NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK 19TH NOVEMBER 2017

On 19th November Nigel Hunter picked me up at 6.20am, we were at Main Gate by 6.30am and after being processed efficiently, speedily and cheerfully we were inside the Park by 6.40am. There were many people on this cold and miserable morning.

Whilst it had not rained for three days, it was not only horribly overcast, but also very cold for this time of year and a sweater stayed on the entire day. To make matters worse, from 7.00am there was a misty rain making visibility difficult and windscreens greasy. This annoying condition continued on and off (mainly on) for the entire morning, and it only got brighter after 1.00pm but by 3.00pm the sun was trying to come out and weakly succeeded and there was no rain in the afternoon. We both agreed that in some thirty past years of Park visitation this was the most unpleasant climatic condition we had ever experienced.

It was quiet from the entrance; a Little Sparrowhawk flew along the road, something that is irregularly recorded in the Park whilst not unusual in neighbouring gardens. We started off at KWS Mess, before there was any rain but it was gloomy and dull. There were no migrants but a few homegrown species were recorded, including the ever-faithful Black-collared Apalis. We did not linger and headed off to Ivory Burning Site, again no migrants and gloomy. We could hear lots of Eurasian Bee-eaters but could not see them. On the Ivory Burning Arena there were five White Storks following buffalo like the Cattle Egrets they were accompanying. There was no sign of the usual Secretarybird. Nothing was to be seen at the Nagalomon Drift, just a Green Sandpiper on the Mokoyeti Bridge, but as the morning progressed and it got lighter Nightingales started calling from the Causeway, and later on, the back road to Hyena Dam, the second Mokoyeti Bridge, below Impala Lookout and the Mokoyeti Causeway at the base of Leopard Cliffs. They were well and truly back but very reluctant to make a sound whilst the weather was unpleasant.

At Nagalomon Dam there was impressive Black-crowned Night-Heron action, maybe thirty or more and they have built nests in full view in the Typha (see image). It was a hive of activity and a lot of noise was being produced. We could on see one Darter but there appeared to be two pairs of Reed Cormorants that might be nesting on the island, and a Fish Eagle crowned the top of the same tree. Migrant waders were not to be seen, apart from two Black-winged Stilt, there was an adult African Jacana, and a Great Egret. There were no swallows to be seen which was unusual in itself. Taking the back road to Hyena Dam there were both Crested and Scaly Francolins, and the bee-eaters heard earlier suddenly flew from a roost at 8.00am feeling it was now bright enough to find a few insects. There were over eighty, which is the largest congregation I have ever seen in NNP. A few Red-collared Widowbirds were displaying along the track, but there was nothing much else.

We picked up the usual commensals at the Unit Block, and some grassland species, again nothing to get the heart racing.

Reaching Hyena Dam, a Fish Eagle was in residence, and two Gabar Goshawks were calling to each other, with their Diederic Cuckoo-like call. The dam was so quiet, apart from a gathering of over fifty Wood Sandpipers, the only other migrants were two Common Sandpipers and a couple of Black-winged Stilts. Other birds were five Long-toed Plovers, the usual Spur-winged and Blacksmith and one adult African Jacana. The first pair of seven Crowned Crane couples seen today, three Red-billed Teal and a Yellow Wagtail flew over. We drove alongside the Mokoyeti finding two Yellow-billed Egrets, and taking the right turn to the bridge, was the first of just three Willow Warblers recorded today, and the only migrant warbler encountered. What was probably the same Eurasian Bee-eaters were all along the river, Red-faced Cisticolas were vocalising, and we ended the day with all ten species of Cisticolas and all are now singing after the recent rains. We completed the circuit and checked Nagalomon Dam to see if anything had come in, and there was now a Yellow-billed Stork (the only one of the day) and two African Spoonbills.

Taking the road below Impala Lookout we could see a pair of Lappet-faced Vultures sitting with two White-backed in the mist and gloom, unusual at the northern end of the Park (see image). Otherwise the plains here looked ornithologically barren, although several Jackson’s Widowbirds were on a small marsh. Heading to Kingfisher Picnic Site we took the side road just past the swamp finding our only Whinchat of the day and an adult Martial Eagle flew over and perched. It was still sprinkling when we arrived at the picnic site and had our breakfast snack in the car. There was a Red-throated Tit calling. Now heading out on the south road we were very surprised not to see any migrants or anything of interest, but Shelley’s Francolins were quite vocal. We had a look at the murrum pits near Maasai Gate, finding a couple of Yellow-billed Duck on the now flooded pits, and we found a first migrant Red-tail Shrike for the season, which was a superb adult Turkestan (see image). Also there were two Northern Wheatears here.

Now back on the main road again it was quiet and now a little brighter and the last rain of the day had fallen, birds became more active, a couple of Pangani Longclaws appeared (see image), and the Pallid Honeyguide was in its fig at the Mokoyeti crossing below Leopard Cliffs and like last time a Lesser Honeyguide was calling from the same location. On the other side of the site we found a pair of Hildebrandt’s Starlings at a nest, and a pair of Crimson-rumped Waxbills. Above Hippo Pools was Banded Parisoma and rare recently, a pair of African Silverbills (see image). In the car park down below we picked up Violet Wood-Hoopoes though not much else, and further along the road our first Spotted Flycatcher of the day, with a second seen later on the Athi Dam causeway. Rhino Circuit was quiet, nothing on the river and no mixed feeding flocks, there were a few acacia species including Red-throated Tit and the days only Purple Grenadier.

Along the pipeline road to Athi Dam we had a Tawny Eagle, and an immature Turkestan Shrike, two each of Northern and Pied Wheatears (see image), and a breeding plumaged male Parasitic Weaver (see image). From the dam causeway there were Spotted Thick-knees calling in broad daylight as on the last visit, and Mottled Swifts came down and drank (see image). An adult male Pallid Harrier swept past us, whilst a pair of Laughing Doves watched us having lunch (see image). As usual four Black-crowned Night Herons roosted in the bushes overhanging the water. The Dam itself was quiet and there appears a mass exodus of waders now the water has come up and the island is again an island. There were a pair of Hottentot Teal, a lone Marabou with only three seen all day, an African Spoonbill, a smart breeding plumaged Pink-backed Pelican (see image), a couple of Black-winged Stilts, a Marsh Sandpiper, two Common Greenshank, four Wood and two Common Sandpipers, just four Little Stints and a Ruff.

The Murrum Pits at the top of Athi Basin had water again, and a Black-winged Stilt was feeding there, nearby was a Secretarybird, and there were a couple of male lions. Along the road out to the Rhino Camp further on we had a sub-adult male Pallid Harrier, a singing White-tailed Lark, and a Sand Martin amongst the Barn Swallows that had now appeared. But the commonest swallow today was Red-rumped, and Lesser Striped have still not returned. Near the Empakasi Dam junction at the small dam there, it once again had water and a Little Grebe had found it. We found a very nice male Common Kestrel (see image), perched on a bank of the Murrum Pits near the ”Beacon,” there was an agitated Banded Martin flying around it, and only a couple of feet below the Kestrel was a hole that looked freshly excavated, and it is likely that the Martin could be nesting there. We tried to access Eland Hollow from East Gate road, but the bottom of the valley was very muddy so we turned back. We did find the days only Isabelline Wheatear. There were about five Rosy-breasted Longclaws here also. One gave a display I had never seen before; singing in flight, it climbed to about 100 metres above the ground, then fluttered around in circles for several minutes, then flew vertically downwards at an impressive speed, much as excitable Wing-snapping and Pectoral-patch Cisticolas do at the end of an aerial song display. It levelled out only at the last moment and dropped into the herbage. As I had not seen this before I looked up the “Handbook of the Birds of Africa,” and the display is in fact described as fluttering around at great heights whilst singing, then gliding gently back to earth, but obviously this individual had not read what it was supposed to do and put on a far more dramatic show! At Karen Primary School Dam we ran into the same sub-adult Pallid Harrier again, it was flying around and around the clump of Phoenix Palms trying to chase out doves and left empty-taloned (see image). A Martial Eagle flew over which upset a juvenile Squacco Heron standing on some Water-Lily pads, (see image). Also on the dam were two Little Grebes.

The last stops were a check of Hyena Dam, where there was little change from morning, although a Saddle-billed Stork was now visible from the Causeway, passing the Ivory Burning Arena the Secretarybird was now there and perched on a Balanites which would be a fine nest site, and a Tree Pipit flew up from the side of the road, and a dozen more Parasitic Weavers rested in a bush. A final look at Nagalomon Dam revealed four Darters present and a pair of Fish Eagles perched on the tree on the island. Our last new birds for the day were Green-backed (Eastern) Honeybird and White-browed Sparrow-Weaver in the Car Park at the Main Entrance.

We were through the gate at 5.15pm having had good day, although no really unusual species found. On tallying up the total on what seemed a below average day, we were surprised to find we had recorded 195 species.

Mammals were in very good numbers, plenty of Rhino and Hippos etc., but the best mammal was an attractive and fairly confiding Side-striped Ground-Squirrel near Athi Dam (see image).

To give some idea of the variety in Nairobi National Park, I went for a morning walk in our paddock much less than a kilometre from NNP. I stayed just 45 minutes from 7.00-7.45am and in that time recorded 44 species of which 15 were not recorded on our previous day in the Park. That’s 33%!!!

Taking the exercise further, Nigel compiled a list of species seen on our previous visit three weeks ago on 28th October, with what we had just had, to see what we had that time but not this and the result was a different 36 species. These were White-faced Whistling Duck, Black Stork, Little Egret, Great White Pelican, Great Cormorant, Black-shouldered Kite, Ruppell’s Vulture, Great Sparrowhawk, Greater Spotted Eagle, Booted Eagle, Hartlaub’s Bustard, Purple Swamphen, Little Ringed Plover, Kittlitz’s Plover, Common Snipe, Common Cuckoo, Pied Kingfisher, African Hoopoe, Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Red-backed Shrike, Plain Martin, Buff-bellied Warbler, Zanzibar Greenbul, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Brown Parisoma, White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Red-billed Quelea, African Pied Wagtail and Golden-breasted Bunting.

Then looking at what we had had uniquely the visit before that on 14th October, he compiled a list of species not seen on the last two visits, and it was another fifteen species; Spur-winged Goose, Purple Heron, Northern Hobby, Augur Buzzard, White-bellied Bustard, African Water Rail, Gull-billed Tern, Yellow-throated Sandgrouse, African Green Pigeon, Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Ruppell’s Starling, Bronze Sunbird, Vitelline Masked Weaver, Yellow-crowned Bishop and White-winged Widowbird.

On those three visits that amounts to 246 species!

Finally the highlight of our day on 19th November has to have been the wild flowers. I have never seen such a display before. Because the grass has not had time to dominate the landscape yet, it is over 80 square kilometres of continuous colour. You are doing yourself a mis-service not to appreciate it. So a large part of the montage today is dedicated to the flora.

Best to all

Brian

PS the first Amur Falcon of the season went over the garden this afternoon.

KEY TO MONTAGE

1 Squacco Heron – Immature.

2 Maasai Ostrich -These three chicks were walking along the road whilst their parents were 75 metres away with the rest of the brood.

3 Parasitic Weaver – Male in breeding dress.

4 Pied Wheatear – pale immature.

5 Turkestan Shrike – Adult Male.

6 Side-striped Ground Squirrel.

7 Croaking Cisticola – all ten NNP Cisticola species were singing.

8 Common Kestrel (palearctic nominate) – Adult Male.

9 Mottled Swift

10 Lappet-faced and White-backed Vultures

11 Black-crowned Night-Herons – nesting Nagalomon Dam.

12 Pallid Harrier – sub-adult Male chasing doves out of Phoenix Palms.

13 Pink-backed Pelican – adult in breeding condition.

14 African Silverbill.

15 Laughing Dove – pair watching us eating lunch.

16 Pangani Longclaw

PLANTS

A Crossandra subacaulis

B Pentas parvifolia

C Aneilema hockii

D Gloriosa superba

E Asystasia laticapsula

F Help required from Birding Botanists…

Can you help us identify the six species

in this line of six flowers.