

Forest-dependent birds of the Tugen Hills, Baringo County, Kenya

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Summary

We document the forest avifauna of the Tugen Hills, finding 65 forest-dependent species in three forest reserves surveyed. Several species reported here are previously unrecorded from the area, and we document breeding seasonality for a further nine species. Of particular interest in the hills, Thick-billed Seedeaters *Crithagra burtoni* appear distinctly different to the expected subspecies in this part of Kenya, and require further study to determine their taxonomic affinities.

Keywords forest-dependent birds, conservation, distribution, biodiversity/species richness, inventory

Introduction

Forests comprise some of the most imperilled habitats in Kenya (Bennun & Njoroge 1999), and yet site specific information on the presence/absence of forest-dependent bird species is unavailable for many locations, including gazetted and protected forest reserves. The Tugen Hills comprises one such site, whence there have been only occasional species reports in published national bird reviews (e.g. EABR 1983 1984, 1991) or merely range inferences made in regional field guides. Given that the forest reserves of the Tugen Hills are in good condition and may possibly support important populations of representative East African forest birds, a dedicated inventory of the species occurring there is warranted. To survey the forest birds occurring there and compile this information, we visited the three largest tracts of forest in the hills between 2011 and 2018. Inventories such as this may be of use in informing management decisions and in measuring the effectiveness of forest conservation for biodiversity (Bennun & Njoroge 1999).

Study area

The Tugen Hills comprise a linear ridge of hills in central-west Kenya formed by block-faulting, which are semi-isolated within the Rift Valley, and separated from the main western wall of the Rift Valley (the Elgeyu/Tambach Escarpment) by the Kerio Valley (Fig. 1). Centred around the main urban centre of Kabarnet, they remain narrowly connected to the western Kenya highlands by the Kamasian Hills 35 km to the south, at an altitude of *c.* 2000 m. The northern reaches of the Tugen Hills, and part of the study area, rise to almost 2500 m.

Kabarnet, 10 km south of Katimok forest and at a similar altitude to the forest reserves surveyed (2058 m), has an annual mean temperature of 17.8° C with little monthly variation. The mean total precipitation is 1238 mm, with at least 60 mm falling in every month except January and February, and receiving >100 mm in

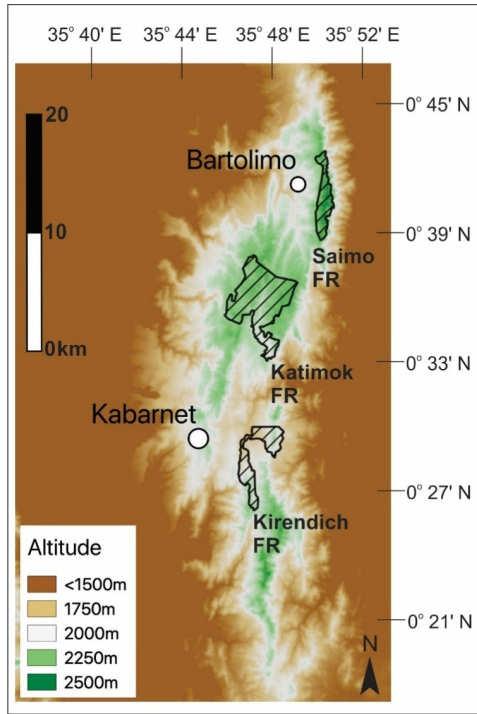


Figure 1. Map of the forest reserves surveyed in the Tugen Hills.

bretum sp., *Diospyros abyssinica* and *Teclea nobilis* (Gichora 2003). The forest obscures moderate to steep valley sides and a humid streamside understorey, characterized by abundant creepers and vines.

Katimok Forest is the largest extant forest in the hills, covering c. 1950 ha at 2000–2300 m. It is floristically also the most diverse, with emergents reaching 40 m in places, and grows on the most level ground, the two other sites being moderately to very steep. Prominent canopy trees include *Olea africana*, *Podocarpus falcatus*, *Polyscias fulva*, *Prunus africana*, *Syzygium guineense*, *Teclea nobilis* and *Vitex keniensis*.

Saimo Forest is the highest and northernmost forest, covering c. 750 ha at 2200–2493 m. The forest grows mostly on very steep slopes and in ravines, but is floristically diverse in places, where the canopy height may exceed 30 m. On the leeward eastern slopes, the forest is drier with less high trees, and comprises primarily dense stands of *Podocarpus falcatus* on the highest ridges.

Methods

Our field data were collected between 2011 and 2018 and comprise species lists from 18 visits during March, June, November and December. These informal surveys lasted up to seven hours each (mean c. 2 h), for a cumulative total of 34.2 h of survey effort (Table 1). Observations were made with 8× and 10× binoculars, while digital photography, audio recording and playback was used opportunistically.

During the course of our visits we also monitored forest species occurring outside of the focal forest reserves. These observations, mostly from lightly treed farmland,

April–August and November (www.climate-data.org).

The largest three tracts of forest in the Tugen Hills—Kirendich, Katimok and Saimo—were surveyed. These forests are comprised primarily of an indigenous vegetation cover, although small areas (up to 20% total area) are planted with exotic species such as *Cupressus lusitanica*, *Eucalyptus saligna*, *Grevillea robusta* and *Pinus patula*, interspersed with secondary regrowth.

Kirendich Forest comprises c. 680 ha of forest and is divided into a northern section of c. 480 ha (Tarambas Forest) to the east of Kirendich dam at 1800–2150 m and a southern section of c. 200 ha (Kinyo Forest) to the south of the dam at 1850–2150 m. The two sections are connected by thin strips of gallery forest around the margins of the dam and along a small stream draining the southern section. A canopy height of 15–25 m is dominated by *Olea africana* and *Podocarpus falcatus*, with other prominent species including *Com-*

small woodlots and remnant forest along streams, provide some contrast to those made in the forest reserves. In particular, we recorded species casually at 1950 m near the town of Bartolimo and in the vicinity of Kabarnet.

To supplement our own observations, we also include and reference where possible any previously published records in short notes, papers or rare bird reviews, as well as a number of records and comments kindly forwarded to us by T. Stevenson, who has visited the area regularly since the 1980s.

Table 1. Survey effort and characteristics for each of the areas studied.

Forest Unit	Area (ha)	% indigenous forest	Elevation (m)	number of visits	number of survey mins	number of survey mins / hectare forest
Kirendich	680	85	1800–2150	6	365	0.54
Katimok	1950	80	2000–2300	9	1120	0.57
Saimo	750	85	2200–2500	3	565	0.75
Farmland (Bartolimo)	NA	10	1800–2000	NA	310	NA

Results

We recorded 59 species of forest-dependent birds. Including a further six species reported from the area by other observers, 65 species, comprising 33 families, are known from the Tugen Hills forests (Appendix 1). Forty-two percent (27 out of 65) consists of forest specialists, the remainder being forest generalists (Bennun *et al.* 1996). The avifauna is primarily montane, with 23 species being representative of the Afrotropical Highlands biome (Bennun & Njoroge 1999). A further three are representative of the Guinea-Congo forests, indicating a slight western affinity. To compliment this diversity, two Palaearctic migrants also make use of the forest habitat on the hills during northern winter months. Taxonomy and nomenclature follow the fourth edition of the *Checklist of the Birds of Kenya* (EANHS 2009).

Twenty-five species were recorded outside of the three protected forests surveyed, in wooded agriculture, small woodlots and remnant thicket along streams. However, only 24% of these (six out of 25) were forest specialists, compared with 40% (21 out of 52) at Katimok, 33% (12 out of 36) at Kirendich, and 31% (11 out of 36) at Saimo, highlighting the importance of reserves for species of the forest interior in particular. It should also be noted that Katimok Forest supports a significantly higher number of forest-dependent birds than the other two forests, probably due to its larger size.

None of the species we recorded are globally threatened, and all are represented by sizeable populations elsewhere in western Kenya (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). However, three species, Crowned Eagle *Stephanoaetus coronatus*, Least Honeyguide *Indicator exilis* and Purple-throated Cuckooshrike *Campephaga quiscalina*, are considered threatened at a regional level (Bennun & Njoroge 1999) and the Tugen Hills forest may be considered important for their conservation. For some species we recorded, the Tugen Hills represents a new site, filling a gap in their western Kenya distributions. Red-fronted Parrot *Poicephalus gulielmi*, Plain Greenbul *Andropadus curvirostris* and Red-headed Bluebill *Spermophaga ruficapilla* in particular were unexpected.

Notes on selected species

Crested Guineafowl *Guttera pucherani*

Scaly Francolin *Francolinus squamatus*

Both appear to be rare in the hills today with only single records of each. This appears to reflect a genuine decline, in the case of the guinea fowl at least, as it was thought to be fairly common in the 1980s and 1990s (T. Stevenson *in litt.* 2019). We observed local villagers in the forests with various pieces of hunting equipment, and this pressure may be the reason for their scarcity. We also noted a similarly low abundance of small mammals and monkeys.

Red-fronted Parrot *Poicephalus gulielmi*

Only one observation, of six together in Katimok Forest at 2300m on 14 June 2014. This appears to be the only record for the Tugen Hills, where it may only occur as a sporadic wanderer when *Podocarpus* are in fruit.

Moustached Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus leucomystax*

Recorded by T. Stevenson (*in litt.* 2019) as common, but we have not encountered it ourselves. Possibly they were not vocal at the times of year we visited.

Yellow-billed Barbet *Trachylaemus purpuratus*

A scarce resident at most. We found singles in the forest interior on only two occasions, at Katimok at 2300m and at Kirendich at 2000m. One foraged on small fruits in the lower midstorey.

Least Honeyguide *Indicator exilis*

Presumably a rare and local resident. We found two counter-singing birds in the forest interior of Kirendich at 1850m in December 2017, one of which was sound-recorded and photographed. This record represents an eastward range extension of c. 90 km from the nearest site of occurrence at North Nandi Forest (Schifter & Cunningham van-Someren 1998, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996).

Fine-banded Woodpecker *Campethera tullbergi*

Apparently a rare resident, possibly confined to the most humid areas of forest in the hills. We have just one record, of a pair foraging together on small branches in the midstorey of Kirendich Forest in March 2012 at 1850m. Observations by others up to around 2005 suggest it may have been more abundant in the past (T. Stevenson *in litt.* 2019).

Plain Greenbul *Andropadus curvirostris*

Seen once in vine tangles at 2250m in Katimok Forest. The bird approached the observers in response to playback of the species' song from Kakamega, allowing reasonable views. Features noted include the narrow and fine bill, a yellow wash across the belly, and a soft rattled call characteristic of the species. Plain Greenbul has also been reported from c. 2300m on the nearby Elgeyu Escarpment (Turner 1993) but otherwise, has a patchy distribution in western Kenya (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996) and was not expected.

Joyful Greenbul *Chlorocichla laetissima*

Not observed by us, but reported from Katimok (Kabartonjo) Forest by Mann (1980). Presumably local and rare, and possibly confined to the most humid sites. Future observers should seek to confirm its continuing presence in the Tugen Hills.

Abyssinian Ground Thrush *Zoothera piaggiae*

Not observed by us; a single bird seen around 2000 m in Katimok Forest by T. Stevson (*in litt.* 2019) is the only record. Presumably very local and rare.

Green-backed Twinspot *Mandingoa nitidula*

Found only in Kirendich Forest, with November observations of a single male and a single female at 2000 m and 1850 m respectively. On both occasions the birds were found near water, at a spring on a steep hillside and next to a streambed. In the immediate region, it has also been reported from c. 1400 m at the nearby Kimwarer mine in the southern Kerio Valley in August and December (Wilson & Wilson 1994).

Red-headed Bluebill *Spermophaga ruficapilla*

Local, favouring thick understorey and tangles in the vicinity of streams. We observed it on four occasions, in Kirendich at 1850 m and in Katimok at 2250 m (Fig. 2). The species is generally scarce and local in western Kenya, the nearest site being Chemorogok/Lembus Forest (Jackson 1996), 35 km to the south.

Thick-billed Seedeater *Crithagra burtoni*

Uncommon in the hills, though we observed it at 1850–2400 m in Kirendich and Saimo as well as in wooded farmland at Bartolimo. Birds in the western Kenya highlands have been variably referred to *C. b. tanganjicae* (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996) or *C. b. kilimensis* (Fry & Keith 2004), but the individuals we saw well appeared like neither of these races. While Fry & Keith (2004) illustrate *kilimensis* with a white patch on the forehead, Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) state this feature to be absent in *kilimensis* (as *tanganjicae* is described by Fry & Keith). Regardless of which account is correct, birds in the Tugen Hills do not have a white forehead patch but a bold white supercilium extending behind the eye and a bold white patch at the base of the lower mandible (Fig. 3). The underparts may also be slightly paler than those of birds elsewhere in the west Kenya highlands. These birds deserve further study to assess whether these differences are consistent across the population.



Figure 2. Red-headed Bluebill *Spermophaga ruficapilla*, Katimok Forest, Tugen Hills, Kenya, 15 Jun 2014 (photo: S. Carter).



Figure 3. Racially unassigned Thick-billed Seedeater *Crithagra burtoni*, Saimo, Tugen Hills, Kenya, 5 Nov 2018 (photo: J. Fidorra).

Discussion

In supporting 65 species of forest-dependent birds, the well-preserved forests of the Tugen Hills provide a refuge for 28% of the 230 forest-dependent birds occurring in Kenya (Bennun *et al.* 1996). Of the three forest units surveyed, Katimok Forest is perhaps the most important with both the highest number of species, as well as the highest proportion of forest specialists, requiring extensive forest interior habitat to survive. The richness of forest birds in well treed farmland and along streams outside of the forest reserves was lower, as anticipated. However, it seems probable that to an extent, these areas function as corridors for at least some species, permitting dispersal and gene flow between areas of protected forest.

Compared with other forests in western Kenya that are roughly equivalent in size, the number of forest-dependent species in the Tugen Hills is similar. Surveys in Nyakweri Forest (1500 ha), 210 km to the south of the Tugen Hills, and at a slightly lower altitude, found 60 forest-dependent species (Bradley & Davis 2019). Likewise, in the nearby Gwasssi Hills (<2000 ha), at similar elevations to the Tugen Hills, 50 species of forest-dependent species have been recorded (Bradley *et al.* 2015, Bradley 2018). Meanwhile, in particularly diverse forests in western Kenya, species richness may be considerably higher given only a slightly larger forest area. Schifter & Cunningham van-Someren (1998) found as many as 92 forest-dependent species in the North Nandi Forest (10500 ha), which may also be indicative of a slightly higher rainfall regime in that area. In the Tugen Hills, our surveys nonetheless confirm the presence of a diverse forest avifauna, in particular at Katimok Forest, and further surveys may reveal additional species as yet undetected.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Elijah Tanui, Matthew Gable and David Bradley for company in the field while collecting observations and David Bradley for assistance in preparing Fig. 1. We also thank Terry Stevenson for kindly sharing his very useful notes from the Tugen Hills forests and for commenting on the submitted version of this paper.

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Scopus 40(2): 29–38, July 2020

Received 3 May 2020

Appendix 1. Forest-dependent species recorded in the Tugen Hills forests. FF = forest specialist; F = forest generalist; ¹ = Afrotropical Highlands biome; ² = Congo-Guinea Forests biome. A general measure of abundance is provided using the terms: common (to be expected on most visits), uncommon (to be expected on ~20–40% of visits), and rare (recorded on fewer than ~20% of visits). Taxonomy and nomenclature follow the *Checklist of the Birds of Kenya* (EANHIS 2009).

Species	forest dependence	Kirendich	Katimok	Saimo	non-gazetted	elevation range (m)	general abundance	comments
Crested Guineafowl <i>Guttera pucherani</i>	FF					unknown	Rare	7–8 birds in the Tugen Hills on 19 May 1983 (EABR 1983)
Scaly Francolin <i>Francolinus squamatus</i>	F				x	1950	Rare	voice only
African Hobby <i>Falco cuvieri</i>	F				x	1970	Rare	a pair observed in wooded agriculture at Bartolimo in Nov
African Goshawk <i>Accipiter tachiro</i>	F	x		x	x	2050–2300	Common	
Crowned Eagle <i>Stephanoaetus coronatus</i>	FF		x			2200	Rare	one adult observed only but also seen here by T. Stevenson (pers. comm.)
Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon <i>Columba delegorguei</i>	FF	x	x			2000–2300	Uncommon	
Lemon Dove <i>Aplopelia larvata</i>	FF		x	x	x	1950–2400	Uncommon	
Tambourine Dove <i>Turtur tympanistria</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1800–2350	Common	
Red-fronted Parrot <i>Poicephalus guillemi</i>	FF		x			2260	Rare	
Hartlaub's Turaco <i>Tauraco hartlaubii</i> ¹	FF	x	x	x	x	1850–2500	Common	
Ross's Turaco <i>Musophaga rossae</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1800–2400	Common	
Red-chested Cuckoo <i>Cuculus solitarius</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1850–2350	Uncommon	
African Emerald Cuckoo <i>Chrysococcyx cupreus</i>	F		x	x	x	1950–2400	Common	
African Wood Owl <i>Strix woodfordii</i>	F				x	1950	Rare	voice only
Montane Nightjar <i>Caprimulgus poliocephalus</i> ¹	F				x	1950	Rare	voice only
Narina Trogon <i>Apaloderma narina</i>	F	x	x	x		2000–2400	Common	
Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater <i>Merops oreobates</i> ¹	F	x	x	x	x	1950–2350	Common	
Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill <i>Bycanistes subcylindricus</i> ²	F	x	x	x	x	1800–2400	Common	occupied nest in Nov
Grey-throated Barbet <i>Gymnobucco bonapartei</i>	F		x	x		2200–2400	Common	occupied nest in Mar
Moustached Tinkerbird <i>Pogoniulus leucomystax</i> ¹	FF		x			unknown	Uncommon	observed here by T. Stevenson (pers. comm.)
Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird <i>Pogoniulus bilineatus</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1850–2450	Common	
Yellow-billed Barbet <i>Trachyaemus purpuratus</i> ²	F	x	x			2000–2300	Uncommon	

Species	forest dependence	Kirendich	Katimok	Saimo	non-gazetted	elevation range (m)	general abundance	comments
Least Honeyguide <i>Indicator exilis</i>	FF	x				1850	Rare	
Fine-banded Woodpecker <i>Campethera tullbergi</i> ¹	FF	x				1850	Rare	possibly declining
Black-throated Wattle-eye <i>Platysteira peltata</i>	F	x	x	x		1800–2400	Common	fledged young in Mar and Nov
Black-fronted Bushshrike <i>Chlorophoneus nigrifrons</i>	FF		x	x		2200–2400	Common	immature in Nov; most abundant at Katimok
Northern Puffback <i>Dryocopus gambensis</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1850–2350	Common	fledged young in Jun
Grey Cuckooshrike <i>Coracina caesia</i> ¹	FF	x	x	x		2000–2500	Common	most abundant at Saimo
Purple-throated Cuckooshrike <i>Campephaga quiscalma</i>	FF		x			2250	Rare	
White-tailed Crested Flycatcher <i>Elminia albonotata</i> ¹	FF		x	x		2200–2350	Uncommon	
White-chinned Prinia <i>Schistolais leucopogon</i>	F					unknown	Uncommon	reported from the Tugen Hills on 19 May 1983 (EABR 1983)
Black-collared Apalis <i>Apalis pulchra</i> ¹	F		x	x		2200–2400	Common	
Chestnut-throated Apalis <i>Apalis porphyrolaema</i> ¹	F	x	x	x	x	2000–2500	Common	
Grey Apalis <i>Apalis cinerea</i>	F	x	x	x		1850–2400	Common	
Mountain Greenbul <i>Andropadus nigriceps</i> ¹	FF		x			2250	Rare	
Plain Greenbul <i>Andropadus curvirostris</i> ¹	FF		x			2250	Rare	
Yellow-whiskered Greenbul <i>Andropadus latirostris</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1800–2450	Common	fledged young in Mar
Slender-billed Greenbul <i>Andropadus gracilirostris</i>	FF	x	x	x	x	1850–2500	Common	
Joyful Greenbul <i>Chlorocichla laetissima</i> ¹	F		x			unknown	Rare	reported from Katimok Forest by Mann (1980)
Cabanis's Greenbul <i>Phyllastrephus cabanisi</i>	FF	x	x	x	x	1850–2500	Common	
Brown Woodland Warbler <i>Phylloscopus umbrovirens</i> ¹	F	x	x	x		1850–2500	Common	
Common Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	F					unknown	Rare	reported from the Tugen Hills on 16 Jan 1984 (EABR 1984)
White-browed Crombec <i>Sylvietta leucophrys</i> ¹	FF				x	1950	Uncommon	one singing bird in a forested ravine at Bartolimo. Also recorded by T. Stevenson (pers. comm.)
Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	F		x	x		2200–2400	Uncommon	
African Hill Babbler <i>Pseudoalcippe abyssinica</i> ¹	FF	x	x	x		2200–2500	Common	
Stuhlmann's Starling <i>Poeyoptera stuhlmanni</i> ¹	FF		x			2250	Rare	also reported from the Tugen Hills in Britton (1980) and Zimmerman <i>et al.</i> (1996)

Species	forest dependence	Kirendich	Katimok	Saimo	non-gazetted	elevation range (m)	general abundance	comments
Sharpe's Starling <i>Pholia sharpii</i> ¹	FF		x			2250	Uncommon	also reported from the Tugen Hills on 19 May 1983 (EABR 1983)
Abyssinian Ground Thrush <i>Zoothera pieaggiae</i> ¹	FF		x			unknown	Rare	observed here by T. Stevenson (pers. comm.)
Olive Thrush <i>Turdus olivaceus</i>	F	x	x	x		2000–2400	Uncommon	
White-starred Robin <i>Pogonochila stellata</i> ¹	F		x			2250–2300	Uncommon	
Red-capped Robin Chat <i>Cossypha natalensis</i>	F	x	x	x		1850–2400	Uncommon	
White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher <i>Melaenornis fischeri</i> ¹	F	x	x	x	x	1850–2400	Common	nest building in Nov
African Dusky Flycatcher <i>Muscicapa adusta</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1850–2500	Common	
Collared Sunbird <i>Hedydipna collaris</i>	F	x	x	x	x	1800–2500	Common	
Green-headed Sunbird <i>Cyanomitta verticalis</i>	F		x			2250	Uncommon	
Olive Sunbird <i>Cyanomitta olivacea</i>	FF	x	x			1850–2300	Uncommon	
Northern Double-collared Sunbird <i>Cinnyris reichenowi</i> ¹	F	x	x	x	x	1850–2500	Common	
Black-billed Weaver <i>Ploceus melanogaster</i> ¹	FF	x	x	x		1850–2350	Uncommon	nest building in Nov
Brown-capped Weaver <i>Ploceus insignis</i> ¹	FF	x	x	x		2200–2350	Uncommon	
Grey-headed Nigrofinch <i>Nigrita canicapillus</i>	F	x	x	x		2050–2500	Uncommon	
Green-backed Twinspot <i>Mandingoa nitidula</i>	FF	x				1850–2000	Rare	
Abyssinian Crimsonwing <i>Cryptospiza salvadorii</i> ¹	F		x			2250	Uncommon	also reported from the Tugen Hills on 19 May 1983 (EABR 1983)
Red-headed Bluebill <i>Spermophaga ruficapilla</i>	F	x	x			1850–2250	Uncommon	
Mountain Wagtail <i>Motacilla clara</i>	F	x	x		x	1800–2250	Uncommon	occupied nest in Nov
Thick-billed Seedeater <i>Crithagra burtoni</i> ¹	FF	x		x	x	1850–2450	Uncommon	