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Occurrence and habits of the Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* in Kenya, including the first description of its song

James E. Bradley and Brian W. Finch

Summary

Historically, the Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* has been a relatively poorly known bird in Kenya. Following a review of all known records in Kenya, we show that breeding of presumed resident birds is known from three discreet areas, but that as many as 47% of all records, from the months of October to March, come from areas where breeding is not known. This finding indicates a migratory origin for these individuals, and the concurrent absence of northern, summer-breeding Gambaga Flycatchers from the mountainous regions of western Saudi Arabia, Yemen and northern Somalia point to that region as a likely origin of these winter visitors. Furthermore, records show that the frequency of occurrence of the Gambaga Flycatcher in Kenya is also increasing, with a rate of reporting since 2000 which is four times higher than during the period 1960–2000, likely representing a shift in range. Lastly, we also describe some habitat characteristics at preferred sites, and provide the first published sonograms and accompanying description of the song.

Keywords: Gambaga Flycatcher, distribution, migration, habitat, vocalizations

Introduction

The Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* is a small to medium sized Flycatcher with a drab appearance and a patchy distribution through the Sahelian zone from West Africa east to Kenya and north to the Arabian Peninsula (Fry 1997, Taylor 2020). Across its range it occurs locally in open woodlands in semiarid to semi-humid habitats but is nowhere numerous. In the western mountainous regions of Saudi Arabia, in Yemen and at Mt Wagar in northern Somalia, it is only present as a breeding summer visitor from April to September (Ash & Miskell 1998, Porter *et al.* 2004, Müller 2010), whereas elsewhere, including in Sudan, northern Uganda, Ethiopia and parts of west Africa, it has been speculated that it is an intra-African rains migrant, with only occasional breeding being reported (Nikolaus 1997, Salewski *et al.* 2003, Carswell *et al.* 2005, Ash & Atkins 2009).

In Kenya, Britton (1980), Lewis & Pomeroy (1989) and Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) all refer to the Gambaga Flycatcher as being little known, local and uncommon, and occurring in dry bushed and wooded country. With only twenty records prior to the 1990s, and a first breeding record as recently as 1990, this has indeed been the case for the Gambaga Flycatcher until comparatively recently. An increase in records over the past two decades, however, due in part to increasing observer familiarity with the species, permits a more in-depth review of its national status than has been possible previously.

To comprehensively assess the status of Gambaga Flycatcher in Kenya, records were collated from the personal notes of the authors, literature accounts, published records and an open user internet database, eBird. Additionally, a number of records were forwarded to the authors through private correspondence (see Acknowledgements), and observations of the species reported to a local email [listserve] forum Kenyabirdsnet are also included. Specimen databases VertNet and the Global Biodiversity Information Facility were consulted for historical records. Sight records documented here which are not supported by photographic or audio evidence, are only those considered by the authors to have been reliably reported.

Results and Discussion

Distribution and Habitat

Ninety-two records of Gambaga Flycatcher in Kenya (all but two dated to month and year at a minimum) were accepted for this study (up to February 2020), depicting a range that is both fragmented as well as only seasonally occupied in some areas (Fig. 1, Appendix A). It remains present in some well-known areas from where it was reported prior to the year 2000, such as in the Archer's Post–Wamba region, the Kerio Valley and in the Kongelai-Mt Elgon area, while a number of new sites have also been found. These include the Lake Baringo area, where Gambaga Flycatchers have been seen near-annually since 2006 during the November–March period, while since 2009, the species has also been reported on a number of occasions at Amboseli NP. Since 2012, occurrence has become regular during the November–March period from the Voi–Sagala Lodge area of the Tsavo region as well, with the species being previously unknown from all three of these well watched sites. Since 2000, single records have also come from Tsavo East NP, Mwea National Reserve, and Mpala Ranch, Laikipia.

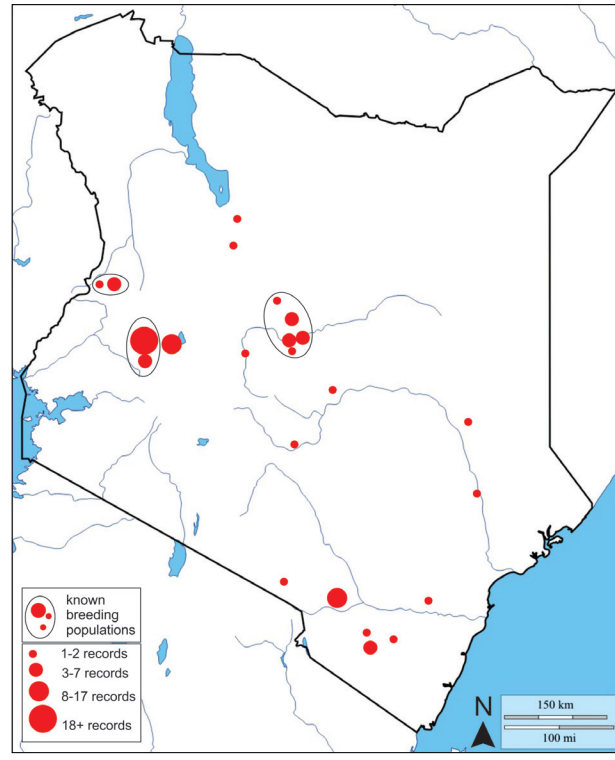

Figure 1. Distribution of Gambaga Flycatcher records in Kenya (n = 92).

Although the increase in records in these areas is in part due to improved knowledge of the species among field observers, it also seems likely that the trend reflects a genuine shift or expansion of range. Numerically, reporting frequency in the 20-year

period from 2000 to 2020 as compared with the 40-year period from 1960 to 2000 (Fig. 2) showed a four-fold increase, with the steady series of winter (Nov–Mar) records from 2006 onwards at Lake Baringo standing out as strong evidence of a new distribution. Furthermore, of the 16 records from Ngulia between 1969 and 2019, nine were ringed from 2010 onwards, comprising a more than five-fold increase in the frequency of occurrence in the last decade as compared with the previous four. While there have been no recent records from historically known sites at South Horr, Baragoi, Garissa, Bura and Galana Ranch, this should not be interpreted as a disappearance from those areas as they are rarely visited by ornithologists and birders.

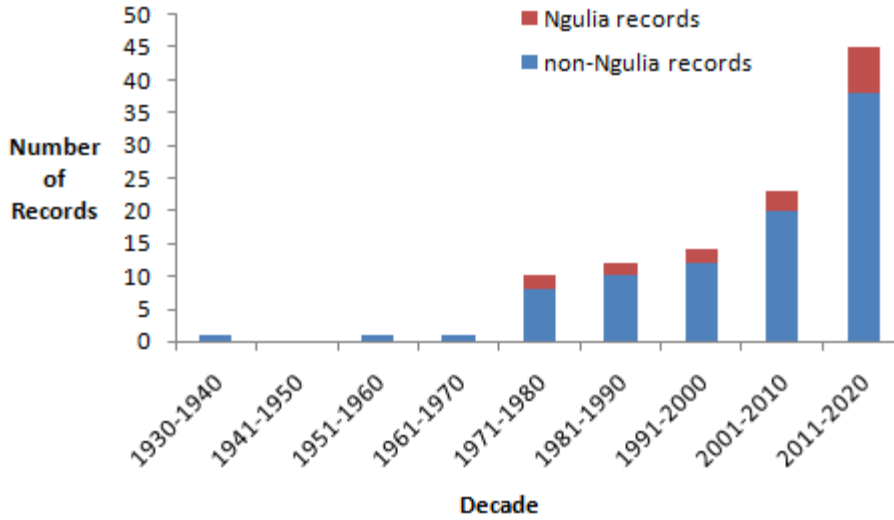

Figure 2. Dated Kenya records of Gambaga Flycatcher by decade from 1930–2020 (n = 91), showing those netted and/or observed at Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP (red), and those observed elsewhere in Kenya (blue).

In Kenya, favoured habitat used by the Gambaga Flycatcher typically comprises mature semi-deciduous woodlands of low to medium canopy height (3–6 m) that may be dominated by one particular species or may be more mixed in character. In the Voi–Sagala Lodge area, for example, mature dense stands of *Commiphora* are favoured; while in the Kerio Valley birds inhabit open patchy woodlands characterized by mixed *Terminalia*, *Acacia*, *Combretum* and *Erythrina* thickets in rocky terrain. In Samburu and Shaba National Reserves by contrast, it favours the margins of mature riverine *Acacia* habitats. Altitudes favoured by the species appear to vary greatly, suggesting its distribution is more closely determined by the distribution of suitable woodland habitat. While recorded as low as 70 m above sea level at Bura on the Tana River, it is most often reported from 600–1500 m at locations such as the Tsavo region, Archer's Post and the Kerio Valley. It has, however, been recorded as high as 1900 m on the Kongelai Escarpment. This is consistent with the habits of the species elsewhere, such as in Yemen, where dry *acacia* woods in wadis as low as 700 m are favoured, but with rather different habitat such as *Juniperus* woods up to 2300 m also being used (Müller 2010).

A feature characterizing most all locations where the species is regularly found is a fairly steep humidity gradient from arid to locally semi-humid sites, where thornscrub habitats transition to woodland. As such, it is more common near terrain that promotes a variety of vegetation associations resulting from variations in aspect and gradient of slopes, and the effect of rainshadow. For example, the Kerio Valley, the eastern foothills of the Tugen Hills at Baringo, and the eastern foothills of the Sagala Hills at Sagala Lodge, are all areas that receive less direct sunlight (and drying) than do surrounding flatter areas due to the shading effect of nearby high terrain. This, in addition to a higher water table which is often present in foothill terrain, may promote the growth of woodland tree species versus those thornscrub species that persist in more exposed areas. Elsewhere, such as near Archer's Post and at Garissa, the proximity to a permanently flowing river promotes a locally steep humidity gradient and associated woodland habitat which may be suitable.

Seasonality of occurrence and breeding records

Breeding records of Gambaga Flycatcher in Kenya come from the Kerio Valley, where two nests with eggs were found on 20 March 1990 (Richards 1992), and from Samburu Game Reserve, where recently fledged young have been observed in November (BWF, pers. obs.). Probable breeding has also been reported from the Kanyarakwat–Kongelai area on the northeast slopes of Mount Elgon, where an individual (one of a pair) carrying nest material was observed on 26 February 2020 (JEB, pers. obs.). Elsewhere, juveniles recorded in Kenya in October–December (including 5 ringed at Ngulia) cannot be confirmed as having hatched locally, and it seems probable that these are entirely migrants from north of Kenya. This is supported by their fairly regular capture during November–December nocturnal banding at Ngulia in Tsavo West NP (see Appendix A), and often with southward Spotted Flycatcher *M. striata* passage from the Palaearctic.

Establishing the definitive presence of migrant birds in Kenya, however, is made difficult by the presence of resident breeding birds in some parts of the country. To ascertain the possibility that some birds in Kenya might be migrants, and to establish the seasonality of their occurrence, we also reviewed records excluding those from sites where breeding is known (Kanyarakwat–Kongelai, Kerio Valley, Samburu–Archer's Post). When reviewing only records from sites where breeding has not been reported (n = 46), a clear picture of seasonality emerges, with all records except for one being in the October–March period (Fig. 3). A single record from Amboseli NP is anomalous with respect to this apparent seasonality; however, this likely refers to a resident bird at a site where breeding has yet to be detected.

The view that at least some Kenyan birds may be migratory has been suggested previously on the basis of a limited number of records in the November–April period (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989), but has not been explored further until now. A general pattern of distribution emerging is that most of the breeding population occurs in central-north to western Kenya, while the migratory population appears to be largely confined to central-east and southeast Kenya (although some overlap of populations in central-north Kenya seems likely). A further point supporting a non-breeding, winter-visitor status and migratory origin for these birds, is that they appear not to vocalize in Kenya, whereas birds in known breeding areas such as the Kerio Valley and Mt Elgon–Kongelai area are fairly regular songsters.

The most likely origin of migrant Gambaga Flycatchers in Kenya is the western mountains of Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, and northern Somalia. This may be concluded based on: a) their absence in that region during the October–March period (eBird 2021) when birds are most often reported in eastern Kenya, b) only a very few records from Uganda, which is to the west of an Arabian Peninsula–eastern Kenya flyway, and, c) records from Djibouti (n = 11) which all fall in the months September and October (eBird 2021), indicative of southbound autumn passage across the Bab-el-Mandeb straits from Yemen. This mixed pattern of breeding and seasonally occurring birds present in relatively close proximity to each other also matches that observed by Salewski *et al.* (2003) in the Ivory Coast, where migratory birds are present from September to April, with breeding reported by some birds in February–April. While these authors attribute seasonally occurring birds in the Ivory Coast to intra-African migrants moving with the rains (as has hitherto been suspected with regards to some birds in Kenya), our analysis suggests that seasonally occurring birds in Kenya are primarily from outside the African continent. Whether this is also the case concerning birds in the Ivory Coast may merit further consideration.

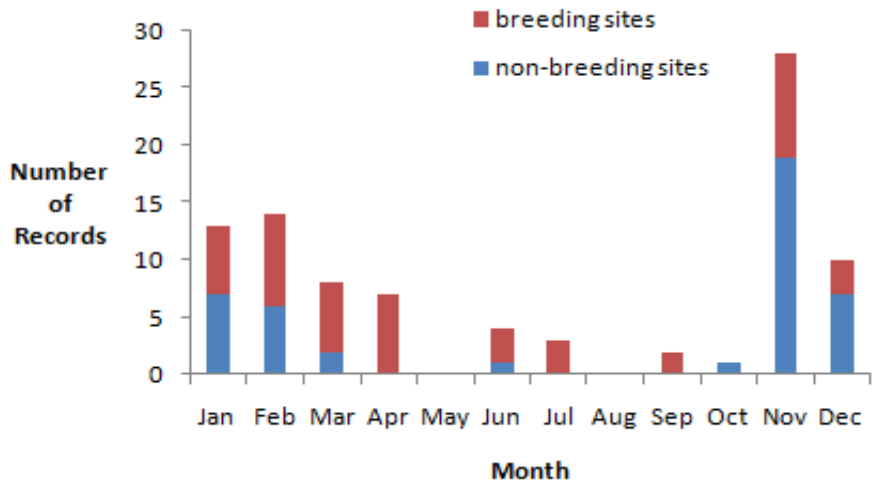

Figure 3. Dated Kenya records of Gambaga Flycatcher by month from 1930 to the present (n = 90), showing records from breeding sites (red) and records from sites where breeding is as yet unknown (blue).

Vocalizations

The vocalizations of Gambaga Flycatcher are not fully known, with literature accounts mostly referring to only a sharp call note with the quality of a snapping stick (Fry 1997). Müller (2010), however, briefly refers to a song as being "*more varied than that of Spotted Flycatcher* Muscicapa striata*, with a number of notes on a different level*", but to our knowledge, few published recordings exist. However, the authors have each made several recordings of Gambaga Flycatcher in Kenya, including of the song, which is detailed together with the previously known call here:

Long song is comprised of an unmusical, lazy and disjointed series of sharp, wheezy and scratchy notes with up to 7 per phrase, and with phrases repeated with no clear pattern (Fig. 4; A–D). It is rhythmically similar to African Dusky Flycatcher M. adusta *in this respect but slower, lower pitched and lacking in the frenetic embellishments of that species. Also gives a short song comprised of a buzzy, three note motif 'djrrr-ZEE-whit' (Fig. 4; E), repeated at intervals of 2.4–3.8 s. Calls comprise a hard and sharp 'chick' note with the quality of a snapping stick, which may be given singly or as a doublet (Fig 4; F), or in a steady agitated series of single notes at ~ 1.5–2.0 notes/s, and periodically interspersed with squeaky song notes or a harsh ratchet-like 'chrrrt' (Fig. 4; G).*

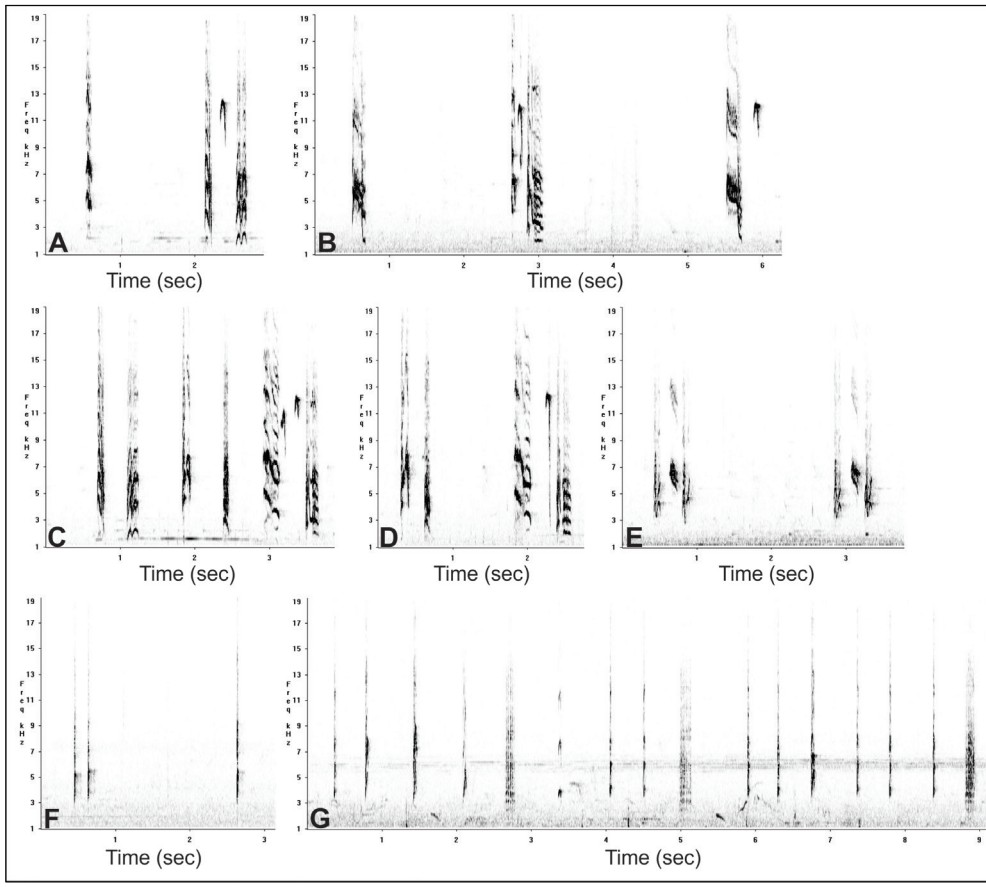

Figure 4. Vocalizations of Gambaga Flycatcher in Kenya, showing several examples of long song phrases of 3–7 notes (A–D; Kerio Valley), a repeated short 3-note motif (E; Kerio Valley), typical sharp call notes in singles and doubles (F; Kanyarakwat, Mt. Elgon) and an agitated series of typical call notes interspersed with other short and emphatic notes (G; Kongelai Escarpment). Recordings by J. Bradley.

Conclusions

The Gambaga Flycatcher is clearly rather local in Kenya and closely tied to mature woodlands in semi-arid to semi-humid regions, often associated with foothill terrain and other rugged topography (e.g., gorges, ravines and canyons) conducive to local pockets of increased humidity. Suitable, but yet to be surveyed habitat for this species exists across much of the outlying foothills of eastern Kenya from Tsavo National Park north through Kitui and Tharaka districts to the Matthews Range, the Ndoto Mountains, and Mt Nyiru foothills.

Also evident from the pattern of records from sites where breeding has not been reported is that approximately half of the records in Kenya refer to non-residents. While the Gambaga Flycatcher has not been previously confirmed as migratory in East Africa, the evidence presented here strongly supports this for birds occurring seasonally in eastern Kenya from September/October to March/April. Furthermore, evidence suggests that these birds originate from the Middle East, and are not intra-African rains migrants as has previously been thought. Meanwhile, resident birds breeding from February to April and/or from October to November, occur from central-north Kenya westwards.

In view of a migratory origin accounting for half of the birds recorded in Kenya, and that the frequency of occurrence of this species is also increasing, it is perhaps surprising that Gambaga Flycatcher has yet to be recorded in Tanzania. Given the proximity of regularly used sites to areas with similar habitat in northern Tanzania in particular, the species should be sought in locations such as Mkomazi National Park, the Pangani River Valley and between Namanga and Mt Kilimanjaro, especially in November.

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Appendix A. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* records in Kenya. LACM = Los Angeles County Museum, FMNH = Field Museum of Natural History, YPB = Yale Peabody Museum, EABR = East Africa Bird Report (*Scopus*), RSc = Records Subcommittee, * precise date not traced.

Record no.	Date	Location	Number of birds	Observer(s)	Notes	Reference
1*	unknown	Mt Elgon	1	unknown	specimen	Pearson *et al*. 1980
2	28 February 1930	Archer's Post	1	A.B. Fuller	specimen	YPM #049146
3	12 December 1958	South Horr	1	unknown	specimen	FMNH #370100
4	23 March 1963	Bura, Tana River	1	J.G. Williams	adult specimen	LACM #55830
5	08 November 1978	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	2	G.C. Backhurst	juveniles	EABR 1978
6	05 February 1978	20 km south of Ura Gate, Meru NP	1	D.J. Pearson	adult	Pearson *et al*. 1980
7	06 February 1978	Isiolo	1	D.J. Pearson	adult	Pearson *et al*. 1980
8	18-19 March 1980	Mt Ololokwe	1	D.J. Pearson, A.D. Lewis	adult, freshly moulted	Pearson *et al*. 1980
9	07 April 1980	Mt Ololokwe	1	D.A. Turner	adult	Pearson *et al*. 1980
10	09 November 1980	Lerata	3	D.J. Pearson, A.E. Butterworth	adults and a juvenile	Pearson *et al*. 1980
11	09 November 1980	Archer's Post	1	D. J. Pearson, A.E. Butterworth	adult	Pearson *et al*. 1980
12	08 November 1980	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	G.C. Backhurst, D.J. Pearson	juvenile	EABR 1980
13	06 January 1981	Lerata	1	N. Hartley		eBird; Checklist #49329973
14	20 November 1983	5 km east of Garissa	2	D.J. Pearson	adult and juvenile	EABR 1983
15	20 November 1983	5 km east of Garissa	2	D.J. Pearson	adults	EABR 1983
16	12 March 1984	northeast border of Galana Ranch	1	M. Coverdale *et al*.	adult	EABR 1984
17	04 February 1985	Wamba	1	J.H. Fanshawe		eBird; Checklist #48673934
18	late December 1985	Wamba	2	D.A. Turner	adults	EABR 1985
19	25 November 1986	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	G.C. Backhurst	juvenile	EABR 1986
20	27 November 1988	Baragoi	1	M. Coverdale, D.J. Pearson		EABR 1988
21	24 November 1990	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	G.C. Backhurst	juvenile	EABR 1990
22	20 March 1990	Kerio Valley	4	D.K. Richards, D.A. Turner	adults with active nests (eggs)	Richards 1992
23	29 June 1991	Shaba NR	1	D.A. Turner	adult	EABR 1991
24	13 November 1991	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	G.C. Backhurst	adult	EABR 1991
25	07 March 1993	Kerio Valley Fluorspar Mine	1	N. Wilson		Wilson and Wilson 1994
26	25 March 1993	Kerio Valley Fluorspar Mine	1	N. Wilson		Wilson and Wilson 1994

Record no.	Date	Location	Number of birds	Observer(s)	Notes	Reference
27	14 June 1993	Kerio Valley Fluorspar Mine	1	N. Wilson		Wilson and Wilson 1994
28	24 July 1992	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch	adult	Pearson and Turner 1998
29	12 July 1993	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch	adult	Pearson and Turner 1998
30	01 November 1993	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch	adult	Pearson and Turner 1998
31	17 June 1995	Mt Ololokwe	1	L. Lens *et al.*		Lens 1994
32	26 November 1995	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group	adult	Pearson and Turner 1998
33	09 January 1997	Kerio Valley	2	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
34	15 July 1998	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
35	07 October 2001	Mwea NR	1	M. Coverdale et al.		RSc 2002a
36	25 November 2001	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group	adult	Backhurst & Pearson 2002
37	early September 2002	Mt Ololokwe	2	B. Chege	adults	pers. comm.
38	01 November 2002	Kerio Valley	1	N. Borrow		pers. comm.
39	29 December 2004	Kongelai Escarpment	1	J.E. Bradley, P.N. Bradley	adult	eBird; Checklist #11621656
40	20 January 2005	Kerio Valley	2	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
41	01 January 2006	Lake Baringo	1	S. Easley		pers. comm.
42	20 January 2006	Lake Baringo	2	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
43	26 April 2007	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
44	05 November 2007	Samburu NR	3	B.W. Finch	adults and a juvenile	B. Finch pers. obs.
45	18 November 2007	Ol Tukai, Amboseli NP	1	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
46	24–27 January 2008	Samburu NR	2	B.W. Finch *et al.*		B. Finch pers. obs.
47	19 April 2009	Kerio Valley	2	B.W. Finch *et al.*	adult	B. Finch pers. obs.
48	11 September 2009	Kerio Valley	2	B. Mugambi *et al.*	adults	RSc 2002b
49	01 November 2009	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
50	09 January 2010	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch *et al.*	adult	B. Finch pers. obs.
51	22 February 2010	Kerio Valley	2	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
52	20 June 2010	Ol Tukai, Amboseli NP	1	B.W. Finch	adult	B. Finch pers. obs.
53	08 December 2010	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group		G. Backhurst pers. comm.
54	09 December 2010	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group		G. Backhurst pers. comm.
55	22 February 2011	Kerio Valley	5	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.

Record no.	Date	Location	Number of birds	Observer(s)	Notes	Reference
56	12 March 2011	Kongelai Escarpment	2	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
57	19 April 2011	Kerio Valley	2	B.W. Finch	adults copulating	B. Finch pers. obs.
58	02 November 2011	Kerio Valley	1	T. Verhulst		eBird; Checklist #63475411
59	18 February 2012	Sagala Lodge	1	P. Steward	photographed	ML #209912071
60	21 March 2012	Kongelai Escarpment	2	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
61	18 April 2012	Kerio Valley	1	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
62	20 November 2012	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group	adult	G. Backhurst pers. comm.
63	16 November 2013	Kerio Valley	2	B.W. Finch		B. Finch pers. obs.
64*	Nov/Dec 2013	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group		D. Turner pers. comm.
65	23 January 2016	Samburu NR	1	R. Vhymeister		eBird; Checklist #27200706
66	19 April 2016	Kerio Valley	1	E. Kistler		eBird; Checklist #29093737
67	17 November 2016	Sagala Lodge	4	T. Pepper	photographed	eBird; Checklist #33136167
68	19 November 2016	Tsavo East NP	4	B. Self, S. Mackintosh		eBird; Checklist #33249793
69	24 November 2016	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group		G. Backhurst pers. comm.
70	05 December 2016	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group	juvenile, photographed	G. Backhurst pers. comm.
71	07 December 2017	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	Ngulia Ringing Group		G. Backhurst pers. comm.
72	13 April 2017	Shaba NR	1	A. Graham		eBird; Checklist #69407119
73	13 November 2017	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	A. Fisher		eBird; Checklist #53800537
74	17 November 2017	Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West NP	1	M. Cade	juvenile, photographed	M. Cade pers. comm.
75	15 January 2018	Mpala Ranch	1	L. Ozsanlav-Harris		eBird; Checklist #53924456
76	06 November 2018	Kerio Valley	2	J.E. Bradley, J.C. Fidorra	adults recorded and photographed	ML #129608041
77	01 January 2019	Lake Baringo	1	A. Newton	photographed	ML #133714431
78	24 January 2019	Marigat-Lake Baringo	1	H. Miller, I. Reid	photographed	ML #140438231
79	21 February 2019	Marigat-Lake Baringo	1	S. Newman	photographed	ML #151154621
80	21 February 2019	Voi	1	M. Ost *et al.*		eBird; Checklist #54293494
81	14 November 2019	Sagala Lodge	1	D. Schaule	juvenile, photographed	ML #193054261
82	18 November 2019	Lake Baringo	1	C. Hesse *et al.*	photographed	ML #189936441
83	2–5 December 2019	Sagala Lodge	2	C. Carter, D. Schaule	juvenile, photographed	ML #194705811
84	22–23 December 2019	Sagala Lodge	1	P. Steward, C. Lamana	juvenile, photographed	ML #208948801

Record no.	Date	Location	Number of birds	Observer(s)	Notes	Reference
85	25 December 2019	Shaba NR	3	M. Grylle		eBird; Checklist #63547467
86	29 January 2020	Lake Baringo	2	K. Valentine *et al.*	photographed	ML #251230091
87	30 January 2020	Marigat-Lake Baringo	1	S. Lefever		eBird; Checklist #64490992
88	9-11 February 2020	Lake Baringo	1	S. Brown *et al.*	photographed	ML #212624081
89	21–25 February 2020	Sagala Lodge	1	D. Schaule		eBird; Checklist #64824700
90	25 February 2020	Kerio Valley	1	J.E. Bradley *et al.*	adult recorded and photographed	ML #211692421
91	25 February 2020	Kongelai Escarpment	1	J.E. Bradley *et al.*	recorded and photographed	ML #211693821
92	26 February 2020	Mt Elgon; Kanyarakwat	2	J.E. Bradley *et al.*	adults carrying nest material, photographed	ML #222976421