

# Kenya

## Highlights II

*15<sup>th</sup> November – 29<sup>th</sup> November 2023 (15 days)*

## Trip Report



Lilac-breasted Roller in the Masai Mara

**Trip report compiled and photos by Tour Leader: Paul Varney**

## Tour Summary

*Kenya has some iconic landscapes and is well known to everyone because of the numerous wildlife programmes we see on TV channels across the world. It is a privilege to be sat in that landscape watching a Lion, Cheetah or some of the numerous birds, resident and migrant and this tour did not disappoint. We visited the coastal forests of Sokoke and the estuaries and creeks to look for shorebirds before heading to Tsavo, Taita Hills and the rainforest around Kakamega in the west. We then had a short cruise on Lake Victoria, exploring the Papyrus swamps near Kisumu before heading south to the Masai Mara. This year was an “El Nino” year so we experienced more rain than usual which did impact our birding and travel on occasions but undeterred we searched the forests, swamps, creeks, and the plains and ended up with a respectable 458 species of bird and 41 species of mammal including some truly outstanding encounters with big cats – always a highlight of any visit to Africa. We ended the tour sitting in a lodge with a huge thunderstorm raging around us as we sipped on a beer in front of a roaring open fire – the perfect ending to a wonderful trip. Kenya is always magical, and this tour was no exception. Kenya delivered.*

### Top Birds

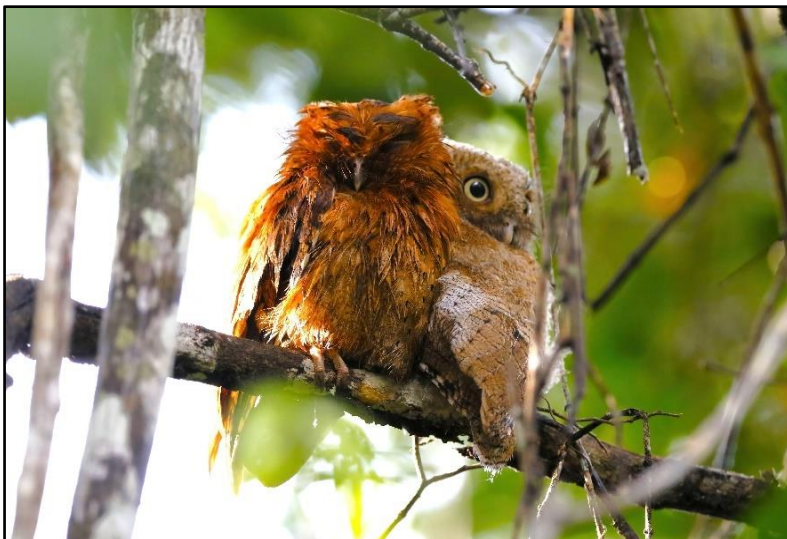
1. Lilac-breasted Roller
2. Great Blue Turaco
3. Malachite Kingfisher/Secretarybird
4. Narina Trogon/Sokoke Scops Owl/ Pallid Harrier
5. African Paradise Flycatcher (rufous)/Red-headed Bluebill/Rosy-patched Bushshrike/ Golden Pipit

### Top Mammals

1. Leopard
2. Cheetah
3. Elephant
4. Giraffe/Warthog
5. Lion

## The Coast, Watamu, Mida creek, Sabaki River Estuary and Sokoke Forest

Having met the evening before for dinner, the tour proper started early with a short flight to Malindi from Nairobi on the Kenyan coast. The flight was on time and having arrived in Malindi we were met by Karanja, our excellent driver for the next 2 weeks. We were transported to our beachside resort at Watamu and after a quick freshen up, we headed to Sokoke Forest. Over the next couple of days, we birded the forest, Mida Creek, Sabaki River Estuary and Jilore Swamp. This rich area holds some special birds, and none is more sought after than the



Sokoke Scops Owls & White-fronted Plover



**“Red” Elephant of Tsavo East & Golden Pipit**

delightful tiny Sokoke Scops Owl. A group of 4, rather wet from one of the rain downpours showed superbly in a small scrubby area and we all got excellent views. Over the next couple of days, we caught up with Crab Plover, White-fronted Plover and numerous species of shorebird, Sooty Gull, Chestnut-backed and Retz’s Helmetshrike as well as some local specialities such as East Coast Akalat, Forest Batis, Amani Sunbird, Tiny Greenbul and Black-headed Apalis. Sokoke Pipit proved to be frustrating, and we heard one and just had a brief view as it flushed from the forest floor. Fischer’s Turaco were far more obliging, and we obtained excellent prolonged views.

## **Tsavo East, Taita Hills and Tsavo West**

We left the coast and headed for Tsavo East, the largest protected area in Kenya. The plan was to drive to the eastern side of the park and drive across to our lodge, looking for birds and game as we travelled. Unfortunately, the excessive rain of the previous days impacted the option to do this as the route was too wet. This meant a longer and fairly traffic heavy drive via Mombasa straight to our lodge. Arriving in midafternoon we were keen to head out and the journey was forgotten as we connected with our first big game – Elephants, Giraffe, Plains Zebra, and Yellow Baboon among other things. The birds started to come too including Chestnut-bellied and Black-faced Sandgrouse, stately looking Southern Ground Hornbill and some rather smart looking Golden-breasted Starling. Tsavo East is famous for its red Elephants, which is down to the colour of the soil, and we saw plenty of them, as well as red Zebra and Impala. We also caught up with some striking Beisa Oryx and a bizarre Gerenuk. Heading out toward Satao Plains the following morning our luck was in, and we bumped into several lazy Lioness, just at the side of the road and later, also a young male.

Birding in Tsavo East was excellent and we had views of several rather dapper Golden Pipit, Somali Ostrich, Somali Bee-eater, some very confiding Rosy-patched Bushshrike and several species of Lark including Pink-



**Pink-breasted Lark & Somali Ostrich**



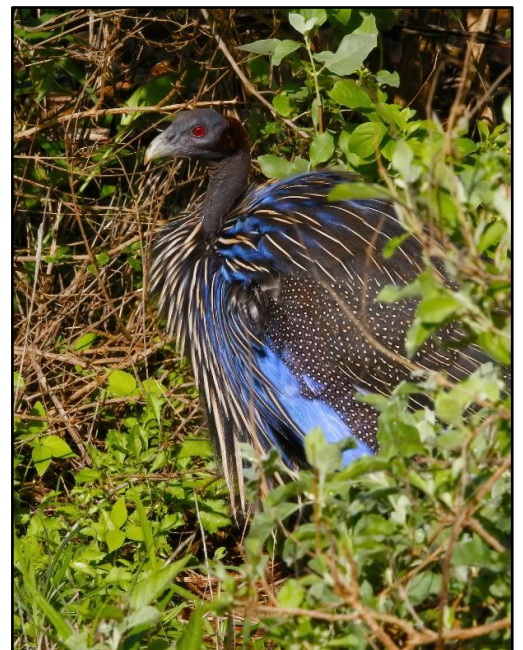


**Hunter's Sunbird & Three-banded Courser**

breasted, a probable Friedmann's (it didn't sing!), numerous Red-winged Lark and Chestnut-headed Sparrow Larks. Harlequin Quail was a nice bonus and a super male Pallid Harrier delighted with its elegance.

The park was full of birds, thousands of Chestnut Weavers, Wattled Starlings and some real stand out birds like the stately Kori Bustard. Taita Hills en route to Tsavo West is a must visit location boasting 3 endemic species: Taita Apalis, Taita White-eye and Taita Thrush. They can be tricky to find but we had good fortune and got good views of all three of them not long after arriving as well as African Emerald Cuckoo, Striped Pipit and White-bellied Tit.

Onward to the beautiful Tsavo West and our fantastic lodge overlooking a waterhole which attracted various game animals and birds during the day (and night). We were a bit delayed arriving at Tsavo West due to a forced hospital visit for one of the group which eventually resulted in an early return home unfortunately. Our "Ferrari Safari" into the park did however produce some good sightings including some really stunning Vulturine Guinea fowl which proved to be quite abundant in the park.



**Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbill & Vulturine Guinea fowl**





**Leopard**

Tsavo West was excellent, and we added many new species to our trip list including Basra Reed Warbler, Somali Bunting, Hunter's and Black-bellied Sunbird, Pringle's Puffback, and some splendid Eastern, Yellow-billed Hornbills. A Cheetah was a surprise find on an afternoon drive and a bonus night drive produced some additional species including Northern Lesser Galago or Bushbaby, Common Genet, Spotted Hyena and Spotted Eagle Owl and 4 Three-banded Coursers.



**Taita Thrush & Taita White-eye**





**Lühder's Bushshrike & Black-billed Weaver**

As we left Tsavo West on our final morning, one of the group spotted a Leopard right by the side of the track. We watched this superb animal for about 20 minutes before it slinked away into the bush. They really are impressive animals and always a real treat when you come across one.

## **Kakamega Forest and Kisumu (Dunga Swamp)**

We left Tsavo West and headed back to Nairobi for one night before taking the long drive west to Kakamega and the wonderful Rondo Retreat. We birded the gardens on our arrival and all the birds were new for the trip – Mackinnon's Shrike, White-headed Saw-wing, Yellow-throated Leaflove, Green-headed Sunbird and a group of stunning Great Blue Turaco, one of the specialist birds of this part of Kenya. White-tailed Antthrush also showed and a couple of the group managed to see a rather fast White-spotted Flufftail as it raced across the track on a couple of occasions. There was even a Crowned Eagle's nest in the garden.

Our local guide Patrick was excellent and over the next day and a half he managed to find most of the specialist birds of Kakamega – Black-billed Turaco, Blue Malkoha, White-headed Wood Hoopoe, Blue-headed Bee-eater,



**Pallid Harrier Fan-tailed Grassbird**



**Masai Giraffe on the Masai Mara**

Yellow-bellied and Jameson's Wattle-eye as well as some superb Lühder's Bushshrike. The forest also produced many Greenbul species, all somewhat similar looking and Grey-winged, White-browed and Snowy-crowned Robin Chat. White-breasted Nigrita was a nice surprise and we also connected with Grey-throated, Yellow-spotted and Yellow-billed Barbets.

Leaving behind Kakamega forest we headed to the busy city of Kisumu on the shores of the vast Lake Victoria. A quick visit to Hippo Point produced Golden-backed, Black-headed, Northern Brown-throated and Slender-billed Weaver as well as Red-chested Sunbird, Swamp Flycatcher and a pair of stunning Black-headed Gonolek. It was a Saturday afternoon and very busy down at Hippo Point and yet again the heavens opened forcing us to retreat to the hotel for the evening. The following morning, the sun was shining and we headed out into Dunga Swamp to search for some Papyrus specialities. Before boarding the small boat we secured Papyrus Canary near the dock but the swamp itself produced Papyrus Gonolek, Greater Swamp and White-winged Swamp Warblers as well as a super male Little Bittern and obliging Carruther's Cisticolas.

## **Masai Mara**

Our final destination on the trip was the Masai Mara, the Kenya extension of the massive Serengeti over the border in Tanzania. Although the migration had passed, the park was still full of game, notably Plains Zebra, Impala, Thomson's Gazelle, Buffalo and Elephant with good numbers of Topi and a few Hartebeest. We didn't see a million Wildebeest though, finding only one on our last afternoon in the park! The lodges and ambience of the Mara is wonderful. Cruising around we found numerous Widowbirds; Fan-tailed, Yellow-mantled, White-winged, Red-cowled and the super tailed Jackson's. Fan-tailed Grassbirds were singing as we entered the park





**Cheetah**

and Rosy-throated Longclaw were seemingly everywhere in the mornings. Trees full of Lesser Kestrels also hosted a single male Amur Falcon, a nice bonus! Cisticola's – always everyone's favourite – were present all over but the real stars of the show were the big cats. We had numerous encounters with Lion including a superb dark maned male but Cheetah stole the show. We had 2 unbelievable close encounters with Cheetah – on both occasions, the animals came to our expertly positioned vehicle and plonked down right in front of us. Superb animals and amazing to see these beautiful animals at such close range.

The trip was fantastic and we had some incredible encounters with birds and mammals. Kenya highlights covers a lot of ground but allows you to see some incredible wildlife and really see Kenya up close and personal. We had a great time.



## Annotated List of species recorded

For the species list and more photos, please see the eBird Trip Report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/162046>

### Mammals

#### HYRAXES - Procaviidae

- 1 Bush Hyrax *Heterohyrax brucei*

Tsavo West on Nov 21<sup>st</sup>; Masai Mara on Nov 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>.

#### ELEPHANTS - Elephantidae

- 2 African Savanna Elephant – EN *Loxodonta Africana*

Numerous animals seen in Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara. Evidence of Elephants – dung/tracks in Sokoke Forest.

#### CATS - Felidae

- 3 Cheetah – VU *Acinonyx jubatus*

Tsavo West, 1 on Nov 21<sup>st</sup>. Exceptional close encounters with singles in Masai Mara Triangle on 27<sup>th</sup> and Mara (East) on 28<sup>th</sup>

- 4 Lion – VU *Panthera leo*

Tsavo East 7 on 19<sup>th</sup>, Masai Mara 7 on 26<sup>th</sup> (2 males), 7 on 27<sup>th</sup> (1 male), 15 (5 distantly) and 1 superb close black maned male on 28<sup>th</sup>.

- 5 Leopard - VU *Panthera pardus*

Tsavo West, close prolonged views of 1 on 22<sup>nd</sup>.

#### VIVETS, GENETS - Viverridae

- 6 Common Genet *Genetta genetta*

Tsavo West, 2 on night drive on 21<sup>st</sup>.

#### HYENAS, AARDWOLF - Hyaenidae

- 7 Spotted Hyena *Crocuta Crocuta*

Tsavo East 1 on 19<sup>th</sup>; Tsavo West 1 on night drive on 21<sup>st</sup>; Masai Mara 1 on 26<sup>th</sup>, 7 inc 4 pups on 27<sup>th</sup>, several on 28<sup>th</sup>.

#### MONGOOSES - Herpestidae

- 8 Common Dwarf Mongoose *Helogale parvula*

Tsavo West, a few seen on 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1 narrowly escaping a pouncing Leopard

- 9 Banded Mongoose *Mungos mungo*

Tsavo East several on 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>; Masai Mara on 28<sup>th</sup>

#### WOLVES, COYOTE, FOXES AND JACKALS - Canidae

10 Black-backed Jackal *Lupulella mesomelas*

Tsavo West 1 near lodge on 21<sup>st</sup>; Masai Mara 5 on 27<sup>th</sup>, several on 28<sup>th</sup>

ZEBRAS, HORSE AND ASSES - Equidae

11 Plains Zebra – NT *Equus quagga*

Noted at Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara including along roadsides on journeys between sites

RHINCEROSSES - Rhinocerotidae

12 Black Rhinoceros – CR *Diceros bicornis*

Nairobi, 1 from hotel in Nairobi National Park (not visited) on 22<sup>nd</sup>. It was distant but everyone got a view through the telescope

PIGS - Suidae

13 Common Warthog *Phacochoerus africanus*

Animals observed at Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara

GIRAFFE, OKAPI - Giraffidae

14 Masai Giraffe – VU *Giraffa tippelskirchi*

Always so elegant and great to see. Quite numerous and seen in Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara

CATTLE, ANTELOPES, SHEEP, GOATS - Bovidae

15 Impala *Aepyceros melampus*

Noted in Tsavo East, Tsavo West, Masai Mara and from vehicle in transit between sites

16 Hartebeest *Alcelaphus buselaphus*

Only a few seen. Noted at Tsavo East, Tsavo West, Masai Mara

17 Blue Wildebeest *Connochaetes taurinus*

The big numbers had left the Kenyan plains. Singles seen from lodge at Tsavo West on Nov 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> and one in Masai Mara on Nov 28<sup>th</sup>

18 Topi *Damaliscus lunatus*

Only seen in Masai Mara where quite common

19 Thomson's Gazelle *Eudorcas thomsonii*

Seen en route to Kakamega from Nairobi on 23<sup>rd</sup> and then frequently encountered in Masai Mara on Nov 26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>

20 Waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*

Noted at waterhole at Voi Lodge, Tsavo East on 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, Tsavo West on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> and in Masai Mara during our stay. Always in small numbers

21 Gerenuk - NT *Litocranius walleri*

Excellent to see at Tsavo East, a female on morning of 19<sup>th</sup> then on our afternoon drive, 3 (1 buck).



22 Kirk's Dik-dik *Madoqua kirkii*

Very common in Tsavo East and Tsavo West and also seen in Masai Mara

23 Grant's Gazelle *Nanger granti*

A few noted, often with Impala. Seen in Tsavo East on 19<sup>th</sup> and Masai Mara on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>

24 Beisa Oryx - EN *Oryx beisa*

Several of these super looking antelope at Tsavo East and Tsavo West

25 Cape Buffalo - NT *Syncerus caffer*

Seen in Tsavo West with big herds in Masai Mara. Tracks and signs also noted at Sokoke Forest

26 Lesser Kudu - NT *Tragelaphus imberbis*

Beautiful looking antelope seen well at Tsavo East on 19<sup>th</sup> and one of the group saw one also on 20<sup>th</sup>.

27 Common Eland *Tragelaphus oryx*

These huge animals were seen in Masai Mara on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>

28 Suni Antelope *Neotragus moschatus*

Single raced across the track in Sokoke Forest on 16<sup>th</sup>

29 Northern Bushbuck *Tragelaphus scriptus*

Singles seen briefly in Sokoke Forest on 15<sup>th</sup> then on night drive in Tsavo West on 21<sup>st</sup> and around Simba Lodge Masai Mara on 28<sup>th</sup>

#### HIPPOPOTAMUSES - Hippopotamidae

30 Common Hippopotamus - VU *Hippopotamus amphibius*

Seen at Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara

#### OLD WORLD FRUIT BATS - Pteropodidae

31 East African Epauletted Fruit Bat *Epomophorus minimus*

Seen leaving roost once evening near Watamu and roosting at Simba Lodge Masai Mara

#### GALAGOS - Galagidae

32 Northern Lesser Galago *Galago senegalensis*

Several seen during night drive at Tsavo West on 21<sup>st</sup>

#### OLD WORLD MONKEYS - Cercopithecidae

33 Blue Monkey *Cercopithecus mitis*

Frequently encountered in Sokoke Forest on 15-17<sup>th</sup> and in Kakamega Forest on 23<sup>rd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>.

34 Vervet Monkey *Chlorocebus pygerythrus*

Seen at Tsavo East, Tsavo West and in the Masai Mara

35      Guereza                      *Colobus guereza*

Only noted in Kakamega Forest where several seen

36      Olive Baboon                  *Papio Anubis*

Seen en route to Kakamega Forest from Nairobi on 23<sup>rd</sup> and also in Masai Mara 27<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>

37      Yellow Baboon                  *Papio cynocephalus*

Seen frequently in Sokoke Forest, Tsavo East, Tsavo West

RABBITS, HARES - Leporidae

38      African Savanna Hare      *Lepus victoriae*

Single seen in Tsavo East on 19<sup>th</sup>

SQUIRRELS - Sciuridae

39      Red-legged Sun Squirrel      *Heliosciurus rufobrachium*

Single noted in Kakamega Forest on 24<sup>th</sup>

40      Red Bush Squirrel                  *Paraxerus palliatus*

Single seen in Sokoke Forest on 15<sup>th</sup>

41      Unstriped Ground Squirrel      *Xerus rutilus*

Seen in Tsavo East and Tsavo West

## Reptiles

TORTOISES – Testudinidae

1      Leopard Tortoise                  *Stigmochelys pardalis*

Noted in Tsavo West on 22<sup>nd</sup> and one crossed the road as we were leaving the Masai Mara on 29<sup>th</sup>

AFRICAN SIDE-NECKED TURTLES - Pelomedusidae

2      Helmeted Turtle                  *Pelomedusa subrufa*

Single crossed the road and slipped into a ditch in Masai Mara on 27<sup>th</sup>

SKINKS – Scincidae

3      Striped Skink                      *Trachylepis striata*

Noted around Serena Lodge Masai Mara

PLATED LIZARDS                  Gerrhosauridae

4      Great Plated Lizard                  *Broadleysaurus major*

Seen and photographed in the grounds of Turtle Bay Beach Resort, Watamu on 17<sup>th</sup>

AGAMAS - Agamidae

5      Mwanza Flat-headed Agama      *Agama mwanzae*



Seen in Masai Mara on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>

6 Kenya Red-headed Rock Agama *Agama lionotus*

Males and females frequent around hotel in Watamu 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> and Mzima Springs, Tsavo West 21<sup>st</sup>

GECKOS - Gekkonidae

7 Common House Gecko *Hemidactylus frenatus*

Noted in virtually all lodgings

8 Kenya Dwarf Gecko *Lygodactylus keniensis*

Single at coffee stop near Narok on 28<sup>th</sup> was identified post trip from photographs (with the help of an expert)

MONITOR LIZARDS - Varanidae

9 Nile Monitor *Varanus niloticus*

Single at Tsavo East on 18<sup>th</sup> and a few around the Papyrus swamps Dunga/Kisumu on 26<sup>th</sup>

CROCODILES AND RELATIVES - Crocodylidae

10 Nile Crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus*"

Seen at Mzima Springs, Tsavo West on 21<sup>st</sup> and in Masai Mara on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>