Short communications

An exceptional gathering of Levant Sparrowhawks *Accipiter brevipes* in Mara North Conservancy, western Kenya

On 23 February 2014, my wife Pat and I were on an early morning game-drive from Kicheche Mara Camp in the Mara North Conservancy, with our guide Benjamin Kaluena. Approximately 2 h after sunrise, on an expanse of undulating plain with scattered trees and bushes, a bird that at first suggested a Shikra *Accipiter badius* flew past our vehicle and alighted in a small tree about 100 m away. It was soon followed by several more flying in the same direction and also alighting in trees and bushes. We then noticed that there were many more of them perching in trees everywhere we looked. By now, we had reassessed the initial identification and realized that these were all Levant Sparrowhawks *Accipiter brevipes* (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Photographs confirming the identification of Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*. Photos: M. Mockler.

The birds appeared restless and were becoming more mobile, constantly flying from tree to tree, all moving in a roughly northerly or north-easterly direction. This constant movement made them difficult to photograph, but a number of shots were obtained of birds perched and in flight. Soon some of the birds tried to gain height, but they appeared to be struggling to find sufficient uplift. There were perhaps 80–100 in this first group, but this was only part of the picture, for within minutes, we noticed more and more birds rising up from beyond a low hill. Birds in the first group were now rising in a thermal while others were searching for thermals elsewhere. Before long, there were four distinct 'stacks' or 'columns' of birds, all rising slowly as they circled, at the same time drifting away to the north or north-east. These new stacks contained well over 100 birds each. Counting them was not easy as they were swirling around and beginning to coalesce as they drifted further and further away. Photographs were taken of part of one of these stacks but it was impossible to include the majority of birds in one image (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Partial stack of 100+ Levant Sparrowhawks over the Mara North Conservancy, 23 February 2014. Photo: M. Mockler.

We eventually assumed that the action was over, but some 10 min later more birds appeared from over a ridge, rising as they flew past us and drifting away in the direction the others had gone. Incredible as it seemed, we estimated we had seen a minimum of 600 birds—and this was probably a conservative estimate.

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Editorial note: Until recently there had been no more than about 20 records of Levant Sparrowhawk in East Africa, nearly all from Kenya, and most of these of single birds. Then in January 2009 a gathering of at least 7–12 birds was seen in south-west Tanzania (N.E. Baker *in litt*.) and this has been followed by sightings of further groups in western Kenya, 23 birds together in January 2010 (D.J. Fisher *in litt*.) and 12 in February 2012 (S. Bird). The species' status and wintering in Sudan and Ethiopia is still little understood. This Mara sighting is thus all the more remarkable.

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Recent undocumented Kenya records of the Grey-chested Babbler *Kakamega poliothorax*

Our attention has been drawn to the status of the Grey-chested Babbler *Kakamega poliothorax* by the *Checklist of the Birds of Kenya* (EANHS 2009), which states that there are no documented records of the species in Kenya since 1979. Though Kenya is at the extreme eastern edge of the species' global range, pre-1979 records recognized the species in Kakamega Forest and North Nandi and South Nandi Forests, and formerly also at Mt Elgon and Lerundo (Britton 1980; Zimmerman *et al*. 1999; Fry *et al*. 2000).

Our perusal of old ringing books available at the Ornithology section of the National Museums of Kenya has shown that the species still exists in some of its known range and may be more common than the checklist suggests. We have collated the available data from museum specimens, ringing books and unpublished reports of expeditions to Kakamega, South Nandi and North Nandi Forests. Various biodiversity survey expeditions with varying objectives have been conducted in these forests since 1979.

During a mist netting survey in Kakamega for the Kenya Indigenous Forest Conservation Programme (KIFCON) project between 11 April 1993 and 22 May 1993, five individuals of *Kakamega poliothorax* were caught in the Buyangu area. All of these were ringed by L. Bennun, who aged them as adults, and two were re-trapped at the same net site a few days later. A previous survey by Waiyaki and Bennun (1992) had failed to catch the species at any of the sites they mist-netted within Kakamega Forest, including the Buyangu area, but they acknowledged that this visit was short. Mann (1980) notes that *K. poliothorax* is very local and faithful to its territory and thus nets placed in the wrong place, even during a long survey, would fail to capture the species. T. Imboma (Ornithology Section, National Museums of Kenya) who regularly rings birds for monitoring around the Ikuywa river area of Kakamega Forest, caught another four in 2005 and two more in January 2014. The most recent records are those of H. Oelke (University of Grottingen, Germany) in Kakamega in February 2015. Two were caught in the Ikuywa river area, one of which was a retrap of a bird ringed by T. Imboma in 2014 at the same site. In all we have retrieved details of 13 ringing captures in Kakamega Forest since 1979, and these are listed together with biometric

data in Table 1. An additional record was submitted to the Kenya Bird Map database (kenyabirdmap.adu.org.za) in January 2015 for pentad (0015c3450) which covers the southern part of Kakamega Forest including the Ikuywa River area.

The most recent Museum specimens of *K. poliothorax* were collected in 1979 in the North Nandi Forest, but there have been no records from either North Nandi or South Nandi since. A short expedition by Waiyaki (1998) to South Nandi did not record it, and several more recent surveys of these two forests failed to find it. But the species is undoubtedly likely to be recorded in both North Nandi and South Nandi if more comprehensive surveys are conducted. In view of its high site fidelity, it would be worth attempting to map territories, as well as establishing the current population within the three forests.

Table 1. Ringing records of *Kakamega poliothorax* in Kenya since 1979. Ring numbers in bold indicate retrapped individuals. Buyangu, Ikuywa and Isecheno are all within Kakamega Forest. All measurements are in mm.

Ring number	Date	Site	Age	Ringer	Wing	Tarsus	Tail	Head to bill
A58278	5 May 1993	Buyangu	Adult	L. Bennun	87	34.4	79	
A58278	6 May 1993	Buyangu		L. Bennun				
X80786	7 May 1993	Buyangu	Adult	L. Bennun	76	29.0	73	32.9
A58292	7 May 1993	Buyangu	Adult	L. Bennun	86	35.5	80	36.7
A59292	8 May 1993	Buyangu		L. Bennun				
AA12514	25 May 2005	Ikuywa	Adult	T. Imboma	80	35.2		38.4
AA12519	25 May 2005	Ikuywa	Sub-ad	T. Imboma	77	34.5		38.4
AA12702	23 Sep 2005	Isecheno	Adult	T. Imboma	85	39.7		34.5
AA12939	30 Sep2005	Ikuywa	Adult	T. Imboma	80	34.7		33.6
AA30707	8 Jan 2014		Adult	T. Imboma	89	40.1		34.7
AA30708	8 Jan 2014		Adult	T. Imboma	87	38.6		34.8
AA33399	23 Feb 2015		Adult	H. Oelke	85			32.8
AA30708	23 Feb 2015		Adult	H. Oelke				

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Discovery of a population of Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher *Trochocercus cyanomelas* in the Mara ecosystem

Blue-mantled (African) Crested Flycatcher *Trochocercus cyanomelas* is a fairly widespread species throughout sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the eastern half of the continent. In East Africa, it is represented by two subspecies: *T. c. vivax* in western Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, and southern Uganda, and *T. c. bivittatus* in central Kenya and along the Indian Ocean coast from southern Somalia to southern Tanzania. A couple of recent sightings of this species in western Kenya suggest there is an overlooked population near the Mara ecosystem on the Oloololo Escarpment.

The first observation was by TD and DB on 13 February 2015 in a patch of fragmented forest atop the Oloololo Escarpment, about 1 km south of Angama Lodge (formerly Ol Kurruk) at 1°16'S, 34°58'E. While some of this forest mosaic can be dense, this particular fragment was characterized by a fairly open understory as a result of frequent cattle usage, with a dense canopy about 2–3 m high. It was at this height that a pair of birds was detected, first by voice, then confirmed by sight as they moved quickly through.

The voice consisted of nasal and somewhat abrasive squeaks and slurs similar to the calls of African Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis*. But this was followed by a beautiful strident series of quickly repeated notes ('*du-du-du-du-du-du*'). This happened a few times, and matched perfectly the song of *T. cyanomelas* in the *eGuide to the Birds of East Africa* (2014), which was consulted minutes later. The sexes were quite different in appearance. TD had a brief but clear view of the head of the female as she perched amongst leaves close overhead. This was uniformly grey with a noticeably pointed, rather shaggy crest, and a hint of an eye-ring. DB had views of the pair as they moved through a small thicket about 2 m above ground. The male showed a black head and throat contrasting with white underparts, a pointed crest, dark upperparts with a long narrow white bar across the wing, and a dark tail. The tail was not fanned and showed no prominent white feather tips.

White-tailed Crested-Flycatcher *Elminia albonotatus* might be considered more likely in these forests but was ruled out. This species does not appear to have a strident song of any kind and the sexes are similar. It lacks the well demarcated white underparts and white wing-bar, and continually fans its tail to show white feather tips. Thus, we are confident that our observation was of *T. cyanomelas*. The subspecies *vivax* known from southern Uganda shows much less white on the wing than the

central Kenya race *bivittatus* (del Hoyo *et al.* 2006), and would conform better with our views of the Oloololo bird.

The second sighting of a pair of *T. cyanomelas* was by AP on 23 May 2015, in Nyakweri Forest, a much larger and denser tract of forest some 7 km northwest of the first sighting. Again, the birds were first detected by voice as they moved quickly through the canopy, and identification was then eventually confirmed by sight.

Given the distance between these two observations, and the amount of suitable habitat in the area, it is most improbable that they involved the same pair of vagrant birds, or two distinct vagrant pairs. In all likelihood, they represent a previously overlooked population. With more observers now interested in this area, further observations of *T. cyanomelas* should result, allowing a better understanding of the size and distribution of this population.

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