

# Kenya Birding

KENYA'S NATURE MAGAZINE ISSUE 17, 2023

## BIRDING IN EASTERN KENYA

Discover birding in the mid-elevation areas of Embu, Tharaka, and Meru

## INSIDE THE NEST BOX OF SILVERY-CHEEKED HORNBILLS

Getting a view of the usually hidden nesting



## FORESTS MANAGED WITH COMMUNITIES

Learn how managing Arabuko-Sokoke Forest is evolving

## USING AI IN BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY

Opportunities and challenges of Artificial Intelligence



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# 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



After three years, in which this magazine was only available as a digital download, we are very excited to be back in print.

This allows us to reach more members, bringing you the best of birds, birding, and nature conservation, in this country. A big thank you from me to everyone that supports Nature Kenya and this magazine, and welcome to the 17th issue of *Kenya Birding*.

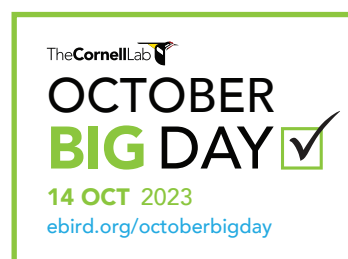
We are delighted to welcome Ben Allen, a first time contributor to *Kenya Birding*. Ben's fascinating article on pg. 24 delves into the details of how he went about designing a nest box for a pair of visiting hornbills, and recording their nesting activity. You don't want to miss it!

Also engaging is the birding exploits of two different groups who travelled to the remote and increasingly accessible north-east corner of the country. Turn to pgs. 19 and 28 to read about their quest for the area's special birds.

Kenya has a wealth of wonderful wildlife and it can be found just about anywhere you go. In our "love nature" section on pg. 22, we become acquainted with some of the most colourful fish of the coral reefs, the parrotfishes, and find out the best times to look out for butterflies, at different places around the country.

By way of various projects, Nature Kenya continues to work for people and nature. We have an update on the effort to save vultures in the Mara (pg. 32), and we take a look, with Francis Kagema, at how well participatory forest management is working in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest (pg. 34). On pg. 8 Fatma Hajio and Rudolf Makhanu report on how supporting farmers in villages situated in the Tana River Delta, is benefiting both the community and the Delta.

*Catherine Ngarachu*  
Editor, Kenya Birding



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### PHOTOS

(Opposite page) Silvery-cheeked Hornbill by Peter Usher, Red glider butterfly by Dino J. Martins, (above) Augur Buzzard, Bridled Parrotfish, Red-fronted Warbler (Prinia), cattle with 'eyespot', and Mutitu Hills by Peter Usher, Dino J. Martins, Mustafa Adamje, Rebecca Ikachoi, and James Mutunga respectively



# Lungs for Kenya

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# Reconstructing nature

Paul Matiku

“Trees provide oxygen, improve air quality, conserve water, preserve soil, support wildlife, store carbon, and ameliorate the climate. When trees make their own food (photosynthesis) they take in carbon dioxide and produce the oxygen we breathe.

Trees give us fibre for our clothes, timber for our houses, and firewood for cooking and home lighting. Trees have aesthetic value, with a comforting effect on our minds and souls. They provide shade to people and wildlife, and some trees have spiritual value. Trees provide homes to a wide range of living things, including bees, birds, and primates. Some are complete ecosystems for lower plants, like mosses.”



Forest restoration in Taita Hills. Photo by Gilbay Obunga

Sixty-seven places in Kenya that are globally important for animals and plants, are endangered. This happens when forests are degraded, wetlands are polluted, and grasslands and savannahs are converted to farmlands. Nature Kenya is working to reconstruct these nature sites, by working with local communities to reduce pressure on these unique places, promoting tree planting, helping counties develop policies that are nature friendly, and purchasing critical land.

## People power

We encourage the setting up of Site Support Groups (SSGs), that promote grassroot engagement in environmental sustainability. SSGs create awareness in the local community and remind leaders that the future is as important as today. They help to find ways to protect the natural resource base in their area, while building resilience, and promoting better use of what resources are available. Often this means bringing together income-generating activities and nature conservation, so both nature and people benefit.

Local champions around the country work to support nature and benefit from activities like growing crops that mature early, and keeping better livestock varieties (in the Tana Delta); beekeeping, and butterfly farming (around Arabuko-Sokoke Forest); wool-spinning (in the Kinangop highlands), and making products from papyrus (around Yala Swamp).

## Trees, trees and more trees

In Mount Kenya, over 6,000 ha are degraded, reducing the quantity and quality of water, biodiversity, and climate amelioration. Nature Kenya is planting trees with support from 28 community forest associations. We are also working with partners like Kenya Breweries (they have planted over 600,000 trees), Coca-Cola Kenya Limited, World Land Trust, and BirdLife International.

## Planning for nature

As Yala Swamp was being targeted for sugar cane production, Nature Kenya led in the

development of a Land Use Plan recognised by the governments of Busia and Siaya. The Lake Yala Ecosystem SSG is championing the implementation of the land use plan that does not advise planting sugarcane. With Nature Kenya’s help a community conserved area has been established. Also, the local people want Yala listed as a Ramsar site.

## Engaging nature volunteers

In the Mara, Nature Kenya needed to engage the communities to help when local people retaliated against livestock predators by lacing carcasses with poison. When this happens vultures become the unintended first victims of this practice, and die in large numbers. Nature Kenya is now working with 65 vulture volunteers who have become very efficient in spotting dead animals. They decontaminate the sites before vultures feed there, and save those vultures that need help, by handing them over to the Kenya Wildlife Service Veterinary Services.

## Land purchase

There are threats to some species, like the endangered **Kilifi (Clarke’s) Weaver** in Dakatcha Woodland, that have reached a critical point. At Dakatcha the forest is quickly being decimated by land owners speculating in land sales. As a result of this, Nature Kenya has decided to purchase 1,010 ha to help safeguard Kilifi (Clarke’s) Weavers.

In the Taita Hills, the forest remains as tiny fragments on the crests of the hills – less than 400 ha is protected, and only 150 **Taita Apalis** remain. Here, Nature Kenya is also buying land, in the hope of reconstructing the forest through restoration, and addressing related issues from forest adjacent communities, and supporting their livelihoods.

Living in harmony with nature is the Nature Kenya dream! Become a member of Nature Kenya and let us take care of nature together.





**African golden cat at Gatamaiyu Forest.** *Photo by Sarah Omusula*

## Confirmed camera trap photograph of African golden cat

Caroline Jemimah


There is little known about the distribution and population of African golden cat in Kenya. One study (T.M. Butynski *et al.*, 2012) surveyed the sightings reported by scientists, naturalists, and guides around Kenya, and identified 38 sites where African golden cat was said to be present. There were, however, no specimens or photographs to confirm any of the reports.

**The African golden cat is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.**

In October 2021, ecologist and biologist, Sarah Omusula received funding from the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, to find evidence of African golden cat in Kenya. Sarah set up camera traps in the eastern Mau, and in Gatamaiyu

Forest, where she installed nine trail cameras at various points. In late November, two of the trail cameras recorded a photograph of African golden cat.

The camera traps in Gatamaiyu have also recorded genet, bushbuck, Jackson's mongoose, suni, bush squirrel, and Gambian pouched rat.

Located approximately 55 km north of Nairobi, the Gatamaiyu Forest block is part of the larger (4,720 ha) Kereita Forest. Kereita Forest is a birding destination, and a Key Biodiversity Area. 

**Editor's note:** Readers may also be interested in the article: *The First Confirmed Record of African Golden Cat Caracal aurata from Kenya since 1946.*


*Published in the Journal of East African Natural History, 108 (1): 49-55 (2019), and available online in the BioOne Digital library bioone.org*

## House Crow spread in Tanzania

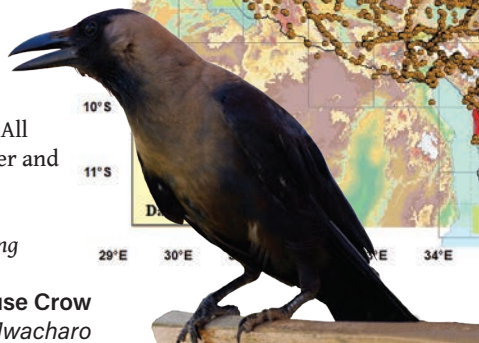
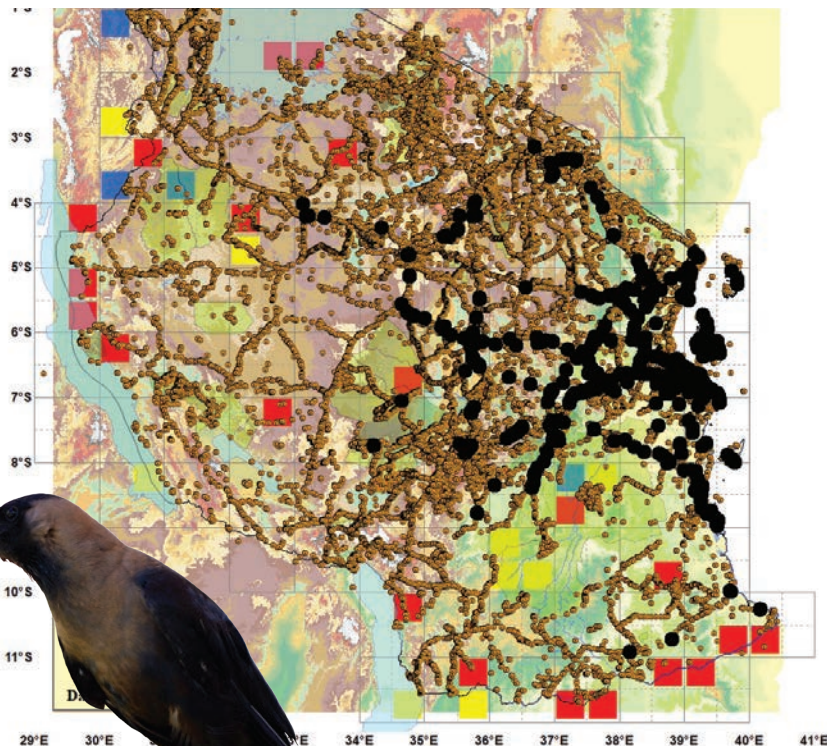
Map (on the right) shows 2,403 geo-referenced database records of House Crow — shown as black circles. They have spread from the coastline of Tanzania, fanning out across a wide area of the country. *Map courtesy of the Tanzania Bird Atlas.*

Neil Baker

The House Crow is an invasive species that is moving to places across Tanzania. Villages and towns along main roads act as stepping stones for their continued dispersal.

When they reach Mwanza (which will be quite soon) there will be nothing to stop them colonising the shoreline of Lake Victoria, and moving into Kenya and Uganda. All they will need is a regular supply of fresh water and fish scraps. 

**Note:** House Crows in Kenya are similarly spreading inland from the Kenya coastline.



**House Crow**  
*Photo by John Mwacharo*



# Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in bird photography

Peter Usher

“Bird watching is a wonderful hobby that can bring you joy and satisfaction in many ways.

You can connect with nature and appreciate the beauty and diversity of birds. You can observe their colours, shapes, sizes, behaviours, and sounds. You can learn about their habitats, diets, migrations, and adaptations. You can marvel at their intelligence, creativity, and social skills.

You can challenge yourself and improve your skills. You can try to identify different species of birds by their appearance or voice. You can keep track of your sightings and records. You can use various tools and equipment such as binoculars, cameras, field guides, and apps. You can also join clubs, groups, or events to share your experiences and learn from others.”

What you have read above is part of a bland introduction to watching birds. It might have been written by any birding enthusiast, even me! However, it was actually composed and written by a machine in seconds.

Such is the power of large language Artificial Intelligence (AI) models, they can write an article, technical paper, poem, or even a novel, based only on the input of a few words. The product would have impeccable grammar and spelling, and it would be mostly, factually correct.

## Embracing AI for editing my bird photographs

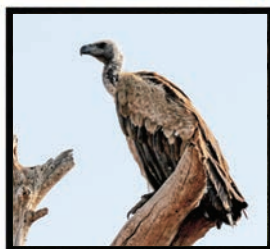
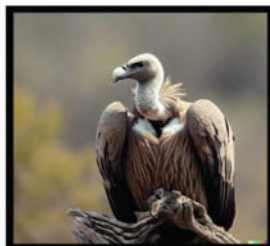
The application Adobe Photoshop is popularly used for editing photographs. But, there are other



Superb Starling



Lilac-breasted Roller



White-backed Vulture

Large Language Model is the technical term for programmes that communicate with the user. ChatGPT is the behemoth trained on some 50 billion items. Microsoft Bing is another. Ask a question, or make a request, and you have a response in seconds.


applications that use AI to undertake tasks, with faster and better results. (Photoshop, in its latest version, is incorporating AI tools as well as developing a text-to-image model called “Firefly”.)

All bird photographs need some editing. Lighting needs to be balanced, images need to be cropped and sharpened, photographic noise must be removed, and contrast and vibrancy must be tweaked. Previously, a slow and painstaking task, it is now all achieved with a few keystrokes on a computer.

Above are two sets of Kenya birds. One set consists of birds photographed by me, and the other set, is created by AI in the Dall-E 2 AI model (with no camera or editing). Which set do you think is real?

The top set is made up of bird photos generated by just writing the bird names in a dialogue box and pressing enter on the computer. The image of each bird was generated in seconds.

Autonomous machines, which use AI, are capable of making decisions and self-learning. With these advances in technology, commercial artists are facing redundancy caused by text-to-image, (and the soon to be, text-to-video), generators.

AI could be a force for good, providing scientific and economic pathways that might solve climate change, cure cancer, and eliminate poverty. It certainly makes photo editing easier! However, there are risks; even to the extent that some believe the future of humanity is at risk from rogue robotics. 

# Counting waterbirds with volunteers


John Mwacharo

Having spent the night at the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya campsite in Lake Nakuru National Park, a predawn call, has volunteers up and outside in the cold, expectantly waiting to get started. Two of the volunteers try to rekindle the dying embers of the campfire, while talk of the roar of lions heard during the night dominates conversations. A contingent of armed rangers from the Kenya Wildlife Service joins the milling group, and a

alight from the vehicles to get organised. The volunteers are divided into ten groups of 4-6 individuals and two rangers. A person is chosen to lead each group, and they are provided with a clipboard with data sheets and a map of the lake. Each group is assigned a specific area on the map. Having gotten an understanding of their task, and equipped with binoculars, telescopes, water, and snacks, the groups disperse to their respective areas — the counts are on at Lake Elmenteita!

By 9:37 a.m. the chilly weather has given way to sunny skies. A line of pink along the saline shoreline reveals **Lesser Flamingos**. Mercy Muli, a first-time counter, can't hide her excitement. "This is so beautiful. This is my first sighting of flamingos," she says.

24 waterbird species are recorded by Mercy's group including **Cape Teal, Little Grebe, Grey-headed Gull, Greater Flamingo, and White-winged Black Tern**.

The count is accomplished by mid-afternoon and the tired volunteers head back to the Nakuru campsite. 

For more information on how to participate contact Nature Kenya: [office@naturekenya.org](mailto:office@naturekenya.org), or 020 3537568/0780 149200

# Chillies, sunflowers & conservation in the Tana River Delta

Fatma Hajjo and Rudolf Makhanu

The adoption of high-value, high-yielding, drought-tolerant crops by farmers in villages situated in the Tana River Delta can be said to be turning round farmers fortunes, while promoting conservation.

In Darga Galge village, one of the farmers cultivating such crops is Abdulkadir Ibrahim. Abdulkadir's farm is a vibrant mix of green, yellow, orange, and red African Bird's Eye chillies. With a steady market for his crop, and regular payments for produce delivered, Abdulkadir has seen his income from farming increase significantly. Another farmer, Ali Dido, is growing sunflowers on his farm in the village of Odha. Growing



Mercy Muli.

Photo by John Mwacharo

short while later, everyone is summoned to the dining area for a quick breakfast comprising hot tea and bread. Energised, the 44 volunteers and rangers board vehicles and drive off in a cloud of dust to count the waterbirds (birds that live in or near water) at Lake Elmenteita.

They arrive at the lake's main entry point at daybreak and

## Some numbers from the counts

The aggregate numbers, from all the groups at Lake Elmenteita this year, show:

**3,332** Greater Flamingo

**876** Cape Teal

**198,584** Lesser Flamingo

**1,007** Little Stint

**860** Great White Pelican

Lesser and Greater flamingo.

Photo by John Mwacharo







Chilli crop (on the left) and sunflower(above). Photos by John Mwacharo

sunflowers, another high-value crop, has improved Dido's income, and boosted his ability to deal with the challenges of being a farmer in the Delta.

Both Abdulkadir and Dido, and others, have received training on efficient irrigation methods, the use of drought and disease-tolerant seed varieties, and the application of organic manure. Farmers are encouraged and receive help to form producer groups and co-operatives to curb exploitation by middlemen. Eleven such cooperatives have been established.

At the heart of this new farming approach, is the conservation of the Delta's natural habitat. The crops

that are promoted for cultivation are those that demand less water and are more tolerant to pests. Farmers are encouraged to use organic manure, and irrigation methods, which are environmentally-friendly. Above all, a portion of the farmers' earnings is channelled for conservation through a kitty.

### Green Heart Project

The introduction of crops like chilies and sunflowers to farmers in the Tana River Delta has been an activity of the County's Green Heart Project. It seeks to enhance biodiversity protection, promote conservation-linked enterprises, and develop value-adding activities. It is part of the Tana River Delta Land Use Plan.

The projected scaling up of the plan is expected to eventually put 5,000 ha under sustainable vegetable production in 80 communal and private farms, like Abdulkhadir's and Dido's; 20,000 ha of dedicated grazing land under beef cattle rearing, 3,000 ha under rice farming, and 2,000 ha under fruit farming.

Alongside helping farmers achieve better results from their farms, Nature Kenya is working towards having 175,000 ha of the Delta committed to community wildlife conservancies. To oversee the management of these conservancies is the Tana Delta Community Wildlife Conservancies Association, which has been formed and registered. 

## BIRDING AND WILDLIFE SAFARIS IN EAST AFRICA



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# Yala Swamp communities reject push for sugarcane plantation

Communities rise up to block a private developer from establishing a sugarcane plantation in Kenya's largest freshwater wetland

**Emily Mateche**



A fishing boat at dawn in Lake Kanyaboli (above) and Papyrus Gonolek. Photos by John Mwacharo

The Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG), is concerned about a decision by the National Land Commission (NLC) accepting the allocation of 6,764 ha of the swamp to a private developer (Lake Agro Limited). It would allow for commercial sugarcane farming, which entails heavy use of water, and also fertilisers and agrochemicals, that are likely to contaminate the swamp through run-off.

“The proposed allocation threatens the swamp, and the community’s ability to rely on it. It puts at risk the livelihoods of over 250,000 people, compromises subsistence food production, and increases the communities’ vulnerability to poverty,” explains Ayiro Lwala, Chairperson of YESSG.

“Agrochemicals and other contaminants may get into the water that communities depend on for their domestic use. Fishing, a key livelihood activity here, may also be affected,” adds Ayiro.

Yala Swamp is home to over 100 bird species, including five papyrus endemics: **Papyrus Gonolek**, **Papyrus Canary**, **Carruthers’s Cisticola**, **White-winged Swamp Warbler**, and **Papyrus Yellow Warbler**. The imminent destruction of the papyrus wetland habitat to pave the way for plantation





Ayiro Lwala (in a grey jumper) and other members of the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG) birdwatching. Photo by Moses Owili

farming also threatens the existence of these birds, and other wildlife.

In 2022, Yala communities went to court to challenge the NLC’s decision, citing the violation of their land rights. The communities sought legal redress at a magistrate’s court in Siaya town. In its ruling, the court determined it had no constitutional jurisdiction to hear an appeal over an NLC determination and advised the communities to file their appeal at a higher court.

YESSG and other groups representing the Yala communities, with support from environmental and human rights organisations, have reinitiated legal proceedings to challenge the allocation at the High Court. They are also engaging local authorities and enhancing public awareness.

“Yala Swamp comprises community land, a gazetted National Reserve (Lake Kanyaboli), and a designated Indigenous and Community Conserved Area. We are pushing the Siaya County government to listen to our pleas and reconsider the decision. A 66-year lease for commercial farming is insensitive to the community, and ignores the needs of biodiversity”, says Ayiro. 🦋

You can help the Yala communities to **SAY NO** to the allocation of the swamp to Lake Agro Limited by signing their online petition here: <https://bit.ly/3beRngg>.

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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 hosted on Google Groups. To join go to <https://groups.google.com/d/forum/kenyabirdsnet>

## Mixed flock of helmetshrikes



White-crested Helmetshrikes by John Mwacharo

6 OCTOBER 2022

At Nature Kenya's Kamale Nature Reserve in Dakatcha Woodland, we saw a flock of **White-crested Helmetshrikes** together with **Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrikes**.

We had not seen the White-crested there before, and I guess they are refugees fleeing the drought. White-crested Helmetshrikes turned up everywhere during the drought.

Fleur Ng'weno

## Morning after heavy all-night rain

11 NOVEMBER 2022

Heavy rain occurred throughout the night and well into this morning in Thika, and as a result there was a large northward movement of **Yellow-billed Kites**. I counted 67 individuals over a short period in the morning.

There is no telling where they came from as these kites are intra-African migrants.

Darcy Ogada



Yellow-billed kite by John Mwacharo

## Cassin's Hawk Eagle in the Aberdare National Park



African Crowned Eagle pair by Peter Usher

12 AUGUST 2022

On 9 August, while birding with a guest at the Ruhuruini loop of Aberdare National Park, we had a **Cassin's Hawk Eagle** flying above us like she owned the territory. Two **Crowned Eagles** also took to the skies at the same time and started displaying.

Washington Wachira



2 MARCH 2023

It seems a **Cattle Egret** became horribly entangled in a discarded hair extension piece, then perished amidst the thorns of a Yellow Fever Tree. Birds and other creatures may be cruelly killed like this when waste disposal is carelessly done.

Peter Muriithi



## Birding in Kitale and Kapenguria

7 SEPTEMBER 2022

Over the weekend Victor Ikawa, Alex Ikawa, Adrian Hinkle, and I, travelled to the Kitale-Kapenguria area on a birding expedition.

With the local expertise of Jeff Mwok we were able to see several of the area's special birds: **Western Black-headed Batis**, **Western Violet-backed Sunbird**, **Heuglin's Masked Weaver**, **Green-backed Eremomela**, and **Foxy Cisticola**. Kudos to the Mwok family for working to maintain a good patch of suitable habitat for the **African Spotted Creeper**, which we saw in the area. The Mwok farm had a good number of **Red-throated Wryneck**.



**African Spotted Creeper**  
by Pete Steward

By the Kapchemot River (close to the settlement of Adurkoit in west Pokot), we had 6 **Yellow-billed Shrike**, while up on the Kongolai escarpment we had **Stone Partridge**, **White-crested Turaco** (which we also saw down on the plains), **Black-billed Barbet**, **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow Weaver**, and **Boran Cisticola**.

Angela Waki



**Pennant-winged Nightjar** by Mathew McIlvenna

## Rare spotting at Ngong Road Forest Sanctuary

22 AUGUST 2022

The weather was good on the Sunday bird walk at the Ngong Road Forest Sanctuary. We started off by seeing a white morph **African Paradise-flycatcher**, and soon thereafter I spotted a **Crowned Eagle** near the parking lot.

On reaching an open area of ground, I spotted a **Three-banded Plover**. So engrossed was I in my birding, I found that most of the birders had moved

along, leaving me, and fellow birder James Mburu, at this area.

Mburu called out to me and asked me to join him. He said he'd spotted something that looked like a nightjar, but he was not sure. It may just be a polythene bag, he said. On joining him I found that it was in fact a **Pennant-winged Nightjar**. I called the others to come and see it, and with everyone there it took flight, showing more of itself, to everyone's delight.

Peter Muriithi

## Bird Atlas of Kenya now digitised

18 AUGUST 2022

The data from the first *Bird Atlas of Kenya* (published in 1989) has been digitised, and made available online, for anyone who may need it. You will find it at <https://tinyurl.com/5bjbknah>.

As part of the project, we are also working on providing maps that show the changes in species distribution, between the first bird atlas and the current atlas, the Kenya Bird Map.

This has been achieved as part of the African Bird Atlas project, funded by the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), and the JRS Biodiversity Foundation.

Special thanks go to Raphaël Nussbaumer, whose technical expertise has been instrumental in this project, and to our data manager Sikenkeny Kennedy.

Sidney Shema

## Finch Pentad

— likely the most species rich on the entire continent

30 DECEMBER 2022

For close to thirty years, I have been keeping a bird list for the area of the Kenya Bird Map project that contributing birders have taken to colloquially refer to as “Finch pentad”. But just how much can be recorded in an area of nine kilometres by nine kilometres?

Only a couple of years ago it was a list of 482 birds, consisting of species that were substantiated, which meant that I had a fixed date and location for the observation. Thereafter, I decided, all new records to the list would also require an image of the bird to qualify for inclusion. Indeed, for every single addition over these

past two years I’ve been able to get excellent imagery to back up the sighting.

Unexpectedly though, while I was recently searching for something totally unrelated on my computer, I came upon the folder of bird records that I used to keep before we had the *kenyabirdsnet* forum that we now use to share records.

I thought I had lost these old records after recurrent computer upgrades, but, in this bounty all my birding memories returned to me. It covered the period December 1995 up to May 2002 after which I posted instead on the *kenyabirdsnet*.

So I went back through the list for the pentad, alongside the freshly discovered records looking at what was contained in them. I was able to tie down a number of additions to the list, now that I had the date and location for each sighting.

There are still so many species that you would have expected, but they are still out there yet to be added. The latest is the **Black-winged Pratincole** at Hyena Dam last November, which stayed through to mid-March 2023, allowing for anyone interested in seeing it to get great views. It was the 500th species for the pentad. *So what’s the 501st species going to be?*

Brian Finch

To see the Finch pentad list, go to <https://kenya.birdmap.africa/>



(Top left) Seven African Skimmers at the Nagalomon Dam, Nairobi National Park, were the first record for the pentad. (Top Middle) This Cape Wagtail at Kingfisher Swamp was the first for the pentad. (Top Right) Bat Hawk There have only ever been two records from Nairobi National Park, but it is a resident outside of the park, (the area that falls within the pentad). This one was in my garden, which is in the same pentad. (Bottom right) Icterine Warbler There have been two records from Nairobi National Park, inside the pentad, but this bird was from my garden, and the only one we have had. All remainder are the recent Black-winged Pratincole - The images show the progression from very immature, first-year non-breeding plumage, to the nearly breeding plumage it had when it departed, after staying nearly five months at Hyena Dam in Nairobi National Park. The inset shows the all-black underwing in flight. Black-winged Pratincole was not just a pentad first, or even a just a Nairobi National Park first — it was the first record in Nairobi County, and the first record in Kenya this century.





**SENTINEL LARK ON TERMITE HILL.** *They habitually perch on raised surfaces, where they claim their territory and sing loudly, ready to defend it from trespassers. Like a sentinel in the army they keep constant watch and stand on the same perch for long periods throughout the breeding season, and much of the rest of the year.*

## A common lark of Nairobi region

21 OCTOBER 2022

A visitor to Nairobi National Park will soon encounter a large lark typically perched on the concrete numbered signs that give directions around the park.

Many of these posts have provided a territorial place from which the birds perch stoically, sing, and preen. They are extremely tame, and it is possible to drive around their signposted cairn without the bird moving or even breaking its song. To all of us the Rufous-naped Lark is a very popular bird for all these reasons.

But despite its name, there is not a trace of rufous on the nape of our bird, which differs, in that and other respects, from the birds that were originally described as 'Rufous-naped Lark'. So perhaps it

is no surprise, that in the constantly evolving world of taxonomy and genetic analysis, that a study has demonstrated that the bird in Nairobi, and surrounding areas, which has the subspecific name *athensis*, is different from *Rufous-naped Lark*.

As such, it requires a new common name, and I have suggested, with agreement from birders on the *kenyabirdsnet* forum, that it is named 'Sentinel Lark' (dictionary definition of Sentinel is "a soldier or guard whose job is to stand and keep watch"). This is based on what is the most striking feature of the bird — its habit of perching or singing from an extremely obvious song-post as if guarding it.

Brian Finch

## A once in a lifetime sighting

**African Snipe** chick at Maji Punda, just west of Molo, seen by Pete Steward, Adam Kennedy, Adrian Hinkley, Angela Waki, and Brian Finch on the weekend of 30-31 July 2022.

*This chick is only a day or so old and was found in a swamp in the Molo highlands.*



## Vultures in a drought stricken Nairobi National Park

1 FEBRUARY 2023

I was in Nairobi National Park on 31 January this year, with two visiting birders. The park was in the grips of a seriously bad drought, and the entire day was warm with relentless sunshine.

Many dams had vanished, but there was still water at the Embakasi (Ruai) Dam, and a horde of vultures were drinking and bathing. As they seemed a good number we decided to count them. Those on the ground were 131 — the greatest proportion being **White-backed**, but also 19 **Rüppell's** and a **Lappet-faced**.



### A group of vultures feeding at a carcass

This is by far the largest congregation of vultures, at one site, I have ever seen. It emphasises, I think, the importance of Nairobi National Park as a globally important refuge for vultures currently, and the necessity of a monitoring programme of this population.

The news about vulture numbers is a disheartening story of decline throughout Africa, with drops in recorded numbers of 85-95% in places. But the numbers in Nairobi National Park appear to have remained much the same throughout the history of the park.

Brian Finch

## Thousands of waterbirds at Thiba Dam

On 14 February 2023, while driving with friends, between Embu and Castle Forest, at the base of Mount Kenya, a **(Western) Osprey** in flight caught my attention. We pulled over to take a closer look, and located the (Western) Osprey perched on the street lights over the main dam wall, which held an impressive area of water. This new irrigation reservoir, little of which can be seen from the road, is called Thiba Dam. A second (Western) Osprey flew nearby, but what we were staggered to see, as we looked at the water through the dam's boundary fencing, was the high number of waterbirds.

With binoculars we saw in the region of 3-4,000 wildfowl including 500+ White-faced Whistling Ducks, 100s of Knob-billed Ducks, and at least 100 Garganey. There were many more birds that were hazed by the heat, and too far away, to positively identify. We attempted to access the site, but the security team was already finished for the day. We vowed to return on our way back.

On 16 February, we managed to gain access at the main gate. We were led by the security team, who drove ahead of us in a separate vehicle, along the main dam wall and then towards the back of the dam itself. The dam, we learnt, was built with support from the Japanese government, and we were fortunate enough to meet the friendly Japanese site manager who knew his birds, and who took great delight in sharing his own observations.

In total, we counted, the following:

3,000+ **White-faced Whistling Duck**, 1 **Fulvous Whistling Duck**, 350+ **Egyptian Goose**, 200+ **Knob-billed Duck**, 100+ **Garganey**, 1,200 **Red-billed Teal**, and 12 **Northern Pintail**.

Other birds noted include **Black-winged Stilt**, **Common Sandpiper**, over 100 **African Open-billed Storks**, plenty of herons, **Long-tailed (Reed)** and **Great Cormorants**, and **African Fish Eagle**.

Adam Scott Kennedy



Wildfowl at Thiba Dam.



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# COAST HERITAGE CIRCUIT



## The Amazing Wonders of Kenya's Underwater Cultural Heritage

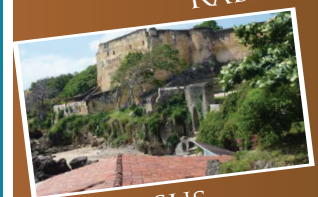
Kenya has a 600 km long coastline. Ship wrecks are evidence of International trade many years ago from places like India, China, Portugal, Arabia, Burma, Indonesia just to name a few. Archeology is the scientific study of human past culture and relationship to the past through material evidence. Underwater 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:

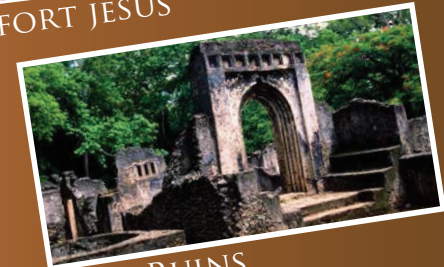
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RABAI MUSEUM



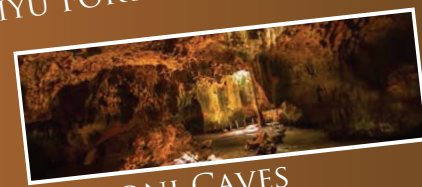
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## Coast Birding with Mustafa Adamjee

A large flock of terns and waders at Mkurumudzi River Estuary. Photos by Mustafa Adamjee

## The 2023 south coast waterbird counts

5 & 7 FEBRUARY

Even though the number of volunteers who participated in this year's waterbird counts were few, we counted loads of birds, and this despite a disappointing start. The Tiwi swamp area, our first stop, continues to bear the brunt of rampant sand harvesting, and the birds were very few. I remember what it used to look like in all its glory, but now, even with the rains, the swamp does not hold much water. This site will probably be excluded from the counts in future.

We moved on to the Kisol dam and swamp, which had good water levels with abundant vegetation around them. Here there were plenty of birds, including a (Western) Osprey at the Kisol dam, and 11 White-backed Ducks,

and a whopping 59 African Pygmy Geese in the swamp.

From here we went to Mwazaro beach, found at the mouth of the Ramisi River. We had good numbers of storks, egrets, and a few waders feeding during the low tide.

We ended the day counting Mkurumudzi River estuary, where we had flocks of Lesser Crested, Common, and 11 White-cheeked Terns, which are regular visitors. Also, a good number of Whimbrels, Grey Plovers, and Crab-plovers were seen.

Having previously secured permission, we visited the Base Titanium dam on the 7th, for the first time ever. It's located inside the Base Titanium mining facility, and much kudos to them for maintaining what has to be one of the best kept areas for biodiversity on the south coast. There were hundreds of birds moving around when we reached the dam, and we counted 65 Great Cormorants and 108 African Darters! I have never seen such large numbers of these species at the coast. Many were

nesting, some had young chicks, while many others were carrying nesting materials.

There were also good numbers of whistling ducks, Black-crowned Night Herons, waders, and some crocs on the banks of the dam. They have a wonderful biodiversity corridor that links the nearby Shimba Hills to Gongoni and Buda Forest. I easily had more than 100 bird species in just a half day of birding. It is also the best place to look for the endemic Shimba Hills Reed Frog.

Lastly, there were yet again, high numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes that passed through this season. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to go out with a boat, but the fishermen estimated between 500-700 birds in scattered flocks. f

Mustafa offers birding trips on the south coast, and elsewhere. You may contact him at [info@swahiliecosafaris.com](mailto:info@swahiliecosafaris.com) or +254 (0) 708 086 622



African Pygmy Goose





# Birding Marsabit & Moyale

with Victor J. Ikawa

## Quest for rare birds in north-east Kenya

Departing Nairobi at 6:45 a.m. on 11 March, Jeff Mwok, my brother Alex, and I, drove (530 kms) to Marsabit town. We had a late lunch and proceeded to Marsabit National Park to make arrangements to camp at Abdul Gate. The park, including the beautiful crater lakes, was bone dry, and there were few birds.

After another long day on the road (247 kms) the next day, we arrived at the border town of Moyale. You could drive this in 3 hours, but we must have taken 10 hours, birding as we drove through the desert landscape. It comprises lava flats and scree (and boy, was it windy!), patches of short scrub, and places where the ground was bare and sandy, with tiny thorny plants.

At Huri Hills, it gets a little more verdant, with bush and acacias. Here we had **Somali Ostrich**, **Black-billed Wood-hoopoe**, **Steel-blue Whydah**, **Chestnut-headed Sparrow Lark**, **Thekla Lark**, and **White-crowned Starling**.

In the evening, in Moyale, while having dinner, we heard a **Freckled Nightjar** calling, which we confirmed with the help of audio recordings. We stayed overnight at the Holale Hotel and Resort, which had very clean rooms and decent food. We woke up early the next morning, to the sounds of people ferrying water using donkey carts.

We had a great start on the third day when Jeff and I observed a couple of sparrows that matched the call and description of

**Swainson's Sparrows** — a lifer for us. But, our mission on this day was to explore for Chestnut-naped Francolin and Grey-headed Batis, rare birds that were last recorded many decades ago. We drove to the last point it is said that the two species were recorded, and walked over 15 kms, in what proved a vain attempt to find them again. It was quite dry, and I would suggest that the next 'explorers' travel north in a wetter month, or just after the rains. Our inability to speak Boran or Gabbra was hilarious to the locals who spoke neither English, nor Swahili.

On 14 March we travelled back to Marsabit, driving leisurely and stopping to check out water pans along the way (though many were dry). At the first water pan we had **Black-faced Sandgrouse**, and **Common, Marsh, and Wood Sandpipers**. In the vicinity of others, we had hornbills, many **White-crested Helmetshrikes**, **Straw-tailed Whydah**, **Somali Bunting**, **Northern Crombec**, and **Brown-tailed Rock Chat**.

We stopped where there are cliffs and a water pan near Turbi town (situated about midway between Moyale and Marsabit), and saw **Egyptian, Hooded, White-backed**, and **Rüppell's Vultures**. **Martial** and **African Hawk Eagles** were plenty.

**Thekla Lark**  
by Jacques Pitteloud



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Just past Turbi, the desert extends in all directions. At first we went west and did not find any 'lifers', so we came back to the main road and drove east, on non-existent roads into the Dida Galgalu desert. Three hours later, we came across **3 Heuglin's Bustards** — a lifer for all of us, and we high-fived in excitement!

After another night in Marsabit, we got back to Nairobi at 9 p.m. on 15 March. 

**Note:** Check on the security situation before traveling northwards.

The full trip report is available online at <https://ebird.org/tripreport/75510>







# Birds I have known



**Peter Usher**

Our home in Nairobi is on an acre of densely wooded land, and each day, my wife and I lunch at an outdoor patio area near the house. Without fail, a number of birds stop by, expecting to lunch, if not with us, then very close by. They have been coming for years.

Always first to arrive are the **Pied Crows**, nicknamed Russell and Cheryl. They fly onto a rain gutter above the patio, peer over the edge to determine if we are alone (they don't like strangers), and if clear, they fly down. Usually, there is food waiting on the lawn for them. If not, the two hop onto the patio, repeatedly bowing and spreading their wings, and calling softly for their rations.

Our three cats look on disapprovingly, but they do not react. Years of close encounters with the crows, has demonstrated that the birds are too nimble and too well-armed, with beak and claws, to be threatened by a trio of fat cats. Should the cats be resting close to the food, the birds are not deterred, and will happily feed a paw's length from them. Occasionally, if they are in a playful mood, the birds will pull the tails of the unsuspecting cats obliging them to seek sanctuary in the house.



The odd thing is, that although there are numerous crows in the neighbourhood (50 can appear if an owl shows up), only the two regulars drop in for lunch.

Several **Black (Yellow-billed) Kites** lurk in the tall avocado tree, that is situated along side the patio. They sit and beg plaintively for food, but they are always too nervous to join the cats and crows on the lawn. Notwithstanding that, they will dive-bomb the crows to grab an unguarded morsel, and a piece of meat thrown skyward, will never return to ground. The kites are lightning fast and rival any bird in their agility.

Another regular lunchtime visitor is a **Hadada Ibis**, which generally prefers the grasshoppers and other insects it extracts from the lawn with its long curved beak. It avoids quarrelling with the other birds, preferring instead, to stare disapprovingly at the mayhem that others cause in their pursuit of lunch. This is never more evident than when the Vervet monkeys turn up. Unlike the cats, this regularly visiting troop, challenges the crows for food. It is not surprising therefore, that there are sometimes severe battles, among monkeys, crows, and kites for control of the larder. The cats sensibly flee to shelter.

At the front of the house is an *Olinia* tree, that fruits once a year. For the last six years, one, sometimes two **African Grey Parrots** visit to feast on the unripe hard green fruit, calling loudly to each other while they eat. You would not expect African Greys in Nairobi, and it is surmised that they are escapees, who have taken up residence in one of Nairobi's forests.

They come daily until the fruit is exhausted, or until it has ripened beyond their liking. Their eating habits involve breaking off a fruit bearing twig, stripping the berries, and discarding the twigs. The parrots are unworried by my proximity, or



that of the numerous birders that come to view these rare birds. Alas, the tree did not fruit in the latter part of 2022, due to the prolonged drought, and the parrots have stayed away. Hopefully, promised future rain will return the tree to life, and encourage the parrots to return.

On most Sunday mornings through the years, I photograph birds at an adjacent suburb (Loresho), where there is an agricultural research station, an extensive coffee plantation; some woodland, marsh, and dams. It is a wonderful place for bee-eaters, warblers, flycatchers, a host of waterbirds, and raptors. I would be disappointed if I did not see or photograph 30-60 species in a few hours here. Loresho's speciality is the widowbirds, and **White-winged, Red-collared**, and **Jackson's** are visible everywhere. The iconic bird, however, is the **Augur Buzzard**, and it would be a rare event if I didn't see one or more of these beautiful red-tailed raptors soaring above the coffee seeking scurrying rodents.

One morning, quite recently, I spotted a very young Augur sitting on a fencepost. Augurs, like most raptors are wary of humans, so, concealed behind a tree I used my 600 mm lens to capture images of the bird. Despite my cover, the bird noticed me, but, instead of flying away, it flew directly towards me, landing in the tree that was supposedly my cover. At little more than an arm's length away, with a great deal of wing-flapping, the bird began a loud conversation. It wasn't aggressive, but appeared to want to communicate something.




## PHOTOS

**Opposite page: Vervet monkeys with pawpaw, Hadada Ibis, Bronze Sunbird and Pied Crow.**

**Augur Buzzard (above) and White-winged Widowbird (below).**

*Photos by Peter Usher*

On a visit to the area a week later, I sighted the young Augur perched in a distant tree. Again on seeing me, he flew to a nearer tree, posing for photographs, with which I gratefully complied. Moving on, I was astonished to find that the Augur followed, landing in the nearest tree to me to the consternation of a group of **Bronze Sunbirds** that were feeding there at the time. This odd inexplicable behaviour was repeated on several subsequent visits. On one occasion, the Augur flew onto a car-park lamp-post at exactly the time I pulled up to park the car. Sometimes the encounters were noisy, at other times, the Augur perched aloof and silent, pointedly looking anywhere but at me.

My experience has been that birds have character, humour, and personality, and it provides an additional dimension and delight to our strange hobby of bird-watching. 



# Parrotfish

keeping reefs clean and healthy

Dino J. Martins




Coral reefs are home to a stunning array of lifeforms, and visitors to the coral reefs along the Kenyan coast will be charmed and dazzled in equal measure. On a snorkelling trip you will find a myriad of coral reef fishes, which display and flitter, offering tantalising views of themselves, before they then move away, disappearing from sight.

The parrotfishes are among the most colourful characters on the reef and there are various species found throughout the warmer seas of the world. They all fall into a single Family, the SCARIDAE and are related to the wrasses, another family of marine fish, with similar attributes.

On a recent snorkelling trip in Malindi, I entered the water in a small channel between sections of reef. To my delight there was a school of vibrant blue and purple parrotfish swimming back and forth in the current. They actually seemed to be enjoying themselves, being carried along past corals and seagrasses, then turning and circling back to do it again.

As the name suggests, these fish have fused teeth that form a parrot or beak-like mouth. They also have another set of teeth in the specialised jaws that line their throat. These enable parrotfish to graze on corals and other rocky surfaces by scraping and gouging out small chunks. Their poo, literally, forms the coral sands and classic white-sand beaches, that we love. Some individual parrotfish can produce up to ninety kilos of sand a year!

By crunching up corals that are covered in algae, parrotfish inevitably act as ecosystem engineers helping to keep reefs clean and healthy, making it possible for new coral to grow.

Watch out for the remarkable parrotfish when you next visit a coral reef. 

A school of Blue-Barred Parrotfish (*Scarus ghobban*) swimming above corals. These are one of the more common parrotfish species that can be found on our reefs. Photo by Dino J. Martins



# Where & when to watch butterflies

Dino J. Martins and Steve C. Collins

As the rains return to East Africa, habitats are springing back to life. Insects are among the first creatures to revive after a long drought. Clouds of winged termites fill the skies, columns of ants march across the ground, and many different beetles and flies emerge.

Butterflies are one of the groups of insects that are especially abundant following a long dry spell. Butterfly populations vary a lot from

year to year. Long droughts often lead to a decline in the predators and parasites of butterflies, and so when the weather conditions improve, striking numbers of butterflies can be seen. This 'peak' of butterflies flying about is something well worth seeing.



What are the best times to look out for butterflies, at different places around the country? Here are some suggestions:

**COASTAL FORESTS & WOODLANDS:** the peak of butterfly activity will follow good rains. Later in June and into July is a good time. Roadside verges and tracks through forest are good places to watch for them.

**GRASSLANDS & SAVANNAHS:** 3-4 weeks after the onset of the first heavy rains is the best time to visit these areas to look for butterflies. Visiting flowering trees and shrubs improves your chances of seeing them closely. Butterflies will continue to be abundant as long as the rains continue and for several weeks after.

**HIGHLAND FORESTS & MOORLANDS:** Typically the peak is more spread out in these habitats, for a few weeks following good rains, but also extending into the drier months of August-October. Sunny days are best, given the cooler conditions. Visit hilltops



Lurid glider (left) and Citrus swallowtails. Photo by Dino J. Martins

and higher areas to seek butterflies gathering on warm days.

**RAINFOREST:** Butterflies are found here year-round, but a distinct peak in numbers and diversity can be observed in May/June and in September/October as the rains taper off a bit. Sunny tracks, piles of animal dung, and muddy stream sides are good places to look.

We have over 900 species of butterfly in Kenya. Kakamega Forest, with 500, has the richest diversity. The coastal forests support some 250-300 species, and even Nairobi has recorded over 200 species.

Enjoy the butterflies wherever you find them! 

## Home with the birds

Shailesh Patel

Kenya was my home before I moved to the UK. I now live in north-west London where I'm able to go birding, by myself or with a group, throughout the year. I visit local parks, reservoirs, woodlands, and occasionally I enjoy a day by the seaside. But although



Barn Swallow  
Photo by Peter Usher


I am here, I still see some of the birds that I was familiar with in Kenya — birds like **Common House Martin**, **Barn Swallow**, **Willow Warbler**, **Blackcap**, and **Common Whitethroat**.

These birds will migrate from northern Europe or Asia to Africa, from mid-September after their breeding season is over, and are called Palearctic migrants.

They start to return from Africa in April. Once here in Europe, their plumage will start to change to a



more colourful breeding dress. Like the **Black-tailed Godwit** will change from its grey-brown winter plumage that we are familiar with in Kenya (Oct-Apr), to a bright orange-rufous for the summer. When we see **Black-headed Gulls** at Rift Valley lakes in Kenya, they have a white head and neck with a black smudge behind the eye. When I see them here they have a dark brown colour on the head.

I love to encounter migrant birds — it is like home wherever I am. 

## CUSTOM-BUILT NEST BOX reveals the secretive world of Silvery-cheeked Hornbills



This photo was taken on 17 March 2022. This was the day we removed the nesting box to fit the newly acquired camera. It took us about 4 hours to fit the camera and make sure it was all working before we felt confident enough to put the nestbox back up in the tree. We had only just brought the nest box down when the birds arrived looking for their nest box. It suggests that even when they are not at the nest box, they are keeping a careful eye on what happens around it. *Photo by Ben Allen*

With a shortage of suitable tree hollows for nesting hornbills, **Ben Allen** shares how he embraced the challenge of designing an artificial nest box and the fascinating breeding insights that this revealed

**S**ilvery-cheeked Hornbills regularly visit the Rosslyn area of Nairobi where I live. I began to notice that a pair of these hornbills would peer into the top of our neighbour's black, plastic, water storage tank. Could they be looking for nesting holes, I wondered. Going online to investigate the nesting requirements and breeding habits of SCHs I found that there was little available on the subject. There was, however, some information on the successful use of artificial nest boxes for large forest hornbills in Asia. These reports emphasised that artificial nest boxes should be well insulated to be successful.

It just so happens, that at the time, we were renovating some small cottages on the compound, and removing their original immersion heaters, to be replaced with modern, solar, hot water systems. It occurred to me that these tubular old heaters might be suitable for SCHs to nest in, as they were insulated and sturdy.





Modified immersion heater in situ. Male outside and female inside with her head out of the hole.

*Photo by Ben Allen*

### Designing the nest box

The 'heaters' are approximately 61cm in diameter and 90cm in height. The insulation is basically concrete and probably about 2.5cm thick. I cut a diamond shaped entrance hole, about 15cm up from the bottom of the tank. The height of the entry hole was about 25cm, and the width was 15cm. See photo above, of the modified immersion heater — repurposed as a 'nest box'. I also placed a layer of compost and wood shavings at the bottom of the nest box.

### PLACEMENT OF THE NEST BOX

I originally placed the nest box on the tank stand beside the black water tank that had been attracting so much interest from the SCH pair. For over two years, there was absolutely no interest at all. In mid-2021, I decided to change the location of the nest box, and transferred it into a Red stinkwood (*Prunus africana*) tree with a suitably convenient horizontal branch for it to rest on. The top of the horizontal branch is about 10m above the ground. The position was well protected from direct sunlight, and well placed for us to see what was happening at the entrance to the nest.

### FIRST BREEDING ATTEMPT

Finally, on 6 November 2021 a pair of SCHs started showing serious interest in the nest box. There were



The pair that nested during the 2021-22 season mating on their honeymoon branch outside my mother-in-law's bedroom window. *Photo by Ben Allen*

daily visits and regular mating on the honeymoon branch; lots of ritual feeding, and then at last, they were collecting mud and working to close the entrance hole.

On 22 December the female spent the night inside the nest box. The male was very diligent and fed her constantly on a diet of fruit, lichen, and the odd chameleon or fat grub. On one occasion we witnessed the male regurgitating 26 figs, one after another, and passing them to the female before he regurgitated a decent-sized chameleon, which was clearly still alive and trying to get away. But, it was successfully passed to the female in the nest box, who was able to dispatch and swallow it.

We were expecting the family numbers to increase at the end of January, and right on time, on 1 February, we found a hatched eggshell under the nest box on the ground— being the right colour, and size, to be a SCH eggshell. It had a small, black, down feather stuck to it.

We observed the male continue to feed the female, but we didn't actually know what was going on inside the nesting box. Four weeks later, when we came back from a weekend away we found the female had broken out of the nest box at the end of February, seemingly unsuccessful.

Since then, we have had a second breeding attempt by a different pair of SCHs.

## SECOND BREEDING ATTEMPT

This pair of SCHs showed serious interest in the nest box beginning in November 2022. The female would spend the day sealing herself inside with mud brought to her by the male, but towards the end of each day she would undo much of her good work and break out.

Then on 30 November she spent the night inside the nest box. The next day she broke out, again. She then reverted to her original behaviour of sealing the entrance hole during the day, and breaking out in the afternoon.

### Making use of a nest-box camera

After the first attempt, I purchased a nest-box camera, which I installed at the top of the nest box looking straight down. It was able to record both in full colour (when there was sufficient light), and infrared light (when there was no natural light). It was also able to record sound, which was useful. To store the images, I also purchased a type of security video recorder with a 4 GB hard drive, after an initial purchase of 1 GB proved to be insufficient.

That was until 9 December when she, once again, stayed inside overnight. She remained inside the nest box until she broke out on 15 February, after 68 days.

This time, with the camera set up at the top of the box, we were able to get a much better idea of what was happening inside:

### 19 December 2022

An egg was seen for the first time.

### 23 December

We saw what looked like her laying an egg and then we clearly saw two eggs.

### 25 December

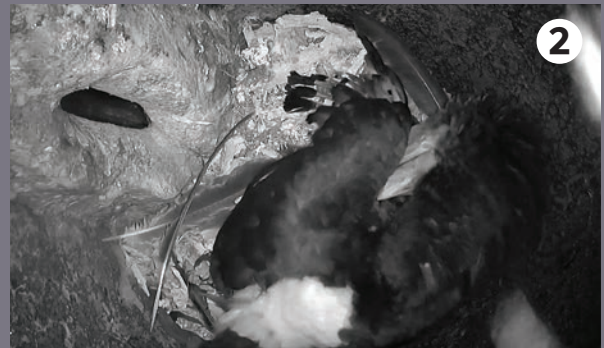
First evidence of the female starting to moult.

### 16 January 2023

We heard a chick calling. The female was seen trying to dispose of the of the eggshell, but she could not get it through the entrance hole.

### 17 January

First images of a chick, and heard it begging loudly for food.



**PHOTO 1:** The female would defecate through the entry hole or onto the mud around the entry hole. In the process, she would briefly reveal her eggs.

**PHOTO 2:** The female preening just two days before her first egg hatched. You can see the primaries on her left-hand wing emerging after she moulted. It was about a month later before she would break out and fly away, despite having lost her chicks within a week of this photo being taken.

**PHOTO 3:** The female with a two-day old chick seen on her right-hand side calling loudly for food.





**18 January**

The chick was still calling, but it was very difficult to see whether it was being fed or not.

**19 January**

Second egg hatched overnight, as evidenced by a newly hatched eggshell. We could hear a chick squawking.

**20 January**

A chick could still be heard, but less vigorously. A bit later the female could be seen eating a dead chick. There were no further discernible chick calls (the second chick probably met the same fate).

As the female had moulted her primaries, and would be unable to fly, it was assumed that she would stay inside until she could safely fly.

**15 February**


The female broke out.

Since the female broke out, the same pair has come back regularly, about twice a week, to check the nest box. They tend to come in the morning and then return late in the afternoon.

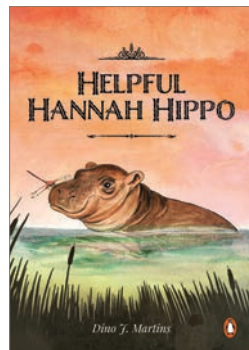
The male Silvery-cheeked Hornbil. *Photo by Ben Allen.*

**What do we need to do to improve our success rate?**

Available figures on wild nesting sites, show that success rates in the wild are between 40% and 65% in any one year. So our two unsuccessful breeding attempts may not be unusual, but perhaps there is more we can do, and I had some thoughts:

- I don't believe that temperature or airflow is an issue, but I am tempted to install a datalogger to monitor the temperature and humidity inside the nest box.
- A second camera on the outside of the box may give us a better record of what the male is doing when he visits the nest box. Once the eggs hatch, the male makes a significant change in the type of food he brings to the female. Less fruit, and more protein— fat grubs, praying mantis, and chameleons are all suddenly on the menu. It would help to get a better view of what he is bringing. 

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Variable Sunbird (white-bellied race) and Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (below). Photos by Mustafa Adamjee

# Birding in the north-east county of Wajir

Mustafa Adamjee

For many years the north-east of Kenya was regarded as too insecure, too far away, and inaccessible. Happily this may be changing — we hear from birders, here and on pg. 19, who ventured to travel to this region to enjoy its special birds.

The dry semi-arid landscape of Wajir County might fool you into thinking it is empty, but if you know where to look it's actually teeming with both birds and wildlife. Birding in Wajir town and the surroundings area will give you many of the typical Somali biome specialties, as well as other dry country birds.

Situated near the airport is the only large water body near the town, a water pan called Lake Yahood. There are *Commiphora* thickets fringing the 'lake', and birding here in the evenings, can yield **Vulturine Guineafowl**, **Chestnut-bellied** and **Black-faced Sandgrouse**, **Black-headed**





Plover (Lapwing), Somali Bee-eater, White-crested Helmetshrike, Taita Fiscal, Hunter's Sunbird, Somali Bunting, Pale Prinia, and Magpie Starling. In the 'lake' itself you can find small numbers of waders during migration, Little Egret, Long-tailed (Reed) Cormorant, and both species of pelicans!

By the late morning hours the heat is quite intense, and it may best to look for birds near rocky outcrops, along dry river banks that have some large trees, or at the few large water pans that can be found alongside the main road, heading north-west to the border town of Moyale (in Marsabit County).

On this road you'll pass areas of short scrub growing on red sands, which are good places to search for **Somali Courser** and **Collared Lark**. Places with thicker scrub, and scattered acacia trees, can yield **Namaqua Dove**, **Eastern Chanting Goshawk**, **Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbill**, **Black-throated Barbet**; **Shining Sunbird**, and the white-bellied race of **Variable Sunbird**; **Somali Crombec**, **Yellow-vented Eremomela**, and **Golden-breasted Starling**. In the open plains you can find **Somali Ostrich**; **Kori**, **Heuglin's**, and **Buff-crested Bustards**.

Stopping at a local roadside restaurant, like in Eldas town can be quite productive, as the food scraps attract birds, like **Somali Crow (Dwarf Raven)**, **Donaldson Smith's Sparrow Weaver**; **Red-billed** and **White-headed Buffalo Weaver**; **Bristle-crowned**, **Superb**, and **Fischer's Starlings**.

## Korondile

Enroute to Moyale, there is a small town called Korondile — it is on the boundary with Marsabit County, and at the foot of a large rocky outcrop. Here you can find **White-backed** and **Rüppell's Vultures**, **Martial Eagle**, **Red-and-yellow Barbet**, **African Orange-bellied (Red-bellied) Parrot**, **Northern White-crowned Shrike**, **Rock Martin** and **Brown-tailed Rock Chat**.



**Somali Crows (Dwarf Raven) with donkey.** Photo by Mustafa Adamjee

By far the best way to get to Wajir, from Nairobi, is by taking a flight, which takes about 40 minutes. We found that the people were very welcoming, and the town's infrastructure was quite good. You can hire a taxi in Wajir town to get around. It is best to get a local guide who can help in navigating the area, and speaks the local language.

## Habaswein

Likewise, to the south of Wajir, is Habaswein, which is situated near the boundary with Garissa County. The Ewaso Ngiro river flows through this town, and though the river is mostly dry, the large trees along its banks are teeming with birds. They include **Pygmy Batis**, **Red-billed Quelea**; **Golden Palm**, **Lesser Masked**, and **Chestnut Weavers**; **Crimson-rumped Waxbills**, **Steel-blue Whydah**, and all 3 species of mousebirds. f

### Wildlife you can find in Wajir County:

Reticulated giraffe (plenty in number), Gerenuk, Kirk's dikdik, Unstriped ground squirrel, Springhare, Aardvark, Desert warthog, Grant's and Thomson's gazelles.



**Vulturine Guineafowl.** Photo by Mustafa Adamjee



Kiagu hill. Photo by James Bradley

# Birding in eastern Kenya

in the intermediate areas between the central highlands and the eastern lowlands in Embu, Tharaka, and Meru

## James Bradley

The mid-elevations, from 800-1500 m above sea level, that form the eastern periphery of the central highlands and extend into the arid lowlands of eastern Kenya, are not frequently birded or well-known. The habitats here primarily comprise various semi-humid to humid woodland formations, that host an avian assemblage with a distinctly coastal flavour. Here are a few favourite areas that should be scrutinised by any birder with an exploring spirit.

### Njukini Forest (1350-1500 m)

Located just to the north-west of Embu, this forest can be easily reached, but has been neglected by birders for too long. While peppered with older exotic plantations there are still some excellent patches of

remnant indigenous forest, rich in birds. There are the typical species of the higher Mount Kenya forests like **Kenrick's Starling**, while **Grey-olive Greenbul** and **Red-headed Bluebill** favour dense thicket (especially *Lantana*) along streams and rivers. The latter is easily detected by its persistent squeaky "chuk-chuk-chuk" call, which is interspersed with squeaky nasal notes. Historically, **Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike** was collected near here (towards Chuka), and they could still be present in the area.

### Siakago Road (1150-1300 m)

This was long known as a productive area, but it is rarely birded today. A preparatory scan of potentially suitable habitat on Google Earth will increase your odds of finding areas that may have something interesting.





**Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher, Green-capped Eremomela, Red-headed Bluebill and (left) Terrestrial Brownbul.**

*Photos by James Bradley*

Moist woodland areas along this road with an evergreen component and a thick understorey support **Red-capped Robin Chat**, **Yellow-bellied Greenbul**, and **Terrestrial Brownbul** (a good roadside patch for the latter can be found at 0°36'8.60"S, 37°36'6.77"E). Thicket habitat throughout the area can be productive for **Eastern Black-headed Batis**, **Black-bellied Sunbird**, and **Peters's Twinspot**, while the hillsides in the Siakago area could reveal **Purple-crested Turaco** and **Jameson's Firefinch**. A few kilometres to the north of Siakago, some rich streamside habitat supports secretive **Eastern Nicator**, and the occasional noisy flock of **Green-capped Eremomelas**.

### **Kiagu Hill (800-1300 m)**

Located about 60 kms north-northeast of Siakago, this hill (at 0°2'4"S, 37°53'0"E) is virtually unknown ornithologically, but supports well preserved gallery forest and humid hillside woodland. **Grey-olive Greenbul** is common along the river here. **Trumpeter Hornbill**, **Blue-mantled Crested-flycatcher**, **Olive Sunbird**, **Eastern Nicator**, and **Red-capped Robin Chat** can also be found. Be on the lookout for a **Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird** (called Lemon-rumped Tinkerbird in the 2019 *Checklist of the Birds of Kenya*) with a trilling call, that is noticeably distinct from the subspecies *jacksoni* of the central highlands, or *fischeri* of the coastal lowlands.

Much more remains to be discovered here so keep an open mind, and your camera close at hand.

### **The lower Imenti Forest (1150-1400 m)**

North of Kiagu Hill towards the foothills of the Nyambeni range, one can choose to bird the lower reaches of the Imenti Forest. This forest is better known from the vicinity of Meru town at 1600 m, but roadside access to the lower parts is an easy 9-13 km east from Meru, on the routes to both Maua and Mikinduri.

These forests are nourished by shallow groundwater, and their humid character is therefore less susceptible to the seasonal drying effects associated with intermittent rainfall. This important ecological aspect underpins the distribution of **Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher**, which is closely associated with springs in this region. It is readily found in the lower Imenti Forest, but is a high canopy bird — knowledge of the calls and song will greatly assist in locating one.

Also present in the lower Imenti, along the roads to Mikinduri (the south side) and to Maua (north side), are **Peters's Twinspot**, **Red-headed Bluebill**, **Terrestrial Brownbul** (fairly common), **Black-bellied Starling**, and **Bearded Scrub Robin**. If you are lucky you may also come across **Orange-winged Pytilia** where water seeps from the ground, and you may be surprised to find typical highland birds such as **Yellow-whiskered Greenbul** and **Rüppell's Robin Chat**, such is the richness of these woodlands.

These sites and birds are just some of the options and possibilities in this part of central to eastern Kenya. All birders are sure to find something of interest, and there are still hills, river valleys, and springs that have yet to be scrutinised. Reported by others, but birds I have yet to see in this area, are scarcities such as **African Finfoot**, **Golden-tailed Woodpecker**, **Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah**, and **Gambaga** and **Ashy Flycatchers**. In many ways, the region remains a candy box for the intrepid birder. **f**

## Adopting simple innovations in the Mara

Local communities in the Masai Mara are turning to simple and cost-effective solutions to keep livestock safe from predators. This in turn is helping to save vultures.



A predator-proof boma beneficiary and cow with eyespots (on the right). Photos by Rebecca Ikachoi

The Masai Mara is an exciting mix of wildlife, sweeping savannah with scattered trees, spectacular wildebeest migrations, and breathtaking sunrises and sunsets. This glamorous image aside, the Masai Mara ecosystem is also home to people, and their large herds of livestock. When predators prey on cattle it results in a vicious conflict, between people and wildlife.

At the heart of this conflict is the indiscriminate use of poisonous substances by livestock owners, as a means of targeting predators. This has been devastating for scavengers, such as vultures and hyenas, who feed on the poison-laced carcasses.

For over five years, Nature Kenya has worked with and engaged local communities and conservation stakeholders in the Mara, to promote the use of simple innovations to end this crisis.

### Predator-proof bomas

Predator-proof bomas offer livestock improved protection from predation at night. This initiative, supported by the Darwin Initiative and Kipeto Energy Limited, has seen the construction of 25 such bomas.

Otuma Ole Tome of Oloiburt village, a small settlement bordering Olkinyei Conservancy, is a predator-proof boma recipient. Nighttime predation incidents are common

### Fridah Wambui and Rebecca Ikachoi

in his area, and before getting the improved boma, Ole Tome had lost 7 cows, 4 goats, and 32 sheep to predators, in less than 12 months.

“I can now afford to sleep peacefully at night assured that my herd is well protected from predators. This is a miracle,” says Ole Tome.

### Livestock eyespots

Another simple innovation introduced to protect livestock from predators in grazing fields, is *livestock eyespots*. Livestock eyespots are large circular spots painted on cow rumps. These painted spots confuse lions and other big cats into thinking they are staring at a much larger animal, reducing attacks by predators.

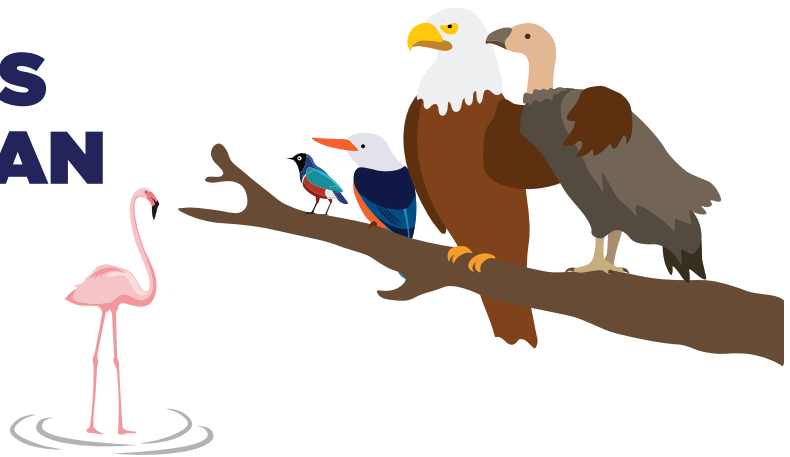
“A lioness once attempted to attack my cows who were out grazing. When it saw the paintings (eyespots) it ran off!

These eyespots seem effective in keeping predators away,” says Kaitet Ole Gilisho, a livestock owner who doubles up as an assistant chief. 





# BEAUTY IS MORE THAN FEATHER DEEP



Eagles, kingfishers, starlings, and flamingos are beautiful birds.  
I'm not that beautiful, but I do prevent the spread of diseases.  
I do clean up the environment.  
Don't you think that's worth your attention?  
We are all worth more alive than dead.

## STAND FOR VULTURES



**THE STATE OF VULTURES** The rapid decline of vultures in Kenya is a serious concern that requires a concerted approach to reverse the trend. Although vultures are caricatured as greedy and selfish, in reality they keep our environment clean by feeding on dead animals. Four out of the eight vulture species found in Kenya (**White-headed, Hooded, White-backed and Rüppell's Vultures**) are now classified as **Critically Endangered**, while two (**Egyptian and Lappet-faced Vultures**) are listed as **Endangered**. Poisoning is the leading cause of vulture deaths in the country.

Vultures feeding on a carcass in Masai Mara (below), and a community warden and a volunteer rescuing a poisoned vulture (on the right). Photos by Munir Virani and Rebecca Ikachoi respectively



# The evolution of participatory forest management in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest

Francis Kagema

For a long time, forest management in Kenya remained a government function effected to the exclusion of communities living next to forests. These communities in turn grew to resent what they saw as forests belonging to the government. They were unsympathetic towards forest conservation, especially in regards to the laws and regulations governing the abstraction of trees and other resources, that did not favour them. This was also the situation at Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, which was first gazetted in 1914.

That was until the 1990s, when a wind of change, towards community involvement in forest management, blew across several countries, from Nepal to Tanzania. In Kenya, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and the villages of Kafitsoni, Dida, and Kahingoni were chosen to pilot what became known as Participatory Forest Management, or PFM. The piloting was generally successful, and led to the development and enactment of the Forest Conservation and Management Act of 2005. This provided for community participation in the



Community members planting trees in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest on World Environment Day. Photo by Francis Kagema

management of their adjacent forests, in partnership with the Kenya Forest Service.

The details of the pilot though scanty, pointed to the potential viability of the participatory approach, and it was therefore expected that Arabuko-Sokoke Forest would be a successful example of PFM. Unfortunately, in 2023, there are better examples of PFM in the country. Why so?

Many reasons contributed to the decline of PFM in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, and here are some of them:

- There are limited extractable wood products in Arabuko-Sokoke, that can be harvested without jeopardising its integrity. Products like timber, poles, firewood, and charcoal, constitute what people perceive as ‘forest benefits’. The concept of ‘ecosystem services’ proved to be an academic ideal, and not practical to most ordinary community members. Many PFM pioneers in Arabuko-Sokoke were disillusioned by the fact that no wood products would be included in the envisaged forest benefits.

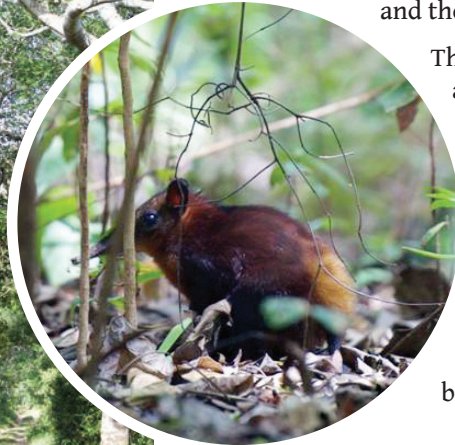




A trail in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and Golden-rumped Sengi (elephant shrew). Photos by Karin Duthie

## Can we say PFM has totally failed in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest?


Kenya Forest Service, local communities and other stakeholders are in the final stages of formalizing the second generation of Participatory Forest Management plans, and agreements. This time around, the community's attitude towards PFM, will be influenced by climate and weather conditions, not just on access to historical forest products, and the results may be better.



The community has a better appreciation for the ability of the forest to sustain the microclimate, mitigate climate change globally, and perhaps suffer less from adverse climate induced events, including heat waves.

Experience will, ultimately, become the best teacher. 🌿

- The understanding of how to increase and measure the benefit of non-timber products was limited. Butterfly farming had just been introduced prior to PFM. Few farmers had embraced it and the income from it was still a trickle. Other non-timber products, like herbal medicines, were less appreciated, even though they had enormous value. The harvesting of wild mushrooms, fruits and berries; basketry, and beekeeping, was only done at a small scale, by a small portion of the community.
- Over 70% of the forest adjacent households fall under the local wellbeing index of poor, or very poor. These are households who cannot afford three meals a day, live in temporary structures, and own no land; many children drop out of school at the primary level. There being no income generating benefit in participating in managing the forest, the effort lost significance.



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A burnt section of Msidunyi forest and Taita Apalis.

Photos by John Mwacharo

# Keeping the precious unique forests of the Taita Hills intact an uphill task

John Mwacharo

For a week or so in late February, fires razed sections of Msidunyi forest, one of the remaining remnants of the Taita Hills forest. Efforts by the near by community to fight the fires yielded a mixture of hope and despair.

“It was a struggle to contain the fires. You put off one fire during the day, but another springs up at night. It was a cat-and-mouse affair,” explained Anthony Mwamodenyi, a Nature Kenya officer based in the Taita Hills.

The fires were started by people clearing their farms and spread to the forest. Some fires were said to be deliberately started by

individuals who believe that the fires will bring rain.

Msidunyi, Vuria, and Ngangao are small forest fragments of the Taita Hills, that are home to many endemic animals and plants. They were all seriously threatened by forest fires, and encroachment. At Vuria, the number of cattle brought into the forest to graze increased.

Likewise, at Ngangao, encroachment took a toll. “We witnessed many people going into the forest to look for alternative fodder plants for their animals. *Dracaena* plants are the most sought after,” says Nathaniel Mkombola, a member of the

Dawida Biodiversity Conservation Community-based Organisation.

“Cabanis’s Greenbuls prefer nesting in *Dracaena* plants. If the harvesting of this plant had continued unabated, we may have lost their breeding sites. Forest disturbances also pose a threat to other critical species, like the endemic **Taita Thrush**,” he says.

With the onset of rains in April, forest fires raze no more. Burnt forest sections sprung back to life with fresh vegetation and communities engaged in restoration. For now, the rains appear to have eased pressure on the forests. **f**



# From hunters to protectors: the Waata of Dakatcha Woodland

A little-known indigenous community is championing the preservation of one of Kenya's precious coastal forests

## Edwin Utumbi

**T**he Dakatcha Woodland on Kenya's north coast is home to the Waata, a small ethnic group who are indigenous to the area. A previously hunter-gatherer people, the Waata have been in Dakatcha long enough to witness its transformation from a once dense wildlife-rich forest to its current degraded state.

Years back, big game hunters sought the Waata for their exceptional wildlife tracking and hunting abilities. Abadiba Guyo Kiribai was one such skilled tracker. "In my heydays, I was a well-known 'sharpshooter' responsible for killing many wild animals," recalls Kiribai. Happily, this community elder now dedicates his time and effort to championing the protection of the forest.

Kiribai and fellow Waata in the community have donated 3,000 acres of their ancestral forestland in Dakatcha to establish the Kasikini Community Conservancy.

"Part of the land set aside by my community for conservation belonged to my family. This gives me great joy," says Kiribai.

To further enhance conservation efforts in the area, the Waata people have established the Kasikini Community Conservancy Self-help Group, that has 100 members. The group intends to spearhead the preservation of the Waata rich cultural heritage. To achieve this, they plan to collect,


document and share indigenous knowledge of trees, including medicinal trees, that grow abundantly in Dakatcha.

"Dakatcha has a lot of trees that give us traditional medicines. We need to conserve this forest to continue getting our medicines," says Kiribai.

Mary Habona, a primary school teacher, and the Waata Community Conservation Group chairperson, reveals that the Waata community also plan to register a conservancy association to manage the conservation area.

"We have held village meetings and other public forums to inform as many community members as

possible, about the conservancy association, and how it will help. We have also invited officers from the Kenya Wildlife Service to assess the proposed conservancy site," says Habona.

Dakatcha Woodland is home to many unique birds and mammals. These include the globally threatened **Fischer's Turaco**, **Sokoke Scops Owl**, **Kilifi (Clarke's) Weaver**, **Sokoke Pipit**, and a mammal, the Golden-rumped elephant shrew (Golden-rumped sengi). 

Nature Kenya is working closely with the Waata community to conserve the forest.



A Kasikini Community Conservancy management meeting.  
Photo by Edwin Utumbi



Sand dunes at Shekiko beach and Water Thick-knee.  
Photo by John Mwacharo and Peter Usher respectively



# TANA RIVER DELTA'S tourism promise

**Emily Mateche**

On our far-flung northern coastline, the Tana River, Kenya's longest river, empties its waters into the Indian Ocean. The area between its old mouth in the south, and its current estuary near Kipini, is known as the Tana River Delta. It is a vast mosaic of habitats – palm forests, acacia woodland, riverine forests, grasslands, floodplains, seasonal and permanent lakes and ponds, pristine beaches, seagrass beds, and the great river itself, lined with mangroves. Where land and water meet, there are large congregations of birds.

The intrepid traveler can reach the Delta in an hour or so from Malindi, or via a more challenging route from Garissa. Visitors can stay at the Tana Village in Minjila, the TARDA guest house in Gamba, or in nearby Garsen. Boat rides are the highlights of a Tana

Delta visit, and can be arranged by the Nature Kenya Tana Delta office ([tanadelta@naturekenya.org](mailto:tanadelta@naturekenya.org) or phone +254 (0)724-031117), or directly with the Lower Tana Conservancy Manager, Mwanamisi, on +254 (0)712-667665.

A boat ride downriver from Darga Galge village (near the Lower Tana Conservancy Camp offices in Chara location) to Shekiko beach, takes you by mangrove-lined river banks, where **Little Egrets** and, during the Northern winter, **Whimbrels**, **Common** and **Terek Sandpipers**, and **Grey** and **Common Ringed Plovers** forage in the mud, close to basking hippos. **African Fish Eagles** and **Pied Kingfishers** are hard to miss.



Stretching alongside Shekiko beach are giant sand dunes that overlook the river. At low tide, thousands of **Lesser Crested Terns** and other terns may roost on the beach. You may also find the flat shells of Sand Dollars, a type of sea urchin, left by the sea.

The Tana River Delta is rich in rare and endangered plants and animals. All the nine species of mangroves found in Kenya occur in the Tana Delta, including *Heritiera littoralis* near the current river mouth at Kipini. Large congregations of waterbirds, including pelicans, storks, herons, egrets, plovers, **Water Thick-knees**, and pratincoles gather along the river banks or in the many lakes, seasonal ponds and swamps.

The endangered Tana River mangabey and Tana River red colobus monkeys can be found in some of the remnant riverine forests in the Delta.

To help conserve this heritage, Nature Kenya supported the establishment of an Indigenous and Community Conserved Area, referred to as an ICCA, comprising many community conservancies and ranches, spread over 116,867 ha in the Delta. The conservancy approach is promoted by Nature Kenya as a sustainable land management method that blends traditional practices like pastoralism with wildlife conservation needs.

The Tana River Delta Community Wildlife Conservancies Association was formed to manage the ICCA. Members of the Association have been trained, by Nature Kenya, on governance, bird identification, and tour guiding. In October 2021, they were assisted to visit and learn from successful community tourism undertakings in Samburu County, in north-central Kenya.

Despite having so much to offer, the tourism potential of the Tana River Delta remains largely unexploited. At the moment there is some insecurity in the Delta, especially



Above is one of the boats used for commuting, patrolling and tours at Darga Galge.  
Photo by John Mwacharo



**Collared Pratincole.** Photo by Peter Usher

the northern part, which we hope will soon be resolved, revealing the vast possibilities. By encouraging eco-tourism as a livelihood activity, it is hoped the income from tourism will help protect this Key Biodiversity Area, while improving community livelihoods.

Efforts to position the Tana River Delta as a key destination in Kenya, and attract investment to develop sustainable agriculture and industries, are ongoing under the Tana River Green Heart project. It is an initiative of the Tana River County government, in collaboration with Nature Kenya and other partners. (Go to pg. 8 to read about the Green Heart project). 



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# Myths & Beliefs that benefitted nature conservation

James Mutunga

Could indigenous beliefs hold the key to preventing biodiversity loss in the present day, as they did in the past?



Mutitu Hills. Photo by James Mutunga

High in the skies above the dry upland forests of Mutitu Hills, in Kitui County, soars a **Martial Eagle**. Revered for its sharp vision, strength and agility, this eagle is among several raptors that are ‘untouchable’ to the local Kamba communities, as by their *kithio* (set of traditional beliefs).

“It is taboo to hunt or kill eagles and owls here in Mutitu. Killing any of these birds brings calamities. When you eat meat from a Martial Eagle, you will die of thirst,” explains Mutiko Kanyala, a local of Mutitu Ndooa village.

Raptors aside, other common birds like the **Red-and-yellow Barbet** are also beneficiaries of *kithio*. Accordingly, looking into a barbet’s tunnel nest is highly discouraged.

“If the bird flies out of its nest and accidentally hits you, you will develop a wound that does not heal. Whether this is true or not, it deters people from disturbing the barbets’ nesting areas,” says Kanyala.

Furthermore Kanyala adds, according to Kamba belief birds also have specific roles. For instance, the calls of **Cardinal** and **Nubian Woodpeckers** are associated with the onset of the rainy season, and the spotting of a **White-browed Coucal** indicates the presence of water.

## Beyond birds

The Kambas at Mutitu Hills have also held its forest in high esteem, and the dry upland forest has partially been kept intact by *kithio*.

“We have *mathembo* (traditional shrines) in the forest. *Mathembo* are sacred places. No one is allowed to cut trees or disturb the vegetation there,” adds Kanyala.

Indigenous knowledge, built from a historical continuity of resource-use practices, has helped conserve and protect nature in Mutitu. The basic ecosystem goods and services that the Kamba community depended on, like water, wild fruits, meat, honey, medicines, and pasture, were closely linked to the health of the hills’ forests. A strict code was used to select elders to oversee adherence to the rules governing forest protection and use.

The rules included warnings against using anything metallic or unnatural to fetch water from the springs. People were only allowed to use *nzele* (calabashes) and *kikuu* (gourds) to fetch and carry water from water sources.

“If anyone broke this law, the spring would dry up immediately. To restore the water supply, community elders summoned the perpetrator to bring a goat offering for a special cultural ritual at the site. The offering was to appease the water ‘owners’ to allow it to run again,” says Kanyala.

## About Mutitu Hills Forests

Mutitu Hills, Kitui County, comprise both scrublands and wooded bushlands on the lowlands, and dry forests on the hilltops. These forests are designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) and Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). Over 100 bird species have been recorded in these forests, including the Kenyan endemic **Hinde’s Babbler**, locally known as *Ikethea*. The hills are an attractive birding and hiking destination in Kitui.

Also, quarrelling or fighting near a spring or water source, it was believed, also resulted in its drying up, and was therefore prohibited. Offenders were equally required to part with goat offerings. These strict rules ensured the preservation of water sources, and their surroundings.

## Losing knowledge

Sadly, indigenous knowledge is on the verge of extinction. In Mutitu, only a few traditional Kamba practices that can be linked to biodiversity conservation are nowadays observed.

“Today, people selectively observe *kithio*. We are losing our Kamba indigenous knowledge and beliefs, many of which promoted conservation. There is an urgent need to document this knowledge before it’s gone forever,” notes Kanyala.

Red-and-yellow Barbet Photo by Lorenzo Barelli





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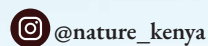
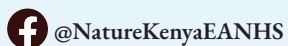
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Northern Carmine Bee-eater. Photo by Lorenzo Barelli