

INTRODUCTION

The Watamu–Malindi area is extremely rich for its diversity of birds. Over 450 species have been recorded within 30 km of Watamu, including some rare and little-known species that have made the area known world-wide amongst birders and ornithologists. Since many species of birds are restricted to particular habitat types, a major reason for this diversity around Watamu and Malindi is the wide range of habitats that occur within the area.

The scrub and forest along the East African coast is unique and as such a significant number of birds are only found in the narrow coastal strip where this habitat occurs. The beaches, reefs, creeks and open ocean support another group of birds not found elsewhere in Kenya. Sand dunes, open woodland and mangroves, all add to the diversity of birds to be found along the Kenyan coast, not least around Watamu. During years of good rain, many seasonal freshwater pools form in the area, some the size of small lakes. These attract large numbers of waterbirds and can be particularly impressive for birding. Lake Chemchem and Lake Jilore are two of the larger ones located inland from Malindi. These are surrounded by bush land and open woodland which also hold interesting species. Seasonal pools in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest and in particular Arabuko Swamp on the northern edge of the forest can be humming with birds when flooded. As one moves inland away from the coastline towards Tsavo East National Park, a number of dry-country, thorn-bush species of the Somali-Maasai biome can be seen, adding to the attraction of the area.

Seasonal movements of migrant birds are also quite marked, with Palaearctic species such as **Osprey**, **Eurasian Golden Oriole**, **Eurasian Bee-eater**, **Rufous Bush Chat**, **Spotted Flycatcher** being quite common, and it is one of the easier places in Kenya to find **Eurasian Honey Buzzard**. The coast is also especially good for Afro-tropical migrants such as **African Pygmy Kingfisher**, **Carmine Bee-eater**, **White-throated Bee-eater**, **Red-capped Robin Chat**, **Yellowbill**, **African Paradise Flycatcher**, and **Black Cuckoo-shrike**.

CONSERVATION STATUS

The Watamu area is not only good for plain birding, but is also internationally important for the continued survival of a significant number bird species. Under BirdLife International criteria (www.birdlife.org), one species in the area is listed as Globally Endangered, five Globally Threatened, and a further 33 listed in the Regional Red Data list of endangered species. Within a radius of just 10 km there are four internationally recognised Important Bird Areas (IBAs) and a further two within 35 km. These are the strongholds for a number of species, either those which have a highly restricted range or which gather in significantly large concentrations in these sites. The six sites are:

- *Arabuko-Sokoke Forest* — ranked among the most important forests in Africa for its bird conservation value with **six globally threatened species**.
- *Gede Ruins forest* — a site for the Globally Endangered **Spotted Ground Thrush** in the non-breeding season
- *Mida Creek* — wintering and passage feeding site for several thousand waders including over 1,000 **Crab-plovers**.

- *Malindi – Watamu coastline including Whale Island* — a stretch of reef and beach which holds up to several thousand roosting terns and gulls at certain times of year. Whale Island is the largest breeding colony on Kenya coast for **Roseate Terns** (up to 1,500 pairs) as well as some **Sooty Terns** and one or two pairs of **Brown Noddy**.
- *Sabaki River Mouth* — feeding grounds for thousands of waders, regular roost for many thousands of gulls and terns. Main wintering site in Kenya for **Broad-billed Sandpiper**.
- *Dakatcha Woodlands* — The only other place in the world that **Clarke's Weavers** can be found outside of the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest; recently found (June 2001) to also hold a small population of **Sokoke Scops Owl**. **Sokoke Pipit** also known to occur there.

THE BIRDS...

ARABUKO-SOKOKE FOREST

Considered amongst the most important forests in Africa for its bird conservation value, it is the global stronghold for one Globally Endangered, **Spotted Ground Thrush**, and five Globally Threatened species of birds — **Sokoke Scops Owl**, **Sokoke Pipit**, **East Coast Akalat**, **Amani Sunbird**, and **Clarke's Weaver** (which is found no-where else in the world). It is also home to a large number of species restricted to the coastal strip and particularly forest. The main species of interest are listed below, many of which are coastal “specialities”.

Madagascar Squacco Heron
 Southern Banded Snake Eagle
 Lizard Buzzard
 Fischer's Turaco
 Thick-billed Cuckoo
 Asian Lesser Cuckoo
 Yellowbill
Sokoke Scops Owl
 African Barred Owlet
 Fiery-necked Nightjar
 Böhm's Spinetail
 Forbes-Watson's Swift
 Brown-hooded Kingfisher
 Trumpeter Hornbill
 Green Barbet
 Eastern Green Tinkerbird
 Black-collared Barbet
 Pallid Honeyguide

Mombasa Woodpecker
 Green-backed Woodpecker
 African Broadbill
 African Pitta
Sokoke Pipit
 Fischer's Greenbul
 Terrestrial Brownbul
 Tiny Greenbul
 Yellow-bellied Greenbul
 Eastern Nicator
East Coast Akalat
 Red-capped Robin-Chat
 Red-tailed Ant Thrush
 Eastern Bearded Scrub Robin
Spotted Ground Thrush
 Ashy Flycatcher
 Lead-coloured Flycatcher
 Black-headed Apalis

Green-capped Eremomela
 Little Yellow Flycatcher
 Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher
 Forest Batis
 Pale Batis
 Retz's Helmet-Shrike
 Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike
 Four-coloured Bush-Shrike
 Black-bellied Starling
 Plain-backed Sunbird
Amani Sunbird
 Purple-banded Sunbird
Clarke's Weaver
 Dark-backed Weaver
 Green-backed Twinspot
 Yellow-fronted Canary

GEDE RUINS FOREST



The abandoned 15th century Arabic city of Gede is surrounded and overgrown by indigenous forest different to that of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest as it is growing on ancient coral unlike the sands of the main forest. This small patch of now quite seriously impoverished forest has for many years been an important wintering site for the **Spotted Ground Thrush**, a globally Endangered species that migrates to the Kenya coast from its breeding grounds in southern Africa. In recent years however, numbers observed in Gede have seriously declined which has given cause for concern for their breeding grounds. Gede also has breeding **Palm-nut**

Vultures, African Wood Owls, African Barn Owls (in the wells), and **Red-necked Falcon** have been seen regularly here. It's also a good site to find and see the beautiful Narina Trogon.

MIDA CREEK

A 35km² enclosed creek open to the sea through just a narrow, 500m-wide mouth, surrounded with mangrove forest and at low tide has vast areas of exposed muddy sand flats. These sand flats provide an optimum feeding habitat for thousands of migrant waders during the northern winter, the majority being **Little Stint** and **Curlew Sandpiper**. Mida is particularly well known for its population of **Crab-plovers** which can number over 1,000 birds in December and January. Other birds of interest to birders are the pretty much resident flock of c.200 **Greater Flamingo, Dimorphic Egret** – often observed trailing Sacred Ibis, **Terek Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Sandpipers, Saunders's Tern, Gull-billed Tern** and the larger and longer-billed eastern race *orientalis* of the **Eurasian Curlew**.

MALINDI-WATAMU COASTLINE & WHALE ISLAND

Much of the coastline is an expanse of tidal reef and beach exposed at low tide that attracts unusually large flocks of roosting terns and gulls as well as providing feeding ground for a variety of waders. This is a good site to see the migrant **Heuglin's Gull** from northern Russia alongside the **Lesser Black-backed Gull** that many visitors from northern Europe will be familiar with. Terns that are often seen here are **Lesser Crested, Greater Crested, Saunder's, Gull-billed, Common, Roseate**, and less commonly, **White-checked**. The huge **Caspian Tern** is not uncommon at this site and **White-fronted Plovers** are easily seen along the beach in Malindi. This stretch of coastline is also the most likely place to turn up a **frigatebird** – more usually **Greater** though **Lesser** has also been recorded in the last few years. A colony of up to 1,500 pairs of **Roseate Terns** breed on Whale Island just offshore from the mouth of the creek. A few pairs of the more pelagic species **Sooty Tern** and **Brown Noddy** also breed on the island.

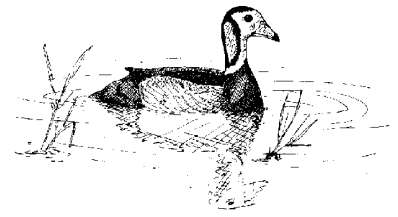
SABAKI RIVER MOUTH

A relatively narrow river mouth emptying water from the Athi-Galana-Sabaki River originating over 400kms away near Nairobi, Sabaki is legendary among east African birders for the number of rarities that turn up there such as frigatebirds, boobies, skuas, vagrant waders and terns. At low tide, huge areas of mud flats are exposed as well as sand banks nearer the sea, the former a feeding ground attracting many thousands of waders, the latter providing excellent roost sites for gulls and terns. Being less saline, the estuary attracts species not commonly found elsewhere on the coastline such as **Marsh Sandpiper** and **Wood Sandpiper**, with whistling duck, cormorants, **African Spoonbill, Water Thick-knee**, and **Spur-winged Plover** found just up stream of the mouth itself. It also holds Kenya's only established wintering population of **Broad-billed Sandpipers** and is the best site to find **Madagascar Pratincole** (sometimes numbering into the thousands) between the months of May-September and **White-fronted Sandpipers**. In 1998 and 1999 2-3,000 **Lesser Flamingos** were resident here, a species which previously was absent from the coastal region, and since then it has not been unusual to see up to a few hundred on the mud flats. A few kilometres to the north of the river near Gongoni is a breeding site for the **Malindi Pipit**, another species with a restricted range and that is hard to find elsewhere (and unlike most birders seem to think, is *not* found regularly at the river mouth).

SEASONAL POOLS

These pools, mostly several kilometres inland from the coastline itself, fill up during the rains and many

develop a dense carpet of purple and white water lilies which not only look beautiful but attract interesting birds. The shallows around the edge provide good feeding habitat for herons, storks and waders, whilst on the open water large concentrations of cormorants and duck may gather. In good years these are extremely rich habitats sometimes holding well over 1,000 birds of many species. Most



notable species found include **African Pygmy Goose**, **White-backed Duck**, **White-faced** and **Fulvous Whistling Duck** which can reach 6–700 birds on one pool, and **African Open-billed Stork** which can number up to 3–400 at times. Indeed when full, Arabuko Swamp on the northern edge of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, is probably the best place in Kenya to find the tiny, exquisite Pygmy Goose as well as attracting often hundreds of the dazzling **Carmine Bee-eater** which feed on the myriad of dragonflies and other insects. These wetlands are also a regular site for finding the very hard-to-find **Lesser Jacana**.

Interesting species found:

Long-tailed Cormorant	Glossy Ibis	Allen's Gallinule
African Darter	African Spoonbill	Lesser Moorhen
Dwarf Bittern	White-backed Duck	Wood Sandpiper
Black-crowned Night Heron	Fulvous Whistling Duck	White-winged Black Tern
Common Squacco Heron	White-faced Whistling Duck	Madagascar Bee-eater
Madagascar Squacco Heron	Knob-billed Duck	Carmine Bee-eater
Purple Heron	African Pygmy Goose	White-throated Bee-eater
Goliath Heron	African Fish Eagle	Malachite Kingfisher
Black Heron	African Jacana	Giant Kingfisher
African Open-billed Stork	Lesser Jacana	Lesser Swamp Warbler

OFF-SHORE WATAMU

A group of birds that are in fact very under-watched are the pelagic species that occur from 5–10 km off-shore. Many of these are little-known and whilst numbers of birds seen on any pelagic trip are pretty small (it is not anything like pelagic birding in the southern seas), there is a chance of seeing something quite unusual. The most likely birds to be seen are mixed species flocks of 1,000s of terns fishing amongst which one can see the more pelagic **Sooty** and **Bridled Terns**, and **Brown Noddy**. It is also possible to see shearwaters, especially **Audubon's Shearwater**, and more infrequently **petrels**, **frigatebirds**, **tropicbirds**, **skuas** and even **albatrosses** if you're fortunate. In 2004 the first record of **Sooty Shearwater** was found dead on the beach at Watamu indicating that there are rarities to be had out at sea.

WATAMU BEACH FRONT HABITATS

Most hotel gardens in Watamu contain mainly exotic plants which are not very good for birds. However one can still see some species of interest and the bush around the hotel is home to one or two typical coastal species. Birds of note that have been recorded from the hotels and beach front include:

Frigatebird (probably Greater)	Crab-plover (mainly nocturnal on the beach)	Red-fronted Tinkerbird
Osprey	Yellowbill	Eastern Bearded Scrub Robin
Bat Hawk	Mottled Spinetail	Red-capped Robin-Chat
African Goshawk	Silvery-cheeked Hornbill	Eurasian Golden Oriole
African Fish Eagle	Trumpeter Hornbill	African Golden Oriole
Hadada Ibis		Black-bellied Starling

Purple-banded Sunbird
Olive Sunbird

Mouse-coloured Sunbird
Grosbeak Weaver

Golden Palm Weaver
African Golden Weaver

Inland from the hotels is an area of cultivation with some scrub patches and odd bits of woodland remaining. This can provide some great local birding with all of the above to be seen as well as **Lizard Buzzard, Great Sparrowhawk, Wahlberg's Eagle, Grassland Pipit, Northern Brownbul, Rufous Bush Chat, Black-crowned Tchagra, Grey-headed Bush-shrike** and **Pin-tailed Whydah**.

ACACIA-COMMIPHORA BUSHLAND

Only 20–30 km inland from Watamu, the more lush coastal vegetation is replaced by a drier *Acacia* thorn and *Commiphora* scrub that stretches for over 100 km into Tsavo East National Park. This habitat also comes right down to the coastline to the north of the Sabaki River where it is very accessible along the new tarmac road. This inhospitable thorn scrub can be great birding and holds yet another group of birds that are of interest to birders.

Brown Snake Eagle

Gabar Goshawk

Tawny Eagle

Bateleur

Crested Bustard

sandgrouse spp.

Namaqua Dove

White-bellied Go-away-bird

White-faced Scops Owl

Blue-naped Mousebird

Von der Decken's Hornbill

Flappet Lark

Pangani Longclaw

Golden Pipit

Spotted Morning Thrush

Bare-eyed Thrush

Siffling Cisticola

African Grey Flycatcher

Northern Crombec

Black-headed Batis

Rüppell's Long-tailed Starling

Shelley's Starling

Golden-breasted Starling

Magpie Starling

Chestnut Weaver

Purple Grenadier

Green-winged Pytilia

Paradise Whydah

Pallid Harrier, Eurasian Roller, Olivaceous Warbler, Upcher's Warbler, Barred Warbler, Red-backed Shrike, Red-tailed Shrike and **Lesser Grey Shrike** are among the Palearctic migrants that can be found in this habitat particularly during the Spring migration.

POST SCRIPT

There is still a lot to be found out about the birds of this overall area. Surprises continue to occur such as the recent discovery of the Sokoke Scops Owl in the Dakatcha Woodlands – the first record outside of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest other than in the Usambara Mountains of northern Tanzania. Since the number of active birders are relatively few, there is every chance that a visiting birder will be able to find some unusual and new record to add to the overall picture of ornithological value of this diverse and interesting area of Kenya. Any such observations would be welcomed — please send them to: Colin Jackson, Mwamba Field Study Centre and Bird Observatory, A Rocha Kenya, PO Box 383, Watamu. Email: colin.jackson@arocha.org. All records will be acknowledged.



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