NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 27th OCTOBER 2018

Dear All,

On Saturday 27th October Nigel Hunter and myself met up with Fleur Ng’Weno at Main Gate to Nairobi National Park. Being a weekend it was quite busy, but with three desks open we only queued for twenty minutes before we got in at 7.00am. In the meantime we had had the first of four Willow Warblers. We first visited the KWS Mess, there had been a little rain and the road was damp, but nothing to impede progress throughout the Park at present. There were a few birds which included a singing Blackcap that would not show itself. On the way to Ivory Burning Site three Sulphur-breasted Bush-Shrikes were cavorting and displaying, we seemed to run into the species in all corners today, they were far more conspicuous than usual though it does not necessarily mean that there were actually more in the Park than usual. On arrival there was a major event planned for here today, and incredibly enormous marquees were being erected. The entire area had been taken over by CNN and Richard Quest to celebrate the arrival of the first Kenya Airways direct flight from New York, but another male Blackcap posed on top of a low shrub for a long while. It was a really gloomy and dark overcast day with sprinkling on and off throughout the day but nothing you would call rain. The sun made a brave but short appearance about two in the afternoon. A flock of thirty Violet-backed Starlings flew over but showed no signs of stopping. An African Moustached Warbler was singing, they were singing from every corner of the Park today (see image).

After a bird less detour around the Ivory Burning Arena, we had a look at Nagalomon Dam, nothing off the bridge, but White-rumped Swifts were back prospecting, and in fact were noticeable all through the area today. A Yellow-billed Stork sat in a tree by the causeway, and the dam really had little to offer. Yet another event was taking place on the far NW shoreline! We only saw two Black-crowned Night-Herons but one was nest building in Typha by the road, the days only Great Egret was here, and the pair of adult Fish Eagles was surveying the comings and goings. Eleven Black-winged Stilts, one Common and three Green Sandpipers were the only migrants present. Finally the first few of a surprising number of encounters with Blue-naped Mousebirds in the northern part of the Park.

It was quiet along the back road to Hyena Dam, but there were a couple of Garden Warblers and a Common Whitethroat keeping to cover. Two Common Swifts appeared briefly and the sub-adult Martial Eagle was perched near its nest. With the feeding birds at the feeders on the units, was a single Red-billed Quelea, but there would be many more in the eastern portion of the Park, but all in non-breeding plumage. There was a Common Sandpiper on the swampy area but nothing else. Hyena Dam was very sad, the only migrant waders being a few Black-winged Stilts and a single Little Stint, but Long-toed Plovers have built back up to eight along the causeway, the only other birds of any note were a Squacco Heron, and a delightful changing Rosy-breasted Longclaw, we would see five more today including fully breeding adults, (see image).

From here we left for the drive along the Mokoyeti, the days only Wattled Starling perched on a Balanites, the African Water Rail was in its usual place, the seasons first Black Stork, a juvenile flushed from a damp area, the first of just two Augur Buzzards appeared, but Barn Swallows had certainly arrived and were abundant in the grasslands with many perched on vegetation. Certainly thousands were probably in the Park today, and a scattering of Banded Martins (see image). The large number of Parasitic Weavers were scattered in parties and perched on the tops of the vegetation, but not concentrated like the flock of over two hundred on the last visit (see images). There were also other seed eating species which included a few out-of-plumaged Jackson’s and White-winged Widowbirds. Karen Primary School Dam had very little water but the Little Grebe is still not going to leave, Eland Hollow Dam still had its solitary adult White-faced Whistling Duck caring for its numerous ducklings, but now joined by a Spur-winged Goose. Five Spotted Thick-knees were very busy and noisy on an adjacent rocky area, but one Wood Sandpiper was the only migrant wader. Two Yellow Wagtails flushed off the road and were not stopping. Crossing across to East Gate road there was an Isabelline Wheatear (see image), and many more White-winged Widowbirds with a few out of plumage Yellow-crowned Bishops. We checked out the Tree Nursery but it had lost its dry time refuge status as it was damp everywhere, however the good news is that it is not going to be destroyed by the proposed container depot road. There were a pair of Pangani Longclaws nest building at the base of a Whistling Acacia, seven birds would be seen today (see image), and many groups of Quail-Finch were being flushed.

Heading towards the SGR we could see a huge pall of black smoke towering into the sky, maybe the people of Kitengela and Twala who six months ago were literally thrown off their rightfully owned land, losing everything and now homeless and destitute with none of the promised compensation being paid to them by the Government and the Chinese, have now taken things into their own hands to show the world how these innocent people who have lost everything are being treated by an apparently non-caring administration. The world must be aware of this travesty. But then again maybe it’s just a fire behind the railway, (see image). A Wheatear flew down the road and was not seen again, but was probably a Northern.

Continuing through the grassland with the numerous swallows there was a party of three White-bellied Bustards, and at the small nearly dry dam near the Empakasi junction was another Spotted Thick-knee and a singing Parasitic Weaver. We met with our first Rattling Cisticolas for the day, this is probably the first time Rattling Cisticola is mentioned in a report, but the reason for this occasion is that it was our tenth and final Cisticola species! The Red-billed Oxpecker with the unusual habit of resting on a cairn was here again, (see image). As it was overcast and cold, vultures were not getting thirsty and not coming in to the drinking ponds of which only little water remained anyway. But there was a large Aquila eagle sitting on the mound. The remarkable thing apart from its very stout bill was a completely whitish crown, and its bulk. We mentally went through all the possibilities and ruled out Tawny, Steppe, Imperial and the two Spotteds which only left Verreaux’s. It just goes to show how you can still be surprised with a new plumage, just like last visits immature African Cuckoo. This was my first time to ever study an immature Verreaux’s Eagle and here it was sitting in a grassy plain! When it took flight the pure white spot on the middle of the back was prominent, and the primaries were showing the pale interiors that would become white as an adult. The underparts were dark but remarkably pale blotched, (see images).

This species is such an extremely rare visitor to the Park now, but to see it perched in open plains is completely out of context.

As always high hopes were held for Athi Dam but it was thoroughly disappointing, there was a pair of Ostrich with fresh chicks on the way down, five Yellow-billed but just one Marabou Stork, the days only African Spoonbill, four roosting Black-crowned Night-Herons, a few Black-winged Stilts, one Marsh, two Green, three Wood and two Common Sandpipers, two Common Greenshank and eight Little Stints, and Banded Parisomas in their usual patch of mellifera. The Pipeline failed to produce, and a quick drive up towards Cheetah Gate (the barrier has been removed) gave us Speckle-fronted Weavers and Black-faced Waxbills but no hoped for rollers and shrikes. Rhino Circuit also very quiet, there was a perched sub-adult Black-chested Snake-Eagle, but roadside birding towards Hippo Pools was far more entertaining with Grey-headed Kingfishers, Red-throated Tits, the days only Spotted Flycatcher, Lesser Masked Weaver and the prize was a female-plumaged Red-headed Weaver (see images). This is only the third ever for NNP, the others were adult males in different years and both in the Main Gate car park. The Nairobi region seems to be a hole in the species range, it’s even just a rare visitor to Magadi Road and few other records exist.

It was now getting late and we made our way back, there was a group of Impala along the Mbagathi with three Yellow-billed Oxpeckers on them. I am not sure I have seen them on Impala before (see image). As Fleur said she does not ever remembering seeing such good views of either Oxpecker before, as both individuals were for once stationary and not dancing around animals playing hide and seek. There were two Northern Wheatears near Kingfisher, a Gabar Goshawk at the nearby swamp, three Crowned Cranes (the only birds today) below Impala Lookout and two Long-tailed Cormorants on Nagalomon Dam. As we were on the last leg up to Main Gate there were ten Violet-backed Starlings in the Crotons, and we were out at 5.30pm.

It was a mixed bag today, Eurasian Bee-eaters were heard a few times, the dams were all disappointing, but the grasslands were very active. We did not have time to visit the forest, but left the Park having recorded a healthy 186 species.

Mammals were in good numbers, but Zebra have appeared to have left the area again, three White Rhinos near Kingfisher were the only rhinos seen and we did not encounter any carnivores.

Best to all

Brian

KEY TO MONTAGE

1. AFRICAN MOUSTACHED WARBLER

Widespread and noisy over much of NNP today.

1. ROSY-BREASTED LONGCLAW

This bird just coming into breeding plumage at Hyena Dam, other birds encountered included full breeding dress.

3A PARASITIC WEAVER

Of many seen today, there was an amazing variation in plumages; this is a male coming into breeding plumage.

3B PARASITIC WEAVER

The immature birds are very like non-breeding widowbirds and features such as the lines across face and crown and the heavy bill are features to look for, but the dry chipping call given in flight is distinctive once recognised.

4 RED-HEADED WEAVER

A real surprise in a feeding flock along the Mbagathi River was this female, only the third for NNP and the first non-adult male.

5 ISABELLINE WHEATEAR

Just one bird, migrants are very late arriving this year, or of course Arabs and Southern Europeans have slaughtered them all.

6 BANDED MARTIN

Small numbers fed out over the plains, hopefully there will be some attempt at breeding this season.

7 RED-BILLED OXPECKER

The regular and tame individual sitting on its favourite cairn at the Empakasi Junction.

8 YELLOW-BILLED OXPECKER

One of three on a small group of Impala, which are not usually used by this species.

9 PANGANI LONGCLAW

Seen on multiple times today and quite noisy, with a pair nest building near East Gate.

10 SMOKE PALL OVER SGR

11 VERREAUX’S EAGLE

This immature was an interesting discovery at the Vulture Drinking Pools above Athi Basin. Note this individual does not possess a pale rump.