NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 16th AUGUST 2019

Dear All,

On Friday 16th August Nigel Hunter and myself arrived at the Main Gate to NNP just before 6.40am, the road from my house was clear of traffic and we had left there just after 6.25am, in the evening leaving through Langata Gate we journeyed back without any hold ups. It wasn’t all plain sailing though, on arrival the top car park was quite full of tourist four-wheel drives and minibuses, the queue for processing was right out the door and the second check-in office was completely shut-up and only one person working the entrance gate. The personnel worked efficiently and we were served twenty minutes after arrival, with another ten minutes to pass through the gate. For the number of people it worked well so if KWS is getting a deserved very bad reputation for wasting visitors valuable game watching time standing in queues then it is not the fault of these ground staff and the blame entirely lies with the incompetency of the administration.

It was dark and cold, as it happens we could have well spent another twenty minutes in the queue on this occasion and not missed anything! Hardly anything called or moved on the drive in, and Ivory Burning Site’s residents continued to have a lie in. Nagalomon Dam was possibly the least interesting as I can recall. It contained a Yellow-billed Stork, Great Egret, about six African Darters, a couple of Black-winged Stilts, but little else worth remarking on. It had got no lighter and if anything colder when we took the back road to Hyena Dam. The nicest observation was a Red-faced Cisticola with a plain-faced juvenile. Hyena Dam had attracted twenty-five Wood Sandpipers, and one each of Common Sandpiper, Little Stint and African Jacana, with four Black-winged Stilts. There was a Barn Swallow with the Plain Martins, and many Palm Swifts, which were a common sight over much of the Park, far more than is normal and the same applied to Red-rumped Swallows.

From here we took the circuit along the Mokoyeti finding the first of at least 25 Black-winged Kites which had increased in numbers during the past weeks. There must have been an explosion in the rodent population. (See image with rodent prey). Another remarkable increase came from Long-crested Eagle, there was one on this circuit at the lower Mokoyeti bridge, then one below Impala Lookout, one flew in as we birded the Kingfisher Swamp, it may have been this bird that appeared at Kingfisher Picnic Site, but it was not the same as one near the old burnt area, or another that was on the Maasai Gate junction, or the ones on the Ololo Road, another joining back with the main road, one near Hippo Pools and the last on the dry oxbow along the Mbagathi! Even with possible duplication which seems unlikely for such a sedentary raptor, most of which didn’t budge as we passed…. it means there are many individuals in the Park.

Back on the Mokoyeti circuit we also had immature Gabar Goshawk on both sides of the river, had large numbers of Red-billed Quelea (and elsewhere), White-winged Widowbirds, Orange-breasted Waxbills and Quailfinch seemed down on last week but Common Waxbills had increased.

Now heading to the Kingfisher area we picked up the African Water Rails and Highland Rush Warbler at the swamp and a few common things at the Picnic Site including Martial Eagle and ten Wattled Starlings. We departed there with just over the hundred species so had allowed ourselves our breakfast tea and toasties! There was not much until we arrived at Ololo, birds were very active and noisy here, and in the riparian woodland we found another Red-faced Cisticola, Brown Parisoma, and three Crimson-rumped Waxbills amongst the commoner species, with the first of just two Secretarybirds (see image), and a few Speckle-fronted Weavers on the entry road.

Back on the main road was the days only Tawny Eagle, an adult Green Sandpiper at the creek before the painful climb up to the woodland above Hippo Pools, where there were African Hoopoe, more Speckle-fronted Weavers and a pair of Black-faced Waxbills (see image).

Rhino Circuit was very quiet but did surrender two Violet Wood-Hoopoes. Towards Cheetah Gate we found a Black-chested Snake-Eagle, both Red-and-Yellow and d’Arnaud’s Barbets, Banded Parisoma, over thirty very variable Chestnut Sparrows in the throes of changing from breeding to non-breeding plumage, (see image), with a non-breeding male Chestnut Weaver in their midst.

Athi Dam was not very productive, apart from 150 Marabous were two Yellow-billed and three Open-billed Storks, five African Spoonbills, three roosting Black-crowned Night-Herons, the only thick-knee was one Spotted, four Black-winged Stilts, four adult White Pelicans with two very young immatures, two changing adult Common Greenshank (see image), five Wood and three Common Sandpipers, three Little Stints all changing adults, and an adult moulting Curlew Sandpiper (see image). Along the Causeway was a handsome pair of Crested Francolins (see image), and three Namaqua Doves.

Now starting the return, a pair of obliging Grey Hornbills were above Athi Basin, (see image), the Vulture Drinking Pools didn’t have a single vulture, just Marabous and a Little Stint, crossing the grasslands we had several parent pairs of Banded Martins and single White-tailed Lark, Pangani and Rosy-breasted Longclaws. The small dam at the Empakasi Junction had the days only Yellow-billed Egret, whilst nil returns were had at both Karen PS Dam and Eland Hollow Dam, but on leaving the latter a lump on a very distant small bush turned out to be a Lappet-faced Vulture (see image). Nothing new was on Hyena or Nagalomon Dams, but the adjacent plains did have the first Augur Buzzard for the day. Finally the forest gave up a few more species with our seventh barbet for the day in Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird making it a clean sweep, Yellow-whiskered and Cabanis’ Greenbuls, Hartlaub’s Turaco etc. and a second Augur Buzzard on the Vlei near Langata Gate.

We were through the gate at 5.00pm having recorded a respectable 181 species, with many common species not appearing as usual. Mammals were plentiful with largest concentrations in the Athi Basin; lions kept a very low profile and the quaintest sighting was a female White Rhino with an extremely young calf casually walking down the tarmac, (see image). In spite of the gloom with blue sky appearing for the first time at 4.30pm and the cold it was still an interesting day, especially in the population number changes.

Best to all

Brian

KEY TO MONTAGE

1. CHESTNUT SPARROW

This male was part of a flock of over thirty towards Cheetah Gate. It is a male moulting into non-breeding plumage so that no two males in this process look alike.

1. NORTHERN PIED BABBLERS

So very common all over the Park, some groups get to over twenty birds.

1. BLACK-FACED WAXBILL

Widespread but not common over all of the southern and especially the south-eastern portion of the Park. Today only the pair seen at the woodland above Hippo Pools.

1. BLACK-WINGED KITE

There must be a major rodent population increase, over twenty-five were seen today and they are all over the Park apart from the forest.

1. BLACK-WINGED KITE PREY

This bird has just caught a rodent, which is currently unidentified but has large very rounded ears.

1. SECRETARYBIRD

Only two encountered today.

1. GREAT WHITE PELICANS

These four adult birds are travelling with two very young birds. The adults even dwarf the Marabous. The juveniles are likely recently fledged from Lake Elementeita the only site in Kenya, yet they appear to be half the size of the accompanying adults and too young to fly which is obviously not the case.

1. WHITE RHINOCEROSES

A mother and very recently born offspring walking casually down the tarmac!

1. CRESTED FRANCOLIN

One of a pair on the Athi Dam Causeway.

1. GREY-HEADED KINGFISHER

This was not in NNP, but in our paddock the following morning. It first appeared eleven days ago and now is back today (17th). It appears that this might be the first photographic evidence that the race semicaerulea which is an endemic breeder to southern Arabia, south Oman and the Yemen has occurred in Africa. This has triggered some research, as it might be a regular visitor as far south as South Africa but in all this time has been overlooked. For five months of the year the birds completely vanish from their middle-eastern breeding grounds where they are fairly common and no one knows where they go!

1. CURLEW SANDPIPER

The first returning bird for the season at Athi Dam, an adult well into moulting its red breeding plumage, but traces remain.

1. LAPPET-FACED VULTURE

This bird was a speck on the horizon not far from Eland Hollow Dam.

1. COMMON GREENSHANK

Two birds were at Athi Dam, both moulting adults.

1. GREY HORNBILL

There hasn’t been a Grey Hornbill for several visits now; this was a part of a pair above Athi Basin.

14a GREY HORNBILL BILL

A study of the bill shows a remarkable structure. Not only the space between upper and lower beak, known as the intermandibular gap, which is shared by very few birds in unrelated families. But it also shows the serrations on both mandibles for a good grasp, like teeth.