

## SWARA PLAINS WILDLIFE CONSERVANCY, KENYA ~ TRIP REPORT 2007

### Day 1 / Aug 20

Swara Plains Wildlife Conservancy is situated on the Kapati Plains, 35 km southwest of the capital, Nairobi, just off the main Nairobi-to-Mombasa highway. The Small World Country Club on the southern side of the road marks the entrance way to Swara and as we turned in Fischer's Sparrow-Larks were feeding along the roadside verge. Overhead African Palm Swifts zipped by as a Black-shouldered Kite could be seen hovering over the adjacent grasslands. A short walk around the gardens was very productive with roosting Little Epauletted Fruit Bats (*below left*) in the canopy of a small grove of trees. Several sunbirds including Purple-banded, Bronze, Amethyst, and Scarlet-chested along with African Yellow White-eyes, Dark-capped Bulbul and a Southern Black Flycatcher flitted about the colorful gardens. Our first Northern Pied Babblers were seen and a White-browed Sparrow-Weaver (*below right*) was putting the finishing touches to its nest.



*Gently rolling terrain and wide open savannahs dotted with Whistling-thorn Acacias, stands of stately open Yellow-barked Acacia and Ballantine trees encompass 20,000 acres. There are three small camps with lodgings, all well staffed and catered. There is an extensive network of tracks and paths that lead to a reservoir and small tank.*

It was not long before we were viewing the extensive game that can be found here. Stately Maasai Giraffe (*below top*) walked in slow motion as they took giant strides venturing from one acacia thicket to the next. Ungulates were represented by Coke's Hartebeest, Impalas, Grant's and Thomson Gazelles, along with many herds of Wildebeest (*below bottom*) some of which had Wattled Starlings on their backs.



As we wound our way towards the Camp hirundines were all over, with Banded and Plain Martins, Barn, Red-rumped and Lesser Striped Swallows and Mottled and Little Swift. Colorful Lilac-breasted Rollers perched on the outer branches of acacia trees while Long-tailed Fiscals and Rattling Cisticolas could be seen on the tops of shrubs. Crowned Lapwings coursed the short grasses letting out high pitched single note cries as we drove by and Rufous-naped Larks were flushed from along the dirt tracks. Raptors on this overcast day we few with only a couple of Tawny Eagles and about a dozen African White-backed Vultures sighted. We would stop any time we picked up any movement in the shrubs, identifying Banded Parisoma, and White-bellied Canary and a beautiful White-browed Scrub-Robin.



*The main lodge at the Swara Plains Camp*



*The cottages at Swara Plains Camp are dotted throughout the extensive grounds with each cottage has a cozy room with en-suite facilities*





Though there were no feeders (as we know them) at the Camp, a couple of dog bowls acted just as well and meant that many species could be easily observed.

*Regional specialties such as Hildebrandt's Starling (top right) and preening Northern Pied Babbler (below right) are endemic to Kenya and Tanzania. Ubiquitous Superb Starlings (top left), Kenya Rufous Sparrow sitting on a Whistling-thorn Acacia (below left) and Grey-capped Social-Weaver (below right lower) are endemic to Northeastern Africa.*

These were joined on occasion by Chestnut Sparrows, a few Speckle-fronted Weavers, White-browed Sparrow-Weavers, African Golden Weaver, Spectacled Weavers, Red-eyed Doves, Red-cheeked Cordon-blue, Red-billed Firefinch and Red-fronted Barbet.



Following a pleasant lunch on the porch while looking at the waning activity around the dog bowls we embarked on an afternoon game drive. Eland, the largest of the antelopes, proved just as skittish in this uncrowded location as in the well known game parks. Vervet Monkeys scurried about the ground and up into the lower branches of trees any time we drove up towards them. The world's largest and fastest running bird the Ostrich was seen in pairs with the males closely guarding females. We had a nice array of new birds that included striking Purple Genadiers and Black-faced Waxbills, the diminutive Red-faced Crombec, a small bush shrike called a Brubru and a Yellow-bellied Eremomela a widespread warbler of the bush country. By comparison the Yellow-rumped Seedeaters and African Grey Flycatchers were duller.

The afternoon's identification challenges came in the form of cisticolas and pipits. We separated Pectoral-patched and Rattling Cisticola and watched a Grassland Pipit wander about the short grass picking up insects. A nice sighting was a beautifully patterned Shelley's Francolin walking along the road. Other game birds included Helmeted Guineafowl and the common Yellow-necked Spurfowl. A pair of White-bellied Bustards inched their way through the taller grass hoping to avoid detection. This was tougher for the tallest of the bustards, Kori's, as it stands 4 feet. By the tank we watched a pair of Yellow-throated Sandgrouse fly in for a drink. We would come across Laughing Doves and often hear the most common of the savanna sounds, the cooing of Ring-necked Doves. At a couple of small ponds we found Brake Crake, Egyptian Goose and Three-banded Plover, the latter pacing along the mud flats. A shorebird of more arid is the Spotted Thick-knee and one was spotted resting in the shadows of an acacia. Two other species rounded out the game drive these being White-bellied Go-away Birds and a pair of Nubian Woodpeckers.



*A contrast in size; the 13" Shelley's Francolin (l) and the 4-foot tall Kori Bustard (r)*

Ben took us to meet Simon Thomsett who has been studying and rehabilitating cheetahs and raptors with great success on this property for many years. First, one of the cheetahs was let out of its large pen to roam the adjacent grasses. After a few short sprints and rest breaks it was back into its enclosure. Many of his birds are released back into the wild, and we got close looks at an African Crowned Eagle and Lammergeier, both of whom soon be flying free. Simon flew several birds during the last hour of light. A Lanner which readily took to the skies and both Jane and I personally got to fly a Verreaux Eagle, Africa's largest *Aquila* which was very exciting.



*Cheetah (l) the fastest land mammal, and Verreaux Eagle (r) Africa's largest, two species in the process of being rehabilitated*

Following dinner we searched for the spotlights and then embarked on a very exciting 2 hour night drive. Spring Hare's which look very much like miniature kangaroos were very much in evidence, and though some seemed to be relatively confiding others would bounce their way to a burrow and down their hole. Other than the common mammals, Cape Hare's were found in small family groups, and at one point we came across about 4 or 5 Spotted Hyena's obviously out on the prowl. Individual mammals included a Bat-eared Fox, Fringe-eared Oryx and a Small-spotted Genet. An African Wild Cat was happy to play hide-and-seek for a short while amongst a shrub thicket and we came across a Zorilla, an odd name for what is essentially a small skunk, scurrying along a fence line. The highlights on the avian front were well over a dozen African Marsh Owls on the track and flying around the vehicle along with three Sombre (Dusky) Nightjars, one of which was very cooperative posing for us.



*Creatures of the Night. Top row: Spring Hare (l); African Wild Cat (r)  
Bottom row: Sombre Nightjar (l); Marsh Owl (r)*

### **Day 2 / Aug 21**

Following the late night it was nice to take it easy this morning. Once again it was very overcast and cool and we enjoyed our coffee and tea on the open verandah watching the usual suspects raid the dog bowls. New around the buildings were Spotted Morning Thrush, Purple Grenadiers, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Red-front Barbet (*below*), Little Bee-eater, Amethyst and a Hunter's Sunbird.



After breakfast there was a brief shower before we headed off on our game drive. We immediately came across a Masai Giraffe with 3 Red-billed Oxpeckers hanging on its neck cleaning all the ticks and even taking something out of his eye to which he just shook his head. A nice surprise was a pair of uncommon Pangani Longclaws sitting up on an acacia. Out of breeding plumage Pin-tailed Whydahs and Red-billed Queleas are relatively non-descript and even in breeding plumage Zitting and Winding Cisticola are non-descript! We drove to the dam to see if we could relocate the Yellow-throated Sandgrouse. At first glance we could not see one but as we took a closer look one flew in but only stayed a short time before flying off again. We carried on down to the pond where we had African Gray Flycatchers, an assortment of sparrows, canaries and seedeaters amongst the tall vegetation. In and around the pond there was an African Spoonbill, 5 sleeping Red-billed Teal, Egyptian Geese, Three-banded Plover, White-browed Coucal, Chestnut Weavers and a Lilac-breasted Roller.



*Pangani Longclaw (l) and Three-banded Plover (r)*

There were a couple of very brief appearances of the sun which got a few butterflies up, including Regular Grass Yellow, many Orange and Lemons, 4 Scarlet Tips and 2 African Caper White, African Monarch and several Western Blotched Leopards.



We drove passed herds of Wildebeest, Common Zebra, and Coke's Hartebeest, a family Masai Giraffe and Elands (*left*), Impalas, Grant's and Thomson's Gazelles. There was a steady parade of Long-tailed Fiscals perched on bushes along the drive. Upon reaching the Tented Camp situated under tall Yellow-barked Acacia trees we soon located a White-browed Scrub Robin, Red-billed Firefinch's, Red-throated Tit and a couple of Abyssinian Scimitarbills.

A Grey Woodpecker worked its way up the yellow tree trunks and a perched Common Drongo was on the lookout for any passing insect. Banded Martin and Plain Martin were plentiful swooping down to pick up insects as were Red-rumped Swallow. On the way out of the camp Nishon spotted a Striped Kingfisher perched high in a tree surveying its surroundings. This open woodland kingfisher specializes in feeding on cicadas and crickets.



*Acacia Tented Camp*

We drove on, spotting 3 Tawny Eagles, Black-shouldered and Black Kites and 7 Ostriches, until we arrived at the Acacia Camp (*below*), where the main office is situated.



Next to the cottages 2 vintage cars were parked in their own private thatched roofed carports to protect them from the elements, but not the monkeys! Getting out of our Land Rover we immediately spotted 2 White-browed Scrub Robins on the ground, a pair of Nubian Woodpeckers hammering away on a nearby tree trunk, Southern Black Flycatchers, Grey-backed Cameroptera, White-browed Coucal, Red-throated Tit, Greater Blue-eared Starling and Crested Francolins.



*White-browed Scrub-Robin (l) and Nubian Woodpeckers (r)*



Upon entering the central garden area Ben located Fischer's Lovebirds (*above*) high up in a tree. At first we were only able to locate 2 to 3. More flew in until we had about 25 of them chattering away.



We soon found Ruppell's Long-tailed Starling, Amethyst Sunbirds on the flowers next to a small pond and a pair of Brubrus in the Yellow-barked Acacia. Vervet Monkeys (*left*) were playing on one of the thatched roofs and visiting the local 'rubbish' dump to collect discarded grapefruit shells. The birds seemed to like this area as well. We had plenty of Hildebrant's Starlings, Red-eyed Dove, Red-cheeked Cordon-blues (*below left*), Red-billed Firefinch's (*below right*), Purple Grenadiers, African Paradise Flycatcher, Slate-coloured Boubou and young Spectacled Weavers. Behind some of the huts we located a stunning Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike that was busy working its way through the acacia picking up the occasional moth. Behind the cabins there was a small party of Rattling Cisticolas and Tawny-flanked Prinias along with a Common Drongo and Dark-capped Bulbuls.



*Red-cheeked Cordon-blue (l) and Red-billed Firefinch (r) are small finches usually found foraging on the ground*

Overhead a Black-chested Snake-Eagle glided past temporarily freezing the monkeys. As we were getting ready to leave we spotted a Von der Decken's Hornbill following a flock of Speckled Mousebirds. We returned to the Swara Camp for lunch and soon found a new visitor, a White-bellied Go-away-bird that did just that, go-away, as soon as Jane tried to take its photo! By mid afternoon we were headed back to Nairobi, but not before another Von der Decken's Hornbill perched high in a tree saw us off along with 3 White-browed Coucals.



*The 18 inch Von der Decken's Hornbill found in semi-arid bush is endemic to Northeastern Africa*

For the 30 hours or so that we visited this very pleasant Swara Plains Wildlife Conservancy, we had a very respectable 120 species of birds, 25 mammals and a handful of butterflies.

*Trip Report by Adrian Binns  
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