of CFAs was to set up tree nurseries and propagate indigenous seedlings. They would then plant the seedlings in degraded forest blocks in their respective areas. Through training facilitated by Nature Kenya, and made possible by a project funded by the Darwin Initiative, CFAs have now started

selling tree seedlings as a livelihood activity.

Growing interest in forest restoration

“Corporate bodies and people from further away are now complementing our efforts by providing implements like seeds, watering cans and growing bags. Our terms of service are very flexible and once the seedlings are ready for planting they can buy them at a discounted price. Also, we are at liberty to sell the remaining seedlings to other interested buyers at a cost we determine,” says 64-year old Elizabeth Kiogora, a member of North Imenti CFA.

The contribution of community members like Elizabeth does not end at the seedling propagation stage. Partnering organisations also engage the communities in clearing areas for planting, pitting and in the planting. CFA members are also hired to weed, replace dead seedlings and to nurture the tree seedlings until they are strong enough to grow on their own. During the short rains season (October-November) in 2019, Nature Kenya, with support from partners, mobilized 22 CFAs to plant

Restoring forests in western Kenya with Safaricom

Nature Kenya and Safaricom Plc. have partnered to restore more than 200ha of degraded forest areas in Kakamega, South and North Nandi. The Kenyan government is working to achieve 10% forest cover and Safaricom will fund the planting of 50,000 indigenous trees over the next five years to offset its emission footprint. Planting activities commenced with the onset of the rainy season in April 2020. Community Forest Associations (CFAs) and other local conservation groups like Site Support Groups (SSGs) will be engaged in this project under the close supervision of the Kenya Forest Service (KFS). With regular monitoring, CFAs, for a period of three years, will tend to the planted seedlings to ensure an optimal tree survival rate.



Power Transmission Lines and Migratory Birds in Kenya

Joel Siele, James Mutunga and John Kiptum

A pair of Great White Pelicans flying over water. PHOTO BY LORENZO BARELLI

Visitors to Lake Elementaita are familiar with the large graceful **Great White Pelicans**, who have for many years congregated here to breed. Lake Elementaita is their only known breeding site in Kenya. It is not only pelicans who frequent the lake's salt-crusted shores. **Greater and Lesser Flamingos, Egyptian Goose, Cape Teals, Little Grebes, Great Cormorants, Little Stints** and over 450 bird species have been recorded at Lake Elementaita. The lake is also within the African-Eurasian flyway, which billions of birds use to migrate from their wintering grounds in Africa to breeding grounds in Europe and Central Asia. Across this flyway, the Kenyan government has decided to put a 220kv electric transmission line.

The transmission line will run along the edge of the lake overlapping with the flight path of migratory birds. Fatalities due to collision with powerlines placed above ground may occur to any flying bird species, but the most at risk are nocturnal migrants, birds that fly in flocks, and large, heavy-bodied birds such as pelicans, whose ability to manoeuvre around the lines is limited. Collisions are imminent and a real danger as birds die from impact with cables, subsequent impact with the ground upon falling, or

as a result of injuries sustained from the impact.


Electrocution of birds may also occur and this is not just a conservation issue. The electrocution of large birds like flamingos, pelicans, eagles and storks can cause damage to the electric lines and disrupt power supplies, creating a problem for electricity distribution in areas where such cases are frequent.

Kenya has a global obligation to safeguard migratory birds within her territory being a party and signatory to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), African-Eurasian Migratory Landbirds Action Plan (AEMLAP) and the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Migratory Birds of Prey in Africa and Eurasia. The construction of the Ol'karia-Lessos-Kisumu transmission line project on the southern edge of Lake Elementaita is in contravention of Kenya's obligations to these multilateral environmental agreements.

Nature Kenya has written to the Kenya Electricity Transmission Company (KETRACO) twice and held two meetings in an effort to have the construction of the controversial section

(approx. 3km) of transmission line stopped and rerouted. However, they have ignored our appeals and continued with the construction.

Nature Kenya extended its appeal to other stakeholders, among them: the Cabinet Secretary in the Ministry of Energy, Birdlife International, the Ramsar Secretariat, and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS). The financiers of the project, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), were also made aware of the problem, and the National Environment Complaint Committee (NECC) was asked to compel the government to address the issue. As a result, Ramsar wrote to the Kenyan government while NECC wrote to the concerned agencies (KETRACO and the Ministry of Energy) to respond on the subject.

It is possible to redesign and reroute to ensure that this section of the power line does not pass at the edge of a Ramsar and World Heritage Site. Avian electrocution and collision with power lines can be avoided when measures such as bundling of infrastructure and burying the power lines underground are taken. 



Birding at Budalangi swamp.
PHOTO BY SIDNEY SHEMA



Northern Brown-throated Weaver.
PHOTO BY SIMON CARTER

Birding in **BUSIA**

Simon Carter and Sidney Shema

The western border county of Busia holds the promise of a number of species that are unlikely to be encountered elsewhere in Kenya. Species like the iconic Piapiac, that is better known from neighbouring Uganda and west of Lake Victoria, can be found without too much difficulty. Our birding team (*Mustafa Adamjee, Simon Carter, James Kashangaki, Jennifer Oduori, Sidney Shema*) visited Busia in November 2019 and explored a variety of habitats, mostly on good tarmac or murram roads, on foot and by boat. Our key objective was to gather data for previously unmapped areas (pentads) of the Kenya Bird Map project.



Amongst the weavers we found was this male - perhaps a hybrid between Yellow-backed Weaver and Northern Brown-throated Weaver?

PHOTO BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE

Budalangi Swamp, Sio River at Luanda, and the Bunyala Rice Scheme

The Budalangi swamp was our first destination. It lies to the west of Budalangi town, about 3km north of Port Bunyala/Victoria and easily accessible from the C30 Siaya Port-Bunyala Road. At approximately 500ha, it is surrounded by farmland and gum-boots and a scope are recommended. The swamp was overwhelming in the sheer number and diversity of birds. High water levels had attracted egrets, herons, storks, kingfishers and lapwings. Large flocks of **Red-billed Quelea**, with a few mingling **Cardinal Quelea** took flight from the marsh grasses as we moved around the swamp. **Black**, **Black-winged Red** and **Southern Red Bishops**, and **Fan-tailed Widowbirds** were all in breeding plumage. Even a flock of some 300 **Abdim's Storks** came in as we struggled with the numbers and diversity of birdlife. At the margins were **Black-rumped Waxbills**.

Along the border with Uganda, the alluvial lowlands adjacent to the Sio River are well worth exploring, although permission from local officials may be needed. Close to a village called Luanda, a mixed flock of finches called Luanda, a mixed flock of finches and waxbills included **Black-crowned Waxbills**

and **Bar-breasted Firefinches**. Two **Red-necked Falcons** passed quickly overhead, but it was Mustafa's rapid camera action that captured the image that allowed us to identify them with certainty. Twice we saw **Western Marsh Harrier** over wet grasslands.

On 29 November we visited the Bunyala Rice Scheme, an extensive area of irrigated paddies, where we found **Spur-winged Goose** and better numbers of Palearctic waders, though overall we saw very few of the latter. **Blue-headed** and **White-browed Coucals** were widespread. >>



Red-necked Falcon (above) PHOTO BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE and **Abdim's Storks (below)** PHOTO BY SIMON CARTER





Lake Margins of Sio Port And Busemba

On two separate days we visited the lake towns of Port Sio and Busemba, which are also accessible off the C30. There we negotiated rates with community fishing groups for boat trips. This allowed us to go along the lakeshore and get up-close to papyrus. We found **Slender-billed**, **Northern Brown-throated**, **Yellow-backed**, and **Golden-backed Weavers** actively nesting, so were **Spectacled** and **Village Weavers**. We found considerable plumage differences in individual birds, such that in some cases we had to carefully review photographs to confirm their identification.

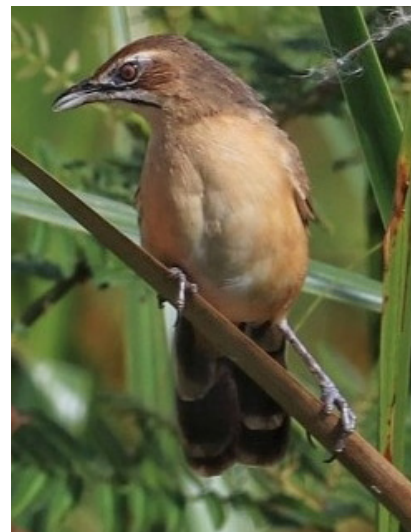
We also saw a good number of **African Openbill Stork**, **Blue-cheeked** and **Eurasian Bee-eaters**, **Angola** and **Lesser Striped Swallows**, **Red-chested Sunbird**, and **Swamp Flycatcher** in the riparian areas. From within the papyrus, **Carruthers's Cisticola**,

White-winged, **Greater and Lesser Swamp Warblers**, and **Papyrus Yellow Warblers** were heard regularly, with an occasional fleeting glimpse.

We were very fortunate at Sio Port to get a close look at a pair of **Papyrus Gonoleks** (causing a jostle amongst the photographers that nearly upset the boat!), and shortly after we were treated to a pair of **Little Bitterns**. Perhaps the biggest surprise at Sio Port was an immature **Palm-nut Vulture**, and again at Busemba we were treated to an adult of this same species.



Above: Yellow-backed Weaver on nest PHOTO BY SIDNEY SHEMA, **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, **Papyrus Gonolek** PHOTOS BY JAMES KASHANGAKI, **Palm-nut Vulture** PHOTO BY SIMON CARTER, and **Little Bittern** PHOTO BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE. Below: **Moustached Grass Warbler** and **Yellow-backed Weaver** PHOTOS BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE.



Farmlands, Grasslands and Scrub (North of Budalangi, Busia Grasslands IBA, and Alupe)

Driving through farmland, we were able to observe a number of raptors. **African Black-shouldered Kites**, **Lizard Buzzards**, **Wahlberg's** and **Long-crested Eagles** were regularly spotted over the farmlands and bush, with the occasional **Shikra**, **Little Sparrowhawk** and **Common (Steppe) Buzzard**. **Golden-backed Weaver** was also widespread in this habitat, **Lesser Masked Weaver** was seen occasionally.

The Busia Grasslands, are an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, situated a few kms southeast of Busia town where the main road crosses the Sio River. We visited and met friendly locals at the pumphouse where the road crosses the river, who offered to guide us around the adjacent farmlands. We were treated to a small flock of five **Piapiac** as they caught insects disturbed by local cattle.




Piapiac adult PHOTO BY MUSTAFA ADAMJEE

A **Western Citril** and **Copper Sunbird** were also seen here, as well as **Common Waxbill** and **Red-billed Firefinch**. We did not have time to explore the more southern parts of the IBA that satellite imagery show to have much less cultivation, and which should be accessible from the Matayos-Samia road.

Further north of Busia town is Alupe, where various research organisations have facilities. The Field Station of the Lake Basin Authority has good mixed habitat and some relict woodland. On the irrigated fields of the station we saw our only **Plain-backed Pipit** (of the western race *zenkeri*), as well as **Yellow-throated Longclaw**.

Concluding Thoughts

We saw 171 species over the course of a very satisfying three days' birding, with many new lifers. We completed full protocols for a total of eleven pentads in Busia and the neighbouring counties of Siaya and Kakamega. However, we found lower numbers of waxbills and finches, and Palearctic migrants than we had anticipated. For those contemplating a visit, there is now good accommodation at Budalangi, that can be found online (<https://www.facebook.com/HomeParkBusia/> or on mobile at (0)722 716859 or (0)790 418483). Alternatively, Busia town offers a range of hotels and guest-houses. 



Birdwatching in Gem. PHOTO BY EMILY MATECHE

Birding Beyond Yala Swamp, in the Rawalo Hills

Emily Mateche and Serah Munguti

For papyrus specialists and other swamp birds there are few places as productive as Yala Swamp. But that is not to say that other nearby sites, such as the low-lying Rawalo Hills, do not also provide some memorable birding. The Rawalo Hills are located in central Gem, west of Yala town, in Siaya County. An enthusiastic team of guides from the Yala Community Ecotourism Organisation visited the hills in February 2020 and recorded over 118 bird species, during a two-day excursion.

"This is a very promising birding destination. Birders will never be disappointed," says Joseph Wanjina a guide from Nango village at the foot of the hills.

"Here we have confirmed the presence of the rare **Grey Parrot**. Birders no longer have to go to Kakamega Forest to see this species," asserts Ibrahim Onyango, a seasoned bird guide based in Kanyaboli.

The rocky geological profile of the hills makes them a significant roosting location for migratory birds, including swallows and flycatchers. The area is also home to the **Spotted Eagle Owl**, a bird which is subject to many traditional myths.

A day's birding at Rawalo is guaranteed to be a rewarding experience, but bird gatherings are most abundant in the evenings, or at sunset when birds return to roost. They return in such large numbers that it is hard to keep count. The species to look out for include **Jacobin Cuckoo**, **Hartlaub's** and **Ross's Turacos**, **Black-and-white-Casqued Hornbill**, **Cassin's Honeybird**, **Meyer's Parrot**, **Tropical Boubou**, **Rock Martin**, **Green-backed Erememola** and **Mocking Cliff Chat**.

The beauty of the Rawalo Hills is best enjoyed on a trekking tour. This will take you through valleys and snaking river tributaries at the foot of the hills, and into bush habitat with wildlife. A hike to the peak of the hills provides pleasant glimpses of the countryside and a spectacular view at sunset. Hiking also provides an opportunity to explore a series of caves that have historically served as sacred shrines for hundreds of religious pilgrims from the local community.

Capacity building for the local bird guides has been made possible by a project funded by the Darwin Initiative. This project aims to secure the future of Kenya's largest freshwater wetland. The Yala Swamp Land Use Plan has won endorsements from the Governors of Siaya and Busia counties and H.E. the Rt. Hon. Raila Odinga, a sign that the project is on course. The land use plan recommends the creation of Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas (ICCAs) to promote biodiversity protection and ecotourism. Meetings currently underway will be held at over 130 villages; they inform the community on the land use plan and ICCAs.

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Above photos: Malachite Kingfisher and zebras in Nairobi National Park by Lorenzo Barelli

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