



A resident of Bunyala harvests papyrus from Yala Swamp . Photo by Caroline Chebet

Help us save Yala Swamp, say local communities

■ By Caroline Chebet

Along the Kombo dyke that separates Lake Kanyaboli and the vast Yala Swamp in Misori, Siaya County, clumps of papyrus reeds dance to the gentle morning wind. Fishermen in traditional wooden canoes paddle through the calm lake waters, occasionally making stops to inspect their traps. Pied Kingfishers lay in wait to catch some fish. Many other birds, including Papyrus and Black-headed Gonoleks, forage through the papyrus. The place is a birder's paradise. Local communities use papyrus reeds from the wetland to make baskets, mats and other products.

"As a weaver, my life revolves around Yala Swamp. It is here that I get the raw materials for my weaving. Together with other weavers, we make and sell products to sustain our livelihoods," Mildred Apiyo, a resident of Bunyala says.

All this, however, hangs in the balance as Yala Swamp, the country's largest freshwater wetland, faces another major threat: the conversion of the swamp to a sugarcane plantation.

"It is like everyone wants a piece of the swamp land. Private developers are scrambling for it. Communities who have lived here long have a right over it. The scramble for this resource is not anything that can be ignored," Ibrahim Ogolla says.

For now, local communities are not so much concerned by the rampant fires to reclaim the edges of the swamp. The controversial allocation of 6,763.74 ha (16,713.57 acres) of the wetland by the National Land Commission (NLC) to a private investor - Lake Agro Kenya Ltd - is what has them worried.

"The move by the National Land Commission goes against our land rights. We depend on Yala Swamp for food, water, pasture, fuelwood and medicinal herbs. Sadly, our voices seem not to count," says Ayiro Lwala, chairman of Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG).

Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group is a community umbrella body working with Nature Kenya to conserve the Yala Swamp. The group also promotes

sustainable livelihood initiatives to ease overdependence on the wetland for sustenance. Climate-smart agriculture, fish and poultry farming, beekeeping, basket weaving and ecotourism are some of the income-generating activities YESSG is promoting with Nature Kenya's assistance.

"We are working closely with Nature Kenya to reduce pressure on Yala Swamp for natural resources by supporting nature-based enterprises. The decision by NLC to allocate large portions of the swamp to a private investor undermines our conservation efforts. The focus should be on protecting the swamp, not destroying it," says Edwin Onyango, a member of YESSG based in Bunyala, Busia County.

To the local communities, the conversion of the swamp to a sugarcane plantation will put many of their livelihoods at risk, compromise their subsistence food production systems, and expose them to abject poverty.

Yala Swamp is one of Kenya's important wetland ecosystems. The swamp is internationally recognized as a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). It provides numerous essential environmental services and vital resources for over 250,000 people who live around it.

Besides being home to the endangered Sitatunga antelope and many papyrus-dependent birds, Yala Swamp is a refuge for cichlid fish that have become extinct in Lake Victoria.

YESSG and many other community organizations object to the Yala Swamp allocation by NLC and are asking the government to stop it.

"Yala communities will not accept to be impoverished at the expense of some rich greedy people. We will continue to fight for Yala Swamp's conservation for the benefit of everyone," concludes Thomas Achando, chairman of the Yala Swamp Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas. 🐘



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Yala Swamp matters to all of us

In November 2022, the National Land Commission (NLC) made a determination in favour of allocating 6,763.74 Ha of Yala Swamp to Lake Agro Kenya Limited. This, together with land originally held by the collapsed Dominion Farm, will lead to over 50% of Yala Swamp allocated for destruction through planting sugar cane. This is contrary to the wishes of the people of Yala. This allocation will compromise the ability of Yala Swamp to provide fish for food, water for food crops, filtration of water before entering Lake Victoria, carbon sequestration by the papyrus, flood regulation, tourism and biodiversity. It also threatens the livelihoods of over 250,000 people who depend on Yala Swamp, including papyrus harvesting and basketry, fishing, small-scale irrigation and tour guiding. The allocation is a gross violation of the land rights of Yala's indigenous communities.

Nature Kenya, local communities and other human rights and conservation stakeholders objected to the allocation. Through their representatives, the communities made clear submissions to the National Land Commission detailing their reasons for rejection. Other stakeholders, including government agencies – Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) – also objected.

The National Land Commission seems to be stage-managing the consultation process in order to promote sugarcane, and thus condemning Yala Swamp and the invaluable ecosystem services that the Yala community and national and global stakeholders depend on. In November, Nature Kenya was able to review a report detailing how the NLC plans to ignore the views of the stakeholders and instead subvert their rights and allocate the land to Lake Agro Kenya Limited. Nature Kenya, representing the voiceless unique fish and other biodiversity, the poor Yala communities and the national and global community, will continue to lobby the Government of Kenya to reverse NLC's decision and instead foster the implementation of the Yala Land Use plan.

If Kenya is serious about reducing and mitigating climate change, then no wetland should be "reclaimed", since wetlands provide critical environmental services such as carbon sequestration, water storage and filtration and flood moderation.

We count on the power of many. Reach out to your leaders and let them know that Yala Swamp matters to all of us! 🐼



Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver nesting site in Dakatcha Woodland. Photo by J. Mwachongo

KBA in focus - Dakatcha Woodland

By Joshua Sese

Lying north of the Sabaki River in Magarini Sub-county of Kilifi County is an extensive tract of relatively intact coastal forest and woodland, the Dakatcha Woodland Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). Its vegetation cover is reminiscent of the western part of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest (about 40 km away). The landscape consists of undulating hills, with beautiful spreading *Mrihi* (*Brachystegia spiciformis*) trees and pockets of *Mfunda* (*Cynometra webberi*) forest, mixed forest and dense thickets mingled with active and abandoned farmlands.

Dakatcha Woodland is home to globally threatened flora and fauna. Among the hidden gems in the KBA is the Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver, whose only known population has been recorded in Arabuko-Sokoke forest and Dakatcha Woodland KBAs. Other rare animals found there are the Golden-rumped Sengi (elephant-shrew), Sokoke Pipit, and Sokoke Scops Owl.

Beyond its importance as a biodiversity hotspot, the *Brachystegia* forest of Dakatcha Woodland traps, stores and releases water, protects the sandy soil, sequesters carbon and moderates the climate.

Regardless of its precious value, the KBA faces many threats. The forest

has no formal protection status. Uncontrolled logging of indigenous trees and illegal charcoal production have destroyed large swathes of forest vegetation and wildlife habitat. Agricultural expansion, especially pineapple farming, has led to clearing of *Mfunda* forests and thickets, critically important as habitats for the endangered Sokoke Scops Owl. The commencement of land adjudication in September 2020 ignited a land rush in the region, resulting in uncontrolled land sales and an unprecedented rate of forest destruction.

The Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group (DWCG) is a local environmental group working with Nature Kenya to conserve Dakatcha Woodland. DWCG advocates for conservation of the forest, regularly monitors birds and biodiversity, conducts environmental awareness and education and supports community livelihoods.

Nature Kenya has purchased 2,573 acres of the forest for conservation through support from the World Land Trust, African Bird Club, RESOLVE and TiME. Part of the acquired land is the 1,800 acre Kamale Nature Reserve, made up of *Brachystegia* forest and several wetlands. The wetlands provide nesting habitat for the endemic and Endangered Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver. 🐼

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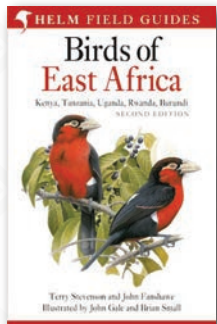
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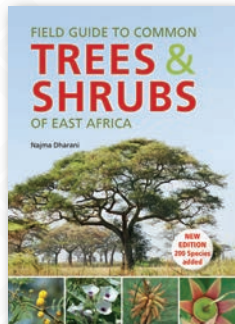


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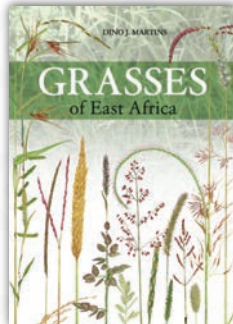
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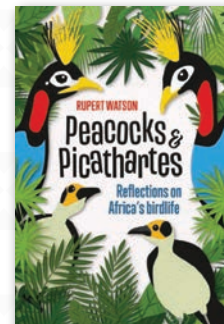
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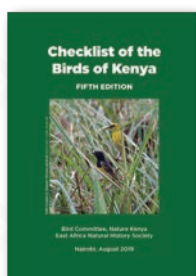
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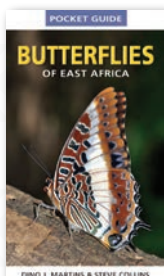
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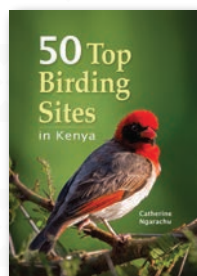
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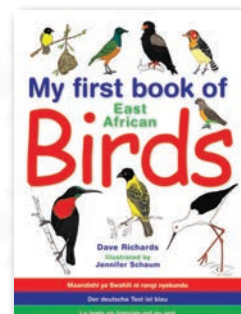
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Tree planting at Hombe forest

■ By John Mwacharo

In November, Team Kijani of Kenya Breweries Limited (KBL) joined Hombe Community Forest Association (CFA) for a tree planting exercise at the Hombe forest block in Mt. Kenya. The activity was part of KBL's support for growing 20,000 trees in degraded areas of the Hombe forest block. This year, Nature Kenya partnered with KBL to plant 100,000 trees to restore forested landscapes in Mt. Kenya. This planting season, KBL has supported the planting of 30,000 trees in Ontulili, 20,000 in Castle, 20,000 in Gathiuru and 10,000 in Upper Imenti forest blocks. Other corporates Nature Kenya has partnered with for forest restoration are Coca-Cola Beverages Africa - Kenya, the Privatization Commission and Kenya Deposit Insurance Corporation. 🌱



Tree planting by KBL staff at Hombe forest. Photo by John Mwacharo

The House Crow at the Coast



House crow. Photo by Nick Athanas

1. The House Crow is an invasive species. It recently moved to Kenya at the Coast and has caused a lot of damage. House Crows are not the same as the indigenous Pied Crow.
2. House Crows kill other birds, and have driven out many of Kenya's own bird species from the Coast.
3. House Crows also kill chicks, ducklings, and may spread diseases.
4. Therefore citizens and hoteliers have asked the Government to reduce the number of House Crows in order to protect other birds and keep our environment clean. Nature Kenya hopes this will be done in a humane way, by poisoning House Crows only, quickly burning the dead House Crows to avoid the spread of disease, and protecting all other birds.

Five bright planets

■ By Fleur Ng'weno

The five planets that we can see with the unaided eye are in the evening sky this holiday season. As the sun sets on the western horizon, brilliant Venus and small bright Mercury rise above the sunset glare. Mercury rises rapidly; at mid-month it appears close to the part of the constellation Sagittarius that looks like a teapot or a basket with handles.

Mercury then falls back towards the western horizon, while Venus rises steadily; they pass each other at month's end. The thin crescent moon is near the two planets on December 24, a beautiful sight.

Bright Jupiter is high in the sky in the evening, then dips towards the west. Saturn, much fainter now, sets in the west during the evening. The waxing moon is near Jupiter on Dec 1 and 2, and again on the 29th. The crescent moon is near Saturn on the 26th.

Mars is at its best, glowing orange as its orbit brings it a little closer to Earth. The 'red planet' rises in the east just after sunset in early December, and is in the sky all night. At month's end it's up in the east at dusk, high overhead around 10 pm, and sets before dawn. The nearly full and full moon is near Mars on December 7 and 8.

December stars

The distinctive constellation of Orion, the Hunter or Warrior, rises due east on December evenings, climbing higher each night. Look for three bright stars in a row, with four bright stars like a box around them. To the Aymara people of highland South America, the three stars in a row were a celestial bridge – and indeed, they seem to link the skies of the Southern and Northern hemispheres.

North (left) of Orion, the stars of the Hyades cluster form a shape like the letter V. The reddish star

Aldebaran, the fiery eye of the constellation Taurus the bull, is at the open end of the "V". Further north, several bright stars are grouped close together – the Pleiades or Seven Sisters of Greek myths. With binoculars, you can see more stars and a glowing blue haze. The moon is near the Pleiades on December 6, near Aldebaran on the 7th – with brighter Mars on the other side.

As the year ends, Sirius, the brightest star we can see at night, rises southeast of Orion. Canopus, the second brightest star, appears further to the south. The star Fomalhaut is high in the southwest, and below it the bright star Achernar is still prominent in the south.

Moon, Dec '22

Dec 8 – full moon, rising in the east at sunset. Dec 16 – last quarter (half-lit moon at dawn). Dec 23 – new moon; look for the slim crescent near Venus on the 24th. Dec 30 – first quarter (half-lit moon at sunset).

Sun

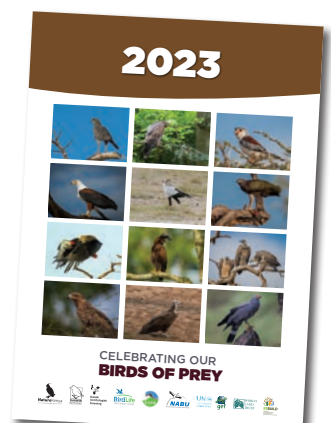
On the solstice, December 21, the sun is at its furthest point south. Here on the equator we may not notice this, but you will notice that the sun rises and sets later each day. Sunrise and sunset are half an hour later at the end of January than they were in November.

Meteors

In early December, the Earth travels through an area of dust and rocks in space. Some of these particles may fall into the earth's atmosphere and burn up. We call them meteors or "shooting stars" (although they are not stars). Look for the Geminids meteor shower on a dark, clear night between midnight and dawn from Dec 7 to 17, especially early on the 14th. The Geminids are followed by the less showy Ursids meteor shower, peaking before dawn on the 22nd.

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Birding Updates

Wednesday Morning Birdwalks in Nairobi

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

7th December – Nairobi

Arboretum. Meet at 8:30 am at the main entrance off State House Road. There is an entrance fee of Ksh. 65 per person payable via Mpesa.

14th December – Paradise Lost

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

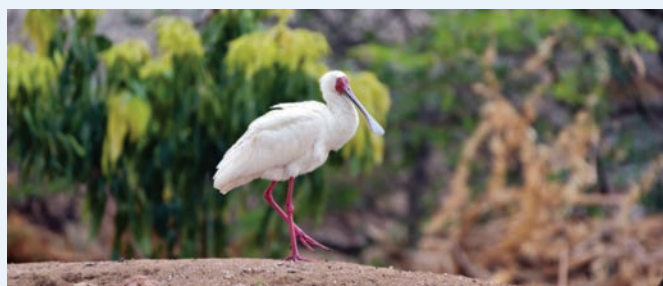
21st December – Karen Blixen

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

Note: There will not be an organized birdwalk on 28 December

18th December. Sunday Bird Watch

– Ngong Road Forest Sanctuary. Meet at 8:30 am at the Main Gate. (There's a Sanctuary fee of Ksh. 100 for citizens.) Directions: Coming from the city centre, take Ngong Road towards Karen. After Jamhuri Sports Ground take the first left turn (before the Commonwealth Cemetery). It's 500m to the Sanctuary main gate.



African Spoonbill. Photo by John Mwacharo

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

Bird Ringing at Nairobi National

Museum grounds usually take place on Tuesday mornings. Please confirm with Titus Imboma <imbomati911@gmail.com> Phone 0721-649452.

Thursday Birdwalks in Malindi

1st December – Malindi Museum

Grounds. Meet at Malindi Museum at 4:00 pm.

8th December – Mayungu.

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

15th December – Malindi Harbor.

Meet at Malindi Museum at 4:00 pm.

22nd December – Mtangani via

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

17th December – Saturday Bird

watch: Mida Creek. Meet up at Malindi HASS Petroleum at 7:00 am. For those who know the place or come from Gede and Mida, we meet at Mida Creek at 7:30 am.

For more information, email: <malindimembers@naturekenya.org > or phone 0725223042.

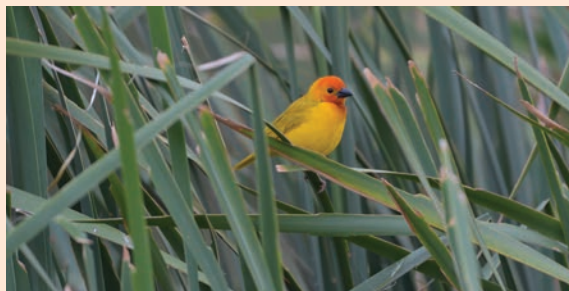
Mombasa Birdwalks are held the 3rd Saturday of each month. To check meeting time and place, check Facebook page:

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

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

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We wish you

Happy Holidays

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