TSAVO EAST – WESTERN GALANA AREA 11th-14th MAY 2017

Dear All,

From 11th until 14th May, Rupert Watson and myself visited Tsavo East National Park with the primary aim of bird-atlassing in a still barely covered area.

On the way down, a horrific discovery was a House Crow at Emali, which was in much the same place five days later. This pushes the burgeoning range of this noisome exotic very uncomfortably closer to Nairobi where the likelihood is that the species could explode with this ideal new habitat with inversely proportional loss of the cities resident species.

We based ourselves at Galdessa Camp, which was a very beautiful site and currently under a refurbishment.

We explored several areas in the north along the Galana River east to Biji Camp, the southern Yatta Plateau, the Athi-Tsavo Rivers confluence, Aruba Dam and on entering the Park at Manyani Gate. I might add here that our dealings with the cashless gate staff were extremely amicable and absolutely painless as they knew exactly what they were doing.

On our arrival at Manyani Gate, and having travelled past a green-looking Tsavo West we were very pleased to see that Manyani Gate was also looking bright, birds were breeding, much singing, three whydah species in full breeding plumage, it was looking very promising. As we headed north to the Galana valley it was progressively dryer, then all of the area visited east of here was in a terrible drought with leafless trees and bare ground. The river was rising and falling rapidly in response to rainfall in the uplands but on the whole, low. Waterholes were bone dry, apart from one on a windmill near Aruba Dam which was completely gone, although the Aruba Lodge grounds were artificially green.

The mammal variety was rich in species though rather poor in numbers. The river was full of hungry hippos as the surrounding area yielded no herbage for them, and it was three days before we encountered our first Elephants. Whilst the latter have obviously vacated for better pasture, the Hippos were just sticking it out. The Swara were well represented, the commonest being Gunther’s Dik-diks and Impala. The recently split oryx-like Peter’s Gazelles have spread from the east (which must be desperately unfavourable), to the western parts of the Park, and was seen frequently although only three fully adult males with their enormously long horns were seen. Common Waterbuck and Lesser Kudu were in very small numbers and both mainly confined to the river environs, although the waterbuck were also around the more richly vegetated Aruba Dam as well. Here we found a solitary Tana River Topi, and whilst we had seen one Hartebeest in the north, they were fairly common here. Gerenuk were widespread and numerically one of the most common species. The necks of the animals here seem to be much more dramatically longer and thinner than those from near Nairobi. Fringe-eared Oryx were confined to small parties around Aruba Dam. Apart from singles along the river, Buffalo were virtually all confined to the Aruba Dam environs, but Giraffe were fairly throughout.

Just south of the river near Galdessa we found eight Desert Wart-hogs, but these were the only wart-hogs of either species recorded.

We did not see Lions, just heard them from the camp, but did have a remarkable encounter with a young Leopard. Large tracts of land appeared to support no mammals or birds, most noticeably between the river and Aruba.

Many bird species were just hanging on, representing a tiny percentage of their numbers during richer times. If there has not been a major die off, then they have moved south into the more favourable conditions of Tsavo West. Here is a current status of species as we found them during our short visit.

CRESTED FRANCOLIN

Very small numbers restricted to vegetation along the Galana.

YELLOW-NECKED SPURFOWL

Scarce, but pockets along the Galana River. Absent in more arid areas of bush.

VULTURINE GUINEAFOWL

The only Guineafowl of any description were fifteen Vulturine near the confluence of the Athi and Tsavo Rivers.

WOOLLY-NECKED STORK

Three individual sightings along the Galana probably representing just one pair.

HADADA IBIS

Recorded just one evening and the following morning at Galdessa.

GOLIATH HERON

Probably four different birds recorded along the Galana.

PYGMY FALCON

Widespread and one of the more common raptors, maybe no change from the more normal times.

BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE

Just a single bird at Lugard’s Falls.

LAPPET-FACED VULTURE

Singles met with three times, the only species of vulture recorded in five days.

BLACK-CHESTED SNAKE-EAGLE

Only one bird seen.

BROWN SNAKE-EAGLE

One of the most frequently observed raptors with six records.

BATELEUR

Although large, obvious and very mobile this appeared to be the commonest raptor, with four in the air at one time in one spot near the river.

AFRICAN HARRIER-HAWK

Only a single bird on the Yatta Plateau.

EASTERN CHANTING-GOSHAWK

Fairly common and widespread, probably not remarkably fewer than a normal wet season.

GABAR GOSHAWK

One at Galdessa was the only record, probably attracted to birds drawn in to regular millet hand-outs.

TAWNY EAGLE

Four birds only were recorded, one consisting of a pair.

AFRICAN HAWK-EAGLE

A total of four birds along the Galana.

MARTIAL EAGLE

One bird along the road between Manyani Gate and the river, was the only individual recorded.

BUFF-CRESTED BUSTARD

Although the only bustard species recorded, it was still quite common and both vocal and giving aerial displays. One of the few species to show any interest in the breeding season.

BLACK-WINGED STILT

Three were on the bore-hole near Aruba.

WATER THICK-KNEE

Common along the Galana, probably not too affected by the drought and much vocal activity.

BLACK-HEADED PLOVER

Only a total of four birds encountered, all away from the River.

KITTLITZ’S PLOVER

Eight attracted to the Aruba bore-hole.

WHITE-FRONTED PLOVER

A pair not far from the Galana Bridge. Probably our most interesting species. The presence has long been known from historical records as regular on the Galana, the only known Kenyan distribution away from the coast. Whilst it is well documented in the literature, there appears to be no records reported of this species presence in the past thirty or so years. It would be interesting to hear if there are any other records in this period.

COMMON GREENSHANK

One near the Galana Bridge was the only migratory member of its tribe recorded. Whilst late more laggards would normally be expected.

SOMALI COURSER

A pair on the Yatta Plateau, and a single bird near Aruba at no distance from a Temminck’s Courser.

TEMMINCK’S COURSER

A single bird on a plain near Aruba.

CHESTNUT-BELLIED SANDGROUSE

Apart from one in the north, five near Aruba were the only record.

BLACK-FACED SANDGROUSE

Common, more so in the Galana Valley. Never more than four in a party which could represent a family unit, so no flocks seen which suggests that birds are not breeding.

SPECKLED PIGEON

Only birds recorded were at Manyani Gate.

NAMAQUA DOVE

Only three birds encountered near the river.

AFRICAN ORANGE-BELLIED PARROT

A pair on the Yatta Plateau were the only birds encountered.

WHITE-BROWED COUCAL

A regular individual at Galdessa, and one near Aruba.

PEARL-SPOTTED OWLET

Because many species are not singing, and few in number, imitations of this owl were used to see what was in the area. The results were not for what was seen as a result of this, but the number of owlets encountered. We tried whistling owlets in fifteen suitable looking isolated treed clumps along dry creek beds, and along the rich forest of the Galana. Of these fifteen sites of potential suitable habitat, we found owlets in every single one. The population present must be enormous over the entire area.

FRECKLED NIGHTJAR

One bird gave a pre-dawn call at Galdessa on one occasion.

SLENDER-TAILED NIGHTJAR

One male called on two different evenings at Galdessa.

LITTLE SWIFT

Apart from a few on Manyani Gate, we only found this species at one other site. It was a small colony nesting in a large rock overhang on a rocky face on the Yatta Plateau. How often are Little Swift colonies found nesting in natural locations nowadays? It’s something that should be reported when found.

SOMALI BEE-EATER

Only a pair and a single bird recorded on the Yatta Plateau.

MADAGASCAR BEE-EATER

A single bird in dry scrub at Galdessa on one morning, and an unseen flock flying over Aruba Dam probably represented southern migrant arrival.

VIOLET WOOD-HOOPOE

Whilst the major part of the entire riverine area appears suitable for this species. A party of four at Galdessa was seen on one morning only. No other wood-hoopoes were seen in our stay.

EASTERN YELLOW-BILLED HORNBILL

A pair on the Yatta Plateau were the only birds recorded.

RED-BILLED HORNBILL

Very few were recorded in the open country, but on the Yatta Plateau we ran into a dense flock of over forty individuals. The likes of this I have never encountered before.

SOUTHERN GROND-HORNILL

Two birds were at Aruba Dam.

LESSER HONEYGUIDE

One singing along riverine scrub near a place called Maji Chumvi, not far from Manyani Gate was the only honeyguide of any description encountered during our stay.

RED-AND-YELLOW BARBET

Only three birds encountered during our stay.

d’ARNAUD’S BARBET

Only four recorded.

PYGMY BATIS

This was widespread and common with no obvious reduction in numbers from what would be considered the norm.

GREY-HEADED BUSH-SHRIKE

One bird resident at Galdessa, the only other being the confluence of the Athi and Tsavo Rivers (forming the Galana).

THREE-STREAKED TCHAGRA

The only bird was one in Galdessa on one morning. No other Tchagra species were recorded.

BRUBRU

Three species seems a low figure for five days and such a normally very vocal species.

BARN SWALLOW

Around four birds seen migrating on most days with direct north-east direction.

AFRICAN GOLDEN ORIOLE

An immature trying to sing in Galdessa Camp was the only one recorded. It was likely a recent arrival from the South.

BLACK-HEADED ORIOLE

In the early mornings when the birds were waking up, I could hear a call that I could not place. It was a downslurred whiplash and reminded me of Pollen’s Vanga from Madagascar. I really could not put a name to is. West of the camp we found a group of three Black-headed Orioles, all of which were adults. They were calling to each other giving the same downslurred whiplash not the normal “fwee-oo” two part fluty call of upland birds. This was very curious that there should be a marked vocalisation difference, and it was the only note given. It did suggest the possibility that the birds might have come in from elsewhere and so I tried recordings on Xeno-Canto to see if I could match it. I listened to very many recordings on the site, and finally came to recording XC247531. Which is listed as a reaction to an African Goshawk attacking a Drongo, the Galana birds were however giving the call spontaneously.

RED-WINGED LARK

The only bird was one in a greener area near Aruba Dam.

CHESTNUT-HEADED SPARROW-LARK

Apart from a pair near the Galana Bridge, they were fairly frequent around Aruba.

NORTHERN CROMBEC

Note that in BLI this has been split off from Northern Crombec of the broad-leaved scrub west of the Rift, as Eastern Crombec. I have always considered the two forms as not closely related. Apart from differences in calls, western Northern has entirely rufous eye-stripe, and entirely deep chestnut underparts, this appears more like a Red-faced than our traditional Eastern form. In Kenya it is only around Lake Victoria and extending into Trans-Nzoia and it quite likely overlooked as Red-faced with which it is sympatric. The dry country acacia-loving (now) Eastern Crombec (leucopsis) is extremely different and looks quite smaller. The eyestripe is striking white not subdued rufous-chestnut, and the face also is white not rufous, and a strong dark line through the eye greatly contrasts with the white immediately above and below it. Underparts are orange-rust, but the centre of the belly is almost pure white. It actually makes you wonder why this Somali-biome species was ever considered conspecific with the high-rainfall western carnapi. Anyway the Eastern Crombec leucopsis, was one of the most frequently encountered species.

RUFOUS CHATTERER

Four in scrub along dry creek bed just west of Galdessa Camp were the only birds recorded.

WATTLED STARLING

The only birds were around Manyani Gate, and the greener Aruba Dam.

GREATER BLUE-EARED STARLING

Four were near Manyani Gate.

RUPPELL’S STARLING

Small numbers were confined to the riverine forest.

AFRICAN BARE-EYED THRUSH

Usually a common bird in semi-arid scrub, only two birds were encountered. Strangely there were none along the Galana where it would be expected that the species would retreat to. As a rule this species loves lodges!

CAPPED WHEATEAR

Two and a single were seen near Aruba. It’s really hard to define the status of this species in Kenya. Huge areas that would normally have been thought suitable don’t support it, and yet it occurs in two widely different habitats, low-lying dusty open sub-desert to arid plains, and locally on highland sub-alpine grassland. These low-altitude birds are considered migratory but from unknown provenance.

BLACK-BELLIED SUNBIRD

Common along the Galana, wooded seasonal creeks and Aruba. Only four sunbird species were found during our stay.

TSAVO SUNBIRD

Surprisingly scarce, only seen twice along the Galana, and the Aruba area. Males were in full breeding colours.

HOUSE SPARROW

The only new species recorded on the last morning, with a pair at the very isolated Galdessa Lodge, attracted by the millet hand-out.

GOLDEN PALM WEAVER

Common at Galdessa, but few others along the river.

VITELLINE MASKED WEAVER

One male in breeding plumage near the Galana Bridge was the only bird seen, and the only Ploceus species apart from Golden Palm Weaver.

FIRE-FRONTED BISHOP

A male in full breeding plumage was associating with Red-billed Queleas at Galdessa Camp, but was the only individual seen.

RED-CHEEKED CORDON-BLEU

Three flew in from a long distance to land at Galdessa Camp!

WHYDAHS

There were very few scattered Pin-tails, but the only other whydahs were around Manyani Gate where Paradise and Straw-tailed were in breeding plumage and holding territories.

WHITE-BELLIED CANARY

A pair at Manyani Gate were the only canaries seen of any species.

CINNAMON-BREASTED BUNTING

Just three birds along the Galana.

SOMALI BUNTING

One of the commonest species of the dry bush. On the Yatta Plateau gatherings up to ten were seen several times.

COMMON/WIDESPREAD SPECIES ENCOUNTERED THAT NO COMMENT CAN BE MADE CONCERNING DROUGHT-CONDITION STATUS CHANGES.

African Mourning Dove/Ring-necked Dove/Laughing Dove/Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove/White-bellied Go-Away Bird/African Palm Swift/Blue-naped Mousebird/Lilac-breasted Roller/Grey-headed Kingfisher/Little Bee-eater/African Hoopoe/Abyssinian Scimitarbill/African Grey Hornbill/Von der Decken’s Hornbill/Black-throated Barbet/Nubian Woodpecker/Cardinal Woodpecker/Rosy-patched Bushshrike/Pringle’s Puffback/Slate-coloured Boubou/Northern White-crowned Shrike/Long-tailed Fiscal/Taita Fiscal/Common Drongo/Wire-tailed Swallow/Rock Martin/Lesser Striped Swallow/Red-rumped Swallow/Fawn-coloured Lark/Pink-breasted Lark/Pale Prinia/Red-fronted Warbler/Grey-backed Camaroptera/Grey Wren Warbler/Common (Dodson’s) Bulbul/Northern Brownbul/Abyssinian (now Kenya) White-eye/Golden-breasted Starling/Superb Starling/Fischer’s Starling/Red-billed Oxpecker/Yellow-billed Oxpecker/Spotted Mourning Thrush/White-browed Scrub-Robin/African Grey Flycatcher/Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird/Hunter’s Sunbird/White-browed Sparrow-Weaver/Black-capped Social Weaver/Grey-headed (Parrot-billed) Sparrow/Yellow-spotted Petronia/Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver/White-headed Buffalo-Weaver/Red-billed Quelea/Blue-capped Cordon-bleu/Green-winged Pytilia/African Pied Wagtail/

ADDITIOINAL WATERSIDE BIRD RECORDED

Egyptian Goose/Yellow-billed Stork/African Spoonbill/Black-crowned Night-Heron/Striated Heron/Cattle Egret/Grey Heron/Black-headed Heron/Hamerkop/African Fish Eagle/Spur-winged Plover/Three-banded Plover/Pied Kingfisher.

FINALLY THE SPECIES THAT PRESUMABLY BECAUSE OF DROUGHT CONDITIONS WERE NOT RECORDED (EITHER ABSENT OR SILENT), BUT WOULD HAVE BEEN EXPECTED AT THIS TIME OF YEAR.

Either Ostrich/Helmeted Guineafowl/Harlequin Quail/Marabou Stork/Sacred Ibis/Great Egret/Long-tailed Cormorant/African Darter/Lanner/Secretarybird/Yellow-billed Kite/any vulture but Lappet-faced/White-bellied, Hartlaub’s Bustard/Grey Crowned Crane/Spotted Thick-knee/Heuglin’s Courser/African Green Pigeon/any species of Cuckoo/Verreaux’s Eagle-Owl/Rufous-crowned Roller/Malachite Kingfisher/Red-fronted Tinkerbird/any Honeyguide apart from Lesser/African Grey Woodpecker/White-crested Helmetshrike/Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike/Brown or Black-crowned Tchagra/Red-naped Bushshrike/Black Cuckooshrike/African Paradise Flycatcher/Pied Crow/Mouse-coloured Penduline-Tit/Singing, Red-capped Larks/Chestnut-backed, Fischer’s Sparrowlarks/any Cisticola/Green-tailed Apalis/Zanzibar Greenbul/Yellow-bellied Eremomela/Scaly Chatterer/Southern Black Flycatcher/Variable Sunbird/Chestnut Sparrow/Black-necked, Lesser Masked, Chestnut Weavers/Cardinal Quelea/White-winged Widowbird/Zanzibar Red Bishop/Common, Crimson-rumped, Black-cheeked Waxbills/Purple Grenadier/any Firefinch/either Silverbill/any Indigobird/Steel-blue Whydah/Golden Pipit and any Pipit/Pangani,Yellow-throated Longclaw.

KEY TO MONTAGE

1 PALE PRINIA

Encountered several times this elegant bird with a very monotonous call was widespread.

2 MAINTENANCE CREW

Although eyesores the Railway and the giant pylons have provided local employment like this work crew during a tea-break.

3 LEOPARD

We had a long encounter with this striking young independent Leopard.

4 BLACK-BELLIED SUNBIRD

This is the male in eclipse (non-breeding) plumage, whilst much colour is lost the long central tail-feathers are retained.

5 VULTURINE GUINEAFOWL

This party off fifteen were the only guineafowls met with, where on earth are the helmeteds!

6 BLACK-HEADED ORIOLE

Two images of birds that gave the strange descending call never hear from upland birds omnipresent in the garden here. The yellowish rather than bright red bills suggest non-breeding birds.

7 WHITE-BROWED SCRUB ROBIN

More attractive and sharper plumage contrasts than typical upcountry leucophrys. Tsavo birds are part of the leucoptera group, once split as White-winged Scrub Robin on account of the solid white wing patch rather than narrow white non-conjoined edgings. It also lacks the heavily streaked breast of leucophrys, and has a greyer rather than brown ground colour to the upperparts. Finally it has a far more simple repertoire often repeating the same few notes. No doubt it will get split again one day, but in the meantime its good to note which of the two types you are seeing.

8 TANA RIVER TOPI

I did not know this occurred in this area even as a vagrant. This single animal near Aruba Dam looked out of place and disassociated itself from other antelope species nearby. In Mammals of Africa it says it is confined to the Tana River area and not shown on the map or mentioned as wandering into Tsavo East. I wonder if there has been an introduction as with Hirola.

9 PEARL-SPOTTED OWLET

Just amazingly common!

10 TSAVO SUNBIRD

This is a pair, male on left and female in right. She is quite distinct from females of both Purple-banded and Marico, in that her underparts appear unstreaked and the colours more pallid. It’s like a small version of female Shining Sunbird. If these features are constant and the sample seen is too small at present, then it makes it quite different from the other maroon and violet banded species. The bill also appears quite heavy and the head pattern more distinct.

11 TSAVO SUNBIRD

Sadly the camera was more interested in focussing on the tree than the bird behind the branches, however this shows a male Tsavo Sunbird in all its stunning and distinctive colour. It too was accompanied by an unstreaked pale female as in the case of the above male.

12 WHITE-FRONTED PLOVER

It would be good to learn when this species was last recorded on the interior Galana.

13 CHESTNUT-HEADED SPARROWLARK

Several males were actually singing.

14 TSAVO SUNBIRD

Female Tsavo Sunbird clearly showing the more massive bill and other plumaged features mentioned.

15 SOMALI COURSER

With only three birds it appears that there has been a vacation from the area.

16 GOLDEN PALM WEAVER

At Galdessa regular millet handouts are a great attraction for this species, and of course many more Grey-headed (all Parrot-billed in Tsavo) Sparrows.

17 SOMALI BEE-EATER

Only encountered on the Yatta Plateau.

18 PETER’S GAZELLE

I had a mental note that I had only previously encountered Peter’s Gazelles (also known as Tana Gazelle) in the far east of the Park from Satao to Sala, but now they were all over the place. However out of more than a hundred individuals only three adult males were long horned. This blurred photo being one of them from the Yatta Plateau. On reading Mammals of Africa it states that there has been a population increase and the species now ranges all over Tsavo East. It’s range was extreme eastern hinterland Kenya, and it used to be along the Juba Rover on Southern Somalia, however if this population no longer exists, it has become a Kenyan endemic by default!

19 BROWN SNAKE-EAGLE

One of the more frequently seen raptors.

20 PYGMY FALCON

Another of the more frequently seen raptors.

21 FIRE-FRONTED BISHOP

This lone male in full breeding plumage was associating with Red-billed Queleas in Galdessa Camp.

22 STRAW-TAILED WHYDAH

As with Paradise Whydah these were in full breeding plumage at Manyani Gate, but not seen anywhere else.

23 NORTHERN BROWNBUL

Seen a few times in thickets along the river and dry beds.

24 THREE-STREAKED TCHAGRA

The only member of the genus encountered, and in Galdessa Camp in dense Suaeda monoica (Saltbush).

25 COMMON (DODSON’S) BULBUL

This on again off again species was very common along the river, less so in the dry scrub.