**NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 8th OCTOBER 2017**

Dear All,

On 8th October, Nigel Hunter collected me at 6.30am, we were at the paying in station for NNP by 6.45am and even with a number of people, there were three desks open and all the ladies were working efficiently meaning that within ten minutes we were in the Park.

Another sunny morning, no rain had fallen in the past week and the drought still rages.

For a change we started at KWS Mess, there were a few birds about including the first local Spotted Flycatcher of the season. Driving down towards the Ivory Burning Site we were surprised how there was no bird song coming from the scrub, and the Site itself was much the same story. An unseen Yellow Wagtail flew over though.

We headed off for Nagalomon Dam, with a Secretarybird on the Ivory Burning Arena as has been a regular feature over the past few months and whilst usually a pair and just one bird on this occasion maybe there is a nest close by. Another single was seen in Athi Basin. There was one Spotted Thick-knee on the Drift, but the dam was so quiet. The closest thing to Palearctic waders were nine very boisterous Black-winged Stilts, otherwise four Darters, and a few Grosbeak Weavers in the reeds starting to sing again. A Zanzibar Sombre Greenbul also started singing from the scrub. The back road to Hyena Dam also failed to produce anything of interest, but House Sparrows seemed more numerous than usual, and a few Red-billed Queleas were associating with the numerous Speke’s Weavers descending onto the balconies for their food handouts.

Hyena Dam looking so exposed with almost zero vegetation presented a depressing sight compared to its hayday when it actually used to be so vegetated that the water was only visible from breaks in the reeds! It provided an African Spoonbill, three Great White and a Yellow-billed Egret, a pair of noisy Gabar Goshawks, five Black-winged Stilts, back to four Long-toed Plovers including the white-winged bird, an African Jacana, a dozen Wood and two Common Sandpipers and a Little Stint. From the causeway an adult Martial Eagle rested on a Balanites, whilst nearby there was a Lilac-breasted Roller, this is likely the same bird present since back in August as it frequents the same bushes. A pair of Grey Crowned Cranes were the only ones of their kind seen today. Amongst feeding hirundines were a number of Barn and Red-rumped Swallows, but no Lesser Striped were recorded today, and so it appears they have now left the district for their annual vacation. In the grasslands there were plenty of Little and African Palm Swifts, and associating with them was a single low-flying African Black Swift. The grasslands were otherwise devoid of birds apart from the Rufous-naped Larks which are starting to sing again. The first of three Black-shouldered Kites made an appearance.

We thought we would have our breakfast at the new picnic site at East Gate, but there was a barrier across the road and it was looking very unused. The two East Gate specialities were present with Laughing Dove and a female Marico Sunbird bathing under a leaking fawcett. There were five Eurasian Bee-eaters, and several small parties also seen elsewhere in the Park. Driving south through the grasslands was unproductive although four charming Banded Martins were singing from the tops of hibiscus. Last weeks pair of Ostrich were near the road with over twenty young, but they were difficult to count in the scrub. On the way to the murrum pits at the top of Athi Basin we found three Short-tailed Larks, but it was too early for the vultures to come in and drink. There was a pair of Red-billed Teal on the pool, the only duck seen today that wasn’t an Egyptian Goose. The first of only two Northern Wheatears seen today was further along the road. A couple of pairs of Desert Cisticolas were grudgingly singing.

Athi Dam had a few birds, the Pink-backed Pelicans have increased to nineteen which is a new record, and now accompanied by three Whites. There were five Yellow-billed Storks, an African Spoonbill, three Black-crowned Night-Herons roosting on the Causeway, the days only Cattle Egret (!), the days only Fish Eagle which was the usual adult, four Black-winged Stilt, last weeks Spur-winged Plover still had the same chick photographed last week, but another pair has two much smaller chicks, a good tally of four Marsh Sandpipers, three Common Greenshank, three each of Wood and Common Sandpipers and ten Little Stints. Heading across to the pipeline we found a Striated Heron on the river, and Banded Parisoma nearby, with Speckle-fronted Weavers in the scrub.

Rhino Circuit again quiet, but we did find the only Green Sandpiper seen today, three Violet Wood-Hoopoes amongst the usual acacia species. The woody patch above Hippo Pools was more productive with a Willow Warbler, delightful pair of Banded Parisomas, a male Beautiful Sunbird, a party of the always resident Speckle-fronted Weavers and a few White-winged Widowbirds. A male Diederic Cuckoo here was the only cuculiforme seen today.

Kingfisher Picnic Site was so full, that cars were not only in the car-park area, but a substantial part of the area inside the fence was also covered in cars, there was a lot of noise and we decided not to stop. On the nearby swamp we found a Common Snipe, the first for the season. Heading back through Kisembe Forest it was so very quiet, but last weeks female (incorrectly called a male) Saddle-billed Stork was still finding food along the Kisembe River inside the forest. After this we left through Langata Gate at 5.00pm.

We actually finished up with 171 species which came as quite a surprise as many of the previous weeks specialities were not encountered. The most abundantly seen species in NNP today was White-backed Vulture which even allowing for duplication could have run into hundreds. Flocks were constantly in the sky wherever we were in the Park, so many trees were crowned with sizeable resting groups. Undoubtedly the dying Buffalo are an attraction, but only two Ruppell’s were seen today. The second commonest species encountered was Long-tailed Fiscal, frequently not sharing the dry scrub with anything else!

Mammals were in good numbers although we failed to see anything of note.

Whilst we can blame the drought for huge apparently birdless areas in what used to be grasslands, and the quiet forested parts, we still had an interesting enough day though lacking in surprises. The two new palearctic species for this season, Common Snipe and Spotted Flycatcher are more or less when they would be expected.

Just as an addendum, the Black-winged Stilts returned to overfly the house yesterday evening for the fourth successive year. In other years this has been a near daily event up to mid-March.

Best to all

Brian

KEY TO MONTAGE

TOP ROW

FAR LEFT

SADDLE-BILLED STORK

The tame female still in Kisembe Forest.

MIDDLE

COMMON SNIPE

First of the season near Kingfisher PS.

FAR RIGHT

PINK-BACKED AND IMM WHITE PELICANS.

Is the bird in the middle the first ever photograph of the mythical Pelican-billed Stork. Could the far left bird be an even rarer Skimmer Stork. It’s amazing what deceptive appearance angles can make in an image!

SECOND ROW

LEFT

SPUR-WINGED PLOVER

One of the latest pair of chicks at Athi Dam.

MIDDLE

KONGONI

This has to be the smallest newborn Kongoni I can remember.

RIGHT

SHORT-TAILED LARK

It would appear that they have bred locally. The bird on the left is an immature, the bird on the right an adult. Examination of the plumages show that they are quite different. The pattern of adults is linear, whilst the immatures are scaly. No field-guides works have illustrated the immature plumage.

THIRD ROW

MARSH SANDPIPER

Two of the four present at Athi Dam.

BOTTOM ROW

BOTTOM LEFT

RED-HEADED ROCK AGAMA

In NNP this species is found all along the Mbagathi River valley and its escarpment but not away from here. Although it looks like agamas down the Magadi Road beyond Corner Baridi, this is now a different species (Ngong Agama *Agama hulbertorum).* Apparently in spite of similar appearances they are not that closely related.

SECOND FROM LEFT

PINK-BACKED AND WHITE PELICANS

Part of the flock at Athi Dam.

SECOND FROM RIGHT

THREE-BANDED PLOVER

Just an unusual view of looking straight down on one!

BOTTOM RIGHT

LITTLE BEE-EATER

Still common enough all through the savannah grasslands, and virtually the only birds at present showing any colour in the landscape.