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National Waterbird Counts Report

Kenya, Coast

2020

Raphaël Nussbaumer, Lennox Kirao, Colin Jackson

Introduction

For the first time in a number of years the Short Rains were good. It rained heavily from early October through December and even to midway through January. As a result, seasonal lakes were full and there were many smaller pools and swamps in every hollow throughout the area including sites which haven't had water in many years. We are grateful to Friends of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest for the use of their scout vehicle to take counters to Sabaki and Kensalt and to Turtle Bay Beach Club for providing snacks and drinks for the team. The entire south coast counts were organized and funded by Mustafa Adamjee. Delta Dunes Lodge once again graciously housed us for the Tana Delta count.

North coast: 23-31 January

The main counts were carried out on 23 and 24 January. Malindi Harbour was counted on 31 January. The full team gathered early on 23rd January at Gede to receive instructions for the day and we split into two groups. We made sure that at least one person was atlasing in both groups, and that each group had a scope and a scribe.

Lake Mikimba [*17 birds of 9 species*]

Habitat had changed quite a bit from previously and we struggled to find the original path we had followed down to the waters edge. This meant we overshot and tried a path farther South than usual but it did not provide access to the lake shore. This meant we arrived at the usual location to scan the lake around 9am. The reeds in the extensive reedbeds covering most of the lake appeared dead (brown-grey) despite the high water levels (or perhaps because of?). It was encouraging to see that relatively little habitat destruction had continued from two years ago when there had been freshly cleared woodland to create fields (which now were abandoned). Near the village, the vegetation has grown, with short scrub growing back after the trees were cut for charcoal in previous years.



Overall, waterbird numbers were surprisingly very low in number despite the presence of water: a single Open-billed Stork, no crakes or gallinules except for one Common Moorhen; no ducks, a single heron (Black-headed Heron), and no cormorants or waders.

On the way back, we stopped at a small seasonal pond (c.25 m wide) beside the road (3°06'13.7"S 40°01'56.5"E) to have some food and found two Dwarf Bitterns. Other than this,

other waterbirds recorded were a flock of White-faced Whistling Duck seen flying over and a single Green Sandpiper was also seen overhead. The absence of water birds at Mikimba together with the presence of them away from the main water bodies might suggest that water birds are scattered in the small temporary wetlands that have appeared in this wet year.

Sabaki *[769 birds of 29 species]*

Numbers of birds were very low at Sabaki – in fact numbers generally at the other monthly counts A Rocha has been carrying out suggest a strong decline in numbers of particularly waders and Laridae using the river mouth. The mangrove forest continues to spread and this may be part of the reason for the decline in waders as much of the open mudflats that were so heavily populated by foraging waders 20 years ago are now forested. A Palm-nut Vulture was a rarity for Sabaki and there were five Crab-plovers which are relatively infrequently recorded there.

Kensalt Saltworks *[3,463 birds of 30 species]*

Entrance to the salt works was easy this year – they were aware of us coming in the office and happily welcomed us to carry out the count. The pans in the central south section where we first count were being repaired and as a result there were no birds present. The large ponds which are the initial ponds for water from the sea also had few birds other than flamingo. For many years there was a large roost of Eurasian Curlew on the first pond from the sea but this was absent this year. We timed the count well to coincide with high tide meaning there was no exposed mud banks in the creek and therefore all birds should be roosting on the salt pans. With the repair work being done on various pond walls and tracks, we had to divert to get to the largest pans beside the mangroves. Here we found reasonable numbers of roosting waders on the small bunds between pans. However, there were very few cormorants – which are often numerous and in fact were absent altogether from the salt works; nor were there any pelicans, very few storks and even reduced numbers of flamingo. Water levels in the ponds were not noticeably high or low.

One non-avian event that will be memorable for the count was when we were parked on the side of the track beside the large ponds, tipper trucks were coming back and forth carrying soil for repairing the sea wall. Several had passed fine when one gave us maybe 50cm more berth putting it's farther wheels too far on the edge and causing the whole huge truck to slowly keel over and lie on its side in the pan – with the driver having to climb up out of the upper window to escape! No-one was hurt but it was a little embarrassing that it was 'caused' by us! We left them to it...

Krystalline Saltworks *[3,801 birds of 30 species]*

For the third edition of the count at Krystalline, we were kindly welcomed by Cynthia who accompanied us throughout our drive in the saltworks and offered us drinks at the end. Cynthia expressed her interest to have a copy of the count for Krystalline as they are part of a UNDP Consortium and need to share regular biodiversity reports.





Of particular note is the breeding record of Black-winged Silt (one chick found – c.f. photo) and several juvenile Avocets swimming in the water which therefore must have also bred there which could constitute the first breeding record for the species on the coast. As per for Kensalt, the count coincided with high tide therefore maximising the number of waders present on the pans – notable numbers were Marsh Sandpiper (513), Curlew Sandpiper (399), Ruff (184) and unidentified waders (640). The number of flamingos counted (488) is

similar to last year (505) – though in retrospect we considered that possibly counting roles were not properly clarified and thus some birds were missed.

Just after leaving Krystalline, we counted some additional water birds at the Gongoni Malindi Pipit Pool (immediately south of the saltworks). This is a public area and not far from informal housing. We observed several children who had just caught a Marsh Sandpiper with a trap and were setting more such traps. This, clearly is an issue that should be addressed – perhaps Krystalline could assist?

Lake Chemchem [154 birds of 20 species]

Similar to the other lakes, Chemchem had high water levels and yet very few birds. Presumably with the large volume of recent rain water, the lake had not yet ‘matured’ for invertebrates to provide food for birds – and also the presence of many other small wetlands would have diluted the number of birds at the large sites. The absence of shallow, wet edges meant that waders were absent. Most of the Ardeidae were seen in flight beyond the lake. A lone Southern Pochard constituted the most notable sighting (first record here on waterbird counts since the 37 of 2000); a single Black-crowned Night Heron in flight was also uncommon for Chemchem.



Mbartum [95 birds of 13 species]

Water levels were up at this site as per last year. The floods in 2018 and good rain since have meant Mbartum has been revived after many years of being dry. As a result, in contrast to the

Juvenile Pied Avocet with adult at Krystalline Salt Works



“real” lakes, Mbartum was full of life with multiple herons and egrets including the first record of a Grey Heron for the counts, a Dwarf Bittern and an Allen’s Gallinule.

Lake Jilore *[34 birds of 9 species]*

Water levels were very high reaching almost to the main road. As per the other larger bodies of water, there were very few birds. It would be easier to enumerate the species seen than the species missing from the usual counts: 4 waders (3 Common Greenshank and 1 Wood Sandpiper), 9 Black-headed Heron and 1 Dwarf Bittern.

Malindi Harbour *[342 birds of 20 species]*

Siltation levels coming out of Sabaki River have substantially affected the Malindi coastline. A result is the reef area in the harbour is covered with silt and provides a different sort of foraging habitat. A roost of gulls and terns was still present though numbers were not high.

South Coast: 8-10 Feb 2020.

Tiwi Swamp *[38 birds of 11 species]*

First counted in 2019, this was therefore the second visit to this site. Tiwi Swamp provided good birding despite the absence of the usual Little Grebe and Reed Cormorant. Interesting sightings were a single Greater Painted Snipe and 2 Temminck Courser.

Kiscol Swamp *[36 birds of 7 species]*

A similar count to 2019 though with a smaller number of Reed Cormorant (2 compared to 115 in 2019) and other species missing (e.g. Open-billed Stork, African Darter, Purple Heron).

Kiscol Dam *[9 birds of 3 species]*

Very high water levels meant only three species were present: 3 African Darter, 1 Hammerkop and 5 Pied Kingfishers.

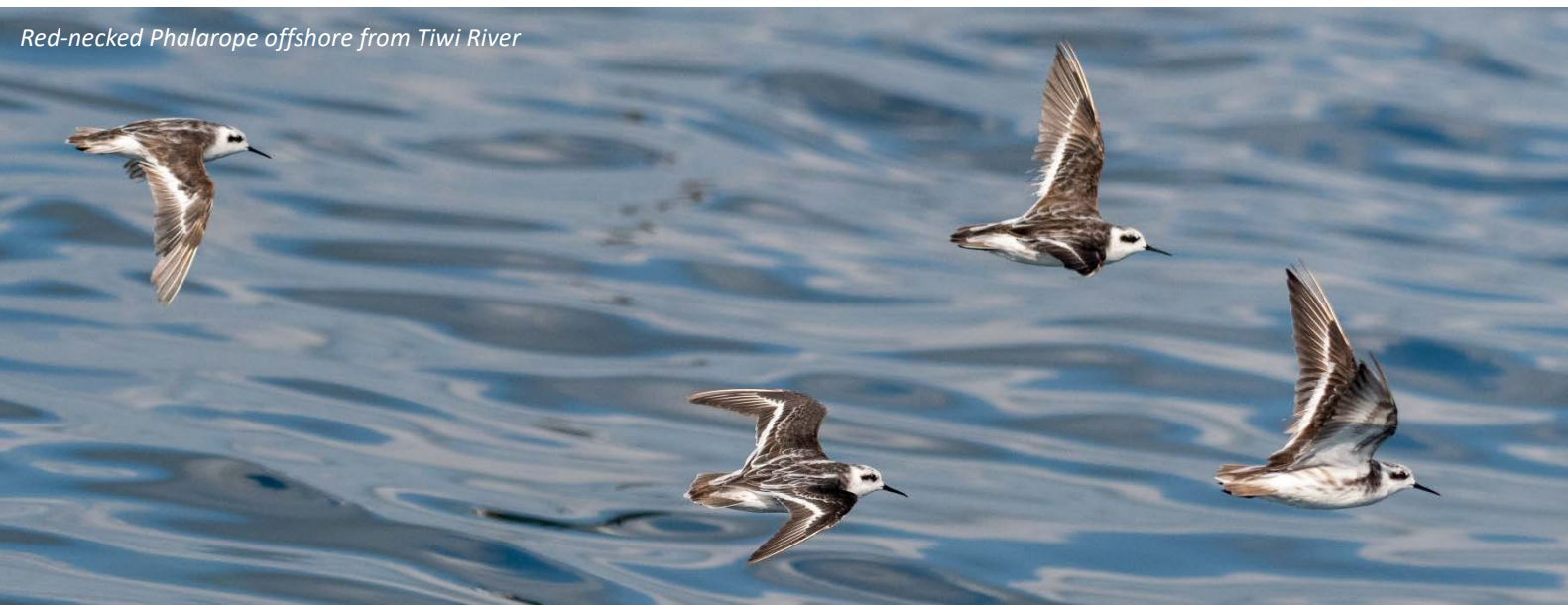
Mkurumudzi Estuary *[907 birds of 23 species]*

The species richness and abundance was quite similar to the previous year though with fewer Lesser Crested Tern and more Saunders’s Tern as well as a few new species of wader: Turnstone, Whimbrel, Sanderling, White-fronted Plover. The count of Palm-nut Vulture (7) remains high.

Tiwi Estuary *[1,112 birds of 13]*

Not counted since 2017 and there were fewer birds present than then actually at the estuary. However, using the scope, large numbers of birds could be seen offshore – estimated at 800.

Red-necked Phalarope offshore from Tiwi River



Taking a boat to confirm what they were, they turned out to be Red-necked Phalarope. From the boat and estimate of an unprecedented c.3,000 phalarope were observed.

Four additional sites were visited to assess the value of regular counts: **Diani Golf Club, Funzi Bay, Lake Nimbodze** and **Chale Island**. None held substantial numbers of birds and are probably not worth the effort to include in regular counts.

Tana River Delta: 10-12 February

After having postponed our initial trip due to high levels of water in the delta making access difficult and some staff being ill, we finally set off to Tana Delta on the 10 February, with LK, AB, MA, RN and AN. We set off rather late and made a number of stops along the way meaning no counts were done on the first day. Once again, we were kindly hosted by Delta Dunes Lodge. We were welcomed by staff who had come especially for us as there were no other guests.

We set off early on Thursday to cover all the usual sections of the river for the full day of the count. The delta looked quite different to previous years, due to unusually high levels of rain. With the high water level, the grass on the river banks was greener and taller, making it harder to spot small birds feeding on the ground. Over the high tide, there was no river banks exposed resulting in the absence of waders along the salt water section of the count. The whole level of flooding throughout the freshwater section was such that we could not stop and land anywhere to scan with the scope. This, together with the tall grass and reeds certainly meant that numbers of waders and birds counted were substantially lower than were actually present. A few flocks of waders/egrets were seen taking off in the distance would confirm this and probably explained the absence of certain species normally recorded (Pacific Golden Plover, Ruff, Glossy Ibis).

A delay in the second boat arriving for the fresh water section together with slow counting meant that by the team arrived back at Kalota, there was not enough time to count the Ozi Mudflats over low tide. These were therefore counted on the third day.



The Ozi Mudflats – now significantly covered with grass as a result of fresh water flooding



A major change in the hydrology had happened over the preceding year. Since counts started in 2005 the 'salt water' section was separated from the fresh water by the river bank at Kalota. In one or two years, this bank had been breached but soon repaired. This year, for the first time, the bank had been breached and not repaired meaning fresh water had now flowed out onto the Ozi Mudflats daily. Furthermore, the bridge at Kalota had collapsed. This has led to a significant change in habitat. The Ozi mudflats now had large areas of small grassy vegetation growing across it – and very few birds as a result. The breaching actually meant that we could have used a single boat from camp on both fresh and salt water since they are now connected.

On the third day, the sand flats in the river mouth near camp were counted as usual and then the Ozi Mudflats en route to the vehicle on our way home. Not long before low tide at around 11am we dropped down to the main beach direct from the Camp and counted the section of beach leading up to the main sand flats. After the count, we followed the base of the dunes along the river channel up to the camp jetty. A very nice surprise on the sand flats was a Red-necked Phalarope sitting on the sand not that far from us!

Some summary statistics from the 2020 Tana Delta counts with numbers and species of interest highlighted:

Species with an “above-average count”.

Species with the highest count recorded since full counts started in 2005 (bracketed are next highest count or additional comment):

- **Duck:** 1,143 Fulvous Whistling Duck (2nd: 246 in 2016), 1 Red-billed Teal (only one other observation in 2017)
- **Cormorant:** 13 Darter (2nd: 4 in 2007), 31 Great Cormorant (2nd: 9 in 2007 - only the 4th time recorded), 446 Reed Cormorants (2nd: 210 in 2009),
- **Pelican:** 493 Great White (2nd: 149 in 2007), 128 Pink-backed (2nd: 71 in 2012)
- **Heron/Egret:** 19 Purple Heron (2nd: 37 in 2007), 1,032 Yellow-billed Stork (2nd: 156 in 2008- 58% of all ever recorded), 461 Open-billed Stork (2nd: 1,493 in 2007), 181 Black-crowned Night Heron (2nd: 77 in 2016), 87 Grey Heron (2nd: 62 in 2015)
- **Waders** 423 Sanderling (2nd: 55 in 2015), 166 Grey Plover (2nd: 120 in 2014), 14 White-fronted Plover (2nd: 12 in 2016),
- **Terns** 110 Saunders's Tern (2nd: 89 in 2007), 109 Caspian Tern (top equal as in 2014)
- **Other** 1 Red-necked Phalarope (first record), 44 Allen's Gallinule (2nd: 58 in 2007), 120 Pied Kingfisher (2nd: 86 in 2016), 9 Marsh Harrier (2nd: 5 in 2012)

Species with a “below-average count”:

- **Heron/Egret** 236 Cattle Egrets (lowest recorded ever), 2 Goliath Heron (avg 11), 5 Hadedda Ibis (lowest recorded)
- **Waders** 40 Ruffs (avg 872), 107 Spur-winged Plover (avg 1,236), 24 Curlew Sandpiper (lowest), 2 Long-toed Plover, 0 Pacific Golden Plover

Participants

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Daniel Kazungu	Mida Creek Guide
Mohammed Ali	Mida Creek Guide
Saddam Kailo	Mida Creek Guide
Joseph Kanundu	FoASF

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