NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 9th NOVEMBER 2018

Dear All,

Nigel Hunter and myself met up with Fleur Ng’Weno and Jennifer Oduore at Langata Gate at 6.30am. The idea being that Fleur would leave her car there, and we would all go round to Main Gate for entry into Nairobi National Park, and all exit at Langata Gate.

The cheerful Customer Service employee said we should go in through Langata Gate, but to do so requires charged up old Smart Cards which they are equipped to handle, but they cannot handle MPesa or Visa transactions so it was not possible.

We had chosen Friday as opposed to the queues on weekends to get processed for entry, but were a bit miffed to find that there were so many tourists (a very good thing) that the queue was almost as bad as on the weekend, and we wasted a good half-hour in the queue for service (a very bad thing!).

We were through at 7.10am and made for KWS Mess hoping for the chance of some migrants. We were greeted by the pinking of numerous Nightingales, and they were throughout the scrub in the north all morning but none were heard in the southern sections of the Park. The only other bird of note was a male Pied Wheatear on the Army building site on the other side of the fence. There were several Black Kites sitting around in the trees tempted by the rubbish tip, one group of five identical appearing birds looked like immature migrant Black Kites (see image). Next we went to Ivory Burning Site, here there were also many Nightingales obviously happy at being here with much chasing, constant calling and many in song. Under one bush was a male and a female-type Irania, possibly my personal earliest in the Park, Marsh Warblers scolded but were only seen as they crossed the gaps, Garden Warblers were mere voices and there was only one Willow Warbler. The seasons first Isabelline Shrike, a female with chestnut ear-coverts and lightly scaled underparts was hyperactive bouncing from bush to bush.

A few Eurasian Bee-eaters flew over, and several Barn Swallows were here but although seen throughout the Park numbers were miniscule compared to the last visit twelve days before. There were vast difference between what we would find today compared to then most noticeable being the grasslands where hardly anything was to be seen and we missed some really common species. There was a Spot-flanked Barbet giving a Lesser Honeyguide a hard time but it was the Palearctics that stole the show at this site.

Next we had a look at Nagalomon Dam which was so quiet, not even a Darter though admittedly two Long-tailed Cormorants. The Fish Eagle pair was on their lofty lookouts, there was a Great Egret, and the only Black-crowned Night-Heron was an immature, waders were restricted to nine Black-winged Stilts, the resident Plovers and a Common Sandpiper, a strange sight was a Laughing Dove sitting on the tree on the island. Feeding on Rus berries were eight Wattled Starlings and a few Blue-naped Mousebirds, a lone adult Yellow-billed Stork sat on a tree along the causeway. We were just about to leave and checking the sand spit before departure when spotted in the corner by the reeds was a pale lavender egret near three African Spoonbills. We watched the bird for some time as a distant lump with it’s back to us but already had identified it as a Western Reef Heron and just the second for NNP and a new bird for “Finch Pentad!” Images and video were taken but it was not going to co-operate and was an exercise in frustration, we couldn’t even see the leg colour. Then a Fish Eagle took off for a circuit of the dam, and pandemonium broke loose, and the egret also took off and flew to a high perch on the island. This was much better now we could see more features, the bright yellow feet extending well up the ankle, with the rest of the legs being olive-green and the dramatic contrast between the pale grey breast and all white belly. Also in flight it lacked a large white-patch usually a character of Dimorphic Egrets, but these also whilst having yellow feet extending up the ankle, have black not olive-green legs and a black bill, whereas in our bird it was dirty yellow-brown. It left the perch and I managed a flight photograph through the Typha and it was never seen again in spite of passing there again two hours later. Maybe it concealed itself in a reed bed. Having already had a good time with the migrants and now this we were “stoked” and eager to find more! (See montage and discussion “western reef egret imm pale lavender form.”

Next we took the back road to Hyena Dam, annoying warblers that would not stop crossed the road not giving the slightest stationary glimpse, plenty of Nightingales and a few Garden Warblers were singing but otherwise it was uneventful, we had the first of just two Augur Buzzards, the first of four Black-shouldered Kites and a Lanner by the units.

Hyena Dam was not giving anything up as we drove towards it through the acacia scrub, around the edge were fifteen Wood, a Green and a Common Sandpiper, one Ruff and a Little Stint. As a result of a small amount of very localised rain, the feeder ditch at the far NE corner was flooded and attracting some of the waders. But there was something else there that caught our interest, a Squacco-like heron with exaggerated stripes on the underparts that continued right around the neck and the sides of the face. So this seemed too coarse a pattern for a normal Squacco but the date was now very late for Madagascar Pond Heron. It was our second frustrating heron for the day, and stayed mainly in cover, with grassy hummocks that often hid it, and was so far away. I managed one image from great distance in the rare instance it became visible, and the image is on the Montage. We could not get closer without going off road and left it as a Madagascar Pond Heron that does not want to go back to Madagascar, it was the day of the Presidential Elections there today and there were no less than fifty Presidential candidates, so who could blame it for wanting to stay anyway. The bird was showing a feature that was niggling me, but we left it. There was a normal Squacco on the causeway. When a Madagascar Pond moults to breeding plumage the upperparts become ivory-white, which is uniform, but not uniform brown.

The problem I was having with this bird that whilst the stripes were remarkably coarse, Mad Pond Herons also show completely striped upperparts in non-breeding plumage, but this bird was uniform earthy-brown with only lighter edges to a few secondary coverts. Ideally any photographers out there should try and get as many and varied images of this bird as possible so we can study it in detail, especially close ups of the head. Very heavy stripes on breast and neck but uniform brown back is a feature of Indian Pond Heron, which may be overlooked who knows, it is a common winter visitor to Oman and has reached as far as Djibouti but no sub-Saharan records that I have heard about. See “pond heron comparisons” attached. Here there are images of Madagascar from NNP as well as Madagascar, and Indian from India, with the Hyena Dam bird in the middle. In reality it is probably an exceptionally stripy Squacco but I haven’t seen one like this before. Squacco striping is usually fine, almost delicate, and towards the centre of the breast becomes more uniform whitish.

There were six Long-toed amongst the numerous Blacksmith and Spur-winged Plovers lining the causeway. Amongst the Plain Martins were several Sand Martins.

The Hyena Dam run-off was fruitless, and so was the oxbow along the Mokoyeti and no sign of the African Water Rail, but a little further up the road a familiar silhouette was circling the sky, the Great Spotted Eagle was back and back in residence in the Hyena Dam area, always his territory. Having watched him pass through the stages and now back for his eighth year and now an adult, he was extremely black, and against the light sky that is all as much as could be seen, (see images). Just before passing Nagalomon again to look for the egret, we had a Common Whitethroat.

The next destination was Kingfisher Picnic Site as we still had not stopped for our breakfast, but with no food, tea or coffee under our belt, so far 140 species of birds were!

A Zanzibar Greenbul was just at the corner of Nagalomon Dam, two Crowned Cranes below Impala Lookout were our only ones today and a party of Blackcaps crossed the road, I suppose this is our only truly sociable migrant warbler! The dam was quiet, but there was some activity at Kingfisher with Red-throated Tits and three Black-faced Waxbills only the second time ever at this site, and apart from these never recorded further west than Hippo Pools.

Apart from the first of two Spotted Flycatchers at the bridge beyond Kingfisher, Quarry Road was almost birdless but did have the days only Secretarybird and Isabelline Wheatear, and the first of just two Whinchats today. The Pallid Honeyguide was not talking below Baboon Cliffs but just past there was a beautiful pair of White-bellied Bustards, with two further trios around Athi Basin. Heading towards Hippo Pools also quiet, a pair of Pangani Longclaws and Banded Parisoma above Hippo Pools, the oxbow a little further has now become attractive, and supported a number of marsh species such as an adult Fish Eagle, a couple of African Spoonbills, a Yellow-billed Stork and the days first Greenshank, but Rhino Circuit was deadly dull. Driving on towards Athi Dam we had a few Speckle-fronted Weavers but no migrants were in the scrub (or at least seen). Along the pipeline were three adult male and one female Pied Wheatear, and a second Isabelline Shrike, this time an immaculate adult female.

We first drove up by the east side of Athi Dam; there were three visible (and doubtless numerous invisible) Spotted Thick-knees under the bushes, and a pair of Water Thick-knees by the waters edge. (See image). There was a single bird in the same spot on 18th October, They were next to the days only Darter. A little further was a pair of Black-faced Sandgrouse (see images), it’s not that long ago that the first of its kind was recorded in NNP, now they are fairly regular and have bred. At the end was a Little Egret, (see image), always an inexplicably rare species in NNP, and next to them five White-faced Whistling Duck with what was thought at a distance to be a Fulvous Whistling-Duck and was obviously an immature White-faced, (see image), and try finding this plumage in the regional literature. An Open-billed Stork was in shade along the causeway but only a couple of Black-crowned Night-Herons were roosting. with the days only Common Buzzard seen from the causeway and a colony of one Lesser Masked Weaver nest with a male in breeding plumage nearby. On the main shore were about twenty Marabous and six Yellow-billed Storks, a couple of African Spoonbills, with waders consisting of the resident plovers and seven Kittlitz’s and an adult Common Ringed Plover that was a crisp as a summer bird, which seems very late not to have changed. Otherwise migrant waders were poorly represented with five each of Little Stints and Common Greenshank, and a few of Wood and Common Sandpipers, and seven Speckled Pigeons searched for weed seeds.

Now for the return, nothing happening at the vulture’s murrum pit bathing area, but then no vultures and no water! In the grasslands we picked up an immature Great Spotted Cuckoo flying alongside the car then perching on a tiny bush a long way away, the days only Rosy-breasted Longclaw flew up, and our sixth Pied Wheatear for the day. A mixed seed eating flock contained a few White-winged Widowbirds with Yellow-crowned Bishops all in non-breeding plumage. Karen Primary School Dam was nearly gone but provided the days only Northern Wheatear, whilst Eland Hollow rewarded with a female Spur-winged Goose, and a Pallid Harrier, undoubtedly the same sub-adult male we saw near here on 18th Oct. Two Quail-Finch here were the only birds recorded today and close by was the days only Turkestan Shrike, an attractive adult male (see image). Near here a flock of about forty White Pelicans flew on formation right over us and continued their way.

We stopped to watch some Red-billed Oxpeckers, evidently it was breeding season as they all had beakfulls of Zebra fur which they pulled from the animals back, and all looked like they had large beards (see images).

Passing Hyena Dam again there was a car watching a lioness quite close by at the eastern end of the causeway, we crossed the causeway and lying across one side of the main road was a substantial crocodile and we had to drive around him as he wasn’t going to budge willingly. Three minibuses arrived with tourists and we stopped them because they were going a bit fast and told them to slow down or they would run-over the crocodile across the road, they said they would but is the lion still there? We had forgotten entirely about the lion already, but it was there for all three cars to admire, and they all drove around the crocodile! (See image).

Our last birds were a Little Grebe on the Langata Dam, with Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird and a party of sunning Green Pigeons nearby. The vlei was none too interesting and no sign of the Great Boubous seen on 18th October when we were last here.

We were through the Langata Gate at 5.30pm, Fleur’s car was still there and we closed our day with 188 species recorded. This is very close to the figure on our last visit on 27th October and yet, no less than 58 species were recorded then but not on this visit!!!

Mammals were good with concentrations Athi Basin, below Impala Lookout to Kingfisher and Hyena Dam.

Needless to say we had had an exceptional day even above average for Nairobi National Park!

Best to all

Brian

KEY TO MONTAGE OF western reef egret imm pale lavender form

1-6 WESTERN REEF EGRET NAGALOMON DAM

1. Bird flushed by Fish Eagle

1b Close up showing pale olive upper tarsus

1. Grab from video after flushed by Fish Eagle, sun on legs showing bright yellow toes extend well up the lower tarsus remainder of leg olive green, no black. Pale grey breast contrasts strongly with white throat and underparts.

2b Close up of foot

1. How the bird was first found and stayed until flushed by Fish Eagle, shows olive legs with paler upper tarsus but toes hidden.

3b Close up of upper tarsus.

1. Head turned showing contrasting grey cap and white throat, dirty yellow not black bill.
2. Perched at distant, yellow toes up to mid lower tarsus.
3. Only image in flight, all pale grey above, apart from white tips to inner secondaries, faint paler tip to primaries, and a very thin white line on inner edge of primaries and frosting on forewing.
4. This is a flight image I took of a Western Reef Egret at Lake Magadi last February, even though this bird was very blackish below the upperparts are extremely similar with the thin white line on the first primary, and the white tips to the inner secondaries.
5. This pale lavender form is quite uncommon, so I have attached three images from Middle East and India of this form. I haven’t located one in flight as yet.

KEY TO MONTAGE OF POND HERONS

First Row all Madagascar Pond Herons images taken NNP and Madagascar.

Second Row the only image of the Hyena Dam bird.

Third Row all Indian Pond Herons images taken Middle East and India.

Fourth and Fifth Rows Squacco Herons from all over range.

KEY TO MONTAGE NNP 9th NOVEMBER 2018.

1. ROADHUGGING CROCODILE AT HYENA DAM AND FLEUR

This amazingly confiding reptile has to be driven round, as it has no intention of getting out of the road.

1. TURKESTAN SHRIKE AD MALE

Only three migrant shrikes seen this being the only Turkestan.

3a ISABELLINE SHRIKE

Female with faintly scaled underparts.

3b ISABELLINE SHRIKE

Female with clear underparts.

1. WESTERN REEF EGRET NAGALOMON DAM

See separate discussion.

1. LITTLE EGRET ATHI DAM

Always inexplicably rare in NNP.

1. RED-BILLED OXPECKER

It must be breeding season, as the birds are tugging the fur out of the Zebras and look very comical with their false beards. This must be lining for the nest.

1. WATER THICK-KNEE PAIR ATHI DAM

One bird was found in the same place as this pair on 18th October.

1. GREAT SPOTTED EAGLE

So good to see the bird back again, not a particularly good view as silhouetted against a bright cloudy sky. Managed these images though.

1. WHITE-BELLIED BUSTARD PAIR

The only bustard species encountered.

1. MADAGASCAR POND HERON HYENA DAM

See separate discussion.

1. COMMON RINGED PLOVER

This bird is very crisp for this time of year with well-defined breast band.

12a BLACK-FACED SANDGROUSE MALE ATHI DAM

12bBLACK-FACED SANDGROUSE FEMALE ATHI DAM

13 ADULT AND STRANGE LOOKING IMMATURE WHITE-FACED WHISTLING DUCK

14 IMMATURE MIGRANT BLACK KITE?

The literature is not particularly helpful in separating immature Black Kites.