



Youths from Chawia take part in monitoring at Chawia forest. Photo by Gilbay Obunga

Pressure on Taita Hills forest fragments mounts as drought persists

■ By Gilbay Obunga

The prevailing drought continues to pile pressure on ecologically sensitive habitats across Kenya. In Taita Hills, scarcity of fodder is driving residents into the fragile forest fragments in search of feed for their cattle. This latest trend, according to local community conservation volunteers, poses a threat to bird nesting sites in Chawia and Ngangao forests. The most sought alternative fodder plants are the *Dracaena* and wild bananas that naturally occur in the highland forest fragments.

"Our monitoring data indicate that seventy per cent of the Cabanis's Greenbul's nests in Chawia forest are on *Dracaena* plants. We fear that if the uncontrolled harvesting of these plants persists, the Cabanis's Greenbul's breeding will be affected," says John Maganga, a member of the monitoring team from the Dawida Biodiversity Conservation (DaBiCo) Community-based Organization. DaBiCo is the Site Support Group (SSG) for the Taita Hills forests Key Biodiversity Area (KBA).

The Cabanis's Greenbul is a dull-coloured mid-sized greenbul with a long bill and tail. It is found in the Taita Hills forest fragments, occurring in thick undergrowth and mid-story sections of the forests, usually in small groups.

In August and September, the SSG carried out common bird and detailed monitoring within the KBA. It is during these monitoring activities that SSG members noticed the illegal harvesting of forest plants for fodder amid the biting drought. Chawia and Ngangao forests recorded the highest cases of the practice.

To dissuade community members from engaging in destructive forest activities, the SSG plans to hold public sensitization meetings in the affected areas. The SSG also intends to increase forest surveillance at the sites.

Another notable observation made during the monitoring exercises include the unusual increase in the sighting of some birds. "The sighting frequency of species such as the Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Grey-headed Bush-shrike was abnormally high in the forest fragments compared to previous monitoring," says Nathaniel Mkombola, another member of the SSG monitoring team.

DaBiCo conducts common bird monitoring twice annually, in February (when there are migrant birds) and August. Information about changes in bird population levels across various habitats, within and outside the KBA, is obtained during this monitoring. Detailed monitoring, on the other hand, focuses on establishing the abundance of the target species – Taita Apalis and Taita Thrush – and changes in their habitat.

Fifteen volunteers from DaBiCo participated in the August-September monitoring exercises, which also engaged pupils from Iyale Primary School. A total of 28 species were recorded within the forest landscapes. These included the threatened Taita Apalis and Taita Thrush, only found in Taita Hills forest remnants, and the magnificent Crowned Eagle. In the forest-adjacent agricultural areas, 49 bird species were recorded, including the Crowned Eagle and Usambara Double-collared Sunbird.

The Taita Hills comprise two main mountain massifs, Mbololo and Dawida, rising from the dryland below. The forests that remain on the hilltops are extensively fragmented. Taita Hills forests are part of the Eastern Arc mountains, one of 34 global biodiversity hotspots, and are one of Kenya's KBAs. Over the years, Taita Hills forests have been undergoing massive degradation. More than ninety per cent of the indigenous forests have been cleared for agriculture and forest plantations, putting at risk the survival of the Taita endemics – birds, amphibians and insects found only in the Taita Hills.

Nature Kenya in partnership with DOF – the BirdLife Partner in Denmark – through funding from the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) through CISU (Civil Society in Development), has been running the 'People Partner with Nature' program in the Taita Hills. The program seeks to support communities living adjacent to the Taita Hills forests to engage in income-generating activities, such as butterfly farming, beekeeping, eco-tourism, and climate-smart agriculture, among others, that reduce pressure on the environment. This program is also running in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and Dakatcha Woodland in Kilifi county. The long-term objective of the program is to reduce the destruction of forested KBAs and contribute to the realization of the best participatory forest management practices for the benefit of all. 🌱



Dracaena plants in Ngangao forest. Photo by Nathaniel Mkombola

Key Biodiversity Areas: Focus on Tana River Delta

By Joshua Sese

Spanning over Tana River and Lamu Counties, about 182 kilometres north of the coastal city of Mombasa, the Tana River Delta is Kenya's largest delta, and the second largest in East Africa. The Delta is a rich mosaic of palm savannah, seasonally flooded grasslands, swamps, riverine forest fragments, lakes, woodlands, mangroves, dunes and beaches. Designated as a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA), the Tana River Delta is also a wetland of international importance (Ramsar Site), a Global Biodiversity Hotspot and a proposed World Heritage Site.

The Delta supports immense biodiversity of global significance. Recent surveys have recorded more than 336 bird species and over 320 species of plants. The Delta is home to two endemic and Critically Endangered primates: the Tana River Mangabey and the Tana River Red Colobus. It hosts a remarkable collection of fish, herpetofauna and invertebrate species. Over 250,000 people practising crop farming, livestock rearing and fishing depend on the Delta for their livelihoods due to its varied, extensive and productive habitats.

Despite its wealth in biodiversity, the Delta faces many threats. Over-exploitation of natural resources, poor land use practices, unregulated human settlement and unsustainable large-scale agricultural development have led to the destruction and loss of some of the Delta's critical habitats. Climate change also poses a challenge to the Tana River Delta's ability to support livelihoods and provide ecosystem services.

Nature Kenya is working with local communities and other stakeholders to conserve the Tana River Delta. In 2011, Nature Kenya led a collaborative effort by various stakeholders in the development of a Tana River Delta Land Use Plan (LUP) that was guided by a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The process was concluded in 2015. The Land Use Plan has since been approved and adopted as a policy by the Lamu County government.

The Land Use Plan is now in its implementation phase. Nature Kenya has also been promoting the Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas (ICCAs) approach. Community Conservation Areas are biodiversity-rich areas partially or largely managed by local communities. 🌿

October Big Day Summary

By Richard Kipngeno

Birdwatchers in Kenya joined the rest of the world in participating in the October Big Day on October 8. On this day, birders from around the world go out to enjoy birds and submit their observations through the eBird mobile app. The day is also celebrated as the World Migratory Bird Day.

Fifteen Site Support Groups (SSGs) affiliated to Nature Kenya took part in the event in Maasai Mara, South Nandi Forest, Lake Elmenteita, Tana River Delta, Mida Creek, Dakatcha Woodland, Dunga Swamp, Mumoni Hill Forest, Mutitu Hill Forest, Taita Hills, Kikuyu Escarpment, Mt. Kenya, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Sabaki Estuary and Kinangop Grasslands Key Biodiversity Areas.

Kenya was ranked 10th in the world with 703 species and 236 checklists completed. Top Kenyan eBirder was Albert Baya from Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Guides Association and also a member of Nature Kenya Site Support Group for Arabuko-Sokoke Forest KBA, with 222 species. The country's top hotspot was Lewa Wildlife Conservancy with 210 species. 🐦



October Big Day photos from Garissa, Dakatcha Woodland, Mumoni hills, Nairobi National Park and Sabaki River Estuary. Photos by John Mwacharo, Patrick Changawa, David Musya, Titus Imboma and Joseph Maangi.

For updates visit
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Conserving the reptiles of Nairobi

By Thomas Odeyo and Haward Atubwa

Urban reptile diversity is surprisingly unknown. We often overlook reptiles in favour of more attractive animals like birds and mammals. These scaly creatures, however, play a crucial role in many of our ecosystems. Unfortunately, they are among the less studied groups of animals due to negative publicity and limited funding to facilitate the studies.

Kenya Herpetofauna Working Group (KHWG), a committee of Nature Kenya, is promoting the conservation of reptiles and amphibians in Kenya. One of its activities involves documenting the diversity of both amphibians and reptiles in Nairobi. Habitat loss and degradation, persecution, pollution and incidental killings are some of the threats reptiles face in most urban areas in Kenya.

While some species face serious threats, others seem to be faring quite well in Nairobi. One example is the Marsh Terrapin or African Helmeted Turtle (*Pelomedusa subrufa*). This terrapin occurs in wetlands in Kenya and much of sub-Saharan Africa. It reproduces by laying eggs, and the sex of young ones is determined by temperature. It can grow up to 30 cm in length and live for 30-50 years in the wild. To survive drought periods, it is capable of burrowing into the ground for years.



A terrapin being rescued from a man-made wetland in Nairobi. Photo by Thomas Odeyo

Despite many challenges, the terrapin is doing surprisingly well in Nairobi due to a combination of factors. These include the construction of dams that have created new habitats for the turtles and the fact that they are no longer hunted for food like before. Increased infrastructural development in the city poses a new threat to the terrapin's habitats, as lately observed.

Recently, concerned residents reported witnessing a wetland filling incident near the Nairobi Eastern Bypass adjacent to Infinity Industrial Park. The Kenya Herpetofauna Working Group members



Members of the KHWG in action during one of the terrapin rescue exercise at a man-made wetland in Nairobi. Photo by Thomas Odeyo

visited the site to assess the impact of the activity on the wetland's inhabitants. The team discovered that not just one but many wetlands in the area were under reclamation. Trucks were filling the wetlands with gravel to reclaim land for construction with little regard for the existing flora and fauna.

Quick intervention by KHWG saved 16 terrapins from one of the wetlands undergoing reclamation for a housing project. The group notified one of the contractors of their rescue mission and was granted permission to relocate the terrapins to ponds at the National Museum of Kenya and City Park. The rescue and relocation of the 16 turtles in Nairobi is good news for urban biodiversity conservation. There is, however, a need to subject all major construction projects in the city to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

What can you do as a citizen to help?

As a citizen, you can help in the following ways:

- Report any cases of wetland reclamation for construction to the Kenya Herpetofauna Working Group or other relevant authorities. Email: khwginfo@gmail.com Tel: +254729978212 or +254710318140
- Volunteer with the Kenya Herpetofauna Working Group to help with community outreach.
- Advocate for the conservation of urban biodiversity and their habitats.

The Kenya Herpetofauna Working Group is also working to raise awareness about the importance of reptiles in the city. We hope our efforts will help raise awareness about these often-overlooked animals and their significance in our ecosystem. We also hope that people will be more willing to protect these animals and their habitats. 🐢

Bright Jupiter and Mars

By Fleur Ng'weno

Planets, Nov '22

The big planet Jupiter is bright in the eastern sky in the evening this month, appearing higher each night. Saturn, much fainter, is high overhead. The waxing moon is near Saturn on November 1 and 29, near Jupiter on the 4th.

The 'red planet' Mars rises in the east during the evening, glowing brightly as its orbit brings it a little nearer to Earth. By month's end Mars is in the sky almost all night. The waning moon appears near to Mars on Nov 10 and 11.

Brilliant Venus and bright little Mercury make an appearance in the glare of the sunset in the last week of November. On the 24th they are joined by the thin, almost-new crescent moon.

November stars

High overhead, four stars form the corners of the Great Square of Pegasus, the flying horse of the ancient Greeks. Low in the northeast, the constellation Cassiopeia is a group of bright stars in the shape of a letter "M". If you missed it in October, look for a hazy, blurry spot of light between these two constellations. The blurry spot is the great Andromeda galaxy.

In the south, the bright star Fomalhaut is high, and the bright star Achernar below it. On a clear, dark night, away from city lights, you can look for the Small and Large Magellanic Clouds below Achernar. These cloud-like

areas are small galaxies, composed of millions of stars.

The Pleiades or Seven Sisters – a cluster of bright stars close together – are rising in the east. Below the Pleiades, a group of stars form a cone-like shape, the Hyades cluster, in the constellation of Taurus the Bull. The bright, reddish star Aldebaran is at one end of the cone.

If you imagine the cone as the face of Taurus, the Bull in Greek myths, two stars further northeast are the horns of the bull. In the second half of November, the red planet Mars seems close to the star El Nath, the northern horn of the bull.

Moon Nov '22

Nov 1 – first ¼ (half-lit moon at sunset). Nov 8 – full moon, rising in the east. Nov 16 – last ¼ (half-lit moon at dawn). Nov 23 – new moon. Nov 30 – first ¼ (half-lit moon at sunset).

Meteor Showers

In its orbit around the sun, the Earth regularly passes through areas of dust and debris. When a bit of dust or rock falls into the Earth's atmosphere, it burns up, creating a bright light. This is called a meteor or "shooting star", or, in parts of Kenya, "burning spear". The Taurids Meteor Shower reaches its peak at night before dawn on November 5. The Leonids Meteor shower lasts from November 6 to 30, the peak from midnight on 17th to dawn on 18th. You need a clear, dark sky to see most meteors. 🌠

WHITE BLOSSOM



A flowering White Jacaranda tree at City Park. Photo by Richard Kipngeno

Birding Updates

Wednesday Morning Birdwalks in Nairobi

Please observe Covid-19 protocols as needed: wear or bring masks and meet at designated venues.

2nd November – Manguo Pond, Limuru.

Meet at 8.30 am at Manguo Pond. Directions: Coming from the City Centre, take Nairobi – Nakuru Highway. Turn right a few metres after Limuru Bridge towards the wetland.

9th November – Paradise Lost.

Meet at Paradise Lost Main Gate at 8:30 am. Directions: Take Kiambu Road; turn Left at Paradise Lost junction in Thindigua after Runda Greens before Quick Mart Supermarket. Turn right at Kencom Apartments just after Kasarini Primary School. It's about 500m to the main gate. Thanks to the management for welcoming the birdwalk.

16th November – Museum Grounds/ Michuki Memorial Park.

Meet at 8 am in the open space in front of the entrance to the museum galleries.

23rd November – City Park. Meet at 8.30 am at the parking near the Coca Cola Kiosk. Directions: Coming from the City centre, take Limuru Road past Aga Khan Hospital. Make a U-turn at Total Energies Petrol Station, Limuru Road. Drive back along Limuru Road and turn left onto City Park Road next to City Park Market.

30th November - Karen Blixen Museum.

Meet at 8.30 am in the Museum's Car Park area. Directions: Coming from the city centre, take Ngong Road towards Karen. Turn left at Shell Petrol Station onto Karen Road. The Museum is about 1.5Kms after Karen Country Club.

20th November: Sunday Bird Watch – Kakuzi.

Meet at the Kakuzi Main Entrance, at 8:30 am. Directions: Drive along Thika Road past Kenol, turn left opposite Kakuzi Butchery / Kakuzi Timber Shop. Alternatively, take Muranga PSVs at Nyama Kima, Nairobi and alight at Kenol. From Kenol, take Makuyu PSVs and alight opposite Kakuzi Butchery / Kakuzi Timber Shop. Walk from there on the same side that you have alighted from Nairobi towards the main office.

If you have questions, please write < news@naturekenya.org > or phone 0780-149200.

Bird Ringing at Nairobi National Museum grounds usually takes place

on Tuesday mornings. There will be no ringing in Nairobi National Museum Grounds from 15th November to 30th November, 2022. Ringing will be taking place in Ngulia, Tsavo West National Park. Please confirm with Titus Imboma <Imbomati911@gmail.com> Phone 0721-649452.

Thursday Birdwalks in Malindi

3rd November – Malindi Museum Grounds.

Meet at 4:00 pm at the Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Membership Office.

10th November – Sabaki Bridge.

Meet at 4:00 pm at the Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Membership Office (100/= Boda boda fare to and from).

17th November – Malindi Airport.

Meet at 4:00 pm at the Malindi Airport Gate (Bring an ID card or passport).

24th November - Mtangani via Afya Hospital.

Meet at 4:00 pm at Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Membership Office (100/= Boda boda fare to and from).

26th November: Saturday Birdwatch - Gongoni.

Meet at the Malindi Museum at 7:00 am. The bird walk is likely to last about 3 hours; Bring drinking water.

For more information, email: <malindimembers@naturekenya.org> or phone 0725 223042.

Mombasa Birdwalks are held the 3rd Saturday of each month. To check meeting time and place, check Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/FFJmombasa/>

Or contact: Taibali Hamzali <thamzali@gmail.com> / 0733-980540 or Kelvin Mazera <klvnrua@yahoo.com> / 0720-928783



A Golden-breasted Starling stretches out to catch an insect. Photo by John Mwacharo

Tree Walk By Nature Kenya Plants Committee



Venue: National Museums of Kenya
Meet at Nairobi Museum main gate

Date: Friday 25th Nov Time: 9:00 AM

Contact: 0780 149200 or 0726 006283

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For details on associated groups such as Youth Committee, Succulenta, and Friends of Nairobi Arboretum, City Park or Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, contact office@naturekenya.org