



COASTAL KENYA TRIP REPORT March 2009

by Adrian Binns

Day 1 (Day 14) Mombassa to Shimba Hills



I awoke early to experience a glorious sun rising above the ocean's curvature, casting a brilliant, orange glow across the tranquil Indian Ocean. Local fishermen heading out in dugout canoes were perfectly silhouetted as they punted their way into deeper waters, making very picturesque photos.

The grounds of the hotel, situated adjacent to the white, sandy beach, produced some nice morning birds. House Crows, imported long-ago from India and now considered a tourist-resort nuisance, nosed around the rubbish dumps. Sunbirds caught the early morning rays - Eastern Olive and Purple-banded being the most interesting, though Collared were most numerous. A Eurasian Golden Oriole, Fork-tailed Drongo and Brown-breasted Barbets moved about the wide branching shade trees, as White-browed Robin-Chat, Red-backed (Black-and-White) Mannikins and Red-cheeked Cordonbleus fed on the sparse lawn.

The morning highlight was African Golden Palm Weavers (*right*) that were building nests amongst the vegetation of a small, man-made pond, engaging our interest while we ate breakfast just a few feet away. We were fortunate to see three lizard species: a large Great Plated Lizard, many Red-headed Agamas basking on tree trunks (young males of this species are stunning), and a couple of Kenya Dwarf Gecko's.



Two hours after sunrise we were heading through Kenya's second largest city, Mombassa, which boasts a fascinating history as one of the oldest ports in the world. The main part of the city is an island, accessible by bridge or ferry; we detoured slightly for sightseeing, narrated by Ben's running knowledge of his childhood home. Merchants push their wares on the narrow streets of the Old Town that dates back to the 9th century when Arab traders first set foot here. Cobblestone roads lead to Fort Jesus, which was built by the Portuguese in the 16th century to help control the region's trade. A powerful reminder of a not-too-distant era was the 'slave bell' hanging from a



concrete bell tower erected in the mid 1880's. Mombassa once served as a hub for slave-trading, and this bell once sounded the arrival of Arab slave ships coming to collect their trade and transport them to Zanzibar, an island off the coast of Tanzania, for further distribution. More recently, huge replicas of elephant tusks were placed across Moi Avenue about 50 years ago to commemorate then-Princess Elizabeth's visit to the city, reminding residents and visitors of East Africa's ivory-trade. Our tour

brought us to the southwestern side of Mombassa, where we crossed the Likoni River via a short ferry ride. Tightly-packed vehicles occupied the center portion while pedestrians, carts and bicycles filled all the remaining spaces. Though we could not get out of the car, we did spot Sooty Gulls flying up and down the Likoni River.

About 20 km south of Mombassa, we turned off the main coastal road and headed inland towards Shimba Hills National Reserve, one of Kenya's smallest parks. Lugging up a red soil road, we were thrilled to spot Northern Carmine Bee-eaters perched close by, and Ben had us turn around for our only Broad-billed Roller of the trip. A Lizard Buzzard sat beside a telephone pole and Eurasian Golden Orioles and a Black-backed Puffback darted amongst the canopy. As the



morning heated up, bird activity slowed to just Brown-hooded Kingfisher and Crowned Hornbill. Reaching the Shimba Hills Forest Lodge (above), we were greeted by calling Green Barbets, dozens of Kenyan Crested Guinea fowl and a pair of roosting African Wood Owls along the path in front of the reception area.

Set deep in the forest, the three-story lodge boasts amazing, wooden architecture that blends well into its natural surroundings. All rooms overlook a large watering hole, which attracts a wide variety of wildlife. A pair of African Fish Eagles surveyed all activities from their day-long perches, occasionally swooping down to catch a fish. A long, winding, elevated boardwalk led to a small shelter where we could see a bull



elephant drinking at a distant pool. As we ate lunch on the second floor balcony, we watched White-throated Bee-eaters flying sorties over the pond, White-eared Barbets roosting in the canopy shade, a pregnant Nile Monitor looking for food below us and Red-bellied Sun Squirrels (*left*) scurrying around the lunch tables, tipping over glasses to lick leftover soda.

The afternoon excursion into the reserve led us around the Marere circuit. Raptors in the air included Palm Nut Vultures, African White-backed Vultures and an exciting Eurasian Hobby. Numerous Eurasian Rollers perched on low stalks in weedy fields, along with a few Little Bee-eaters and a Common Rock Thrush. Hedgerows produced Tropical Boubous, Brown-crowned Tchagras, African Cuckoo, Zanzibar Sombre Greenbuls, and Yellow-bellied Greenbuls. Black-and-White Mannikins, Pale Flycatchers, and Fork-tailed Drongos were also seen. New for the trip was the drab-colored Siffling Cisticola which ended-up being more numerous than the Croaking Cisticola. We added to our impressive mammal list, seeing Sykes Monkeys, Angolan Black-and White Colobus for which this park holds the highest density, Coke's Hartebeest, Maasai Giraffe, Suni, Warthogs and Buffalos.



We witnessed Africa's never-ending struggle for survival in the showdown between four elephants and a mother and calf Sable Antelope (*left*) (the Roosevelt subspecies which only occurs in this Kenyan park). Riveted by the action, we watched in fascination and horror as the scene unfolded. Somehow, the young Sable became separated from its

mother when the elephants moved into the area. The calf sat down to hide as a young elephant came over to inspect it. The mother Sable frantically paced a good distance away, possibly trying to divert the elephant's attention away from her offspring.

The calf eventually blew it's meager cover, arising to walk towards one of the elephants. It was a showdown between David and Goliath, though the diminutive mammal had little chance when the whole group of elephants quickly circled the young creature, bellowing angrily and visibly stomping their feet. The largest male tusker was in musth, secretions flowing from its temporal glands as a result of a large increase in testosterone levels, which in turn causes extremely aggressive behavior. Reaching down it lifted the antelope by its trunk and flung it into the air. The angry bull repeated this several times, with the herd congregating close by, looking angry as hell, with ears flapping, feet stomping and bellowing loudly. After one last toss, the elephants left the calf for dead and moved on. We pulled up a little closer and to our surprise, we could see the antelope was still alive, blinking in it's crouched position. What internal damage it suffered we would never know. All this time, the mother sable stood watching in the distance, maybe as sad as we were to witness such violence against her innocent baby. Nature works in mysterious ways. When we returned to the stop the following morning there was no sign of the young sable or it's mother.

A plethora of nocturnal creatures exist in the forest, and many of them visited our lodge's floodlit watering hole to enjoy the handouts and delight the guests. A Greater Galago (*right*) came in for a "banana split" and a family group of Bush Pigs emerged from the shadows to feed amongst the vegetation in the shallow pond. Marsh Mongoose ambled along the banks of the pond and a Large-spotted Genet climbed the platform tower table to feast on meat scraps.



Day 2 (Day 15) Shimba Hills; Mida Creek; Arabuko-Sokoke Forest



As the coffee kicked in this morning an Eastern Olive Sunbird flitted about below the balcony and the rhythmic call of Green Barbets echoed around the forest. By 6:45am we entered Shimba Hills Reserve and soon had

Tambourine Doves taking off from the road as we drove through. A quick flurry of activity along a trackside tree-line produced three orioles - an African Golden, several Eurasian Golden and a calling Green-headed - along with Common Cuckoo and Eastern Nicator. Black-bellied Starlings, a coastal forest starling, moved about in small groups and other woodland species included the distinctive coastal race of Tropical Boubou which lacks a white wing bar, and Black-headed Apalis. Fork-tailed Drongo, Collared Sunbird, Eastern Bearded and White-browed Scrub-Robins showed on the edge of the woods, while Flappet Lark, Palm-nut Vulture and both Siffling and Croaking Cisticola made appearances in the open areas.

By mid-morning we were back at the lodge where we were greeted by a Fischer's Turaco in the car park, the wood-owls in the same spot as yesterday and dozens of Kenyan Crested Guineafowl (*right*) that were feeding on grain thrown out by the kitchen staff. Below the verandah the Nile Monitor was back and a Striated (Green-backed) Heron perched motionless beside the waters' edge.



Leaving the memorable reserve, we caught the 11:45am ferry back into Mombassa and made a short stop for a picnic lunch at a roadside petrol station an hour north of the city. The ginger beer here was most refreshing!

We arrived at Mida Creek at 2:30pm and the tide was already coming in at a fast clip. We met up with

Willie, our charismatic local guide, and walked quickly across the mudflats to the elevated blind, with the rising tide nipping at our heels. Are there any other birding places where the tide comes in faster?

Overwintering Crab Plovers are the big attraction here, and there was no shortage of them. There were large numbers of Greenshank and Little Stint, along with Terek Sandpiper, Lesser Sandplovers, Grey (Black-bellied) Plovers, a couple of Greater Sandplover, Gull-billed Terns, Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel. In the distance a group of Greater Flamingos stood tall.



From Mida Creek it is only a short drive to the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, the largest stretch of indigenous coastal forest remaining in East Africa and a critical habitat for globally-endangered species. Arabuko means 'place of thin elephants' and Sokoke means 'deep shade'. We took one of the driving trails through mixed forest and *Brachystegia* woodland. It is in the dense but open canopy of the *Brachystegia* trees that the widest variety of bird species can be found, and we were not disappointed. We enjoyed such specialties as Amani Sunbird, Mombasa Woodpecker, Pale Batis, Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike (*right*), Little Yellow Flycatcher as well as Dark-backed Weaver, Eastern Black-headed Oriole, Common Scimitarbill, Green Barbet, Black-backed Puffback, the white morph of the African Paradise Flycatcher, Lizard Buzzard and Zanzibar Sombre Greenbul. Two stunning species that gave us fits as they were so close but we could not find them were Peter's Twinspot and Four-coloured Bush-shrike. Butterflies were surprisingly few with the nicest being a cooperative Broad-bordered *Acraea*. We saw a Speke's Sand Lizard scurrying along the sandy track.



Based out of the Driftwood Club, located on the southern side of Malindi, we watched Sooty Gulls flying up and down the white sand beach, and were amused by a small White-bellied Hedgehog nosing around the swimming pool as we dined.

Day 3 (Day 16) Arabuko-Sokoke Forest; Sabaki Estuary



Our morning departure activities flushed a Little Sparrowhawk from a tree near the car park where it probably had spent the night.

The drive to the Jilore gate of the Arabuko-Sokoke forest took a little longer than expected, however we did get to see a Lizard Buzzard sitting alongside the road and Black-bellied Starlings before getting to the barrier.

This morning we entered the dense

Cynometra forest section, in search of the Sokoke Scops Owl. Following the red soil track we came across White-throated Bee-eaters, Black-throated Apalis, Ashy Flycatcher and an African Oriole. A Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew ran across the road, affording only the quickest of views if one happened to be looking straight ahead!

The butterflies were active, providing perched views of Black Swordtail, Citrus Swallowtail and the gorgeous Flame-bordered Charaxes.

We followed Willie on foot into the thick underbrush, winding our way through tangles and an imaginary path. I don't know how he knew where to go, but soon enough he showed us a pair of very confiding Sokoke Scops Owls (*right*) roosting about eye level.



On the way out, we returned to a section of *Brachystegia* woodland and caught up with a flock of Chestnut-fronted Helmet-shrikes, Amani Sunbirds, African Crowned Eagle and the small Green-backed Woodpecker. Ben spotted a perfectly camouflaged, plain-looking Tree Gecko on a tree trunk.

Back at the Driftwood we relaxed a few hours over lunch, the swimming pool, and a not-so-refreshing dip in the tepid Indian Ocean. A steady parade of Sooty Gulls streamed up the beachfront, while a handful of Hüglin's Gulls soared further up the Malindi coastline.



The incoming tide and afternoon light to our backs made for perfect conditions along the Sabaki River. After parking the vehicle beyond the village we walked down to the estuary. A pair of Black-headed Lapwings stood in the shade of a palm tree that had a Pale Flycatcher perched on a lower frond. Namaqua Doves skirted across the sand dunes and we caught sight of a Malachite Kingfisher flying away over the rushes. The mudflats appeared completely white, so numerous were the waders, terns and gulls. Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans stood tall with African Spoonbills and Black-headed Herons (*above*) walking amongst them. Sooty and Lesser Black-backed Gulls mixed with Caspian, Great Crested, Lesser Crested and White-winged Terns. There was even a few Pied Avocets. Lint Stints, Common Ringed Plover and Curlew Sandpipers comprised the majority of smaller waders actively feeding in the mud. The supporting cast included Greater and Lesser Sand Plover, Wood Sandpipers, Marsh Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, Greenshanks, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew and a Broad-billed Sandpiper.

Day 4 (Day 17) Arabuko-Sokoke Forest; Tsavo East

We made a final visit back into the forest for three hours this morning, beginning at the forest station. Though the woods seemed quiet we did manage to get good looks at Lizard Buzzard, Green Barbet and a pair of Trumpeter Hornbills. A Great Sparrowhawk flew over the canopy opening and vanished, and Yellow-bellied Greenbul moved actively in a small stand of bamboo.

Once into the *Brachystegia* the lovely tropical call of a nearby Eastern Nicator led us to pinpoint and view at least most of the bird! We also tracked down the Eastern Bearded Scrub Robin by following its melodious song. We came across Northern Carmine Bee-eater, Black-bellied Starlings, Amani Sunbird, Isabelline Shrike, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Dark-backed



Weavers, and Chestnut-fronted Helmet-shrikes. We added several new trip species: Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Plain-backed Sunbird, Red-tailed Ant-Thrush, Sokoke Batis (the coastal Kenyan race of Forest Batis), Ashy Flycatcher and Blue-mantled Crested-flycatcher.

At 10:15am we were on our way inland to Tsavo East National Park, entering through the southern Buchuma Gate shortly after 2pm. Two of the brightest and most colorful



birds were soon on display, the Golden-breasted Starling and Golden Pipit (*left*); field guide pictures cannot do justice to these striking birds. The iridescence of the former and large, yellow, butterfly-like quality of the latter make these two birds exquisite. Covering over 8,000 square miles, the Tsavos East and West is Kenya's largest park; the two are separated by the Nairobi-Mombasa highway. Interestingly, Tsavo East, home to late 19th century man-eating lions,

is one of the least visited. Maybe it is the harsh, arid scrubland dotted with baobabs, because it is certainly not the wildlife. Though poaching decimated the park's elephants and rhinos in the 1970's and 80's, the good news is that they are now on the rebound, and we enjoyed many wonderful sightings of elephants. Rhinos still remain elusive.

A White-bellied Bustard remained inconspicuous in the tall grass, as Black-faced Sandgrouse sat motionless in the open assuming that we did not notice them. A few sparrows were noticeable, these being Parrot-billed Sparrows and the rather drab Yellow-spotted Petronia. Taita Fiscal, Long-tailed Fiscal and Northern White-crowned Shrikes were well-represented. We had good numbers of larks and wheatears, including Pink-breasted, Rufous-naped and Red-winged Larks, along with Isabelline Wheatear and one Pied Wheatear. We found Ashy Cisticola perched characteristically on low shrubs, and a likely Upcher's Warbler amongst the acacias. We noticed untidy Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver stick nests dotting an acacia, while Grey Hornbills announced their presence with a single drawn-out high-pitched note.

Several birds caught our attention around a watering hole, so we stopped to see what else might be around. A Common Sandpiper and African Spoonbill worked the water's edge, while a Hammerkop perched on an exposed rock. Straw-tailed Wydahs preened in a tree after having a drink, as Fischer's and Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks swept across the red soil in search of seeds. A Common Rock Thrush alighted on a dead stick and a Northern Wheatear took advantage of dung piles to get an elevated view.



It couldn't have missed the large elephant ambling towards the pool. The big bull circled the entire pool carefully, pausing occasionally to have a drink. Our attention was diverted to watch an Amur Falcon fly in and chase a dragonfly before flying away. That was exciting! It was not the only raptor that we would see this afternoon. By day's end there would be many Montagu Harriers as well a Lesser Spotted Eagle, Gabar Goshawk and Eastern Pale Chanting Goshawk.

A nice surprise was finding a Somali Bee-eater which reaches the southern end of its range in Tsavo East. We finished with a family group of hippos having a mud bath, joined by a small herd of buffalos quenching their thirst.

Day 5 (Day 18) Tsavo East; Taita Hills lowlands

In high spirits this morning, we set ourselves the fun goal of finding 50 species before breakfast. As we took a few minutes for tea, coffee and biscuits a Pearl-spotted Owlet called, a fine beginning for our game! Superb Starlings and Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers moved boisterously, while a Spotted Morning Thrush sang in the manicured garden grounds. Leaving at 6:30am, we

set off to work the low open scrub. Immediately outside the gate, a pair of Verreaux's Eagle Owl were duetting before flying off for one last crack at a meal, and a congregation of Spur-winged Plovers had spent the night sheltered at the base of an acacia. A small group of Somali Ostriches were feeding alongside Impalas (*right*). We found over a dozen Kori Bustards and enjoyed many larks along with Golden Pipits, Grassland and Plain-backed Pipit. Raptors included Pygmy



Falcon, Bateleur, Montagu Harrier's and a Martial Eagle. We had good looks at a couple of Tsavo Bush-shrikes (split from Rose-breasted Bush-shrike), Northern Crombec, Grey Flycatcher, Ashy Cisticola and Nubian Woodpecker. In just about two hours we achieved our goal!



Following breakfast we packed up and searched the grounds one last time, finding a Cutthroat amongst hundreds of African Silverbills drinking at the fountain. The spectacular Grey-headed Bush-shrike moved from tree to tree near the bandas, and Collared Pranticoles flew over the dried Aruba Dam.

Heading west towards the Voi gate, Dwarf Mongoose, a large Savannah Monitor and a Gerenuk (*left*) caught our attention along with the beautiful Pangani Longclaw. Raptors were well represented by a pair of African Hawk-Eagles, Brown Snake Eagle, Tawny Eagle and a Black-chested Snake Eagle. A thicket produced a Bare-eyed Thrush, Barred Warbler and Grey Wren Warbler as well a silhouette of a nightjar which



turned out to be a Square-tailed. At Kanderi Swamp (*left*) a Hunter's Sunbird actively fed along the flowers on the embankment while Cattle Egrets picked up insects that avoided being trampled on by Coke's Hartebeest, Common Waterbuck and zebras and elephants.

Isolated rocky hills punctuate the savannah around the Voi gate and here we found Yellow-spotted Bush Hyrax,

Lesser Kudu and the sure-footed Klipspringer (*right*). We finally located a Pearl-spotted Owlet amongst the lower branches of an open tree and saw White-bellied Go-away Birds, Red-and-yellow Barbets on a red termite mound, Pale Flycatcher, Slate-coloured Boubou, Orange-bellied Parrot and Secretary Birds taking to the air. Yellow Baboons and zebras walked across the plains and a Topi kept company with a herd of Coke's Hartebeest.



A bumpy, one-hour journey from Voi (just outside of Tsavo East) brought us to the Saravo Taita Hills Lodge. After check-in we drove to the nearby Lumo Community Wildlife Sanctuary and spent two-and-a-half wonderful hours exploring the area on foot. We covered only about one kilometer along a dirt track, reveling in the bird activity, the habits of nearby farming families, and the brilliant colors of sunset. Mount Kilimanjaro stood alone in the distance to the west, a small patch of snow visible on it's summit. To the northeast the Taita Hills (*below*).



A dark morph Gabar Goshawk flushed from its shaded perch as we arrived as did a pair of Eastern Pale Chanting Goshawks. White-headed Mousebirds showed well as they worked their way up to the top of a shrub. Slate-coloured Boubou, White-browed Scrub-Robin (*right*), Black-necked Weavers, Purple Grenadier and Black-throated Barbet soon followed. A Rueppell's Agama (*below*) blended in perfectly with the red soil. As we moved slowly from shrub to shrub it felt as though we were always seeing something.



This most memorable evening yielded Southern Grosbeak Canary, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Hildebrandt's Starling, Pink-breasted Lark, Rattling Cisticola, Dodson's Bulbul's, Three-streaked Tchagra, Grey Wren-Warbler, Red-fronted Warbler, Somali Golden-breasted Bunting, Scaly Chatterers, Bare-eyed Thrush, Northern Grey Tit, Red-faced and Northern Crombec, Banded Parisoma, Tiny Cisticola, White-bellied Canary and Yellow-bellied Eremomela. While we noted the

Red-billed Oxpeckers clinging to livestock, it was the working boma that caught our interest, the first one we got to experience up-close. Sharp-thorned acacia shrubs were packed together, providing shelter from predators for the domestic cattle, donkeys and goats huddled inside.



Day 6 (Day 19) Taita Hills to Nairobi

Our final morning was spent climbing the winding and occasionally very steep narrow dirt road up the Taita Hills to an elevation of about 6000 feet. Bathed in sunlight, the view to the north and south was simply stunning. Kilimanjaro loomed in the distance as Tsavo West stretched out on the floor beneath with the mesas protruding to the south. Small holdings and larger villages were spread out with terraced plots allowing farmers to maximize their agricultural opportunities on the steep terrain.



We met Jonam and his son at the appointed spot, and duly had a Hartlaub's Turaco and Spot-flanked Barbet as Rock Martin, Plain Martin, Common House Martin and Red-rumped Swallow flew overhead. A Stripe-cheeked Greenbul bounced about the forest edge and after several sightings showed well enough. It took nearly half an hour to finally get good looks at our target Taita Thrush, as several of them were flipping the leaf litter in the dark forest understory.

Though Cabanis Greenbuls were vocal in one particular section, we only got a brief look as one came down to forage with the thrushes. A pair of White-starred Robins also showed.

From here we continued walking along a beautiful stretch of forest path where we had a female Mount Kilimanjaro Two-horned Chameleon (*below right*) and, unfortunately, little else. The forest was amazingly quiet, with the exception of school kids running around during a playtime break at their hilltop school. We descended well into the forest on a narrow track, working our way up and down trails for about three quarters of an hour. A few butterflies caught our attention namely Desmond's Taita Green-banded Swallowtail, Pearl Charaxes and the Garden Inspector (*below left*).



We were finally rewarded with our second Taita Hills endemic, the Taita Apalis, a slow moving, mid to low canopy warbler. Hugging the forest edge we passed close to agricultural plots where a woman was collecting water to take back on her head to her home. Avian activity was remarkably low until we came across a small flock of Taita White-eyes (*right*).



It was an hour's ride descending down the hills to Voi where we 14 stopped for a picnic lunch before beginning the long journey to Nairobi. The road from Mombassa is much improved and we made good time as we passed the park boundaries of Tsavo West and Tsavo East and the many baobabs that dot the landscape. The last 100 kilometers was another story, with road construction and deviations bringing the traffic to a crawl at times. Though the group was tired, we kept our eyes on the road, fascinated by the mix of tractor trailers, land rovers, matutus and donkey-pulled carts, all jockeying for position at top speed on the deeply-rutted dirt "highway." Peter's driving skills were even more admired after darkness descended! We finally reached the airport shortly after 8pm, and did some last minute repacking before saying goodbye to Ben and our driver, Peter. All told, it was an extraordinary trip with over 525 bird species, 72 mammals, numerous butterflies and a handful of reptiles. The wonderful memories of East Africa will remain strong in our hearts for a long time.



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