NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 14th MARCH 2019

Nigel Hunter and myself met up with Fleur Ng’Weno and David Fox, an ex-resident who had been helping with the Crowned Crane survey throughout Kenya. The rendezvous was in the Park Entry Office, and Fleur and David were already in a queue which dwindled rapidly and we were soon entering the Park.

With no rain since the previous visit things were very quiet, with scarcely a sound from the scrub or forest as we entered. Ivory Burning Site was too tranquil and so we tried to continue to Nagalomon Dam. However the road was entirely blocked by traffic as some forty vehicles jostled for position to view Lion cubs playing on the road sign. So with Nagalomon Dam not accessible we went straight for Hyena Dam. The drying edges continue to attract wading birds, the Goliath Heron was not to be seen but numerous Black-headed and a few Grey Herons were joined by a couple of Yellow-billed Storks, a few Marabous, three African Spoonbills, single Great and Yellow-billed Egrets, and in the wader line five Long-toed Plovers with the usual Blacksmith, Spur-winged and Three-banded, a dozen Black-winged Stilts, three Common Snipe, two Green, twenty Wood and three Common Sandpipers and single Little Stint and Ruff. Whilst we were there the Greater Spotted Eagle flew in and dropped down into a sedge bed behind the dam, so it had still not departed in spite of not being seen on the last visit. The first of well over ten Black-winged Kites appeared, and first of three Augur Buzzards, and a stunning male Pallid Harrier was also hunting in the area whilst a Great Sparrowhawk flew past. The first of ten Whinchats appeared and a flava Yellow Wagtail was feeding along the edge. We circled along the back road to Ivory Burning Site but it was none too productive, there were single Common Swift and House Martin and the first of three Turkestan Shrikes.

At Nagalomon Dam there was a Nightingale on the Causeway but no other migrants in the bushes, the Goliath Heron was on the spit with a couple of Yellow-billed Storks, six African Spoonbills which might nest soon, and a Great Egret. Eight Darters were on the island and a few coming in had beak-fulls of nesting material. A Fish Eagle perched on the island and a female-plumaged Western Marsh Harrier sat not far away. A species not seen in a while was a Bateleur cruising past over the forest. Now retracing back to drive along the Mokoyeti we had a flock of twenty Parasitic Weavers and another Yellow-billed Egret on the ox-bow but not much else. So we looped back past Nagalomon on the way to Kingfisher finding a Common Buzzard. The picnic site was fairly quiet but a few regular features showed up and we continued on to Ololo.

A pale Booted Eagle appeared and disappeared into a valley, they have been extraordinarily sparse this season, and a Secretarybird was on parade striding over the plains. By the Mbagathi there was a Fish Eagle, an obliging Brown Parisoma, the days only Spotted Flycatcher and two African Firefinches. At the quarry was the days only Isabelline Wheatear, and at the Mokoyeti crossing a handsome Mountain Wagtail was feeding on the rocks and a Lesser Honeyguide in the fig. Further along the Mbagathi was the days only Tawny Eagle, and the woodland above Hippo Pools provided us with the seasons first Upcher’s Warbler which was low down in an Acacia mellifera waving its tail gracefully in all directions. The usual Speckle-fronted Weavers were also on site.

Rhino Circuit was quiet, but we did find Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Red-throated Tits, a couple of Willow Warblers, and a few Lesser Masked Weavers. The Pipeline produced only two Northern Wheatears, so off to Athi Dam. The falling water level has left a wide margin, but was not as bountiful with birds as hoped for. Some twenty Yellow-billed Storks were here, but only fifteen White Storks, about four-hundred Marabous, a flock of fourteen African Spoonbills, five Black-crowned Night-Herons at their roost, the only two Crowned Cranes of the day, a Ruppell’s Vulture came in to drink, and several Spotted Thick-knees lurked under the bushes. Waders on the shoreline included ten Black-winged Stilts, three Common Ringed Plover, a Common Snipe, five Greenshank, one Green, fifteen Wood and five Common Sandpipers, ten Little Stint, and a Ruff. Resident waders were the usual Spur-winged, Blacksmith and Three-banded Plovers but no sign of Kittlitz’s today. On the Causeway were the only Eastern Olivaceous Warbler today, Banded Parisoma and three Crimson-rumped Waxbills.

Crossing the plains there was a male Kori Bustard, several Banded Martins, a pair of Little Grebes at Karen Primary School Dam, whilst Eland Hollow Dam offered up another Yellow-billed Egret, a male Ashy-headed Wagtail and Quailfinch coming in to drink. Nothing new had come in to Hyena or Nagalomon Dams, but along the Mokoyeti were several Eurasian Bee-eaters.

We exited Main Gate at 5.15pm having recorded 181 species. Barn Swallows were in small numbers but Lesser Striped Swallows were virtually throughout.

Mammals were widespread with the majority and greatest variety being in Athi Basin..

Best for now

Brian

NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 24th MARCH 2019

Dear All,

I met up with Pete Steward at the bottom of Mukoma Road at 6.05am, and we drove to the Main Gate of Nairobi National Park. When we arrived at the Office for processing the entry, the queues were outside the doors and into the car park. For a change there were three desks open, and we were finished and actually through the entrance before 6.30am. It was still pretty dark.

There had been no rain, and the awful drought and heat continues. The early morning though was pleasantly cool and there was hardly a bird calling apart from pinking and churring of unidentified Sprossergales. The silence was virtually matched at Ivory Burning Site, although there was a slight waking, which included Crested Francolins, and birds were leaving the roost at Nagalomon Dam. Through the gap on the hedge at the bottom all hell was breaking loose, there were cars along the bottom road, along the entrance road and out in the direction of Hyena Dam, the cars had made a large surround of two lions who were in an arena with vehicles on three sides, but sharing this arena were two Buffalos that seemed oblivious of the lions. We left them and have no idea of the outcome! We made for Nagalomon Dam.

As we arrived, birds were still leaving and this included six Black Storks who had probably spent the night here. We watched them flying off down to the south of the Park, later on when we came back to the dam, there was a lone Black Stork dropping in from a height, there were more singles over Kingfisher, Maasai Gate and five roosting in a tree along the Rhino Circuit (see image). We know there were at least six, but it seems likely that more than this were involved. The dam was entertaining with a Yellow-billed Stork, four African Spoonbills, female Little Bittern where seen with young recently, a breeding plumaged Squacco Heron which might suggest a returning Palearctic bird, a Great Egret, two Little Egrets, an adult Purple Heron which arrived whilst we were there, some seven Darters with males returning with much nesting material, the Fish Eagle was on the island but concealed, not on its usually prominent perch, a female type Western Marsh Harrier, an adult African Jacana was the first in NNP for over a year, apart from four Black-winged Stilt the only other Palearctic wader was a Common Snipe. The Causeway usually reliable for a few warblers at this time of year, produced nothing.

Hyena Dam was more interesting with five Yellow-billed Storks, four African Spoonbills, the first of ten Black-winged Kites, fifteen Black-winged Stilts, six Long-toed Plovers, three Common Snipe, three very smart Green, twenty Wood and four Common Sandpipers, eight Little Stint and two Ruff. Around the edge were the first of four Whinchats, and first of three Turkestan Shrikes, and a very dark crowned flava Yellow Wagtail (see image). Nearby we watched a young Gabar Goshawk picking at something small in the grass, which must have been very small insects, which seemed unusual (see image). From here we took the back road back to Ivory Burning Site, but the road was so quiet although the usual commensal species were at the units there was nothing of any note, we did have the first of four Augur Buzzards, and continued along the Mokoyeti to the Ox-bow.

A small collection of birds feeding in a remaining swampy patch consisted of a young Yellow-billed Stork, a Great Egret and up to then, the missing young Goliath Heron. It was good to find that the African Water Rail still holds ground here. There appeared to be no birds of interest on the run-off nor as we crossed the bridge and returned back towards Nagalomon Dam were it not for two Eurasian Rollers (see image).

Along the road at the base of Impala Lookout we stopped at a marsh at the base of the hill where many mainly concealed Parasitic Weavers were making much noise, but not singing. Females and immatures were seen, but there was no sign of any adult males. Also here were a few White-winged Widowbirds in non-breeding plumage, and the only members of that genus seen today. The road along the side of Kingfisher Swamp gave us one of the most interesting observations of the day, where two Eland were feeding on the Opuntia Cactus leaves, and appeared to be enjoying it even though the leaves consumed were still armed with spines. This is evidently a dry season forage, and something I have never witnessed before (see images).

Kingfisher Picnic Site had a few people but was very quiet in the bird line, as it was from here all the way to the Maasai Gate turn-off. We continued to Ololo, picking up another Fish Eagle, Red-faced Cisticola, Marsh Warbler, a Common Nightingale that was probably the same bird as had wintered here, flew across the river to challenge a playback, the days only Spotted Flycatcher, Grey-capped Social-Weaver and Black-faced Waxbill. At the nearby quarry was the first of only two Isabelline Wheatears, and along the road was a Secretarybird and the first of two Pangani Longclaws, and in fact these were the days only Longclaws. At the Mokoyeti causeway the only bird was a cryptic Green Pigeon.

As we passed the Mbagathi we found both Tawny and Martial Eagles, and Abyssinian Scimitarbills with Violet Wood Hoopoes at three different parts of the river. In the woodland above Hippo Pools were a few Speckle-fronted Weavers but little else. Along this section of the Mbagathi there was an immature Lappet-faced Vulture in a spiral of Marabous, and a skulking but singing Common Whitethroat. The Rhino Circuit failed to satisfy but the Pipeline faired better. First looking along the Mbagathi we followed the first of four Northern Wheatears into a low Acacia mellifera, and in the field of view when we looked at it were a dancing Upcher’s Warbler and a Banded Parisoma. A very noisy Eastern Olivaceous Warbler was near here and a pair of Vitelline Masked Weavers with the singing male in full breeding plumage. Now following the Pipeline towards the turn off for Athi Dam we had a few more Northern, just our second Isabelline and the only Pied Wheatear for the day.

Whilst the water-level is dropping fast, Athi Dam was still attractive to birds, with eight Red-billed Teal being the only waterfowl today that weren’t Egyptian Geese, an impressive cluster of thirty-three Yellow-billed Storks probably the largest assemblage of the species seen in NNP, amongst the Marabous were a paltry three White Storks, some ten African Spoonbills were scattered around the edge, at least ten Black-crowned Night-Herons were in their roosting tree, the days only Hamerkop and an adult Pink-backed Pelican, about five Spotted Thick-knees, but a surprise of the Water Thick-knee roosting in the same place as six months ago for several months, which had disappeared for the past two months (see image), and the waders consisted of fifteen Black-winged Stilts, four Common Ringed and three Kittlitz’s Plovers, five Common Greenshank, three Green, a dozen Wood and five Common Sandpipers, and a dozen Little Stints. There were four Willow Warblers feeding in the mellifera flowers and were the only ones seen today, and more Banded Parisoma. The most astounding sight was a solid flock of thirty-four Spur-winged Plovers, with another fifteen on the spit. Nothing like this has been seen before and represents a major incursion of the species (see image). Our final nice bird was a breeding plumaged Red-throated Pipit feeding along the edge (see image).

Climbing out of the basin we found a male Hartlaub’s and a group of three White-bellied Bustard (see images), heard some unseen Quail-finch and had a female lutea Yellow Wagtail with a herd of herbivores. Eland Hollow Dam did not produce anything surprising, a Yellow Wagtail seen briefly in the same spot as the previous visit may have been the same Ashy-headed Wagtail. Time was against us having left Athi Dam after five o’clock, and after a brief look at Hyena Dam we exited through Main Gate.

Barn Swallows were in low numbers, and the whole situation regarding Palearctic migrants was horrifically poor, the only migrant raptor was the one Western Marsh Harrier. We still managed to close the day with 178 species, which was amazing when much of the day seemed to be birdless, the plains being particularly bleak but thankfully we still have action on some of the dams.

Good numbers of mammals in the Athi Basin, though a scattering throughout the Park,

Best to all

Brian

KEY TO MONTAGE

1. RED-THROATED PIPIT (Image Pete Steward)

This bird showing spring colours was at Athi Dam, gone are the days when parties up to forty were not an uncommon sight most of the northern winter but this is hardly surprising when well over a thousand Red-throated Pipits were seized at the Italian border bound for Italian Restaurants.

1. AFRICAN JACANA

A nice adult at Nagalomon Dam was the first recorded in NNP for over a year since the drying out of Hyena, Langata and Eland Hollow Dams sent them packing to find alternative accommodation.

1. GABAR GOSHAWK

This interesting juvenile near Hyena Dam was picking up small things from the ground and swallowing them. Whatever it was it was enjoying it and this behaviour not seen before.

1. YELLOW WAGTAIL

This bird at Hyena Dam looks like a Blue-headed (flava) Wagtail, but the colouration of the head is much darker and bordering on grey. It has the white supercilium of flava, but the throat is whitish and not yellow. This is a male of the form dombrowski which comes from Roumania, a few years ago we had a male spend several months but that until now was the only record from NNP.

1. SPOTTED-FLANKED BARBETS

This pair was at the back of Hyena Dam and definite posers.

1. TURKESTAN SHRIKE

The only migrant shrikes today were three Turkestan; they used to be a common sight with over a dozen or more in a day. Many small-minded, pathetic Arabs who believe they are “macho” to have slaughtered the birds ceaselessly when they are tired and land in their countries to rest and feed, most of this is a sick sport for deranged people with too much throw away income, and they are not for the table to feed starving peasants. The heads of these nations should be ashamed for not taking measures to stop, or at least control this senseless murder.

1. EURASIAN ROLLER

Only two near Nagalomon Dam, but it’s better than none!

1. ELAND

We were riveted by this couple of Eland along the road alongside the dry Kingfisher Swamp, the reason being is that they were plucking leaves of Opuntia cactus and seemed to be relishing them spines and all. It’s good to see something native is deriving a form of sustenance from Opuntia vulgaris.

1. BLACK STORK

We don’t know whether we saw six up to fifteen Black Storks in the Park today. This five at Rhino Circuit could be most of the six that flew off Nagalomon in the morning but maybe not!

1. WATER THICK-KNEE

On 18th October 2018, I found a bird in under exactly the same bush as this one at Athi Dam, during November this became two birds in association, in early December they were absent, and now what it certainly one of these same birds is back again in the SE corner of Athi Dam.

1. HARTLAUB’S BUSTARD

This attractive male was on our way out of Athi Basin.

1. WHITE-BELLIED BUSTARD

These three were not that far past the Hartlaub’s Bustard.

1. WHITE STORK

An abysmal showing of just three White Storks at Athi Dam, and somewhere birds seem to be getting covered in oil like this individual.

1. SPUR-WINGED PLOVER

Up in the NE corner of Athi Dam was an extraordinary congregation of Spur-wings, this is most of a gathering of 33 birds, we were not the only visitors surprised to see so many as there was already a Lion there counting them. On the sandy spit opposite was another fifteen and other individuals scattered in various parts of the Dam putting the total here well past 50 individuals. The largest number ever recorded before has been fifteen. So where have they all come from and why?