

Kenya Birding

THE NATURE KENYA MAGAZINE ISSUE 16, 2022

CRANES WITH COLOUR RINGS

Why are Grey Crowned
Cranes sporting rings?

VISIT NGANGAO FOREST

Discover the home of gigantic
trees and endemic birds

SECURING YALA SWAMP

A community working to
conserve our largest swamp



NatureKenya
THE EAST AFRICA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Kenya Birding

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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.



Welcome to the
Kenya Birding
magazine,

where we show how
birds are amazing, how
wonderful our natural
environment is, and
why your support is so
important to protect

it. In this issue we get to learn about the
familiar, but indispensable, grasses on page 20, see what epic
journeys birds undertake each year on pg. 4, and read about
the spectacular trees found in the remnant forests of the Taita
Hills (pg. 28). Who isn't thrilled by the sight of **Grey Crowned
Cranes**? I'll be doubly hoping that they turn up when I'm
birding, especially so I can check to see if they are marked, as
explained by Wanyoike Wamiti on page 9.



Sadly, there are situations building to a crisis, like in the
number of birds of prey being electrocuted by power lines,
and on pg. 32 is one eagle's story. Also, on pg. 36, read
Timothy Mwinami's and Silas Wanjala's report on Lake
Naivasha to get to know how overfishing is slowly, but surely,
bringing Lake Naivasha to the brink.

Nature Kenya continues to do very interesting work with
communities, like with the farmers in the Tana River Delta
(pg. 39), and in the Yala Delta (pg. 42). The farmers in
these areas are protecting and restoring the habitat around
them, and in so doing, improving their farming yields, and
household incomes.

Let's also celebrate local bird guides (pg. 30), who also earn
income from natural sites, by providing guiding services to
visitors. They are often local conservation champions. Local
guides gather data and monitor sites across the country. They
raise the alarm when things are going wrong, so mitigating
measures can be taken to avert catastrophes.

When I was growing up, it seemed like there were trees all
around—along the roads, in the gardens, “over the hills
and everywhere” as the song says. But, we have lost a huge
number of trees felled for roads, housing, farming, and to
meet the demand for domestic energy in the country. Trees
have a major role in carbon sequestration, and in capturing
and filtering water; they provide food and shelter for birds
and other wildlife, and timber for people to use in building
housing, furniture, and cooking. To reduce the consequential
damage of losing our trees we need to plant as many trees as
possible. So as a last word, please, whatever the outcome of
the upcoming election, let each of us plant trees!

Happy Birding! (& planting),

Catherine Ngarachu
Editor, *Kenya Birding*

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LAST WORD

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Life on the planet

We must act now to save the life support system that we call nature

Paul Matiku

Biodiversity – the variety of life forms on Earth – continues to decline in every region of the world. This endangers our economy, income-generating efforts, food security, and the quality of life of people everywhere.


A report by the UN Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) highlights the following areas of concern:

- Agriculture being the most widespread form of land-use, has resulted in over one third of the terrestrial land surface being used for cropping or animal husbandry.
- The doubling of urban areas since 1992 and an unprecedented expansion of infrastructure, has come mostly at the expense of indigenous forests, wetlands and grasslands.
- In freshwater ecosystems, a series of combined threats include land-use change, water extraction, exploitation,

pollution, climate change, and invasive species.

The good news is that nature can be conserved, restored and used sustainably while simultaneously meeting the goals we have as a society.

To secure food, water, energy, health and the well-being of people everywhere we need to better implement our existing policies. We also need to launch new initiatives that more effectively enlist individual and collective action for transformative change. In this way we can hope for a healthy planet, one that continues to provide for people.

To this end, world governments are looking to develop a **Post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework**. The vision of this framework is a world living in harmony with nature, where: “By 2050, biodiversity is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used, maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people.” 



The good news is that nature can be conserved, restored and used sustainably while simultaneously meeting the goals we have as a society.



A beneficiary of macadamia tree seedlings from Nature Kenya.

Photo by Gilbay Obunga

(Opposite page photos) Beekeeping training session in Siaya and tree planting at Chawia forest, Taita hills by Moses Owili and Gilbay Obunga respectively. Blue Pansy and Cape Robin-chat by Peter Usher

NATURE KENYA'S STRATEGY 2022-2032

For the next 10 years Nature Kenya will focus on five strategic pillars for action.

These pillars are based on the premise that nature is humanity's life support system—it is critical for people's well-being and quality of life. Saving nature is not a choice, but an obligation. It has never been more urgent. Nature demands respect from whatever perspective it is viewed.

Nature Kenya's strategy is built upon putting that respect into action:

Saving species and sites: Nature Kenya will save species and restore sites of conservation concern, focussing on: threatened species, common species, and key sites. We will continue work on the conservation of birds, and include non-bird taxa, under the broader scope of Key Biodiversity Areas.

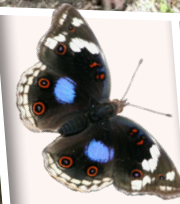
Foster sustainability: Nature Kenya will work to address and reverse the systemic drivers of biodiversity loss. We propose to do this through policy reform, advocacy, and by encouraging the consideration of biodiversity in economic decision-making. Sustainability will also be achieved by promoting nature-based solutions and models.

Building support: Nature Kenya will mobilise public and political support for nature, by engaging and empowering local communities, and the society at large. We will recruit and retain members who are the supporters that make our conservation work possible.

Act on Science: Nature Kenya will enable the provision of biodiversity information, for evidence-based conservation. We will do this by supporting the study of biodiversity, including citizen science.

Strengthen Structures: Nature Kenya will make stronger the organisation's management and communication arrangements needed to drive action for conservation. We will do this by finding resources, nurturing relationships and growing partnerships.

Our work and impact in numbers (2021/22)



13

Site support
groups
actively
supported

17

ongoing plans
for threatened
bird species
recovery

65

vulture
volunteers
engaged

56

biodiversity
sites monitored

52 ha

of degraded
grasslands
reseeded with
grass seeds

743 ha

of degraded
landscapes being
restored

83

community
groups engaged

**Ksh. 45.8
million**

earned by
communities from
nature-based
enterprises

Epic journeys on the African-Eurasian flyway

Alex Ngari

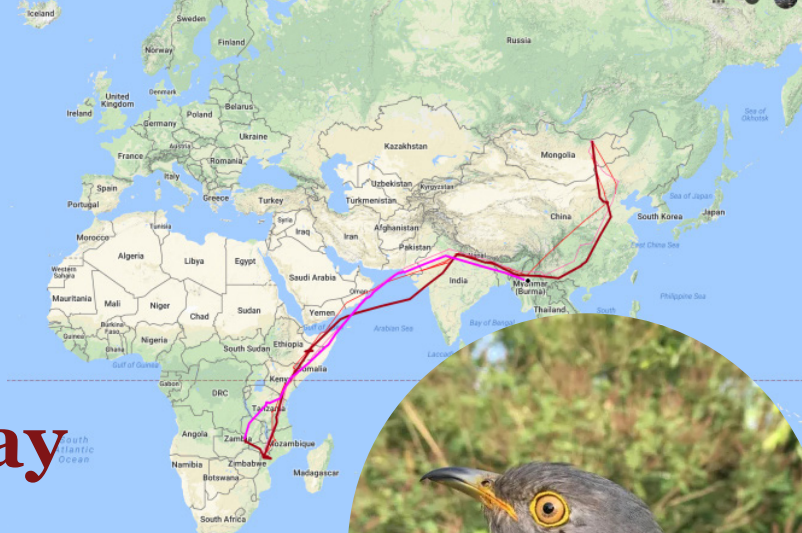
The spectacle of bird migration has long amazed people around the world. In recent years it has become possible to follow their travels, to better understand their journeys and needs.

Long ago, people could not fathom the birds disappearance from around their homes. Where do they go? In Europe, there were many myths—some thought that like frogs and many reptiles, birds hibernated and went into hiding at the bottom of water bodies, in the mud, for the winter. Others believed that birds went on a trip to the moon and back. Now we know, thanks to bird ringing programmes and satellite tagging, that birds become ‘absent’ because they travel great distances, depending on the season.

Palearctic migrants travel from sites where they nest to sites with a warmer climate during the northern winter. They set off before the onset of winter, after breeding in Europe and Asia. They begin to arrive in East Africa in September-October and many remain here until March or April. Others pass through to winter in southern Africa. They return north from mid-March to their breeding grounds, for the northern summer.

The African continent hosts large populations of migratory species from Europe and Asia. The route that they traverse annually is known as the African-Eurasian flyway.

Alex Ngari is the Migratory Birds Flyways Programme Manager for Africa, at BirdLife Africa



Common Cuckoos tracked on the Beijing Cuckoo Project

The Birding Beijing team fitted satellite tags to cuckoos in China and followed their progress. One of these birds (named Flappy McFlapperson by a local school) gained a following on social media. Many followed ‘Flappy’ as she travelled thousands of kms from her breeding grounds in outer Mongolia, through India, and over the Indian Ocean, to eastern Africa. She then travelled through Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania, the DRC and Zambia, to overwinter in Mozambique. She successfully returned to her summer grounds having flown “More than 32,000km in 12 months.” Read all about this epic journey on the blog at <https://birdingbeijing.com/beijingcuckoo-project/>

Top right Common Cuckoo photo, and the Google map showing its migration route, is used courtesy of birdingbeijing.com

Palearctic migrants take advantage of the favourable summer season to raise their young. During this season, there is a lot of food, the feeding hours are long. Some birds have synchronised their breeding cycles such that their young hatch at a time when the insect population is at its peak.

Some types of migrants

Perching birds (also known as Passerines), which include many species, like warblers, orioles, and flycatchers, stock up fat in their bodies to help fuel their long journeys. They will have to cross large water bodies, harsh deserts; they may have to navigate sandstorms and manoeuvre their escape from predators.

Large bodied birds like **White Storks** have evolved to use warm air uplifts to rise up high in the skies and glide to cover long distances hence saving a lot of energy.



White Stork, European Roller and European Honey Buzzard. Photos by Imran Shah, Erkki Hallila and www.pxhere.com respectively

Obstacles that migratory birds have to overcome

Migratory journeys are tough and exhaustive to birds. Along the way there are human activities that present additional challenges. They include:



Urbanisation

Expansion of human settlements takes away land previously important to birds.



Energy infrastructure

Africa is in a race to connect some 600 million people, that are still unconnected, to electricity. But when energy infrastructure is poorly deployed the consequences are severe. When built along flyways, the spinning blades of wind turbines kill many birds that are struck by them. When power lines are built along flyways, with bird un-friendly designs, they escalate the danger of birds colliding with them.




Large-scale agriculture

This results in there being less suitable land for feeding and survival, and pollution.



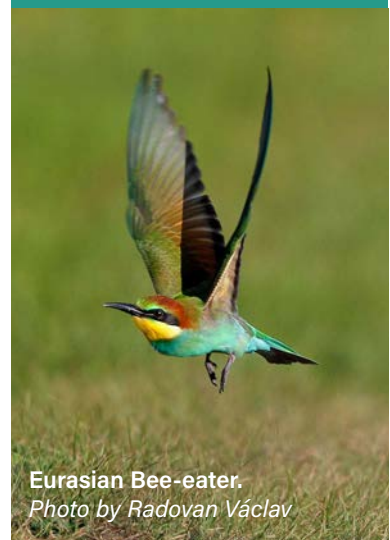
Hunting

Hunting along the African-Eurasian flyway has led to the killing of millions of birds.

As a result of these pressures, the numbers of many migratory birds is on the decline and migratory species like the iconic Egyptian Vulture, that long ago was valued by the Pharaohs, is now listed as **Endangered** on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. 

What BirdLife is doing about the threats in the Flyways Programme

The BirdLife Partnership is implementing a number of actions, working with national partners, like Nature Kenya, to save migratory species and their habitats along flyways. They have chosen to focus on ensuring that our agricultural systems continue production in a sustainable way, that the energy sector develops in ways that consider the safety of birds, and that hunting is regulated.



Eurasian Bee-eater.
Photo by Radovan Václav



It's Time.

100th Anniversary 15 September 2022

The world's oldest and
largest international
conservation partnership
turns 100 in 2022.

FIND OUT MORE:

[BIRDLIFE.ORG/BIRDLIFE100](https://birdlife.org/birdlife100)

100 YEARS and counting



Caspian Tern in flight.
Photo by Peter Usher

Christopher Sands

A century ago, visionary conservationists concerned about the plight of the world's birds and the wider environment came together to form an international movement.

Rooted in the foundations of a handful of campaigning national organisations, it steadily gathered momentum, spread its wings and eventually evolved into a powerful global voice for nature. This is how the BirdLife story began.

Imagine a sky made dark by an avian eclipse. The Passenger Pigeon, once the most abundant bird in North America, could literally block out daylight when its unimaginably huge flocks passed overhead. Thought to have numbered around three billion individuals, and possibly as many as five billion, this was a gregarious species like no other – a single flock seen in 1866 was estimated to have been 300 miles long.

The arrival of European settlers, however, soon changed all that. In just a few decades, under pressure from indiscriminate hunting on a vast scale and extensive deforestation, this most populous of species was rendered extinct, despite having lived in harmony with indigenous peoples for tens of thousands of years. The Passenger Pigeon had been eliminated from the planet in perhaps as little as half a century, with the last confirmed wild bird thought to have been shot in 1901.

'Natural' extinction occurs over many hundreds or thousands of

years, but human activity has dangerously accelerated this rate.

Other threats to birds in the late 19th century took more novel forms. In both Europe and the United States, the increasing wealth of large numbers of people led to ever more showy wardrobes. For women, the obligatory hat had to be adorned with feathers, both exotic and not, if one was to make one's mark on the boulevard.

Both our original American Partner, the National Audubon Society, and our UK Partner, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, had their roots in tackling what was called "murderous millinery". In the words of the RSPB, "In 1889, Emily Williamson created the society with one core aim – to fight a fashion for feathers and exotic plumes that was driving birds, including Little Egrets, Great Crested Grebes and birds-of-paradise towards extinction".

Her all-women movement was born out of frustration that the male-only British Ornithologists' Union was not acting on the issue. Likewise, in Massachusetts, USA,

in 1896, Harriet Hemenway and Minna B Hall organised a series of afternoon teas to convince Boston society ladies to eschew hats with bird feathers. These meetings culminated in the founding of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Our Dutch Partner, Vogelbescherming Nederland (VBN), also had its early roots in successfully campaigning against feathers in hats.

Others joined the battle. According to Cassidy Zachary, a fashion historian, "During a six-month period in 1911, four feather-trading firms sold approximately 223,490 bird corpses in London alone".

"The blood of uncounted millions of slaughtered birds is upon the heads of the women," prominent wildlife activist William H Hornaday told the New York Times in 1913. "They have shown themselves a scourge to bird life all over the world."

NEW AGE, NEW PROBLEMS

... in the decades before 1922, the conservation consciousness

enmeshed within BirdLife's DNA was growing by leaps and bounds.

Our oldest Partner, the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), had been working for nature conservation since 1883. Then, as now, birds were an early warning system about the devastating consequences of human activity. Knowledge about how we were destroying nature began to grow in the late 19th century, whether in India, Europe or the Americas.

In addition to BNHS, RSPB and Audubon, many other Partners have been fighting on the front lines for birds and nature for more than a century. Two more founder members, German BirdLife Partner NABU and VBN in the Netherlands, both began life under other names in 1899. The Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union was hatched in 1901, and from it eventually came Birds Australia, which also became a BirdLife Partner.

Dansk Ornitologisk Forening (BirdLife in Denmark) was founded in 1906. **The East Africa Natural History Society, which later evolved into BirdLife Partners Nature Kenya and Nature Uganda, first met in 1909**, and our founding French Partner, Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO), was established in 1912.

Aves Argentinas started life in 1916 as the Sociedad Ornitológica del Plata. Lëtzebuurger Natura Vulleschutzliga (BirdLife in Luxembourg) was formed in 1920, the Estonian Ornithological Society in 1921, and SVS/BirdLife Switzerland shares BirdLife's birth year of 1922.

GREAT MINDS

This growing consciousness about how the practices and behaviour of the day were destroying birds and nature brought an eclectic range of concerned people together.

...the International Committee (later Council) for Bird Preservation (ICBP) was

founded in 1922. In record time, it established Partner organisations in France, the USA, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Hungary, Australia, the UK, Germany, Canada, Japan, Sweden, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Luxembourg, Austria, South Africa and New Zealand.

... in 1978, all ICBP posts had been voluntary and unpaid, but the organisation's membership took the decision to employ a full-time director. On his appointment in 1980, the Swiss conservation biologist Dr Christoph Imboden began to appoint a professional staff to form a Secretariat, whose role would be to develop strategies, programmes and policies.


One of the first five employees was Dr Nigel Collar, who joined as Red Book compiler and is still with BirdLife today. In the same year, the Secretariat moved to Cambridge to share the newly established headquarters of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Species Conservation Monitoring Unit.

... in 1985, Cristoph Imboden opened discussion about a new direction for ICBP, as "a network of strong allied national



Long-crested Eagle
Photo by Charles J. Sharp

organisations", and relaunched it as BirdLife International. Its new name and logo was established in March 1993.

The plan worked, and today the BirdLife family is at its strongest, with 117 Partners around the globe working to protect birds and habitats in every continent. The underlying principles which guide BirdLife today were the same as those which led to our creation back in 1922. 

This article originally appeared in the *BirdLife Magazine* January-March 2022 and is republished (in part here) with permission.

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A pair of Grey Crowned Cranes with chicks. Photo by Wanyoike Wamiti

Report your sighting of marked Grey Crowned Cranes

Everyone can participate in research by reporting sightings of marked cranes.

Wanyoike Wamiti tells us how.

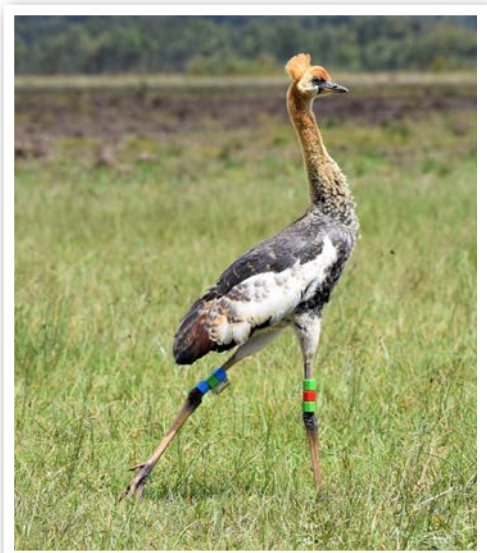


Fig 1: An estimated 12 week old Grey Crowned Crane chick (identified as BuGBu/GRG) released after marking at Lake Ol' Bolossat on 29 September 2018.

Photo by Wanyoike Wamiti

Large numbers of **Grey Crowned Cranes** in Kenya, and across their range in Africa, are being marked with coloured rings. This is helping us study aspects of their natural history that remain unknown or poorly understood. This includes their distribution and movements, their regional (within-country and cross-border) populations, and the causes of mortality. Birders can help us collect this valuable information on cranes by reporting their sightings of marked cranes.

Marking cranes

Use of colour rings (also called bands) makes it possible for an individual crane to be identified. In Kenya, the programme was rolled out in December 2017, and by March 2022, a total of about 60 crane chicks had been colour-marked at Lake Ol' Bolossat and Mugie Wildlife Conservancy, and about 71 in Nandi, Trans Nzoia and Uasin Gishu counties.

In addition to the colour rings, a few cranes have been fitted with GPS tags (fixed on the colour rings or as a backpack) to allow the remote collection of movement and habitat choice data. The findings so far are revealing a lot about the movement of cranes. For example, the crane chick in Figure 1 was marked at Lake Ol' Bolossat. The same chick was re-sighted 3 years later at Ol' Pejeta Conservancy (see Figure 2), about 65 km away.

HOW TO READ THE COLOUR RING COMBINATIONS

When marking cranes a set of three rings is placed on the tibiotarsus of each leg.

- In Figure 2, on the **LEFT LEG (LL)** the top and bottom rings are blue (**Bu**), which is the colour code for Kenya.
- The middle ring is green (**G**), which is the designated colour for the population representing Lake Ol' Bolossat and central Kenya.
- **The combination is always read top to bottom** i.e. **BuGBu** (Blue, Green, Blue).
- Western Kenya has settled on the colour red as their population colour code, and therefore the **LL** marking in Figure 3 is **BuRBu** (Blue, Red, Blue).
- Currently, there are a total of 7 colours in use in Kenya: Green (G), Blue (Bu), White (W), Yellow (Y), Red (R), Brown (Br) and Black (Bk).
- On the **RIGHT LEG (RL)** can be rings of any 3 colours from the choice of 7 to make a unique combination for that individual crane.
- The **RL** marking in Figure 3 is **WBrG** (White, Brown, Green).
- Together you would report the crane's identity in Figure 3 as **BuRBu/WBrG**.

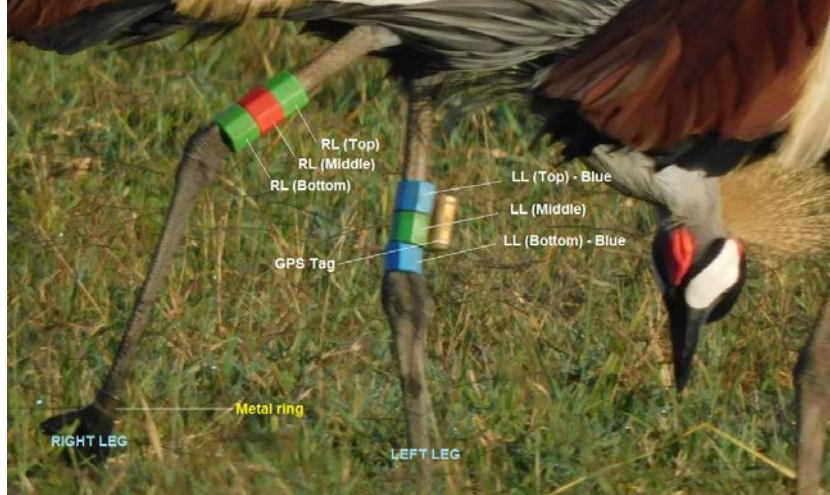


Fig 2: A close look at the markings protocol from the BuGBu/GRG crane re-sighted on 20 January 2022 in Ol' Pejeta Conservancy. Photo by Simon Lomelo

Why ring crane chicks?

As opposed to marking mature individuals, marking chicks at 10-14 weeks old, before they fledge (develop wing feathers for flight), is safer for the birds. Also by marking chicks we have the advantage of knowing with certainty both the origin and age of the chick. There are rare occasions when it is possible to mark an adult as with those who are released following the rescue of an injured individual, but normally capturing adult cranes would require use of complicated traps (e.g. cannon-netting) that could seriously injure or even kill them.

A small team of 2-3 persons (trained in chick handling, placement of rings and taking measurements) is involved in a marking mission. The colour rings are very light and have not been observed to interfere with the natural behaviour of the cranes.

Findings so far

Re-sighting of colour-marked individuals in the field has been quite poor, especially after the chicks fledge. The most rewarding data is from individuals marked with GPS tags. From the movement of two GPS tagged cranes at Lake Ol' Bolossat and western Laikipia, we have identified critical areas they use at different times of the year. These are predominantly wetlands (mostly marshes) (for nesting, roosting and feeding), and croplands (wheat and maize fields) in which they forage.

The re-sighting of first-year birds in western Kenya shows most of them stay within 15 km of where they hatched. But, dispersal distances are expected to increase once they start pairing and looking for breeding territories, and as the availability of food resources changes over time. Then, once they start breeding, movements are expected to drastically reduce.

New facts about Grey Crowned Cranes

Recent re-sightings of a single crane family with rings marked in 1986/87 around Lake Ol' Bolossat (Gichuki & Gichuki *personal communication*, 2019) and in Kipsaina, Kitale in the early 1990s (M. Wanjala, *personal communication*, 2019) have confirmed without doubt that they can live for over 35 years in the wild!

A cohort of marked cranes at Lake Ol' Bolossat shows that they start mating at the age of 2 years.

How can you help?

Everyone has an opportunity to participate in this research by reporting sightings of marked cranes. **Do not attempt to catch cranes in order to remove rings for the purpose of reporting.** It is illegal to capture wild cranes. Just read the combination while the cranes are feeding or resting, and most importantly, without disturbing them.

Send your sighting report with information about the markings, and where and when it took place.

If you cannot read the marking combinations on either or both legs with rings, you can still report where the sighting occurred. It will also be very helpful if you take photographs, and send them to any of the contacts below.

Where to submit observations

Share your marked crane sightings with: Wanyoike Wamiti <wwamiti@gmail.com> (WhatsApp: +254 733 599 686); George Ndung'u <georgeccv.ke@gmail.com> (WhatsApp: +254 723 550 552); and Joseph Mwangi <josephm@savingcranes.org> (WhatsApp: +254 720 780 126). Your records will be highly appreciated, and acknowledged.

The ringing programme being implemented in Kenya, and the rest of the Grey Crowned Crane range in Africa, is adopted from the European Crane Ringing Programme. The European Crane Ringing Programme has been running since the early 1990s led by Cranes Conservation Germany.

In Kenya, this project is a jointly implemented by the National Museums of Kenya, Kenya Wildlife Service, Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union, International Cranes Foundation/Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership, Community Action for Nature Conservation (CANCO), Cranes Conservation Volunteers and Cranes Conservation Germany.

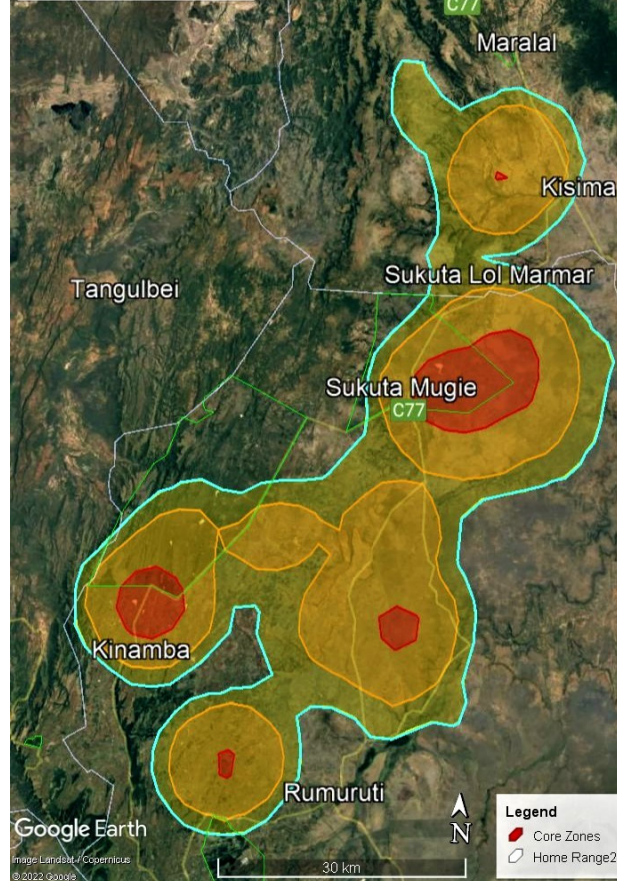


Fig 4: Movements and habitat use of the population of Grey Crowned Crane between Rumuruti and Maralal covering an area about 2,500 sq km. The core areas (intensively used) are shown in deep red.



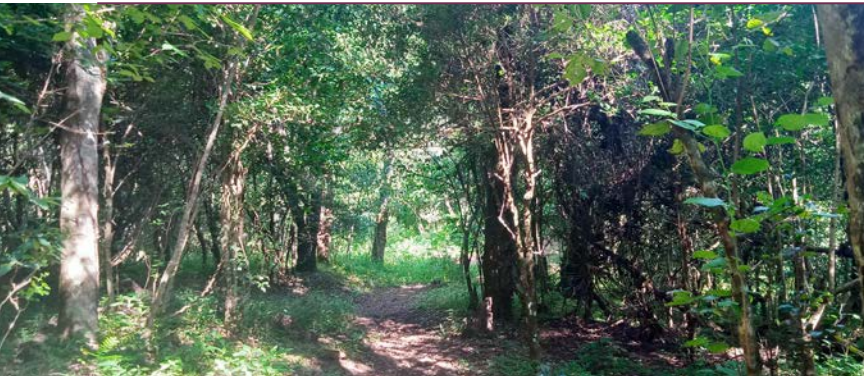
Fig 3: A re-sighting of a western Kenya population individual (BuRBu/WBrG) at Baraton University, Nandi County.
Photo by Joseph Mwangi

People connected with the project are Wanyoike Wamiti, Günter Nowald, George Ndung'u, Joseph Mwangi, Peter Njoroge and Werner Schröder.

All photos are by the post contributor unless indicated otherwise.

Many of these posts first appeared on Kenyabirdsnet, an email Listserv where local subscribers post interesting bird sightings, observations of unusual bird behaviour, 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>

Oloitokitok Forest, and a new bird and new race for Kenya



Located at the foot of the mighty Mount Kilimanjaro and just above the border town of Oloitokitok is a remnant highland forest called Oloitokitok Forest.

Surrounded by farms, this hidden gem is home to birds that include **Dusky Turtle Dove** and **Blue-spotted Wood Dove**, **Hartlaub's Turaco**, **Southern (Grey-faced) Citril**, **Eastern Mountain**, a subspecies of **Stripe-cheeked**, and **Grey-olive Greenbuls**; **Waller's** and **Kenrick's Starlings**.

There are also **Mbulu White-eyes** and a recently discovered population of **Kilimanjaro White-eye**, *Zosterops euryzycoticus*, that is known only from Mount Kilimanjaro and montane areas south of the border. (The white-eyes were recorded by members of the Kilusu Bird Club, a local bird club in Oloitokitok.)

On 12 May 2021, I set out for the Oloitokitok Forest. It was raining, but I found 2 young **Kilimanjaro** (also called Broad-ringed) **White-eyes** being fed by their parents. I took photos and call recordings. I have also recently found that both Kilimanjaro and Mbulu White-eyes occur in the same foraging flocks.

The other bird I found is the *guttifer* race of **White-starred Robin**, which has recently been described in Kenya for the first time (see the ornithological journal *Scopus* 42(1): 21-27, January 2022)

Covering an area of 765 ha the forest is managed by the Oloitokitok Community Forest Association. It is a superb birding stop if you are visiting the area. This and other information, and photos of the site can be found online: <https://www.orniverse.com/site/8727>

Isaac Kilusu



Photos: Red-billed teals and Coypu (below) by Peter Usher

In search of migrants at Nairobi National Park

2 DECEMBER 2021

We decided to visit the Nairobi National Park on Monday 29 November to see if the migrants, particularly the nightingales, were still around. We entered the park just after 6:30 a.m. (being very grateful for the free entry for the those over 75 as the park celebrated 75 years).

It was a grey damp morning, but the **Common Nightingales** were very much in evidence. They could be heard calling in the bush along the road from the gate, and at the Ivory Burning site one emerged clearly into view. Here we also had a couple of **Common Whitethroats**, and then male and female **Blackcaps**.

We found a surprise at Hyena dam. At the far end of the dam beyond the large Acacia tree, a dark grey furry animal came out of the reeds. Closer inspection showed it to be a Coypu. Showing much interest in the Coypu were two large crocodiles. Coypu is a non-indigenous, invasive species and we reported the sighting to Kenya Wildlife Service. A single **Red-billed Teal** flew across the dam as we watched the Coypu.



A little later, perched in his usual tree, we came across 'Blinky', the **Greater Spotted Eagle**, with an extremely large extended crop. He must have eaten well earlier that morning.

Isabelline Wheatears and a good variety of both local and migrant birds were seen throughout the day.

Heather Elkins

Rains! — Finally, a proper all-night soaking rain

27 NOVEMBER 2021



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater

The all-night rain brought about a change of plans and a not-to-be missed birding morning. The only challenge was going to be the muddy roads.

It was such a joy — alates and birds were everywhere, with the birds being front and centre feeding on them. **D'Arnaud's Barbets** were feeding young and a **Red-and-yellow Barbet** was seen for the first time in many years. **Red-faced Cisticolas** were in decent numbers. There was a **Jacobin Cuckoo**, and francolins (**Scaly** and **Crested**) were seen not just heard.

My highlight were definitely a large group of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**.

It's the first time I've seen them in Thika.



Scaly Francolins

Darcy Ogada

Yellowbill at Satao



We saw one **Southern Yellowbill (Green Malkoha)** at Satao Safari Camp, Tsavo East, on 8 June. It was very green, but the bill was not as yellow as in the picture in the bird guide. I was just so excited to see it as I think we had only ever seen one before!

Patrick Plumbe



Sunbirds from Samburu and Meru National Park

30 MARCH 2022

I saw these sunbirds in the Buffalo Springs-Samburu National Reserves, and in Meru National Park, early February this year. Are they Tsavo Sunbirds or Violet Breasted Sunbirds?

Edwin Selempo

Comment by Brian Finch:

*These appear to be **Tsavo Sunbirds**, which is an impressive extension of their range to the west. The bills are short and dainty, and the birds are not in full breeding plumage, as there is no impressive violet cast on the underparts. They might be wanderers out of range (this is possibly related to the various droughts), but an excellent record nevertheless.*

Del Monte migrants and swallows

17 AUGUST 2021

I have been out exploring some new areas on the Del Monte Kenya farm since my usual pond has completely dried up. This past Sunday I had my first migrants.

There were about 4 **Common Sandpipers** and 1 **Wood Sandpiper** sharing the same

stream-side area, though not without some squabbles between them.

I also had a **Malachite Kingfisher** that had speared a crayfish (invasive) right through its shell. Quite a big meal for the little bird.

Finally, I had swallows, mostly **Wire-tailed** on the wire.

Darcy Ogada



COAST HERITAGE CIRCUIT



The Amazing Wonders of Kenya's Underwater Cultural Heritage

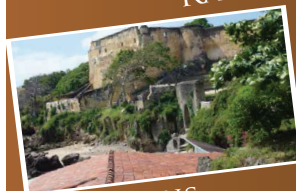
Kenya has a 600 km long coastline. Ship wrecks are evidence of International trade many years ago from places like India, China, Portugal, Arabia, Burma, Indonesia just to name a few. Archeology is the scientific study of human past culture and relationship to the past through material evidence. Underwater archeology has helped us understand the different types of ships that visited our coast, how these ships were built and the sailing technology available many years ago

Other attractions:

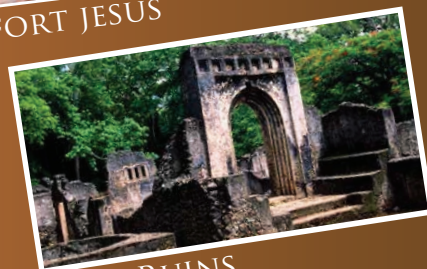
- Lamu Museum • Lamu Fort • Swahili House
- German Post Office • Takwa Ruins • Mnarani
- Pate Island and Mijikenda Kaya Forests



RABAI MUSEUM



FORT JESUS



GEDI RUINS



SIYU FORT



SHIMONI CAVES



MALINDI MUSEUM

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www.museums.or.ke



@museumsofkenya

Coast Birding with Mustafa Adamjee

The first birding of 2022

JANUARY 2022

Last week James Apolloh, from Watamu, was able to join me in Diani for some birding at my favourite spots and over the next two days we recorded 154 species.

Thika Birding

1 August 2021



I've been doing some exploring around the Del Monte Kenya farm and found a large number of seasonal wetlands, which are proving to be important for migrants and other waterbirds.

While driving to the wetlands, I spotted an **African Cuckoo Hawk**, which I hadn't seen in many years so finding this juvenile was particularly exciting.

I spent a lot of time next to a large dam where an adjacent overhead irrigation pipe was dripping and attracting a lot of birds, including **Pallid Honeyguide**, **Scarlet-chested, Bronze** and **Variable Sunbirds**, **Brimstone Canary**, **Violet-backed Starlings**, and lots of seedeaters and waxbills.

The dam also had a juvenile **African Fish Eagle** and both **Long-tailed (Reed)** and **Great Cormorants**. There was a single **White-headed Saw-wing**.

Darcy Ogada

We started at my farm in Diani with many common coastal species, but we also found **Harlequin Quail** and **Crested Francolin** foraging together, and a **Hooded Vulture** (a lifer for Apolloh).

We then took a trip to Mkurumudzi River estuary, where we found that there were no birds roosting. But, just as we were leaving, a noisy flock of **Crab-plovers** drew our attention. We walked back and saw them out on a small sand bank. As the tide seemed to be going out we decided to wait for it to recede further. As it did, more and more waders and terns came in, until the small sand islands left exposed by the tide were just brimming with birds.

had seen so many fish jumping out of the water — that was his non-birding 'lifer'.

We then visited Ramisi Swamp and though the water was low it was still teeming with birds and full of water lilies! We recorded 40 species in a very short amount of time. Highlights here were the ducks — there was a **Knob-billed** and some **Fulvous Whistling** amongst a greater number of **White-faced Whistling ducks**.

By this time the better part of the morning was gone, but we decided to go on to Buda Forest and Kaya Muhaka Forest. At these sites we were mostly birding by ear as we drove on the roads on the outskirts of the forest. We recorded a few of the common forest species.



Flock of Little, Common and Lesser Crested Terns

Like Mida Creek on the North Coast, this estuary is a haven for migrants, but it has a much higher number of terns and fewer people. We saw hundreds of **Saunders's** and **Common Terns** roosting. We waded into the shallow water to get closer views and got encircled by **White-winged Black** and **Lesser Crested Terns** attempting to catch the fish that were literally bumping into our submerged legs and leaping around. It was the first time Apolloh

Lastly, I decided to visit some of the smaller wetlands and lily ponds around Diani, though I wasn't expecting to find many birds. We found that the wetlands were mostly dry, with sand harvesting happening in all of them. One pond had some water and we found a **Wood Sandpiper**, two **Yellow-billed Storks**, and some egrets.

Mustafa Adamjee



Zanzibar Red Bishop



South Coast Waterbird Counts 2022

Our counts took place on Saturday 12 February this year and our team of seven birders started off at Tiwi swamp. The wetland consisted of pools of water between little heaps of sand collected for harvesting. Here we recorded a **Greater Painted-snipe**, **African Jacana**, and two **Malachite Kingfishers**.

Next we visited the Ramisi swamp, which was mostly quite dry, but for one section. In this section was a lone **Knob-billed Duck**, 25 **Spur-winged Plovers**, some **Common** and **Wood sandpipers**, 12 **African Open-billed Storks**, and about 30 **(Western) Cattle Egret**. (The surrounding sugar cane fields were full of **Zanzibar Red Bishops** and **Fan-tailed Widowbirds**.)

(I had visited the Ramisi wetland just four days earlier and found 4 **Great White Pelicans** that were enjoying a small pool that was full of fish and quickly drying up. Nearby was a **Long-crested Eagle** sitting on a fence pole. It was the first time I'd recorded either of these species on the South Coast.)

We then went over to Mwazaro beach, at the estuary of the Ramisi River. Here we noted that the tide seemed to be coming in so we decided to head for Mkurumudzi River estuary before high tide.

When we reached the estuary the tide was coming in and there were thousands of birds to count.

We saw 46 **Whimbrel** (among which were 2 **Eurasian Curlews**), a handful of **Ruddy Turnstones**, 226 **Little Stints**, and **Curlew** and **Terek Sandpipers**. There were also good numbers of **Grey Plovers** (60) and **Crab-plovers** (85), but few **Common Ringed** and **Lesser Sand Plovers**.

Saunders's and a surprising number of **Little Terns** numbered more than 2100! Other terns we found were **Gull-billed** (15), 4 **White-winged Black**, about 250 **Lesser Crested**, **Common** (36), and **White-cheeked** (6). As we were counting the terns, we noticed one that looked darker, and as we went closer and saw its red bill, we realised it was an **African Skimmer**! We were just over the moon at this point.

After a good lunch we went to Kisol dam not expecting too much, but we did find a flock of **Egyptian Geese**, **Spur-winged Plovers**, **Hamerkop**, **Long-tailed (Reed) Cormorants**, and a pair of **African Darters**.

We ended the day by visiting the lily pond of the *Leisure Golf Club* in Diani. Here we had a few **White-faced Whistling Ducks**, **Water Thick-knees**, a **Black-crowned Night Heron** and 3 **African Darters**, that were calling to each other with their frog like calls.

Mustafa Adamjee

Special sighting

FEBRUARY 2022

Near the border town of Lunga Lunga I saw a **Mountain Wagtail** and **Southern Black Flycatcher**, both of which were out-of-range, according to distribution maps.

The forest bordering Umba river is still intact and a wonderful oasis for all the birds around. I've seen the area of Lunga Lunga become more and more dry and it is gradually becoming more like Tsavo (semi-arid) in areas that used to have coastal bush. **White-backed Night Herons** and an **African Wood Owl** were at their usual spot.

Another great record was that of **Red-necked Phalaropes**—they're back! I counted about 50 or so individuals. The fisherman, whose boat I took, told me that a few days earlier there had been more than a thousand just offshore from Kongo beach, where in 2020 we saw almost 3,000.

Mustafa Adamjee

Mustafa Adamjee has recently launched a birding company called



Swahili Eco Safaris, and offers to take you on birding trips on the South Coast and elsewhere. You may contact him at info@swahiliecosafaris.com or +254 (0) 708 086 622.



Turtle Bay, Watamu. Photo by Peter Usher

Watamu Birding 2021, a year with a difference

29 NOVEMBER 2021

It has been an interesting birding year on the north coast with many unusual and uncommon records. We have had literally thousands of **Lesser Masked Weavers** moving all over the Watamu headland in flocks of several hundred. Between 5,000 and 6,000 of these weavers, I would estimate, have been roosting in trees on the properties of the Hemingways Hotel and Medina Palms each evening!

Additional interesting records have been unusual reports of **Steel-blue** and **Straw-tailed Whydahs** seen on the inland edge of Mida Creek. In October we trapped and ringed a **Spotted Ground Thrush** on the A Rocha grounds right on the beach-front. Towards the end of October a second Spotted Ground Thrush was seen on the A Rocha nature trail. We had previously seen this Afrotropical migrant at A Rocha in 2004, and only one has been reported from Arabuko-Sokoke Forest in the past couple of years. As such it is very rare now and therefore a great surprise to find it on the nature trail.



African Paradise-flycatcher
Photo by Peter Usher

Another change has been in the numbers of **African Paradise-flycatchers** — in 2020 there were very few records, but this year they are back again in good numbers. We have also had more records of **Black Cuckooshrike** on the Watamu headland this year, and recently there were the first **African Bare-eyed Thrushes** that I'm aware of in Watamu.

The usual Palaearctic migrants have been incredibly slow to come through on their southward migration. **Eurasian Bee-eaters** are perhaps the only exception with the first appearing in early October. Otherwise, species that are normally very common have been absent — for example I saw my first **Barn Swallow** of the year on 3 November (and only one!) and since then, even though they've been around, they have not been easy to find.

However, since the middle of November, the converse has been true, with an all-time high number of Palaearctic migrant warblers, thrushes and shrikes present. In our normal

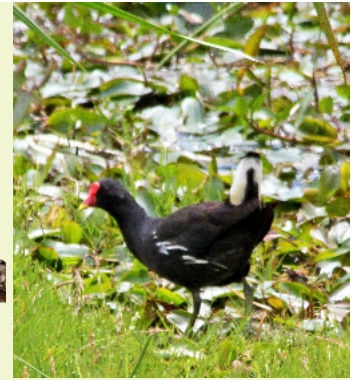
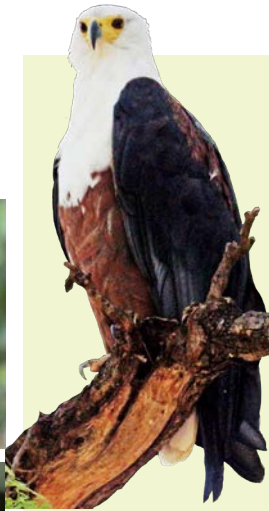
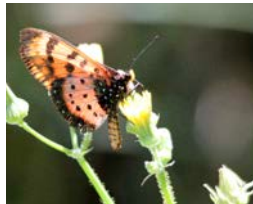
weekly ringing at the A Rocha Conservation Centre we have now caught several **Red-backed Shrikes**, almost 30 **Marsh Warblers**, **Barred Warbler**, **Common Whitethroat**, **Thrush Nightingale (Sprosser)** and **Common Nightingale** (both *hafizi* and *africana* races). This week we have had two **River Warblers** — I've only ever had one before on the coast and that was over 20 years ago.

One morning, at between 7:30 and 8:30 a.m., we had an amazing number of **Common Swifts**, estimated between 500 and 1,000, steadily moving south at a low altitude, and giving very good views. A good number were significantly brown suggesting they are likely to be the *pekinensis* race from China. With the swifts were a handful of **European Rollers**.

All of these are really unusual on the coast during the southward migration (November/December). In April/May we often get good numbers of migrants, but I have always lamented that the one down point of locating a bird observatory on the coast is the really poor southward migration of small Palaearctic migrants. Not this year!

To cap it all, a week ago we caught a Marsh Warbler with a dull ring already on it bearing the inscription "BULGARIA BAN SOFIA"!! As the first control I have handled in over 30 years of ringing in East Africa (other than those we catch at the Ngulia Ringing each year) this was hugely exciting. We are still waiting to hear about the details of the original ringing, but I'm still buzzing with the excitement of it!

Colin Jackson



Déjà vu

Peter Usher

Photos taken by Peter
on his weekly walks

PHOTOS

Above: Malachite Kingfisher,
Baglaffeht Weaver, African Fish Eagle,
Common Moorhen, small Orange
Acraea and Black Cuckooshrike.

Opposite page: White-winged
Widowbird, Common (African)
Stonechart, Eurasian Bee-eater and a
flock of Red-knobbed Coots and Fulvous
Whistling Ducks.



We live in strange times. COVID-19, and all its variants, remains two years after its emergence; climate change is a problem that was recognised as potentially disastrous more than sixty years ago, yet it is still to be properly addressed, and, astonishingly, as I write, there is again war in Europe.

When COVID-19 struck and vaccination was but a dream, I started to take a weekly and solitary nature walk through the Nairobi suburb of Loresho. Even now that vaccines have become available, restrictions have been relaxed, and I have been birding in other beautiful parts of this country, I continue to visit the dams, swamps and farmed lands of Loresho.

As weeks turned into months and then years, I found that my observations and records were serving to show changes occurring by being able to compare the birdlife in any month with the situation I'd observed during the same time the previous year.

I have also been able to observe the weather, as a professional interest, as until my retirement, I worked as a meteorologist in Kenya. Also, for 20 years, I managed a United Nations programme to address the impacts of global climate change.

Kenya has distinct seasons that can be summarised as a warm and dry season, and a cool and cloudy season, interspersed with two wet periods (the long rains of April and May, and the short rains of October and November). There is considerable inter-seasonal and inter-annual variability associated with external factors such as El Nino and the thermal gradient across the Indian Ocean known as the Indian Ocean Dipole.

There is also global heating and climate change. I am not attempting here to offer a treatise on East African weather, but rather to show that the effects of climate change are physically discernible in Kenya, and that many of the anticipated impacts are undesirable.

During the latter part of 2021 and the early months of 2022, Kenya experienced a significant La Niña event. La Niña (the obverse of El Niño), is a warming of parts of the Pacific Ocean. The La Niña event induced dry conditions in the Horn of Africa and northern Kenya, leading to a disastrous drought.

Climate prediction is fraught with uncertainty and any one weather event or seasonal circumstance is not necessarily indicative of climate change. But one can't help being aware that in Kenya, temperatures are higher, the cool season is less cold, rainfall events are more violent, lakes are rising to levels never before experienced, and birders are recording changes in bird numbers and migratory habits that are unusual.

My Loresho comparison exercise shows, for example, that seasonal ponds that had water in 2020-21 dried up completely in 2022. Also, a large permanent swamp, that hosted an exciting variety of indigenous and visiting

waterbirds, has dried (and is now farmland), a condition outside the experience of even the oldest Loresho resident. The deliberate and illegal burning of the reedbeds was a significant contributory factor, but even so, there appears to be a trend to dryness not previously apparent.

I am not qualified to address the relationship between bird behaviour and climate and I shall not attempt to do so, but there are worrying trends that need to be examined. An example is the seemingly fewer numbers of migratory birds. There were the welcome sightings of **Eurasian Bee-eaters**, **Western Yellow**

Wagtails, and a variety of migrant raptors and warblers, but not in the numbers or frequency of those observed in 2020. Of course, this may be due to changing local conditions, the regional La Niña related drought, and other external factors, which may have adversely impacted seasonal migratory routes and behaviour. Especially worrying are reports of hundreds of migrants lying exhausted or dead, and whether they are victims of drought, poisoning or adverse atmospheric factors, it is still to be explained.



On the other hand, all our local friends were present, including weavers and waxbills, sunbirds and swallows, and kites and kingfishers. The majestic **Augur Buzzard** can always be spotted and is certainly the symbolic bird of Loresho. The brief appearance of **Golden-winged Sunbirds** brightened up the cool, cloudy season, but it is probably the widowbirds—**White-winged**, **Red-collared** and **Jackson's**, present in their hundreds, that confirms Loresho as a birding hotspot. As always, the enigmatic **African Cuckoo Hawk** made a brief seasonal appearance before leaving for goodness-knows-where. But then again,



where is the **Common (African) Stonechat**—apparently so eager to be photographed, it would follow me around. How about the butterflies—they

have been decimated in the last year! There are neither the clouds of Orange Acraeas, nor the intermittent streams of intra-African migrant Brown-veined Whites, which are reduced to a trickle.

As for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, should it continue or expand, especially in a nuclear age, the awful consequences will be widespread, unpleasant and costly to people and nature.

For now, Kenya is a natural delight and still is a constant wonder despite the familiarity. f



Getting to know our **GRASSES**

Dino J. Martins

Grasses are the most familiar plants, but few people recognise just how much they are both diverse and interesting. There are close to 700 species of grasses described from Kenya, and about 1,000 species in East Africa. Worldwide there are over 12,000 species and all grasses are part of a single plant family, the Poaceae. Humans, livestock and wildlife all benefit from grasses, most significantly from the food they provide.

Waxbills, and other birds in the Estrilidae family, including including firefinches, pytilias and cordon-bleus, along with seedeaters feed mostly on grass seeds. While the seeds of grasses are typically rather tiny, they are an extremely rich source of food that is available in

abundance when conditions are right. Other birds like guineafowl, francolins, and even the giant, majestic Ostrich will consume grass seeds when they are seasonally available.



Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse.
Photo by Dino Martins

While I was working on the guide *'Grasses of East Africa'*, I spent a lot of time watching birds and other creatures interacting with grasses. One such occasion was on a visit to the *Cynometra-Manilkara* habitat of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest on Kenya's north coast. It was one of those wonderful moments, following good rains, where carpets of grass had covered the sandy red soil. As the rains had been especially good, these grasses had flowered and set seeds.



Crested Guineafowls. Photo by Dino Martins

From a distance, with some friends, I watched as a flock of **Crested Guineafowl** moved slowly through the grass. This was slightly puzzling, as typically these flighty fowl flee on being spotted! Creeping closer, we were able to see that they were completely focused on picking off the ripening grass seeds. With incredible dexterity, they moved along pulling off individual seeds with a deft peck-and-tug motion. They were so focused on their task that we were able to get really close and watch them at work. Even the appearance of a Sokoke bushy-tailed mongoose, that dashed across the road, only elicited a brief squawk of alarm before they returned to their feast.

Large grazing animals and livestock feed primarily on the leaves and stems of grasses. Photo by Dino Martins



Vitelline Masked Weaver on nest.
Photo by Peter Usher

Grasses also serve many different birds as an important source of material for building their nests. The weavers are the true artists at using grasses to create incredible works of art and shelter. I have had the

pleasure of watching a number of different weaverbirds build their nests both out in the bush and around my house.


The **Vitelline Masked Weaver** makes its nest almost entirely out of the leaves and stems of grasses, including tall Guinea Grass (*Panicum maximum*). Despite their nest-building being a noisy chaotic affair, with males competing, stealing and sabotaging each other, they harvest and carefully weave grass together to form a neat, compact oval-shaped nest. Another species, the **White-Browed Sparrow-Weavers** use dry grasses to

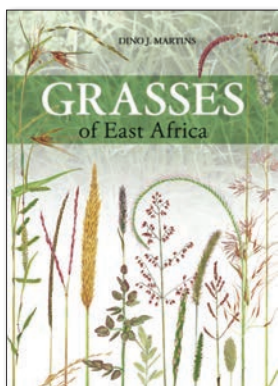
build, dense, untidy nests. They are fond of nesting near people and their loud, scratchy calls are a part of life in many parts of Kenya.

Insects too, live, feed and flourish within grasses, which in turn provide sustenance for a host of birds, reptiles, mammals and even other arthropods. Without the grasses, none of these creatures would be able to survive.

As everyone who has lived and travelled in East Africa can attest, just a couple days of rain can turn an entire landscape green. Where there was dust and despair previously, life bounces and erupts with abundance. This first flush of growth and life is mostly thanks to grasses, which are one of the most resilient groups of plants on our

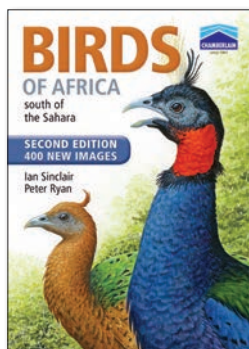
planet. They have the ability to grow quickly and produce new shoots, allowing for new growth after just a little rain.

For the past 30 years I've had the pleasure of studying and exploring this amazing group of plants. Grasses are not easily identified and, perhaps for this reason, they have been largely overlooked by even seasoned naturalists and ecologists. My hope in writing a general guide on grasses is to inspire people to pay them more attention, learn their natural history, and better understand their intricate connections with other species. 

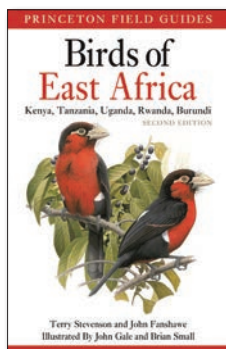


Copies of the 'Grasses of East Africa' are available from the Nature Kenya bookshop at the National Museums of Kenya at Ksh. 2,000

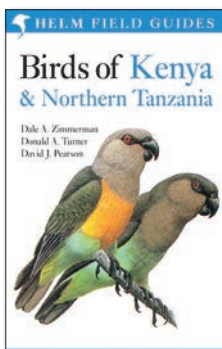
Books also available at the Nature Kenya Shop and online at www.naturekenya.org/shop



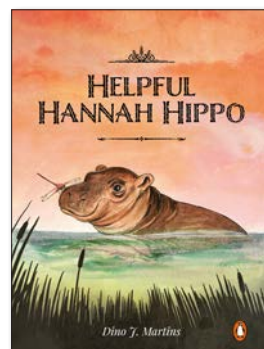
Ksh. 5,200



Ksh. 5,100



Ksh. 5,100



Ksh. 900

In search of Great Crested Grebe at a wetland site in Nakuru

John Wanyoike takes a bird walk that uncovers two Endangered species

I am a passionate birder, and on the morning of 23 February 2022, I went birding at a wetland near my home, in Kuresoi North, Nakuru County — a site I visit frequently when I'm home. The wetland includes a dam where I had in the past observed Great Crested Grebe breeding. On this day I was particularly interested to see if it was still the case.

The morning was very cold and wet from the previous night's rains and it was drizzling as I walked to the wetland. My first sighting, to my surprise, was a duck I had not previously recorded here. I focused my binoculars eager to confirm its identity, and yes! **Maccoa Duck**.

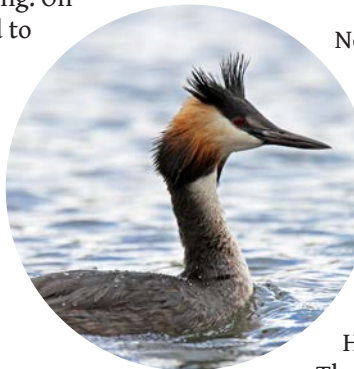
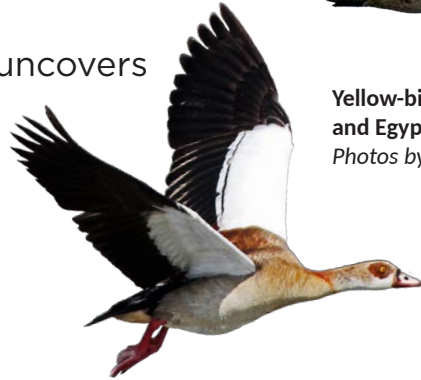
Maccoa Duck is an **Endangered** species (on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species) and is not found in large numbers. I was happy to enjoy this special bird for a while. Other birds around included a good number of **Egyptian Goose**, **Hottentot Teal**, **Yellow-billed Duck**, **Red-billed Teal**, **Little Grebe**, **Red-knobbed Coot**, and **Wood Sandpiper**.

Shortly thereafter I caught sight of a **Grey Crowned Crane**, another **Endangered** species that has previously attempted to nest at the dam's shoreline. I then scanned the dam looking for other birds, and there about 60m from the cranes, to my delight, was a beautiful **Great Crested Grebe**. It was at the same spot I had recorded three individuals in August 2021. I excitedly took lots of photographs.

More Grey Crowned Cranes flew overhead and landed in a freshly harvested maize field closeby. I went in search of them and found that it was an even bigger group than I'd anticipated. I counted 62 cranes drinking water at a small man-made pool.



Yellow-billed duck and Egyptian Goose.
Photos by Peter Usher



Great Crested Grebe
Photo by Peter Usher

Not far from there, is a grassland, which I thought might be good for highland glade species, and being a birder, naturally, I went to explore the area. There I found a **Sharpe's Longclaw**, a species endemic to the highland grasslands of Kenya. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get a good photo of it, but it was still another great record.

Heavy rains cut short my exciting day. The following day I went back to see if I could get some photos of the Maccoa Duck. It wasn't where it had been the previous day, but as I walked around I found a Great Crested Grebe on a nest built on a floating water lily. Walking further along I spotted another. In fear of disturbing them, I turned back and went in search of the duck.



Maccoa Duck
Photo by John Wanyoike


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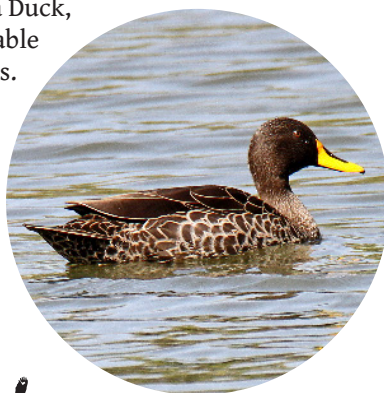

This tropical forest is a must for all serious – and less serious – birders to visit with its vast array of bird species, including the **Great Blue Turaco**, the star of the show! The **Colobus**, **Red-tail monkey** and more add to the ambience. **HIKING TRAILS, VIEW POINTS, GUIDES** available.





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I found the Maccoa Duck, but again I wasn't able to get better photos. This made me come back on a third consecutive day and this time I was in luck. It didn't take me long to find it, and to my satisfaction, I got fairly good photos.



Yellow-billed duck
 Photo by Peter Usher

Wetland in Danger

This wetland is being degraded by livestock grazing, extraction of water using pumps, and by the fish farming that has started at the dam which is at the heart of this wetland (called Kenyatta Dam).

These activities have negatively affected the breeding of ducks and cranes, and endangers all the species that depend on it.

The biggest threat will be the intended pumping of water for the flower farms in Molo (4 km away).

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How it feels to bird on a **GLOBAL BIG DAY**



Mbulu White-eye. Photo by Isaac Kilusu

Isaac Kilusu shares the excitement and challenge of covering an area of south-eastern Kenya for the Global Bird Day

I was eagerly waiting for this day (9 May 2021). The feeling was inexplicable. The adrenaline rush at another level. My younger brother, Mandegee, Jr., was likewise so excited he dressed for the day the night before! I introduced him to birding 6 years ago when he was 9 years old, and he has shown a huge interest in birding. We were up by 4:30 a.m., got ready quickly, and had our cup of coffee for the day. We set out to see as many birds as possible (along with Zachariah Chege, another birder with the *Kilusu Bird Club*, who joined us).

We recorded our first bird at 5:00 a.m. It was a **Southern Ground Hornbill**, whose booming calls were clear in the silence of the cool dawn. **Grey Crowned Cranes** also called as they flew to their early morning foraging sites. Mandegee Jr. picked up **Red-eyed** and **Ring-necked doves**, and an **Emerald-spotted Wood Dove**, by ear. Birding along the way we gradually made our way to the *Satao Elerai Conservancy* that neighbours Amboseli National Park.

Before we reached the conservancy we stopped on the



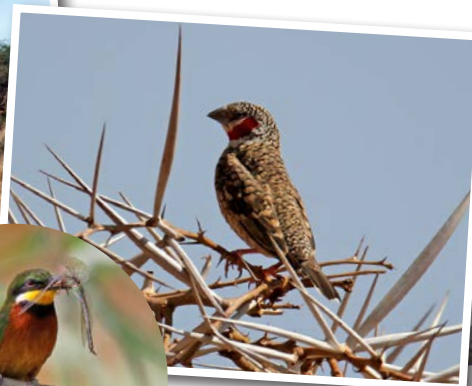
A view of Mount Kilimanjaro and a **Southern Ground Hornbill** with prey. Photos by Isaac Kilusu and Peter Usher respectively

road a little past the *Amboseli Sopa Lodge*. With breathtaking views of the majestic Mount Kilimanjaro, we ticked off one of our target species, the **Mouse-coloured Penduline Tit**. We then went on for about 2 km and stopped in a rocky area of acacia scrub. We took a few minutes to listen and scan the bush for birds. There was nothing new, but then I saw that Mandegee Jr. was attentively looking in some Wait-a-bit thorn. I asked him if there was anything exciting, he was silent for a moment and then he said, 'Village (that is what he calls me) I have seen the tit that we saw the other day'. Yes! It was a **Northern Grey (Somali/Acacia) Tit**. It responded to sound recordings we played back, as did a **Tiny Cisticola**.

Mandegge Jr. also picked up an **Alpine Swift** and a **Lesser Grey Shrike**, and we went on to see **Black-necked Weaver** and **Rufous Chatterer**. By 9:30 a.m. we had seen 100 species. Arriving at *Satao Elerai Conservancy* we were greeted by **Ashy**, and **Desert Cisticola** calling, and logged a few other good birds. We didn't see Böhm's Spinetail that we had heard was nesting in the main camping area, instead we had **Speckle-fronted Weaver** and **Cut-throat Finch**.

Other birds were **Hartlaub's Turacos**, **Streaky Seedeater** and **Common (African) Stonechat**; a **Peters's Twinspot** came in close in response to a playback. Soon after we had more of our target species: **Pangani Longclaw**, **Zitting Cisticola**, and a **Rufous-naped Lark** singing *umechelewa* (you are late). The lark was right of course, we were running late, as we still wanted to visit an area of mixed habitat around a village called Osoit.

By this time the sun was setting. In a race against time, we walked as quickly as possible to reach a swampy area with tall reeds. Here we ticked off **Black Crake**, **Red-chested Flufftail**, **Red-faced Cisticola**, and **Little (Southern) Rush Warbler**. We saw weavers (**Grosbeak**, **Taveta Golden** and **Eastern Golden**) and a sad looking (I thought so) **Black-winged Red Bishop** whose grassland home was burnt. We then went hastily towards the Tsavo River, one



Leaving *Satao* at around 1:00 p.m. we headed to areas closer to the border, and for almost 2 hours had no new birds. That was until we found a **Yellow-crowned Canary** singing in a farm field. This was followed by our coming across eight **Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters** and an **African Dusky Flycatcher** hawking insects along a wooded stream.

Walking through a small town we had **Tropical Boubou** (heard), **Spectacled Weaver**, **Placid Greenbul**, and **Rüppell's Robin Chat**, **Mbulu White-eye** and many **Abyssinian Crimsongwings** were foraging together with mannikins. A **Stripe-cheeked Greenbul** was enjoying a fruiting fig.

We trekked for 30 minutes, flushing quails (both **Common** and **Harlequin**) along the way, before we came to the village. At a hilly area we had **Cinnamon-breasted Bunting**, **Northern Brownbul**, and several other common birds. In an area of short grass with scattered trees we had none other than an **Eastern Paradise Whydah**. He was displaying over his territory, with that long, long tail, which is maybe what the females like. Of course, he was displaying so nicely that if I were a female whydah I would have chosen him without much ado.

Photos: **Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater**, **Cut-throat Finch** and **Verreaux's Eagle Owl** by Peter Usher.

of a few rivers in the area, for **Mountain Wagtail** and in some adjacent woodlands found my favourite bird (**Verreaux's Eagle Owl**), roosting. A **Slender-tailed Nightjar** was heard.

Our last birds of the day were two **Crowned Plovers** (**Lapwing**) calling. It was around 7:40 p.m. and we were all exhausted, but very happy to take our tally of 204 species. On this day we had walked approximately 30 km and the next day Mandegge, Jr. was so tired he didn't go to school. f



Miombo Blue-eared Starling by Peter Steward and photos of juveniles by Julio Mwambire.

Miombo Blue-eared Starling in Dakatcha Woodland

Fleur Ng'weno wrote about seeing immature starlings that were rufous-brown below, puzzled about them — the mystery is solved 3 year later.

Over some 15 years of bird monitoring in the Dakatcha Woodland, we have seen glossy starlings in the farmlands and bush on a regular basis, and assumed they were Greater Blue-eared Starlings. In Zimmerman *et al.*, *Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania*, Greater Blue-eared Starlings are not shown north of the Galana-Sabaki River, but it seemed a minor range extension.

In late March 2018, we were in Dakatcha observing birds with the Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group. The *Brachystegia* trees were in bright new leaf, and some were in bloom. There were flowers and insects everywhere. As we were departing from a seasonal wetland we saw, some distance away, a large tree full of starlings.

The birds looked like Greater Blue-eared Starlings;

Dakatcha Woodland Important Bird Area
(and now a Key Biodiversity Area) is located to the northwest of Malindi, inland on Kenya's north coast.

but with binoculars, we saw that there were immatures with rufous-brown underparts. Taking a moment to check the books, we realised that the immatures of Greater Blue-eared Starling have dark “sooty” brown underparts. We were confused. We tried to approach, but the birds flew away. This was the second time we had seen such starlings in Dakatcha.

Soon after I made the following report to the *Kenyabirdsnet* listserv:

*I remain puzzled by the starling flocks; in addition to **Violet-backed** and **Black-bellied Starlings**, there were Greater Blue-eared Starlings with many immatures that were rufous-brown below.*

This report received a fair number of responses, some like Don Turner's (next page) with interesting background information.

Commentary by Don Turner

"The Lesser Blue-eared Starling has two very distinct populations: one in northwest Kenya, often occurring in flocks around the Kongelai Escarpment, and a southern one in the miombo woodlands of Tanzania, which comes up to the Pangani-Tanga area. In the collection of the early ornithologist VGL Van Someren is a couple of specimens from back in the 1920s, from the Vanga/Mombasa area.

The southern bird has been considered a separate species (**Miombo Blue-eared Starling**) by some authors.

Morphologically there is one major difference between northern and southern birds, and it occurs in the juveniles, with juvenile northern birds being buffy-brown below, while those of the southern population are distinctly all tawny-brown on the underparts.

In *Birds of Africa* Volume 6, there is a mention of southern birds being recorded in coastal lowlands north to Vanga and Mombasa (referring to the Van Someren records), and near Malindi. The reference to "near Malindi" appears to come from the map in Hall & Moreau's (1970) *An atlas of speciation in African passerine birds* where both Lesser and Greater

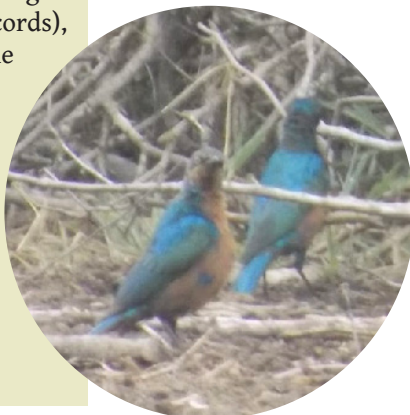
are shown in what appears to be the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest.

It may be that in some years these birds have been overlooked among the southern **Greater Blue-eared** (sub-species *sycobius*) that do occur annually in the coastal lowlands north to Kilifi and Malindi. Certainly, worth checking out all flocks of Greater Blue-eared at the coast in the future."

Despite the very encouraging and detailed replies, we were unable to follow up right away.

It was Julio Mwambire of the Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group who solved the puzzle three years later. On 18 June 2021, he photographed the starlings on *Nature Kenya's* Kamale Nature Reserve in Dakatcha (02° 43.322 South, 039° 56.819 East).

Mwambire's photos were shared on the *Kenyabirdsnet* listserv and the Kenya Bird Map *WhatsApp* group. Again, many interesting comments were received, including the two here on the right:



Commentary by James Bradley

"These look very much like young **Miombo Blue-eared Starling**, much as you reported a few years ago...

Greater Blue-eared juveniles don't show rufous underparts like this, and Miombo is a greener bird than Greater. The adult in the photo showing its back looks good for Miombo on size and so too is that nice green sheen to the mantle.

The birds in these photos also differ from Shelley's Starling: the blue of the upperparts is not deep enough, the rusty colour of the underparts is not rusty enough, and on one of the juveniles you can see blue belly feathers moulting in, where it would otherwise be rusty in an adult Shelley's.

Miombo Blue-eared Starling (formerly lumped with Lesser Blue-eared) is known from the coast by mostly old records, with specimens from Malindi, Gedi, Mongeya, and inland from Yatta east of Ol Doinyo Sabuk. There is also an audio recording from the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. All records in Kenya are Apr-Sept, and they are probably currently fewer than 10."

Commentary by Neil Baker (Tanzania)

"These are indeed **Miombo Blue-eared Starling** — a typical post-breeding flock. They are not uncommon in our coastal woodlands, but local and not confined to miombo woodland. Those copper coloured juvenile birds are typical."

The record of **Miombo (Southern/Lesser) Blue-eared Starling** was submitted to the East African Rarities Committee and accepted in September 2021. The record has been published in *Scopus*, the ornithological journal of the East Africa Natural History Society (Vol. 42 (2), July 2022).

A forest walk in the extraordinary Ngangao Forest

John Mwacharo visits this special place and tells of gigantic trees, rare butterflies, endemic birds and special plants



Ngangao forest canopy (above), and Taita Thrush in Ngangao forest. Photos by Ian Francis

The cool of the forest is apparent as soon as we step into Ngangao Forest. An aura of mystique permeates our overgrown passage through moss and lichen-clad trees. It is mid-morning. The sun above makes its way west, its light streaking through the thick canopy. Against the background of many forest sounds are the calls of **Cabanis's Greenbul**, **Rüppell's Robin Chat**, and **White-starred Robin**. Walking in single file, we venture into the enchanting forest.

Ngangao Forest is the second-largest of very few surviving moist forest fragments of the Taita Hills. It is located 10 km from Wundanyi town and is home to many plants and animals, including some found only in these hills. We press through the forest walking on the leaves, broken twigs, bark and decaying branches that litter the ground to form a thick sponge-like layer. We observe countless insects and other creatures scurrying on the forest floor. There are scattered understorey plants, wild mushrooms and colourful butterflies.

A trek through this magnificent forest is a magical experience, a moment to treasure. Today we are lucky. We are in the company of John Maganga, a seasoned community bird

guide. Maganga's many years of guiding visitors through Ngangao have nurtured a personal connection with the forest. His vast knowledge of the forest's plants, birds and other animals are unparalleled.

"Ngangao Forest is our jewel. Some of the plants and birds found here are quite rare," notes Maganga as he leads us through a narrow descending forest trail.

A few metres ahead of us stands a gigantic tree. We pause for a while and let our eyes feast on this natural marvel. Its towering 52 metres leaves us speechless.

"Welcome to the Ngangao *mother tree*!" announces Maganga.

I struggle to get a good photo of the entire tree. After several attempts, I give up. The *mother tree* is too big to fit into a single photo frame! I strain to catch a glimpse of its crown.


"This *Newtonia buchananii* is over 300 years old and not about to die anytime soon," says Maganga.

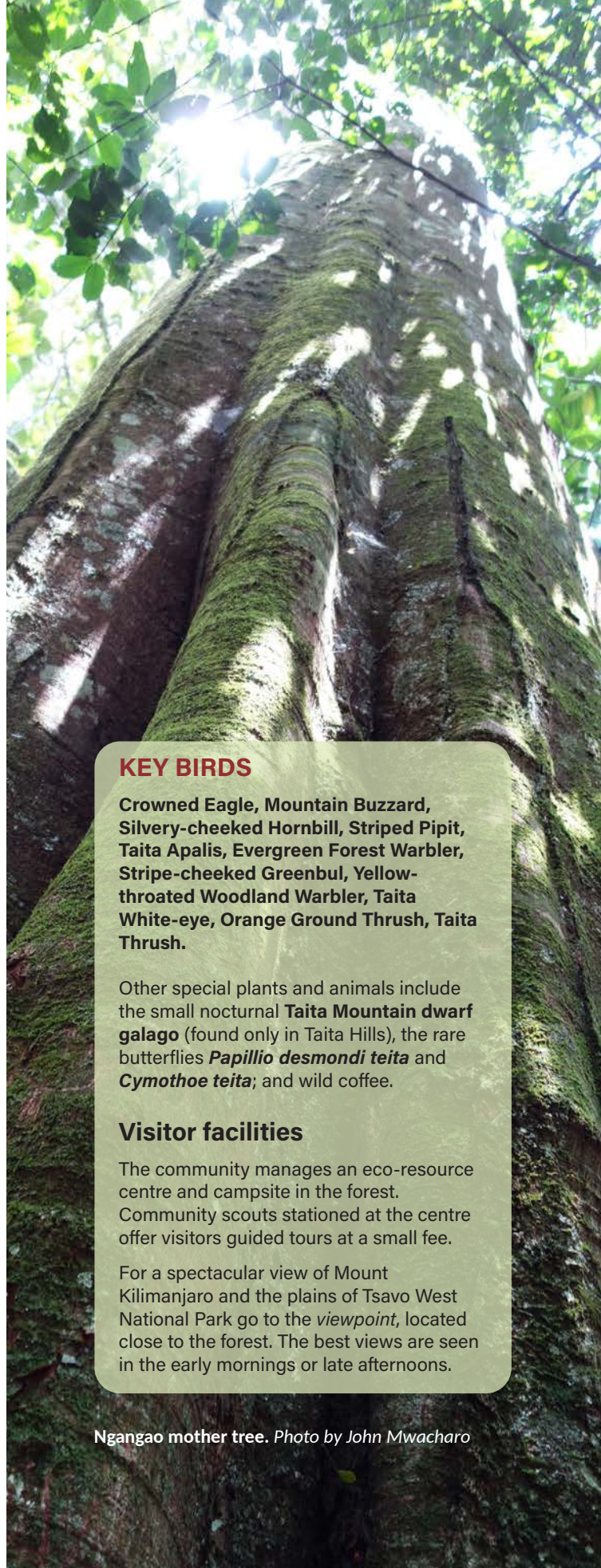
Maganga goes on to say that, according to legend, the mother tree has mysteriously survived countless attempts to fell it, as evidenced by 'cut' marks on its ancient trunk.

After a couple of minutes of taking photos with the famous tree, we proceed to our next stop, a gigantic *Aningeria adolfi* tree. We are drawn to the tree's hollow trunk that branches into three separate sections. The cavity, at its base, resembles a cave, big enough to fit two people.

"People here call this the cave tree," Maganga explains.

Taking turns, we again pose for photos with this unique forest attraction. Moist forests once covered the Taita Hills. Over the years, these forests shrank into the existing scattered fragments on hilltops and ridges, that survive today. Gradual conversion of forest land to farms and settlements has over time led to this decline. Pressure from the dense human population surrounding the forests has left them extremely vulnerable.

Our adventure into Ngangao Forest with Maganga comes to an end after an hour or so. It has been an awe-inspiring journey of discovery into one of the area's best-kept secrets. 



KEY BIRDS

Crowned Eagle, Mountain Buzzard, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill, Striped Pipit, Taita Apalis, Evergreen Forest Warbler, Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Taita White-eye, Orange Ground Thrush, Taita Thrush.

Other special plants and animals include the small nocturnal **Taita Mountain dwarf galago** (found only in Taita Hills), the rare butterflies **Papillio desmondi teita** and **Cymothoe teita**; and wild coffee.

Visitor facilities

The community manages an eco-resource centre and campsite in the forest. Community scouts stationed at the centre offer visitors guided tours at a small fee.

For a spectacular view of Mount Kilimanjaro and the plains of Tsavo West National Park go to the *viewpoint*, located close to the forest. The best views are seen in the early mornings or late afternoons.

Ngangao mother tree. Photo by John Mwacharo



Photos: Cabanis Greenbul and Spot-flanked Barbet by Ian Francis. Goliath Heron and Black-winged Stilts by Peter Usher.

LOCAL BIRD GUIDES

Three guides from community birding groups from across the country, share some facts and tips, about their sites, and invite you to visit.



Ibrahim Malibe Hiribae
Tana Delta Conservation Network

Key species

Collared Pratincole, African Skimmer, (Western) Osprey, Red-necked Falcon.

A draft bird checklist is available with TDCN and Nature Kenya.

Fees

Kenya Forest Service fees apply. Guiding fees are KES 1,000 per person/per day.

“The Tana Delta is a large complex area of floodplains, coastal forest patches, wetlands, grasslands, mangroves, and riverine forest. There are several good birding spots in the area. There is also the Tana River Primate Reserve, that is rich in biodiversity and rare species. To get around you have to use a speed boat, available for hire from the community.

For accommodation, visitors have to camp in private farms, which welcome visitors.

Though you should bring your own tents and food, catering services can be arranged. Delta Dunes, the only tourist lodge in the area (in which the local community holds shares), is currently under renovation.

The Tana Delta Conservation Network operates in the Tana Delta, and has four guides. For birding in the Tana Delta contact me on mobile +254 (0) 724 031 117, or by email: hiribaeibrahim@gmail.com.”



John Maganga
Dawida Biodiversity Conservation
Organisation

Key species

Striped Pipit, Taita Apalis, local race of **Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Taita White-eye, Orange Ground Thrush, Taita Thrush**

Fees

Forest entry fees per person/per day: Citizens KES 500 (Children KES 100), and Non-citizens KES 700. Guiding fees are KES 3500 per person per day.



Patrick Kurere
Friends of Nature Bogoria

Key species

Cape Teal, Greater Flamingo (hundreds), **Lesser Flamingo** (in the thousands), **Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Kittlitz's Plover, Little Stint, Ruff, Western Marsh Harrier**

Fees

Reserve fees per person/per day: Citizens KES 300 (Children KES 150), Residents KES 1,000, Non-residents USD 50. Guiding fees are negotiated between visitors and local bird guides, and depend on visitors specifications.

“

I am one of five bird guides in the Taita Hills, associated with the Dawida Biodiversity Conservation Organisation. We would be very pleased to take you birding in the Taita Hills.

There are a number of small remnant cloud forests in the Taita hills—Ngangao, Vuria Hill, Mbololo, Iyale, Fururu, Chawia—that are home to interesting species, some being endemic to the Taita Hills. I recommend birding in the early morning hours as that is the best time to hear and see birds.



Lesser Honeyguide
Photo by Ian Francis

Camping facilities are available at Ngangao Forest where the community resource centre is located. For birding in the Taita Hills contact Dawida birders on mobile: +254 (0) 712 329525, or on +254 (0) 719 885265.”

“

Lake Bogoria is the deepest alkaline lake in Kenya, and has numerous hot springs. It is located in the Lake Bogoria National Reserve, which includes the lake and the surrounding area. The vegetation around the lake comprises of grasslands, thickets, and woodlands. The woodlands form an important habitat for the greater kudu and other mammals.



Lesser Flamingos
Photo by Timothy Mwinami

Lake Bogoria can be hot during the day, and visitors should bring sun lotion and protective gear to shield against direct sun rays. Accommodation at Lake Bogoria ranges from 4-star spas to low budget resorts, like Zakayos Resort.

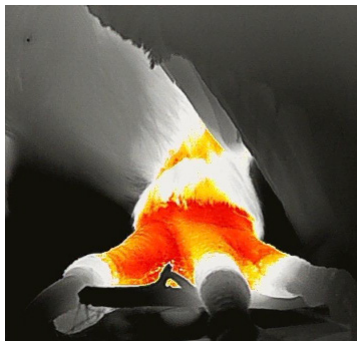
Friends of Nature Bogoria is a group of 12 bird guides. Visitors can reach us on mobile: +254 (0) 720 385096, or on emails: fonbogoria@gmail.com, kurere2007@gmail.com.”

WHAT THE STORY OF ONE MARTIAL EAGLE TELLS US ABOUT RAPTOR ELECTROCUTIONS

Simon Thomsett,
Kenya Bird of Prey Trust



Day 2 post-electric shock
The eagle's deep wound with the
tendons exposed.



A colour-coded thermal image proved very useful in delineating the precise boundary between living and dead tissue prior to the amputation of digits. The white distal of the red was viable tissue.

On 17 February 2022 a couple posted photographs and videos on social media of a young **Martial Eagle** flopping around in front of Salt Lick Lodge, situated on the Tsavo plains. It is only in retrospect that the story of this bird's subsequent journey can be used to illustrate the grim reality facing Kenya's raptors as they perish due to electric shock caused by 10-32 KV power lines.

Thousands of miles away those photos and video were seen online and the Kenya Bird of Prey Trust was alerted. To experts at the Trust it was all too evident that the eagle had been electrocuted and would die unless rescued. Martial Eagles are **Endangered**, and therefore an effort was made to rescue this one—the local rangers picked her up, keeping her safe overnight.

The eagle was delivered to the Trust's facility at Soysambu, in critical condition. She was given fluids, food, a warm enclosure, and hundreds of fast-growing maggots were immediately removed from her wing. Any dead flesh in the tropics attracts flies and thus maggots. She had self-mutilated overnight, as do most raptors when trying to remove maggots from their wounds. This renders all chance of her recovering flight impossible.

We were fortunate, at this time, to have *National Geographic* magazine photographers staying at the centre, as they had a thermal scope. Using the scope, we were able to see that all the toes of the left foot were almost entirely cold, and essentially dead, due to a lack of blood. But, the toes still functioned, opening and closing. The eagle was even standing on its dead foot for weeks afterwards. This forcefully illustrates the ability to grossly underestimate electrocution related deaths of raptors because the dead feet can take a very long time to become non-functional.

A month and a week later, the eagle was still using its left foot although the toes were not opening and closing as well as before. Her quality of life was good as she was otherwise fit, and rapidly becoming tame and even playful, and very ready to protect her meal! If she kept the remainder of the wing and could stand on the damaged foot she would be a good candidate for captive breeding.



Day 16 The eagle is standing on the dead foot. The good foot could feel pain, the “bad” foot could not. Reinforcing the implication of raptors using a limb normally long after electrocution.



Day 36 After her wing dried, it was amputated mid-radius and ulna in an effort to keep as much of the wing as possible.




On Day 38 The base of the foot is swollen and her digits are dry and blackening. The foot had minimal movement, but could still flex. On Day 40 All 4 digits were amputated, being as conservative as possible.

On the morning of the 22 March 2022, 43 days after injury, she was found standing in her box, but with blood loss from her wing that had soaked the towels beneath her.

Clearly, she was extremely depressed, but still standing, and so we opted to act giving minimal disturbance and stress to prevent further haemorrhaging. We would address that later, we thought, after she had some time to recover. She was now in a precarious condition, for the first time. I was obliged to answer the phone, ironically on a discussion about electrocution, when she collapsed and died.

Retrospectively

In dealing with electrocuted raptors we are often caught in a cycle, as one limb after another becomes non-viable, and you really don't know which, or precisely where, until it happens. Even then, they look you in the eye as fearlessly as they would when they were whole and undamaged. They tame down in days, become as engaging as a dog, demonstrate interest, happiness, and intelligence. Inevitably, they creep into that area considered scientifically off limits and unprofessional—your heart.

Will there be any changes made as one after another endangered species needlessly dies? Should we not adopt better approaches to power line construction, plan around protected areas, and avoid areas where raptors and large birds are most numerous? There are safe options. There is no need for a single eagle to be electrocuted—it is not a cost we have to bear to pay for “development”. 

Reducing raptor mortalities

Research published in February 2022 showed that over a period of 40 years 86% of raptors studied had declined by a mean of 70% (Ogada *et al.* 2022).

Some of Kenya's most iconic raptors, including **Secretarybird** and **Long-crested Eagle** have almost disappeared, with both species declining by 94%.

Many of the most rapidly declining species are at the highest risk of electrocution. For example, **Augur Buzzards**, whose populations are at extreme risk, declined by 91%.

Dr. Munir Virani, the now CEO for The Mohamed Bin Zayed Raptor Conservation Fund in Abu Dhabi, has noted, that raptor electrocutions can be easily mitigated. “Some excellent work is being done around the world to reduce raptor mortalities. A case in point is the remediation of power lines done in Mongolia where raptor mortalities from electrocution has been reduced by 98% per year.”

Keeping track of nature



Paul Gacheru

Ngangao forest, Taita hills, a dragonfly and African Goshawk.

Photos by Ian Francis, John Mwacharo and Peter Usher respectively

In Kenya, there are currently 67 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), that include Rift Valley lakes, coastal wetlands like Mida Creek, river deltas like Yala Swamp and Tana River Delta, and private and community lands, like the Kinangop grasslands and Dakatcha woodlands.

IBAs are designated by BirdLife International on the advice of its Partners, following a set of international criteria: they hold viable populations of bird species that are threatened with extinction, have highly restricted distributions, gather in large congregations, or are characteristic of a particular biome.

Monitoring IBAs/KBAs

Monitoring of these important sites has been done annually since 2004, to take measure of the following three conditions:

1. The condition of critical species and habitats (called the STATE)
2. Threats facing the site (called the PRESSURE)
3. Any conservation actions taken for the site (called the RESPONSE).

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species shows the status of biodiversity with yearly revisions when the status of a species improves (it is downlisted) and when it declines (it is uplisted).



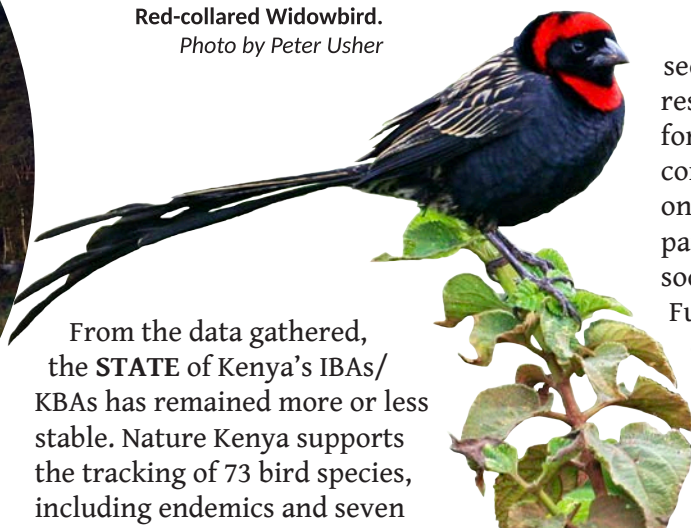
IBAs are now called Key Biodiversity Areas

Important Bird Areas/Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) were first identified and documented for Kenya in 1999, in the book *Important Bird Areas in Kenya* by L. Bennun and P. Njoroge. Key Biodiversity Areas, developed by Nature Kenya, BirdLife partners, and IUCN, broaden the criteria to include other animal and plant taxa. In Kenya, IBAs meet the KBA criteria and are included within Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs).

In 2016 the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) adopted a global standard for the identification of KBAs 'to identify sites contributing significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity in terrestrial, inland water and marine environments.'



Photo by Peter Usher



PRESSURE on these habitats and ecosystems has increased owing to threats such as land-use changes, pollution, and rapid infrastructure development (road, rail, electrical power lines, and wind farms). These changes are happening at a fast rate, leaving conservation responses lagging behind. A crucial problem is the late engagement of conservation sector players, when projects are at the implementation level. In an ideal situation, all sector players should be involved at the development conceptual stages to ensure integration of appropriate safeguards and balancing is achieved.


Frequent, severe, and prolonged droughts, increasing demand for food and natural resources, and the proliferation of invasive plant and animal species, like *Prosopis juliflora*, and the Indian House Crow, are other threats to IBAs/KBAs.

RESPONSES

We have recorded a general decline in actions to support nature and species conservation. This is in part due to the reduced national budget allocation in 2021-2022—only 0.02% of GDP was specified for the environmental

Furthermore, access to donor funding is a competitive process that is never assured.

People the world over have been beset with crises in the past year – a pandemic, a war and civil wars, floods and droughts, leading to shortages and rising prices. Responding to these crises has diverted people's attention from the overarching crisis of our time: biodiversity loss.

If the decline in conservation funding for IBAs/KBAs persists, our social and economic well-being will be negatively impacted. Nature and biodiversity in all its forms are the base on which we, our economies and societies, depend. 

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Fish-eating birds in trouble on Lake Naivasha

Western Marsh Harrier.
Photo by Jacques Pitteloud



For how long will Lake Naivasha provide for birds given the existing and emerging threats?

**Timothy Mwinami
and Silas Wanjala**

Twice-yearly, waterbirds on Lake Naivasha are counted by volunteers (organised primarily by the National Museums of Kenya's Ornithology Section, in collaboration with the Kenya Wildlife Service, Nature Kenya, and local organisations). The counts show that Lake Naivasha is an important site for fish-eating birds, like pelicans, ducks, herons, storks, and cormorants. The lake has a large breeding population of **African Fish Eagles**, and provides a foraging and roosting site for Palaearctic migrants like **Western Marsh Harriers** and **Ospreys**.

But it isn't just the birds feeding on fish.

Baiting birds

There is an increasing number of fishing communities and fishing vessels at Lake Naivasha. This has resulted in over-fishing. The problem is made worse by illegal unlicensed fishing, and the use of inappropriate fishing gear, that indiscriminately traps both fish and birds.

In the past, whenever birds were found trapped in the fishing nets they would be thrown back in the water, or released. But now, birds have become the target. Whether dead or alive, if found, ducks and cormorants are either eaten by the lake shore, or sold on the black market.

The current fisheries at Lake Naivasha is not sustainable and threatens the lake's ecology, and fish-eating bird species.

An uncertain balance between resource use and nature

Multiple government agencies and various stakeholders, over many years, have sought to help establish a stable and sustainable fisheries industry at Lake Naivasha. The Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute, Fisheries Department, Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), Kenya Coast Guard Service (KCGS), and the Lake Naivasha Riparian Association (LNRA), put in place the following measures:

- Control of the number of licensed fishermen
- Enforcement of a three-month fishing ban each year to allow the fish to breed (this took place in 2003-2013)
- Intensified patrols and enforcement of regulations
- Regular artificial fingerling restocking to help boost fish stocks in the lake.



Long-tailed (Reed) Cormorants, Grey Heron and Great White Pelican on Lake Naivasha. Photo by Timothy Mwinami

In their routine lake patrols, KWS, KCGS, and LNRA have made an effort to rescue trapped birds. Illegal fishing gear, and the plastic rafts that end up being death traps, to birds and other fauna, are destroyed.


However, despite the concerted effort, the intended balance between the fishing demand and the needs of the lake ecosystem has not been achieved. The numbers of fish-eating migratory birds over the last 28 years have greatly declined.

There has also been an initiative by the County government of Nakuru to set up a Fisheries Taskforce to advise on how best to manage fisheries within the county. However, its

recommendations are yet to be implemented.

Beside fisheries, the lake is a tremendous resource that supports the flower industry, geothermal power generation, and tourism.

...Try, try, and try again

The future of Lake Naivasha's ecosystem, its biodiversity, and its social-economic potential will remain in a dilemma without a better approach to conservation, management, and monitoring. We may not have succeeded in the past, but we must keep trying. 



Plastic containers tied together are used by poachers as boats. Here they are being destroyed by regulating agency patrols. Photo by Timothy Mwinami

WHAT NEXT?

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

- Employ targeted search and rescue patrols for trapped birds
- Create awareness in the community
- Mobilise all parties to remove fishing nets and plastic waste discarded in the lake
- Enhance wildlife monitoring and involve the community
- Restore degraded sites around the lake
- Involve all stakeholders



A dried up seasonal wetland in Dakatcha. Photo by Edwin Utumbi

Drought piles pressure on Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver nesting sites

Edwin Utumbi, Paul Gacheru and John Mwacharo

The seasonal wetlands of Dakatcha forest (a Key Biodiversity Area), are the only known places where the endangered **Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver** nest. Over the years, these seasonal wetlands have endured direct and indirect threats ranging from habitat loss to the adverse effects of climate change.

Bore Swamp is one of the largest seasonal wetlands in Dakatcha forest. In recent times the swamp's water level has dropped due to the prolonged drought spells witnessed in the area. Degradation of the swamp's sedge and grass vegetation and surrounding areas has further compounded the situation.

"The ongoing drought has led to overgrazing at the swamp. People bring their animals to the wetland as it is one of the few places with green vegetation. In the past, cattle never fed on sedge. That has now changed. Cows have adapted to eating it owing to the prevailing drought," says Julio Mwambire, a bird guide in Dakatcha.

The felling of trees to produce charcoal and the clearing of bushes adjacent to the swamp have also negatively impacted the once vibrant Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver nesting site.

According to Julius, who was part of the team that discovered the first breeding site in another wetland in 2013, the last time the bird was seen nesting at Bore Swamp was in 2019.

"For now, the situation in Bore is not pleasing. The sedge can effortlessly regenerate once the rains fall. It is, however, not easy to restore the surrounding swamp vegetation. Kilifi (Clarke's) Weavers prefer feeding their chicks on trees close to the seasonal wetlands where they breed," observes Julio.

Gandi Swamp faces a similar predicament to Bore. Cattle have invaded the wetland for pasture, and its water is drying up.

"In February, I observed some Kilifi (Clarke's) Weavers on sedges at Gandi Swamp, but they did not appear to be breeding," says Julio.

Also, some of the nesting sites are owned by individuals, whose activities may be detrimental to nature. "In Chalalu, for example, part of the wetlands has been excavated to create a water pan," says Julio.

Other key drivers of habitat loss include the conversion of wooded areas into farms for pineapple

cultivation, and logging to produce charcoal. Charcoal from Dakatcha supplies urban populations in Malindi, Kilifi, Mombasa, and even Nairobi. This loss of pristine forest vegetation, including *Brachystegia* forest, has hindered the forest's ability to provide environmental services, including its capacity to replenish water.

To conserve the forest a nature reserve has been established. The 1,800-acre Kamale Nature Reserve was purchased with financial support from the World Land Trust, African Bird Club, RESOLVE and DANIDA/Civil Society in Development. Nature Kenya is also working with local communities to facilitate the setting up of community conservation areas.

Nature-based enterprises, such as beekeeping, improve livelihoods and are being promoted as incentives to conserve the forest. Policy-wise, Nature Kenya is working closely with the Kilifi County government to develop legal frameworks to safeguard Dakatcha forest. 



Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver
Photo by Colin Jackson

In 2021, BirdLife International (who assess birds for the IUCN Red List) proposed downlisting Clarke's Weaver from **ENDANGERED** to **Vulnerable**.

Nature Kenya, BirdLife Africa and A Rocha Kenya made impassioned objections to this proposal, and held a virtual meeting with the BirdLife assessment team to stress the need to keep Clarke's Weaver listed as Endangered at this time of extreme drought when the birds have not bred for two (now three) years.

Our appeal was considered and the Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver remains as Endangered on the IUCN Red List.



A sandbar at Kipini, Tana Delta (above) and Ali Dido at his chilli farm. Photos by Peter Usher and John Mwacharo respectively

Investing in green value chains strengthens community resilience and promotes nature conservation in the Tana River Delta

Green ventures in the TANA RIVER DELTA

Rudolf Makhanu and John Mwacharo

It has been a while since it rained, and the unforgiving scorching sun has left a landscape of withered plants. On Ali Dido's farm in Wachu Oda however, the chilli crop on his farm is flourishing, seemingly undeterred by the prevailing drought.

Several kilometres away in Mapunga-Kiziwani, Esther Nzilani tends to her two-acre green gram farm. The green gram crop at Nzilani's farm has blossomed to maturity, awaiting harvest.

Dido and Nzilani are among farmers from the Tana River Delta practising climate-smart agriculture to overcome the challenges of unpredictable rainfall patterns and the increased frequency and severity of drought.

The environmental degradation that the Tana River Delta has suffered over the last decade has been induced by natural causes, human activity, and climate change. Climate change in the Tana Delta has caused

the intrusion of saltwater due to rising sea-levels, frequent and severe drought, flooding, and unpredictable rainfall patterns. These adverse effects threaten community livelihoods, impacting negatively on farming, fishing and pastoralism (the three major community income sources in the area). In response, communities have ventured into the unsustainable production of charcoal, and farming and grazing in ecologically sensitive areas.

“Life in the Tana Delta has changed. Rainfall patterns have become unreliable, and farmers can no longer rely on farming calendars they have depended on for decades. Pastoralists now keep their livestock in the core delta all year, which significantly degrades it. There has also been an increase in charcoal production as a fallback when mainstay community livelihoods fail. Concerted efforts are required to reverse these unsustainable trends that are detrimental to the Delta’s biodiversity and ecological value,” says George Odera, Nature Kenya Project Manager, Coast Region.

As such, Nature Kenya is intervening to halt this downward trend. It is organising actions to make it possible to add value to local products and build community resilience in the Tana River Delta. By doing so household incomes are improving and the degradation of critical landscapes is lessening.

Climate-smart agriculture

Through the climate-smart agriculture initiative, farmers are offered improved (and certified) seeds that are fast maturing, drought-resistant and highly nutritious. These are available for green grams, cowpeas, and maize.

“The green gram variety I have grown takes 45 days to mature and requires little rainfall. I planted when it last rained, and am just about to harvest with no additional rainfall,” says Nzilani.



Esther Nzilani at her green gram farm. Photo by Caroline Chebet

Measuring 130,000 ha, the Tana River Delta is a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA), a Global Biodiversity Hotspot, harbouring rich plant and animal life. Tana River Delta is also a designated Ramsar site (wetland of international importance). Many communities are dependent on the delta for their livelihoods.



A perching Northern Carmine Bee-eater. Photo by Peter Usher

Farmers are also provided with seeds for high-value crops like sesame, sunflower and chilli to supplement their earnings. To ensure their success, Nature Kenya is facilitating access to agricultural extension services, and training in crop husbandry.

“I was fortunate to participate in a farmer’s exchange visit

to Embu, organised by Nature Kenya. During that visit, I learnt a lot of things such as selecting suitable crop seeds for a given area, and how to determine the right time for planting,” says Dido, who has put two and a half acres of his farm under chilli cultivation.

Boniface Musyoka, an agronomist working for

Chilli farming

Chilli farming in the Tana Delta is underpinned by an investor, Equator Kenya Ltd. Dido and 170 other farmers have a contractual arrangement with Equator Kenya, for African bird's eye chilli seeds, extension services and market access. This chilli variety is preferred as it tolerates drought, requires little attention, and is not susceptible to pests and destruction by wild animals. Equator Kenya buys 1kg of chillies from the farmers at between Ksh 50 and 60. Nature Kenya has made it easier for a chilli producer group to be established, to ensure sustainable production.



Rice farming

In Ozi and Kileleshwani, communities have traditionally grown rice by utilising the natural flood cycles. The intrusion of seawater, however, has affected soil salinity, compromising the survival and productivity of traditional rice areas. To work around this, Nature Kenya introduced an adaptable rice variety called ITA, which offers higher yields and tolerates the high salinity levels in soil. 4,700kgs of ITA rice seed was distributed to 245 farmers in Ozi, in 2021. The farmers harvested 190,200 kgs of milled (white) rice valued at Ksh 9,510,000. This was at a farm-gate price of Ksh 50/kg. In 2022, 6,900kgs of ITA rice seed was distributed by Nature Kenya to 345 farmers in Ozi and Kileleshwani.



African Pygmy Goose and African Jacana at Lake Mnuji, Tana Delta.
Photo by Peter Usher

Nature Kenya in Tana Delta, says 1,570 farmers drawn from Kipini, Garsen and Tarasaa are actively engaged in climate-smart agriculture.

“Most of the farmers engaged in climate-smart agriculture are women. The initiative seeks to build resilience among communities in the Tana Delta,” says Boniface.

Nature Kenya is also working closely with the Tana Delta Farmers' Cooperative, based in Tarasaa. The cooperative manages the Ngao Farmers' Field School, and offers farmers hands-on know-how

on climate-smart agriculture, greenhouse technology and conservation agriculture. Two more farmers' field schools are based in Hewani and Kipini.

Conservation kitty

In place is a benefit-sharing process that sees 10% of earnings, from sold produce, put into a conservation kitty. This kitty is managed by the Tana Delta Conservation Network (TDCN). TDCN is an umbrella body of community-based organisations and self-help groups.



Boniface Musyaka (right) with a sunflower farmer.
Photo by Caroline Chebet



A view of Yala Swamp and Papyrus Canary
Photos by Moses Owili and Peter Usher respectively



Securing **YALA** **SWAMP**

**John Mwacharo and
Moses Owili**

With funding from the Darwin Initiative, MacArthur Foundation, and USAID-PREPARED, Nature Kenya has implemented numerous projects and activities aimed at securing a sustainable future for Yala Swamp.

The following are some notable highlights of these activities:

The Land Use Plan

Working collaboratively with the Siaya and Busia county governments, local communities and the national government, Nature Kenya developed a Land Use Plan (LUP) for Yala Swamp. It is currently being implemented.

The Yala LUP seeks to balance the development and conservation needs at the wetland.

This involves addressing the settlement and livelihood needs of communities, and fairness in land resource allocation (for both investors and communities). It serves to protect the wetland's unique biodiversity by embracing strong conservation ethics, and highlights the environmental services given by the swamp, that support the economy, biodiversity, and livelihoods.

The Busia County Assembly has ratified the Yala Delta LUP, with its Siaya counterpart expected to follow suit soon.

An Indigenous and Community Conserved Area

As prescribed in the Yala Delta LUP, multi-agency stakeholders, with support from Nature Kenya, established a 8,404 ha Indigenous and Community Conserved Area (ICCA) in the heart of Yala Swamp. A management committee elected by community members oversees the running of the ICCA. It is made up of natural areas surrounded by open-access farming and grazing lands, riverine forest, and papyrus wetlands.

Site restoration

Local community conservation champions, the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG), have undertaken habitat restoration activities at the wetland. Within the ICCA, YESSG has restored 66.7 ha of degraded wetland by planting papyrus. This is in line with the management committee's guidelines for promoting natural papyrus regeneration in degraded areas. In addition to this, YESSG has planted 69,622 indigenous trees in the Yala River riparian zone.



Community members conducting biodiversity monitoring at Yala Swamp

Photo by Moses Owili

Defending land rights

When the National Land Commission (NLC) announced, in late 2021, its intention to allocate 6,764 ha of Yala Swamp to a private developer, Lake Agro Ltd, community members from the area went to the High Court to block them. The case was withdrawn, later refiled, and is currently pending. With support from Nature Kenya and other conservation stakeholders, the aggrieved communities also sent a petition against these plans, to the NLC, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), the Siaya county government, and other public institutions. The communities have used the mass media extensively to voice their concerns.

YESSG has also been vocal in pushing for the designation of Yala Swamp as a Ramsar site (a wetland of international importance).

Promoting livelihoods

With skills and knowledge acquired through training and capacity building efforts, communities now engage in various nature-based income-generating activities (IGAs). These include papyrus weaving, fish farming, climate-smart agriculture, beekeeping, poultry farming, and ecotourism. An agreed fraction of earnings from the IGAs is channeled to support site monitoring, restoration, advocacy, environmental education, and awareness creation activities. 



A beneficiary of climate-smart agriculture. Photo by Moses Owili

Citizens reporting bird electrocutions and power line collisions

A bird-power line collision site near Lake Elmenteita. Photo by John Mwacharo

Vincent Otieno

Power line-related deaths pose a major threat to birds, particularly large raptors and migratory species. Thousands of birds silently die from electrocution and collision with electricity infrastructure every year. There isn't a comprehensive process to monitor and gather information about these incidents so they go largely unreported.

Citizen science data collection

Citizen science is a method of data collection, which encourages ordinary people (the public) to gather information for scientific programmes or projects. Data gathered over time provides a basis for pursuing informed conservation actions.


Nature Kenya is currently employing this approach to get data on bird electrocution and

collision by power lines. It is engaging community volunteers in different parts of the country, for reports on incidents, in their area. Information gathered by volunteers includes the type of incidence, location, date, and bird species (if known). Photos of the bird and surrounding areas are taken also. This data is relayed to Nature Kenya through a social media platform.

Since April 2020, in the southern rangelands of Kajiado and Narok counties, community volunteers have reported 20 bird deaths involving 11 species, including **Secretarybird, White-backed**

Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Tawny Eagle, Mountain Buzzard, Augur Buzzard, and Spotted Eagle Owl.

Around Lake Elmenteita area, volunteers reported more than 50 power line related **Lesser Flamingo** deaths in December 2020.

Data collected by citizens on these deaths helps us to assess the risks of bird mortality by electrocution or collision in areas where power lines are proposed. It can be used to inform the design and development of new electricity transmission infrastructure. 

Be a citizen scientist

Have you observed a bird electrocution or power line collision incident? Report it giving your name, telephone, and email contacts to **office@naturekenya.org**.

When reporting include the following:

1. Date
2. Location (name of the place e.g. town, village, centre, institution), with GPS coordinates, if possible)
3. Kind of bird(s) involved
4. Number of dead or injured birds
5. Photos of the bird(s) and the power lines



Hartlaub's Turaco and a view of Mount Kenya forest . Photos by Peter Usher

Nature Kenya works to promote the understanding and conservation of nature and is grateful for the support of all our partners and sponsor organizations.

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Northern Carmine Bee-eater. Photo by Lorenzo Barelli



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