



## KENYA and TANZANIA TRIP REPORT Sept 25-Oct 23, 2009

### PART 3 - Coastal Kenya

*text and photos by Adrian Binns*

#### Oct 18 / Day 24 - Shimba Hills

Having crossed the Tanzania-Kenya border at Lunga Lunga, we were back in Kenya, in the southeastern corner of the country, on the coast of the Indian Ocean. We made a mad dash up the coast so we could get to Shimba Hills Lodge before the gate was closed on us. There were quick views of African Goshawk, Palm Nut Vulture and Lizard Buzzard and a bathroom stop at a roadside lodge where thirty five women were sitting on the lawn waiting to meet with the local councilman. We thought we had made it to Shimba Hills in time, but the gate was locked. Perhaps the ranger thought she might knock-off early, but she was still around, and after some negotiations we were let inside.

The lodge is a wonderfully-constructed, three-story timber “tree-house” set deep in the coastal rainforest. From our covered dining room verandah we were able to watch the activities of myriad nocturnal creatures at the floodlit watering hole. Nile Monitors glided through the waters, and two Large-spotted Genets were attracted to the bait-stand below us. They were soon joined by an American Civet (*below*) looking for any fallen scraps. Just after settling in for the night, Ben discovered a Wood Owl outside his room and everyone got to see it at eye-level.



## Oct 19 / Day 25 - Shimba Hills; Arabuko-Sokoke Forest

The dining room was no less entertaining at breakfast, when Crowned Hornbills perched on the balcony and stunning Red-bellied Coast Squirrels mustered the courage to sneak in looking for scraps.



Shimba Hills is a small park with rolling hills, grasslands, open glades, woodlands and coastal forest. Cruising through the open areas we soon saw many species, including: an eye-level view of a perched Flappet Lark; Siffling Cisticola a small non de-script warbler; Croaking Cisticola, larger and slightly more marked than Siffling; and our only Pangani Longclaw (*left*) of the trip. Along thickets we saw Brown-hooded Kingfisher and a Yellowbill, while a Grey Wagtail flushed from the track as we drove by. I wondered why the migrants, such as Eurasian Roller and Red-backed Shrike, have not arrived, as it is now the middle of October. As we drove around the Marere Circuit, a couple of Palm-nut Vultures were viewed in flight, and Trumpeter Hornbills alighted at the top of a tree.

The woods edge and grasslands buzzed with activity. We heard a Klaas' Cuckoo calling nearby and could see Black-bellied Starlings, Black Cuckoo-shrike, Red-tailed Ant-Thrush, the coastal race of Tropical Boubou, Dark-capped Bulbul and a Zanzibar Sombre Greenbul feeding on a termite hatch. Under the right conditions, hatches usually occur after the rains. The winged termites, known as imagoes, leave the colony to reproduce and establish new colonies.

Less than ten minutes later we encountered a second termite hatch. Not only was there far more activity but it was right in front of us on the track! Two Yellow-bellied Greenbuls, Ashy Flycatcher, Narina Trogon, Dark-backed Weaver, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, two Red-capped Robin-Chats, Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrikes, Green-headed Oriole, Black-backed Puffback, and Black-headed Apalis were all fly-catching as the winged termites emerged from a hole in the ground. We watched in amazement for about 10 minutes until the mixed flock gradually faded away, hopefully as satisfied as we were.

There are not many large predators in Shimba Hills, which makes it a little easier for the last remaining population in East Africa of the Roosevelt Sable Antelope (*below*). We had no problem locating a herd of about a dozen feeding alongside a Maasai Giraffe, and later came an impressive though shy male. Other mammals we encountered included Buffalo, the diminutive Suni, Bushbuck and a troop of Yellow Baboons.



At the Makadara picnic site we got out to stretch our legs and walk around the perimeter of the glade as an Angolan Pied Colobus and Blue Monkey watched us. Butterflies abounded including Victoria Silverline, Green-veined Charaxes, Coast Glider, Golden-banded Forester and Black Swordtail. Elephants had walked through the picnic site about an hour earlier, judging by the dung piles left behind. It was most fascinating to watch Dung Beetles fighting for fresh elephant droppings. Three of them would grasp a piece of dung and begin to tuck it under themselves and add more, all the time rolling it into a ball. With so much dung available in this pile I wondered why one beetle would try and take a piece from another beetle's ball?



We returned to the lodge to pack up and take a short walk around the tree-level wooden walkway that leads into the forest. Kenya Crested Guineafowls stalked passed us. A Fish Eagle made the obligatory attempt to snag a fish and Nile Monitors swam through the water hyacinth to bask on the bank. A beautiful Clouded Mother of Pearl butterfly landed next to us with wings closed. Ann and I almost stepped on the neatest of colored snakes, a Speckled Green Snake (*above*), that was crossing the walkway. About three feet in length it kept flicking its blue tongue as it slithered up a post and into the leaves beside the railing. Blending in perfectly, it positioned itself to look like part of the vegetation and waited for anything to venture within striking distance.

An hour north of Shimba Hills we caught the ferry across to Mombassa. After a stop at Nakumatt Mall for odds and ends, including ice cream, we headed along the coastal road through bustling towns, smaller villages with mud houses thatched with coconut fronds, and endless cissal plantations dotted with towering bare leaved baobabs.

Arriving at the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Reserve headquarters, we picked up our excellent local guide, Willy, and headed inland to the *Cynometra* forest which makes up almost half of this coastal forest. Our target here is the Sokoke Scops Owl (*right*), which Willy had staked out. There were no trails to follow through the dense habitat, but somehow Willy was able to lead us through, around, and under branches to a delightful pair of brown-grey morphs. While in the forest we heard an



East Coast Akalat calling within fifty feet, but we got few glimpses, even after getting down on our knees to peer for it at ground level. A Fiery-necked Nightjar lifted off the red soil track and disappeared as dusk descended upon us.

## Oct 20 / Day 26 - Arabuko-Sokoke Forest; Sabaki Estuary



The thriving coastal town of Malindi served as our home base for the next few days. After a comfortable evening in our hotel Eden Rock, we ventured out with Willy again, this time exploring the more open *Brachystegia* woodlands. The gorgeous Four-coloured Bush-Shrike skulks in dense undergrowth, advertising its presence with a loud, clear 3- or 4-noted call, but refusing to show itself. With patience we all got to see it in due course as it moved from one thicket to another. As Narina Trogons and Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robin kept to themselves, a small

flock of Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrikes moved through the canopy with two Dark-backed Weavers, in an area that had Little Yellow Flycatcher and Black-headed Apalis actively feeding in shrubs.

While trying to locate a calling Plain-backed Sunbird, a flock of Retz's Helmet-Shrikes landed in a wide brachystegia. Black-bellied Starlings soon followed as did several Clarke's Weavers, a Kenyan endemic that is known only from this forest from April to November. They likely breed north of the Sabaki River but no nest has ever been found. As we worked various sections of the forest, many of the birds were vocalizing, possibly due to the impending breeding season. We encountered Northern Brownbul, Pale Batis (*right*), Grey Cuckoo-Shrike, Eastern Black-headed Oriole, Black-backed Puffback, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Emerald Spotted Wood-Dove and Amani Sunbird. For once, our eyes were down as we walked the sandy trail, attracted to elephant footprints, ant lion pits, and Speke's Sand Lizards running away from us.

Overhead, a Southern Banded Snake-Eagle was calling from high in the sky. We managed to track down a Pallid Honeyguide amongst a tree's green leaves, and got a brief look at a group of Scaly Babblers. While viewing a Common Scimitarbill, a LeVaillant's Cuckoo popped into view, only to be gone when I pulled my binoculars down.





Taking lunch back at the hotel, we had plenty of time to watch Golden Palm Weavers (*left*) nest building near the outdoor patio. The nests were in various stages of construction with the most complete ones sporting males hanging upside down flapping their wings in an attempt to lure a mate. I don't know about the females of the species, but we were quite impressed with his efforts! As we were assembling mid-afternoon, an Osprey flew over the hotel grounds.

The Sabaki Estuary, our afternoon destination, is fed by the Galana River which flows through Tsavo East and enters the Indian Ocean at this spot. Turning off the Malindi to Lamu road, we drove carefully through rain-washed tracks and gullies to get as close to the sand dunes as possible, before disembarking the vehicle and walking out to the estuary. We passed an African Cuckoo-Hawk standing in grasses, and located a pair of Black-headed Lapwings with one youngster in the shade of a palm tree. For the last two-and-a-half hours of daylight we enjoyed the spectacle of birds on exposed mudflats, their numbers increasing with the rising tide.



Shorebirds comprised the bulk of the scene, with Curlew Sandpipers the most numerous. We also picked out Terek Sandpipers, Common Ringed Plover, Lesser Sand Plovers and Little Stints. Greenshanks, Marsh and Wood Sandpipers were busy feeding in the shallow tidal pools that separated us from the more distant mudflats. Lesser and Greater Flamingos flocked in the deeper water, joined by a lone Pink-backed Pelican. Several Yellow-billed Storks flew back and forth from the estuary to the adjacent marshes. White-faced Whistling Ducks waddled amongst the waders - Pied Avocets, Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel and their larger relatives, Eurasian Curlews. Abundant gulls included Sooty, Lesser Black-backed and Hüglin's, while the terns consisted of Caspian, Lesser Crested, Common and many Gull-billed.

Back at the hotel, I spent a little time trying to find a White-bellied Hedgehog amongst the ground cover of the hotel grounds after dark. Unsuccessful, I went to bed. Some time later, the night watchman banged on my door to say he had found one, which a few of us went out to see.

## Oct 21 / Day 27 - Arabuko-Sokoke Forest; Mida Creek; Ngomeni; Gongoni

Lizard Buzzards love to perch on wires, fence posts or from vantage points on a tree along the roadsides. The coastal road is as good a place as any to find one and sure enough there was one on a Palm tree. We were back in the forest once again this morning, beginning around the headquarters with several Ashy Flycatchers. Taking the same track as yesterday, and branching off into the thickets, we soon saw Tiny Greenbul, Blue-mantled Crested-Flycatcher, Tambourine Dove and Sokoke Batis. Plain-backed Sunbirds were heard but continued to elude us in spite of Willy's perseverance to get one in sight. We came across Red-tailed Ant-Thrushes, Mombassa Woodpecker, Eastern Olive Sunbird and followed the rising trill call of a Scaly-throated Honeyguide until we finally found it.



One of our targets today was the Sokoke Pipit, a small, heavily streaked bird. We searched areas of dense thickets with small patches of grasses, until we found two birds. Though not far from us, we had difficulty getting good looks, as they walked through the grasses and under shrubs. Finally one confident bird flew up and landed on a branch over our heads for us all to admire.

Surprisingly, there were not as many butterflies as I expected, but we did find a few ranging in size from large Constantine's Swallowtail to Tiny Orange Tips. As we walked the main sandy track, we were mindful of ants, especially those that could inflict a nasty bite. We came across a group of large black ants walking in a column down the track. This party was likely on a mission to find termites, which they not only consume, but also capture to bring back to their colony to work for them. The line of marching ants suddenly started dispersing in all directions, and to our amazement began to hum. They get their local name, the "singing ant" from this sound which emanates from vibrating parts of their body. They exhibit this unique behavior when agitated, as a means of communicating with each other. Soon the performance was over and we watched the group restore itself back into their original column. Crowned Hornbill, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, African Paradise Flycatcher, Trumpeter Hornbill and Fork-tailed Drongos were seen before we left.



Late morning found us across the main road at Mida Creek, an important conservation area on coastal Kenya. There are few places in the world where you can watch the tide come in at an extraordinary rate, advancing before

your eyes, and Mida Creek is one of them. At the time of our arrival the tide was ebbing, exposing extensive mangrove-lined mudflats, providing sustenance to myriad shorebirds.



Setting up scopes we scanned the area, enjoying many of the same species seen at the Sabaki Estuary. But the outstanding star here is the Crab Plover (*above*), a unique avocet-sized shorebird that overwinters along the East African coast. They spend their winters, August through April, along the East African coast, and Mida Creek is one of the best and easiest locations to see this globally endangered species. We spent time comparing Greater and Lesser Sand Plover, and added Lesser Crested Tern to our trip list. In the woods, we found a Mangrove Kingfisher perched low in a tree in the grassland, and Yellow-fronted Canary and Purple-banded Sunbird near the mangroves.

Toasting a successful morning, Ben and Sue drank freshly-bored coconut water offered by an enterprising local entrepreneur. Arafa, one the Mida Creek guides, displayed locally designed jewelry and dozens of Kenyan kanga's (sarongs), which are rectangular pieces of cotton, printed with vibrant, colorful, traditional patterns. The local economy as well as the Mida Creek Conservation and Awareness Group, in particular, benefited from our purchases.



After lunch we headed north to bird several different areas. Driving north beyond the Sabaki River, we stopped to inspect a flock of small birds that landed on the roadside, which turned out to be Red-billed Queleas. Far more interesting was a pair of Fire-fronted Bishops (*left*) moving about in an agricultural plot. We got extraordinary looks at this stunningly colorful seedeater.

At Ngomeni, we walked through a coastal short grass plain dotted with cissal, trying to avoid mud puddles of various sizes. We covered a great deal of territory before finding another endemic, the Malindi Pipit (*right*). Three of these next to a couple of Grassland Pipits made for good comparisons.

We next checked the Gongoni Salt Pans for any Western Reef-herons or Dimorphic Egrets. From a distance there looked to be a few potential candidates but most turned out to be Little Egrets. Lesser Flamingos were spread throughout the pans, and closer birds included Greenshanks, Curlew Sandpipers and Three-banded Plovers. In the short grasses that lead to the salt pans we came across several more Malindi Pipits.



## Oct 22 / Day 28 - Tsavo East

Leaving Malindi, we drove south and west, heading inland. We took a dirt road south of Kilifi to cut out Mombassa city traffic, and give us a chance to bird along the way. Northern Carmine Bee-eaters, Green Pigeons, Northern Brownbul, Red-billed Quelea and Fire-fronted Bishops were at our first stop. Two Brown-hooded Parrots flew into a palm and one stayed long enough to scope it. A couple of raptors were seen well - an African Goshawk in flight and a Cuckoo-Hawk perched beside the road.



Near the Sagala Hills we spent an hour-and-a-half walking the dry acacia scrub finding many species. Three whydahs were seen well as they flew across a wide pipeline cut - Straw-tailed, Eastern Paradise and Steel-blue, all with long tail streamers. Somali Golden-breasted Bunting (*left*) and a White-browed Scrub Robin were singing up a storm from the top of the acacia. A Grey-headed Bush-shrike was making its grating call and a Pink-breasted Lark was displaying. In the lower portions of the acacias we came across Red-fronted Warbler, Pygmy Batis, Blue-capped Cordonblue, Nubian Woodpecker and Grey Wren-Warbler. Just as it began to drizzle, Ben spotted a pair of Red-naped Bush-shrikes. There was a little hide-and-peek going on before we were all able to view at least one the two birds.

By early afternoon we arrived at the Voi Gate to Tsavo East (*right*), Kenya's largest national park. Unfortunately, we had time for just a short afternoon visit to this wonderful place, but we made the most of it and enjoyed some great wildlife sightings. Grey-headed Kingfisher, Hunter's and Amethyst Sunbird, Von der Decken's Hornbill and a tailless Red-billed Hornbill were seen upon entering the park.



Taking the loop road around the headquarter hill we soon came across Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers, Grey Hornbill and our first look at a Tsavo Bush-shrike (*left*). Groups of Yellow-necked Spurfowl foraged between thickets, and the occasional Isabelline Wheatear hopped along the ground. Barn and Lesser Striped Swallows hunted insects over the more open grasslands. We spotted a Northern Crombec, and delighted in seeing the brilliantly-colored Golden-breasted Starlings. Elephants covered in red dust lumbered through the tall grasses.



Like most of the places we had visited, Tsavo was reeling from the drought. The only yellow weaver we came across was Vitteline Masked. In a small, roadside pool Jan found a male Greater Painted Snipe walking along the mudflats; it settled into position behind some shrub stems, making it difficult to see. Our attention was diverted away from a circling Black-chested Snake Eagle when our vehicle rounded a bend and startled two Leopards (*below*) in the open. We thought we may have interrupted a romantic interlude - but in the middle of the afternoon? One Leopard ran across the track and into the scrub, while the second one, a male, took a moment to stare at us before walking away in the opposite direction across the short savanna. Still in view, the first Leopard looped back and attempted to join the male, but changed it's mind and returned back to the scrub, revealing that it was another male. I am not sure why two males would be out together since they are usually solitary.



Crossing the Pipeline Road we saw Taita and Long-tailed Fiscals perched alongside the track. A few Red-winged Larks were singing from low, prominent posts, and a White-bellied Bustard stalked slowly away from us, hoping that we did not see it. We were surprised to see three large Savanna Monitors (*below*) along a 5-kilometer stretch. Though relatively common, we usually find just one per trip of these smaller, arid-loving relatives of the Monitor Lizard. Four Lesser Kudus brought our total of mammal sightings for this safari to an impressive 84.



We had been so lucky in dodging rain on this trip... I guess we shouldn't complain that we had to pull down the pop-up roof and confine our viewing to inside the vehicle during a passing rainstorm. Sadly, there was just enough rain to make it almost impossible to find anything



amongst the thickets. Once we reached the more open area around the Aruba Dam the rain had let up enough to pop the roof up again. Kori's Bustard, the largest of all bustards, paced the short grasses in search of a potential mate. Gabar Goshawk and Peregrine scared up any small passerines in their path. Close to the vehicle we watched Chestnut-headed Sparrow-Larks (*left*) actively foraging, and pondered over a wet Singing Bush-Lark, before deciding that is what it was. Eurasian Rollers had just arrived on their wintering grounds and we got to see two of them. On the way out of the park new birds for the day included Red-backed Shrike, Yellow-spotted Petronia and Southern Ground Hornbill.

We entered the Shaba Camp, west of Voi, just as it was getting dark. Our vehicle spotlighted a Four-toed Elephant-Shrew as it ran across the road. Both Lesser and Greater Galagos were heard, with the latter seen in a dense tree canopy adjacent to the open dining area.

### **Oct 23 / Day 29 - Shaba Camp; Taita Hills**

Sleeping rather lightly, I heard Pearl-spotted and African Scops Owls calling in the night, along with Slender-tailed Nightjar. A post-breakfast walk around the Shaba Camp compound produced Yellow-rumped and Red-fronted Tinkerbird, D'Arnaud's Barbet, Green-winged Pytila, Red-cheeked Cordonblue, and Black-backed Puffback. We marveled at a Vitelline Masked Weaver weaving freshly plucked grass stems into his hanging nest.



From the camp it was an hour's drive, steeply ascending up the Taita Hills (*above*) where we met Jonam, the forest ranger, in the Ngangao Forest. The Taita Hills are an isolated remnant of Tanzania's Eastern Arc Mountains and, as such, hold a few species not found elsewhere - namely Taita Apalis, Taita Thrush and Taita White-eye.

We began our trek on foot at the forest edge, immediately finding three sunbird species, Collared, Eastern Olive and Northern Double-collared, as well as several Dusky Flycatchers. Our view overlooked a deep valley full of terraced agricultural plots created by the local people to increase self-sufficiency. Mount Kilimanjaro showed hazily in the distance, barely visible through a cloud layer. We could not locate a Striped Pipit that was calling down the slope. A White-starred Robin (*right*) was sitting serenely on a branch as we turned our attention to a flock of Taita White-eyes moving through the trees below us. Other species in this open area included Yellow-rumped Seedeater, Western Citril, Spot-flanked Barbet, Red-winged Blackbird, White-browed and Cape Robin-Chat.



We moved further around the mountain side to a second location. Before entering the forest on a wide track we could hear Cinnamon Bracken-Warbler and Hartlaub's Turaco and see Mountain and Yellow-whiskered Greenbuls working the edge dense habitat. We penetrated deeper into the forest and found our sought-after Taita Thrush scratching amongst the leaf litter. Between the tree trunks and darkness of the forest this is a tough bird on which to get a good visual, but after a lot of persistence and George relocating the bird, we all got to see it. Jonam was excellent in tracking down the last of our three targets, the Taita Apalis. Hearing it in the distance, we followed him up a slope of towering evergreens and into a mixed deciduous section. This pair was always on the move and we positioned ourselves to have them come towards us. We were pleased to accomplish our goal of finding the three Taita endemics in a span of three hours.



Back down the mountain, we returned to Shaba Camp to pack up and grab a bite to eat, before heading to Nairobi Airport. The five-hour drive was broken up with a break for petrol and tea. As we neared Nairobi, the Kapiti Plains gave us one last look at some of the savanna wildlife that makes this such a wonderful country to visit. Impalas browsed amongst acacias; Zebras, Thomsons Gazelles and Grants Gazelles grazed the grasses; Coke's Hartebeest warily scanned the surrounding plains; and Maasai Giraffe stalked majestically near the road... all wonderful memories to end a magnificent trip.

