NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 7th JUNE 2019

Dear All.

On 7th June, Nigel Hunter and myself arrived at the Main Entrance to NNP at 6.35am, it was a Friday and so there were no long queues to check-in, in fact no queues at all just two check in desks and only us to attend to. We were in in minutes.

In the past few days there had been some good rain and we were a little wary, but by being careful we did not get stuck anywhere.

It was a grey and gloomy start, the drive in was amazingly quiet were it not for the booming on an adult Verreaux’s Eagle Owl and the screams of it’s offspring, an African Goshawk also added it’s voice to the comparatively avian silence. We slowly proceeded to Ivory Burning Site, also very quiet, the lower plains were grey and gloomy, but beyond this the sun was shining on Lukenya making it stand out, as did the Cement Factory to the right, and what was that further away to the right of the Cement Factory, Kilimanjaro!

Nothing much was stirring in the cold grey post dawn, so we went off to Nagalomon Dam. Here we found four immature Yellow-billed Storks, a few African Spoonbills but none on nests, one Black-crowned Night-Heron flew over surprisingly high, along the edge was a Little Egret, some ten Darters were on the island with their noisy young, there were many Long-tailed Cormorants but only one incubating, Sacred Ibis crowned their new tree further along the edge of the Dam, in a distant tree was a noisy adult Fish Eagle, the adult African Jacana still held on, and a Zanzibar Greenbul called from the scrub.

We attempted the back route to Hyena Dam, the road was in good state until the valley below the units, and we thought it too risky to enter Hyena Dam from the back, and retraced back to Ivory Burning Site having found the first African Pygmy Kingfisher in a while, also the first of three Augur Buzzards amongst the usual.

Taking the main road to Hyena Dam there was a couple of Parasitic Weavers in the grasslands, but the dam was open and bleak. The Long-toed Plovers were not to be seen, but it also looks as if another fairly long-term temporary resident had also left, being the young Goliath Heron. There was a compact group of ten Yellow-billed Egrets, and a tight bunch of four Red-knobbed Coots (see images) at the back of the dam was a pair and a single Crowned Crane, The Mokoyeti ox-bow only produced a Great Egret, on the Mokoyeti Bridge was the most impressive display of Gloriosa lilies I have ever seen (see image), whilst in the grass on the road back to Nagalomon on the west side of the Mokoyeti was the seasons first Cardinal Quelea in full breeding colours and a Namaqua Dove was the first in a while.

At the junction towards Kingfisher there was an immature Lanner uncharacteristically sitting on top of some dead branches, whilst a Reichenow’s Seedeater sat right next to it. This was not a typical young Lanner as it showed head pattern at least partly suggesting a young Barbary Falcon (see images and discussion). Kingfisher Swamp was disappointing even though it looked in fine condition for marsh birds. A few Yellow-crowned Bishops were seen, but this species was met with in several other localities today. Kingfisher Picnic Site was much more entertaining, mainly because of the fearless handout-seekers. Superb Starlings were almost on my feet whilst Red-cheeked Cordon-bleus were almost under them. Joining these expectantly were Bulbuls, Purple Grenadiers, Red-billed Firefinches, Kenya Rufous Sparrows, and Holub’s Golden Weavers. It was quite a show, in the trees were the usual resident Lesser Honeyguide, Brown Parisomas and Red-throated Tits, and of course the Striped Kingfishers which give the place its name… amongst others that added to the days total and at this point we had attained 130 species which seemed very good for a time when there were no migrants to boost the list (we had surpassed 100 on leaving Hyena Dam). On the drive past the old burnt area there were our first Hildebrandt’s Starlings for the day, and seen on a further number of occasions along the southern road. There have been days when the species has not been recorded, so it appeared that birds were returning, but the rarest species along here was a Parrot-billed Sparrow, the first ever in the Kingfisher area!!!

We thought that the roads to Maasai Gate and Ololo would be dodgy and they were and chose to enter on the road direct to the quarry picking up a Banded Parisoma, a pair of Crimson-rumped Waxbills, Pangani Longclaw and our fourth Passer of the day in Chestnut Sparrow. Towards Leopard Cliffs we had a young Great Spotted Cuckoo (see image), and a Jacobin Cuckoo, no sign of the Pallid Honeyguide returning to its usual fig, nor anything else on the Mokoyeti ford. Climbing the Road of Pain from the Mbagathi towards the junction with the main road was a Southern Black Flycatcher in open Acacia mellifera savannah, mentioned because I have never seen one leave the immediate vicinity of the Mbagathi River before, or in open country and not riverine forest or thick woodland, (see image). There was also a Long-billed Pipit in the same place (see image).

With nothing but Speckle-fronted Weavers and another Banded Parisoma at the woodland above the Hippo Pools, we continued along the Mbagathi, one tree had a few birds in it including Abyssinian Scimitarbill and Black Cuckooshrike, and with Rhino Circuit inaccessible we carried on along the road towards Cheetah Gate finding a pair of displaying d’Arnaud’s Barbets (see image), whilst another called nearby, and our first pair of Secretarybirds and a pair of Vitelline Masked Weavers with the male in full breeding colours, another species that had not been recorded in quite a while. Ignoring the access to Athi Dam from the Pipeline we entered from the main road which was in good condition although the Causeway was a bit muddy in places. In the far SE corner were four Water Thick-knees with a fifth in the far SW corner (see image), so one was missing as the last count was six together, there were the usual Spotted Thick-knees under the mellifera in the SE corner as well. Along the edge of the dam were 35 White-faced Whistling-Ducks, the highest number for a long while, also a pair of Hottentot Teal, and five Southern Pochards the first in a long time, and more extraordinarily all were drakes, (see images). An Open-billed Stork rested on the island; there were also a few African Spoonbills, four roosting Black-crowned Night-Herons, and two Red-knobbed Coot. No migrant waders remaining, but there were two Black-winged Stilts still hanging on suggesting that these might be African and not Palearctic, but I suppose we do not know whether some Palearctics do oversummer. On emerging on the rim of the Basin we came across a herd of some 300 Buffalo that had attracted over a hundred Cattle Egrets, which is an high number for NNP.

The Vulture-Drinking Pools had no Vultures, just a sleepy Red-billed Teal, so we continued northwards but not on the usual short cut, Empakasi Junction Dam gave another pair of Red-billed Teal and a pair of Little Grebes and a fly-by immature Great Spotted Cuckoo, at the flooded murrum pits near the Beacon were the usual three Mountain Reedbucks, and the pair of Banded Martins seen there prospecting on previous recent visits were now going into a hole. Crossing the grasslands was a pair of White-bellied Bustards, another Secretarybird, our seventh Black-winged Kite for the day, our fifteenth Diederic Cuckoo, and direct flying flock of thirty Banded Martins, a Barn Swallow in the same place as four were seen last Sunday, and the days only Rosy-breasted Longclaw. As the grasslands are by far the most extensive habitat in the Park, grassland birds are virtually recorded throughout. White-winged Widowbirds were very common in the north but few in the south, Red-collared were fairly common in the north and not in the south, Jackson’s were few in the north, but several flocks of over fifty non-breeding birds in the Beacon area. Over the entire Park, Desert was outnumbering Pectoral-patch Cisticola which was a surprise, Zitting were displaying in ten territories, Croaking were very widespread apart from the extreme north, other grassland species Stout and Winding were common, but Winding needed some bushes nearby, the Parks most abundant Cisticola is not a grassland species, but Siffling were singing wherever there were bushes or forest edge with the exception of the eastern Mbagathi. To complete the cisticola species Rattling were probably the commonest bird in the southern dry bushland, Singing were common all over the bushed north and southern riverine and we did not encounter a Red-faced.

Karen Primary School Dam was interesting with two White-faced Whistling-Ducks, a Little Grebe but the second bird could have been hidden on a nest, with hardly any cover and a new record for this dam were three adult Black-crowned Night-Herons, the Lesser Moorhen has now become two and a single Crowned Crane sat on its nest. The days only Tawny Eagle was along the Mokoyeti, and the last stop was a Glossy Ibis that had dropped in at Hyena Dam. We exited through Langata Gate at 5.00pm picking up a few last birds in the forest and another pair of Crowned Cranes on the Langata Vlei, and closing the day at 185 species which is a good total for June, especially when Nigel’s records show that the previous highest number recorded in a day in June was 163.

Mammals were excellent, plains game largely Beacon to Athi Basin. Our only Lion was the ginger-maned large male along the eastern Mbagathi. Four White Rhinos formed a complete roadblock as we tried to get to Langata Gate, and were reluctant to get up.

Best for now

Brian

KEY TO MONTAGE

1. MOUNTAIN REEDBUCK

Obviously enjoying the view!

1. SOUTHERN POCHARD

This is not even an annual visitor to NNP anymore, interesting that these five at Athi Dam are all drakes. I seem to remember reading at some time that the males and females do at times associate with own gender, but can’t remember where.

1. WATER THICK-KNEE

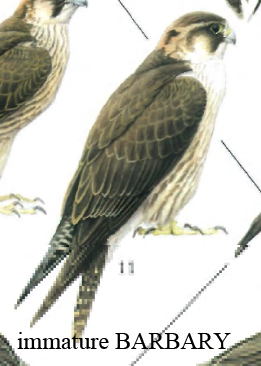
It seems this species is now a fixture at Athi Dam. There were six in late May, so one is missing as there were only five to be seen.

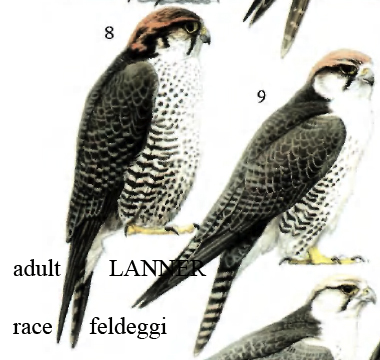
1. LANNER FALCON(?)

This is an interesting beast, when we found it sitting on top of a tree right at the junction to Kingfisher from the Kisembe ridge, it was quite wet. As all other birds in the Park looked dry, and there had been no rain, this suggested that the bird had arrived in NNP having passed through a rainstorm. It did not appear particularly large, but fortunately there was a key for scale, in that a rather bold Reichenow’s Seedeater flew in and landed next to it. These are 11cm in length, and the falcon appeared about four times the length of the Seedeater which would place it around 44cm, which matches the length of Lanner, Barbary and Peregrine, but a conspicuous feature on this bird quickly eliminated the last named. The head had a very complex patterning of rufous, blackish and whitish. It had a prominent white supercilium which continued as conspicuously down both sides of the back of the head to the nape. This is not a regular feature in Lanners of any ages. The forehead was pale, but restricted to immediately above the base of the bill, behind this, a much larger area of blackish covered the forehead up to the top of the crown, the top of the crown was a pale orange-buff which only extended to the back of the head. On the nape was a blackish “Y” this was completely encircled by the extension of the pale supercilium and crossed the nape as a very narrow hind-collar. This patterning suggested an immature Barbary Falcon rather than Lanner.

Immatures of all three species have coarse dark-brown linear streaking on the breast and flanks, but Barbary has less than the other two, and in this bird the striping was very bold, and on the flanks was all dark with small whitish blotches, the undertail was unmarked greyish, there tends to be barring in Peregrine and blotches in Barbary, but not all as some are plain. The tail barely extended beyond the wing tip. Tail pattern not seen, and the bird stayed perched and that is how we left it, so no underwing or upperwing seen.

I tried to find a match for the strange “Y” mark on the nape, and having consulted very many images, have only succeeded in locating one on an immature bird, and that was on a young Barbary, and one from an adult and that was on a Lanner of the race feldeggi, both from a paper titled “Field Identification of large Falcons of the Western Palearctic,’ by Shirihai, Forsman and Christie, and illustrated by John Gale reproduced below:





Compare these images to the bird on the Montage. In spite of many features of Barbary, I still feel that the amount of dark on underparts and particularly flanks, is too suggestive of Lanner. However as this is far from a normal Lanner, I am going to seek the advice of the expert “raptorphiles” and will advise of any outcome.

If the opinion supports this to be a Lanner, then it is a flag to be wary of future Barbary Falcon records, and if it is a Barbary then I am very happy I studied it in detail.

1. HOTTENTOT TEAL

This pair was on Athi Dam.

1. YELLOW-BILLED EGRET

Usually this is a species seen singly. This image is six of a party of ten but they wouldn’t all fit in. This suggests the species migrates to new areas as a group, and is not a gathering of birds moving singly. I wonder if Yellow-billed Egrets are currently turning up in parties at many other locations. It’s not something we have any idea about the movements of.

1. GLORIOSA SUPERBA

Never, ever, ever have I seen a show of Gloriosa like this one at the upper Mokoyeti Bridge (a couple of kilometres south of Nagalomon Dam).

1. LESSER STRIPED SWALLOW

I just like them, and currently they are over the whole Park.

1. SNOWY BARBET

For something like fifteen years I have been trying to instil the idea that this bird is a Kenyan endemic and not just a race of the widespread White-headed Barbet. Then finding that White-headed Barbet was resident on the west wall of the Ngongs really convinced me. Then a couple of years ago BirdLife produced their “Illustrated Checklist to the Birds of the World,” and in it they had split off Lybius senex as a species in its own right and called it Brown-and-White Barbet, for a bird that is ¾ white! Even before this was published a few of us referred to the bird as the Snowy Barbet, and the new name of Brown-and-White Barbet was heinous, and it was also offensive. This name was coined by someone who didn’t even leave the building he was writing from, without any attempt at liaising with the people that live with the bird (and it is a Kenyan endemic), the name was created and we are expected to use it? Surely if you are a foreigner and about to name a bird belonging entirely to another nation, then out of consideration for those people (especially the citizen birders), wouldn’t you say something like…”look we are about to split off Lybius senex from White-headed Barbet, we appreciate that it is only found in Kenya, and will only ever be seen in Kenya, what would be your preferred name?” Well they didn’t, it was a case of: it is called Brown-and-White Barbet so use it! Well we won’t, it’s Snowy Barbet, it’s the only nearly all white barbet there is, it’s a common garden bird in many suburbs, it’s daily in my garden where Brown-and White Barbet has never been seen, and never will be! That’s moan of the day out of the way!

1. RED-KNOBBED COOT

These Coots are not a regular feature in NNP, but there seems to be an influx this season, last couple of weeks singles Nagalomon Dam, Athi Dam and even the Vulture Drinking Pools, and now four together Hyena Dam and three at Athi Dam.

1. SOUTHERN BLACK FLYCATCHER

This is the bird that broke the mould and was found in Acacia mellifera savannah, first time away from the immediate vicinity of the Mbagathi River.

1. GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO

Two birds were encountered today and both immatures.

1. LONG-BILLED PIPIT

This bird was in a regular haunt near the woodland above Hippo Pools.

1. d’ARNAUD’S BARBET

This pair out towards the noisy pylons on the road to Cheetah Gate, was displaying and calling to another bird not so far away.

1. BUFFALO SURROUNDED BY CROCODILES

This unusual sight was on the sand spit at Nagalomon Dam. Whilst only four crocodiles in this image, there were in fact seven warming up on the spit, but the Buffalo seems to totally ignore them. Mind you with two Egyptian Geese for protection it probably instils extra confidence!