

Kenya

Highlights I

6th October to 20th October 2023 (15 days)

Trip Report



HeadlineImage

Trip report compiled by Tour Leaders: Yoav Perlman and Francis Cherutich

Tour Summary

Our tour covered some of the best bird and mammal watching areas of Kenya. From the Indian Ocean coast to the Ugandan border, we enjoyed a fantastic diversity of habitats and their special birds and mammals. On our tour we saw many of Kenya's rarest and most sought-after species, and also appreciated the glory and splendor of the magnificent wildlife of Kenya, including the most beautiful species and stunning scenery. Our tour started along the Indian Ocean coast. We spent considerable time at Arabuko-Sokoke forest where we enjoyed amazing views of endemics like Sokoke Scops-owl, Sokoke Pipit and Amani Sunbird. The rich coastal habitats held good numbers of range-restricted Crab Plover and Sooty Gull. We then drove west through the magnificent Tsavo East and Tsavo West, where we watched huge numbers of bird and mammal species including dryland specialists such as Somali Bee-eater and Gerenuk. We then crossed the country to the far west, admiring breathtaking scenery and excellent birds en route. Kakamega forest lived up to its reputation as one of the best African rainforest reserves. Blue-headed Bee-eater, Equatorial Akalat and Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye are some of the special birds seen there. In Kisumu, Papyrus Gonoleks did their part and performed beautifully. Time spent at the wonderful Masai Mara, with its wealth of mammals and birds, was the cherry on the cake. Lion, Leopard, Cheetah and Black Rhino were some of the exciting mammals seen among the masses of ungulates. Birds were represented by a wealth of species, including Schalow's Turaco, Red-throated Wryneck and Narina Trogon.



Golden Palm Weaver by Yoav Perlman

Tour in Detail

Day 1, October 6th: Arrival in Nairobi, flight to Malindi and drive to Watamu Bay. After meeting in Nairobi, we took an early morning flight from Jomo-Kenyatta airport to Malindi. In Malindi airport we met up with Lenard Korir, our wonderful guide and driver.



Sokoke Pipit by Yoav Perlman

Already in the airport carpark we had Coastal Cisticola and Ethiopian Swallow, indicating how bird-rich this lush part of Kenya is. We quickly headed to our accommodation in Watamu Bay, dropped our gear and headed out to the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest straight away – we were so eager to explore this wonderful forest! It wasn't easy because we were attracted to the small pond inside our resort had a large breeding colony of African Golden Weaver and Golden Palm Weaver. Our first drive through this protected reserve that covers 420 square kilometres of coastal forest was exciting. The forest

itself is very heterogeneous, consisting of Brachystegia woodland, dense Cynometra forest and Afzelia lowland forest, mixed with different plantations and open patches. Each forest type supported a different suite of species including some of East Africa's rarest and most range-restricted species. Literally our first bird in the park was a day-roosting African Wood-Owl by the park headquarters. From there it only got better. Before lunch we already had walkaway views of the stunning Sokoke Scops-Owl, in beautiful orange morph. This was clearly one of the tour highlights. Afternoon in the park provided more quality birds including Scaly Babblers, Red-capped Robin-Chat and Bearded Woodpecker. The Arabuko-Sokoke Elephant Swamp was full of birds, including Forbes-Watson's Swifts hawking over and Malindi Pipit in the adjacent cultivated fields.

Days 2 & 3, October 7th and 8th: Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Sabaki River Mouth & Mida Creek. Over the next two days we spent more time in and around Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. We birded many of the trails in the park, some on foot and some while driving slowly. Our local guide Willy was amazing in listening and spotting birds, and quickly our bird list increased nicely. We saw many of the Arabuko-Sokoke specialties, including Amani Sunbird, Spotted Ground-Thrush, Red-tailed Ant-Thrush, Forest Weaver, Green-backed Twinspot, Chestnut-fronted and Retz's Helmetshrikes, Mottled Spinetail, Mombasa Woodpecker, Fasciated Snake-Eagle, and Trumpeter Hornbill. Fischer's Turaco played it hard to get but eventually we connected with a vocal pair. Sokoke Pipit eluded us at its traditional site until on our final session in the forest we had wonderful views of a couple at point-blank. The mudflats of Mida Creek and the coastal mangroves were full of birds. Highlight was of course Crab Plover – we saw well over 100, among thousands of other migrant shorebirds, including Tibetan Sand-Plover and Terek Sandpiper. The coastal estuary of Sabaki River held an impressive gull and tern roost. The most special gull was the range-restricted Sooty Gull. Seven species of tern joined the roost, including Great and Lesser Crested, White-cheeked, and Roseate.



Gerenuk by Yoav Perlman



Sokoke Scops Owl by Yoav Perlman

Day 4, October 9th: Watamu Bay to Tsavo East National Park. It was a day of long-distance driving, but very enjoyable birding was done en route as we moved between different biomes. We left Watamu Bay early in the morning. We made a circuit around Arabuko-Sokoke forest, and stopped for the first time in Jilore which is on the northern edge of the forest. It is a traditional site for Zanzibar Red Bishop, and indeed we saw there a large flock. They were quite mobile, but a few birds perched up nicely. On the overhanging wires we encountered a flock of migrant Northern Carmine Bee-eaters. After several days of birding in thick forest, in fact it was our first birding session in open farmland, which added many common farmland species to our growing list. Nice species included Sombre Greenbul and our only Grosbeak Weaver of the trip. We continued heading west along the C-103 road. It is a very quiet road, running through good habitat. As a result, it took us too much time to reach Sala Gate – so many great birds to stop and look at! White Helmetshrike, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Eastern Paradise Whydah, Fischer's Starling and our first Golden-breasted Starlings of the trip were all worth a stop. After eating our

packed lunches at Sala gate, we entered Tsavo East NP and started heading west across the park. The habitat became very arid, and bird and mammal densities were low. Still, we had good stuff including Somali Bee-eater, Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Lark and Kori Bustard. The unique Gerenuk was enjoyed stripping leaves off high acacia branches using its extended giraffe-like neck. We also had our first Fringe-eared (Beisa) Oryx and Coke's (Grant's) Gazelle. As we headed west in the park and approached Aruba dam, mammal and bird densities increased and we got our first taste of African safari experience, with large numbers of mammals grazing on the fresh grass. In the evening we reached our accommodation in Voi.



Golden-breasted Starling by Yoav Perlman

Day 5, October 10th: Tsavo East NP. We spent a full day in the park, enjoying its wealth of birds and mammals. In the morning we birded again around Aruba dam and Sentrim camp and encountered our first vulture concentration on a carcass, that attracted dozens of White-backed and Rüppell's Vulture, joined by several mighty Lappet-faced Vultures and a pair of White-headed Vultures. We also encountered our first Lions of the trip, a pride of Lionesses doing what lions usually do – sleep. During the day we encountered many cool birds, including an especially productive afternoon drive to a dry grassland in the northern section of the park that held large flocks of Cut-throats, and Straw-tailed Whydah. The grounds of Voi Wildlife Lodge had a breeding colony of Lesser masked and golden palm Weavers. The waterhole attracted many elephants, and the muddy banks hosted many shorebirds. The trees around the carpark held Tsavo and Black-bellied Sunbirds.

Day 6, October 11th: Taita Hills and Tsavo West NP. We left our accommodation in Voi early and made the ascent up the ridge to Taita Hills in good time. We met there with our local guide, Nethaniel, who's a local conservation leader too, leading DaBiCo, a grassroots organization that protects the highly threatened



Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye by Konrad Enderlein

indigenous forest and its special birds. As we stepped out of the car, we already had our first target, the striking-looking Taita White-eye. With Nethaniel we had an excellent time in the forest, having great views of Taita Apalis, and brief but good views of Taita Thrush. All three endemics in the bag! Additionally, we enjoyed watching other quality species up on the Hills, including Striped Pipit, Hartlaub's Turaco, White-starred Robin, and Yellow-throated Woodland and Evergreen-forest Warblers. We then headed towards Tsavo West NP. We continued the theme of good birds by national park gates. Our packed lunch

break by Makatu Gate was productive with White-headed Mousebird, Banded Parosoma and Black-throated Barbet. Our drive through Tsavo West NP towards our accommodation in Kilaguni Lodge was excellent – lots of birds and mammals, including group-favourite Vulturine Guineafowl, Quailfinch and Red-bellied Parrot. The waterhole at Kilaguni Lodge attracted huge numbers of mammals – elephants, buffalos, warthogs, and Spotted Hyenas. After dark the nightjar show started, with tens of individuals of three species hawking around the lit pool, including the rare Nubian Nightjar.



Black-and-White Casqued Hornbill by Donna Schulman

Day 7, October 12th: Tsavo West NP. A full day was spent in the wonderful national park. It was difficult to detach ourselves from Kilaguni Lodge grounds that held so many birds. Morning visit to Mzima Springs was excellent – so good to use those legs for walking again... The riparian forest was full of birds, including Nubian Woodpecker, Northern Brownbul and Great Kingfisher. Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Somali Tit, Somali Bunting and a day-roosting Verreaux's Eagle-Owl entertained us very well as we explored different parts of the park during the day. More mammals were added to our growing mammal list including Rock and Bush Hyrax.

Day 8, October 13th: Tsavo West NP to Nairobi. A day of travel essentially, with some great birds seen en route. During breakfast at Kilaguni Lodge we had a fly-through Red-necked Falcon, and Spotted Morning-Thrush picking up moths attracted to the lodge lights overnight. We drove out of Tsavo West NP through Mtitu Gate, picking up more new birds including Pygmy Batis and Yellow-breasted Apalis. We stopped for birding a few times along the Mombasa – Nairobi Road. A roadside stop to check upland grasslands north of Malili was fairly quiet because of how dry the grassland was. Yet we saw African pipits displaying, and Fischer's Sparrow-Larks. The Ole Sereni Hotel grounds in Nairobi held Buff-bellied Warblers and Speke's Weavers.



Mantled Guereza by Konrad Enderlein

Day 9, October 14th: Nairobi to Kakamega Forest. This was another day of long-distance travelling. Yet it was a fantastic day, driving through breathtaking scenery and stopping at vantage points that held excellent birds. After an early breakfast we left Nairobi, we headed west towards the Great Rift valley. The view from the escarpment was stunning. We stopped for birding in Manguo Dam and Timborua Dam that delivered goodies such as Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk, Gray Crowned Crane, Lesser Jacana and Gray-capped Warbler. We arrived in Kakamega forest in the afternoon and

settled down at our accommodation in Rondo Retreat Lodge. We really didn't need to go anywhere – there were so many birds on the lodge grounds! Our pre-dinner walk produced Great Blue Turaco, Brown-throated Wattle-eye and Black-faced rufous-Warbler.

Day 10, October 15th: Kakamega Forest. Full, incredible day of birding in the wonderful Kakamega Forest. Our fantastic local guide Patrick walked us along the forest trails – the best way to experience the lush Central African rainforest. It was wonderful to pick up fast-moving flocks in the forest and see as many species as possible. The list of quality birds we saw during the day is

too long, it included highlights of Blue-headed Bee-eater, Lühder's Bushshrike, Mackinnon's Shrike, Uganda Woodland-Warbler, White-tailed Ant-Thrush, White-headed Wood Hoopoe, Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat, Equatorial Akalat, Black-billed Turaco, Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill and Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye, which was one of the tour's top birds. Wow!



Papyrus Gonolek by Konrad Enderlein

Day 11, October 16th: Kakamega Forest to Kisumu. We spent the first half of the day in Kakamega Forest, checking a few more spots and walking a couple more trails. African Harrier-Hawk, White-spotted Flufftail, Honeyguide Greenbull, Banded Prinia, Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat and Red-headed Malimbe were some favourites. It wasn't easy to leave Rondo Retreat Lodge, but our next destination was calling us. After a short drive we arrived in Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria. We birded Hippo Point and enjoyed good activity of weavers including Northern Brown-headed, Slender-billed, and Black-headed, Eastern Plantain-eater, Swamp Flycatcher, Double-toothed Barbet and Black-headed Gonolek.

Day 12, October 17th: Kisumu to Masai Mara. In the morning we took a boat trip on Lake Victoria. Papyrus



Masai Mara landscape by Donna Schulman

Canary showed well by the docks. The lake was full of exciting waterbirds. However, the most-wanted bird was waiting for us on the vegetated Papyrus-covered shores. A pair of the stunning Papyrus Gonolek performed beautifully, as they should. The papyrus stands also held Carruthers's Cisticola and White-winged Swamp Warbler. After lunch we drove towards the Masai Mara. We entered the national park at Ooloolo Gate and spent the afternoon safari-driving and birding the marvellous savanna.

We were thrilled to see our first Black Rhinos of the trip, such incredible and rare animals. We stayed in the wonderful Mara Serena Lodge.

Day 13, October 18th: Masai Mara NP. Full day in Masai Mara NP. Our accommodation in Mara Serena Lodge is right at the epicentre of all action, so we didn't have to drive far to experience the powerful awesomeness of Masai Mara. Huge herds of Wildebeest, Plains Zebra, Buffalo and Impala stretching across the vast savanna. The predators - Lion, Leopard, Cheetah, Spotted Hyena and Black-backed Jackal waiting for their chance. Birds everywhere! So many birds,

so many species and such quality! The grasslands held several cisticolas, including Stout and Pectoral-patch, Temminck's Courser, Common buttonquail and different larks and pipits. The riparian forest along the Mara River produced Ross's Turaco, Rufous-necked Wryneck, Narina Trogon.

Day 14, October 19th: Masai Mara NP. Our second full day exploring Masai Mara. We focused on some special birds, birding near Simba Lodge and Mara River crossing bridge. Schalow's Turaco was a main target for the day, and we enjoyed wonderful views of a stunning pair. Other highlights and favourites included African Pygmy Kingfisher, Rufous-tailed Weaver, Silverbird and Foxy Lark.

Day 15, October 20th: Masai Mara NP to Nairobi. Our final day in Kenya. We spent the morning walking the ground of Simba Lodge, which was excellent with African Gray Woodpecker, Holub's Golden Weaver, and Red-fronted Barbet. On our way out of the park through Sekanani Gate we enjoyed more fantastic wildlife and birds and said our farewell to the wonderful Masai Mara. A couple more stops along the way back to Nairobi included near Suswa that added a few final species to the bird list. Then off to the airport, from which most of us departed back home. What a trip! We had some time to reflect on our tour, covering so many wonderful ecosystems, and indeed connecting with a huge number of highlights – birds and mammals.



Cheetah by Konrad Enderlein



Lion with Warthog piglet by Peter Friedmann

back home. What a trip! We had some time to reflect on our tour, covering so many wonderful ecosystems, and indeed connecting with a huge number of highlights – birds and mammals.

Top birds and mammals selected by tour participants.

Sokoke Scops-Owl
 Sokoke Pipit
 Yellow-bellied Wattle-eye

Gerenuk
 Cheetah

Acknowledgements

Donna Schulman, Peter Friedman, and Konrad Enderlein kindly provided images used in this report that were taken during the tour. Special thanks to our expert guide and driver Lenard Korir for doing such an excellent job. Our local ground agent provided top-class support throughout the tour.

Annotated List of species recorded

Bird species (495) list and more photos, do see the eBird Trip Report

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/161878>

Mammal species (44)

1	Bush Hyrax Tsavo West and Masai Mara	Heterohyrax brucei
2	Rock Hyrax Tsavo West and Masai Mara	Procavia capensis
3	Hippopotamus Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	Hippopotamus amphibius
4	African Savanna Elephant - EN Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	Loxodonta africana
5	Golden-rumped Sengi - EN One, Arabuko-Sokoke, 8/10/23	Rhynchocyon chrysopygus
6	Cheetah - VU Masai Mara, 19/10/23	Acinonyx jubatus
7	Lion - VU Tsavo East, Masai Mara	Panthera leo
8	Leopard - VU Masai Mara, 18/10/23	Panthera pardus
9	Spotted Hyena Tsavo West, Masai Mara	Crocuta crocuta
10	Common Dwarf Mongoose Tsavo East, Tsavo West	Helogale parvula
11	Common Slender Mongoose Tsavo East	Herpestes sanguineus
12	Banded Mongoose Tsavo East, Masai Mara	Mungos mungo
13	Black-backed Jackal Masai Mara	Lupulella mesomelas
14	Plains Zebra - NT Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	Equus quagga
15	Black Rhinoceros - CR Masai Mara	Diceros bicornis
16	Northern Giraffe - VU Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	Giraffa camelopardalis
17	Harvey's Duiker	Cephalophus harveyi
18	Blue Wildebeest	Connochaetes taurinus



	Tsavo West, Masai Mara	
19	Thomson's Gazelle Masai Mara	<i>Eudorcas thomsonii</i>
20	Gerenuk - NT Tsavo East	<i>Litocranius walleri</i>
21	Guenther's Dik-dik Tsavo East, Tsavo West	<i>Madoqua guentheri</i>
22	Kirk's Dik-dik Masai Mara	<i>Madoqua kirkii</i>
23	Grant's Gazelle Tsavo East, Tsavo West	<i>Nanger granti</i>
24	Beisa Oryx - EN Tsavo East, Tsavo West	<i>Oryx beisa</i>
25	Bohor Reedbuck Masai Mara	<i>Redunca redunca</i>
26	Cape Buffalo - NT Tsavo West, Masai Mara	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>
27	Lesser Kudu - NT Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	<i>Tragelaphus imberbis</i>
28	Common Eland Tsavo East, Masai Mara	<i>Tragelaphus oryx</i>
29	Common Waterbuck Tsavo East, Tsavo West	<i>Kobus e. ellipsiprymnus</i>
30	Defassa Waterbuck Masai Mara	<i>Kobus e. defassa</i>
31	Hartebeest Tsavo East, Masai Mara	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus cokii</i>
32	Suni One, Arabuko-Sokoke, 8/10/23	<i>Nesotragus moschatus</i>
33	Impala Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>
34	Northern Bushbuck Arabuko-Sokoke, Masai Mara	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>
35	Common Warthog Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>
36	Northern Lesser Galago One, Arabuko-Sokoke, 8/10/23	<i>Galago senegalensis</i>
37	Vervet Monkey Tsavo East, Tsavo West and Masai Mara	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>
38	Guereza Kakamega	<i>Colobus guereza</i>
39	Red-tailed Monkey Kakamega	<i>Cercopithecus ascanius</i>
40	Blue Monkey Arabuko-Sokoke, Kakamega	<i>Cercopithecus mitis</i>
41	Olive Baboon Kakamega, Masai Mara	<i>Papio anubis</i>
42	Yellow Baboon Arabuko-Sokoke, Tsavo East, Tsavo West	<i>Papio cynocephalus</i>

- | | | |
|----|---|----------------------------------|
| 43 | Ochre Bush Squirrel
Arabuko-Sokoke, Tsavo West | <i>Paraxerus ochraceus</i> |
| 44 | Unstriped Ground Squirrel
Tsavo East, Tsavo West | <i>Xerus rutilus</i> |
| 45 | Red-legged Sun Squirrel
Kakamega, Masai Mara | <i>Heliosciurus rufobrachium</i> |

Rockjumper Birding Ltd
Labourdonnais Village
Mapou, Riviere du Rempart
31803, Mauritius

Tel: (USA & Canada) toll-free: 1-888-990-5552
Email: info@rockjumper.com
Website: www.rockjumperbirding.com



Group photo at Arabuko-Sokoke Park by Peter Friedmann