

# Notes on the assemblage of forest birds at Oloitokitok, Mt. Kilimanjaro, including a new species for Kenya

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## Summary

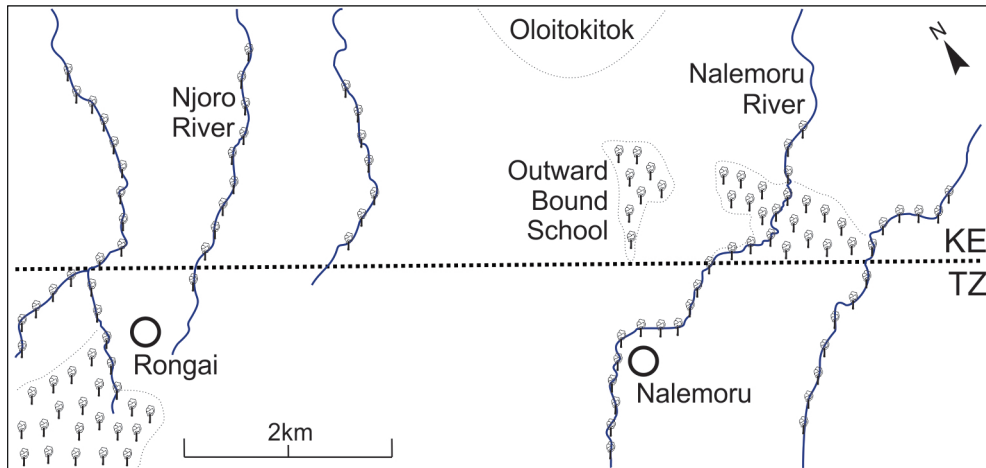
Observations of birds from previously unknown and apparently overlooked forest remnants at Oloitokitok in southeast Kenya are presented. Several forest specialists reported have very limited ranges in Kenya, such as Bar-throated Apalis *Apalis thoracica*, Stripe-faced Greenbul *Arizelocichla striifacies* and Kenrick's Starling *Poeptera kenricki* while the *guttifer* subspecies of White-stared Robin *Pogonocichla stellata* and Broad-ringed White-eye *Zosterops euryricotus*, both formerly endemic to Tanzania, are documented in Kenya for the first time.

**Keywords:** Forest birds, endemics, White-eyes, Mt. Kilimanjaro, Oloitokitok

The avifauna of Mt. Kilimanjaro is well known (Moreau & Sclater 1935, Moreau & Moreau 1939, Cordeiro 1994). However, the precise distributions of forest species on the northern slopes with respect to the international Kenya-Tanzania border are less well documented. In the vicinity of Oloitokitok (2°55'34" S, 37°30'22" E), approximately 1 km from the Tanzania border at an altitude of 1750 to 1950 m, small corridors and patches of remnant montane forest are preserved along streams and on private land. These have not previously been surveyed for birds, and regional distribution maps (e.g., Lewis & Pomeroy 1989, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996) do not indicate the presence of forest specialist birds in this part of Kenya.

The indigenous forest surviving at Oloitokitok is typical of many other montane forests in the region and is best classified as montane mesic and dry evergreen forest, following a delineation of vegetation belts on Mt. Kilimanjaro given by Pócs (1991). Fragments of forest covered here are scattered throughout the study area but primarily occupy two larger stream valleys supporting forest cover extending up to 1.5 km in length and 90 m in width on the Kenya side of the border. Of these two main drainages, evergreen forest cover along the Njoro River (2°55'43" S, 37°28'21" E) at the western extent of the study area covers an altitudinal range of 1825–1950 m, while forest along the Nalemoru River (2°57'12" S, 37°30'48" E) at the eastern extent covers an altitudinal range of 1750–1850 m (Fig. 1). Owing to the moister microclimate, floristic diversity in these valleys is high, with prominent tree genera and/or species including *Albizia* sp, *Croton macrostachyus*, *Croton megalocarpus*, *Celtis africana*, *Cussonia holstii*, *Ficus thonningii*, *Juniperus procera*, *Olea europaea* and *Podocarups* sp. An additional, small privately owned forest fragment is situated between the two river valleys on more level ground in the vicinity of the Outward-Bound School

(2°56'37" S, 37°30'27" E). This forest fragment covers approximately 25 ha at approximately 1850 m, and is less floristically diverse than the river valleys, being dominated by *Juniperus procera*, *Cussonia holstii* and *Croton megalocarpus*. While the riverine valleys are also better connected to contiguous forest habitat on the Tanzanian side of the border, the forest at the Outward-Bound School is more isolated, being separated from forest in Tanzania by old coniferous plantations. All forest fragments covered here can be encompassed in a roughly 8 x 2 km<sup>2</sup> rectangle abutting the border and extending either side of the town of Oloitokitok.



**Figure 1.** Map of the study area showing indigenous forest remnants and streams flowing north into Kenya, between the international border and the town of Oloitokitok.

Observations have been made intermittently in the vicinity of Oloitokitok from 2015 to 2021 mostly by IK, while short visits in 2020 and/or 2021 were made by the remaining authors with the intention of securing photographic documentation of some species. The purpose of this short paper is to provide some information on the occurrence of forest birds at Oloitokitok that is of distributional interest. All records were compiled by JEB, and taxonomy and nomenclature followed is that of Gill *et al.* (2021). Comments on regional occurrence are based on Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) unless stated otherwise, and it should be noted that most species reported here are commonly found on the Tanzanian side of the border (Cordeiro 1994) and are therefore not unexpected records for this area.

#### **Hartlaub's Turaco** *Tauraco hartlaubi*

A common resident of taller trees in all forest fragments, with up to six observed together in August. Within forest areas it preferentially seeks areas of thicker canopy cover, being less frequently encountered where trees have been selectively felled and forest cover is thinner. It is known from nearby in Kenya on the Taita and Chyulu Hills.

#### **Green Malkoha** *Ceuthmochares australis*

A rare intra-African passage migrant with a single record from 1850 m at the Outward-Bound forest on 7 August 2021. Elsewhere in interior southern Kenya and

Tanzania border regions it is similarly rare with scattered records from Kibwezi, the Chyulu and Taita Hills, and Kitovu Forest, as well as a single record from the west-ern slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro on 7 September 1990 (Cordeiro 1994).

**Blue-spotted Wood Dove** *Turtur afer*

A fairly common resident of forest edge and adjacent well wooded gardens. Although present in central Kenya as far east as Lakes Nakuru and Naivasha in the central Rift Valley, this species is hitherto unknown from areas of Kenya east of the Rift Valley.

**Mountain Buzzard** *Buteo oreophilus*

A scarce visitor that is unlikely to be resident or breeding locally on Kenyan soil. Records of single birds have been in May and November, down to the lower altitudinal limits of the study area at c. 1800m.

**Golden-tailed Woodpecker** *Campethera abingoni*

A scarce (probably) resident of forest edge in the study area as well as in small strips of groundwater forest to the northeast of Oloitokitok. The subspecies present here is the eastern form *suahelica*, and our only dated records are in May and August. Nearby presence in Kenya is known from Taveta, ranging north very locally to Nairobi (B. Finch, in Hunter 2021) and Kijabe (J. Davis pers. comm., September 2021).

**Black-fronted Bushshrike** *Chlorophoneus nigrifrons*

Presumably a local and uncommon resident, with two records from the Nalemoru River, one reliably dated to the month of November. Apparent presence in only this river valley may be related to this site's higher degree of connectivity with forests in Tanzania, than that of other fragments in the study area. Nearby in Kenya, this bushshrike is a rare resident on the Chyulu and Taita Hills.

**Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher** *Trochocercus cyanomelas*

Probably a scarce and local resident in thicker forest habitats found in the stream valleys. Our two records of the subspecies *bivittatus* are from the months of October and November, in the Njoro River Valley, and the valley of a small proximal stream to the east. Cordeiro (1994) notes this species to be local and uncommon on Mt. Kilimanjaro, with previous records from only the lower elevations of the southern and southwestern slopes. An audio recording of birds at Oloitokitok has been archived at the Macaulay Library (ML #392823761), and presence in nearby Kenya is also known from the Chyulu and Taita Hills.

**Mountain Greenbul** *Arizelocichla nigriceps*

Singles and pairs of the nominate subspecies have been observed at the Outward-Bound forest and along the Njoro River in November, with a pair at the latter site observed nest-building (Fig. 2). Oloitokitok is the only known site in Kenya east of the rift valley where this species is found, with an old report from the Taita Hills being doubtful in the absence of subsequent records, and more likely to have involved a juvenile *A. striifacies* (J. Bradley & B. Finch *in litt.*).

**Stripe-faced Greenbul** *Arizelocichla striifacies*

The nominate subspecies is a common resident throughout forest areas, and

easily located by its repetitive call (Fig. 2). Pairs typically favour the lower forest mid-storey, and breeding at Oloitokitok is confirmed by way of an adult observed carrying food to a nest in November. Elsewhere within its strictly southern distribution in Kenya, this species is found on only the Chyulu and Taita Hills, and at Ol Doinyo Orok (Namanga Hill). Similar to those birds, *striifacies* on Mt. Kilimanjaro shows pale blue-grey irides, readily distinguishing them from birds in the Usambara and wider East Arc Mountains (also treated as *striifacies*) to the south that show a hazel brown iris. See Dowsett (1974), Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire (1993) and del Hoyo & Collar (2016) for comments on eye colour within this species complex.

#### **Placid Greenbul** *Phyllastrephus placidus*

A fairly common resident of all forest areas, inevitably vocal, in pairs and family groups, and favouring the understory to the lower mid-story but also commonly on the ground. On occasion, birds are observed entering mature coniferous plantations separating stream valleys, and may be tolerant of some habitat modification.

#### **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler** *Bradypterus cinnamomeus*

A fairly common resident of thick understory and forest edge, and which is most often found above 1900 m along streams. Previously, birds on Mt. Kilimanjaro have been treated as the subspecies *rufiflavus* (elsewhere in Kenya only in the Chyulu Hills) by Britton (1980) and Zimmerman *et al.* (1996), but which are now widely included within the nominate form.

#### **Bar-throated Apalis** *Apalis thoracica*

Pairs are fairly common but local residents of forest areas with a thick understory of tangled creepers, and are most often seen at the Outward-Bound forest and along the Njoro River (Fig. 2). This species is known elsewhere in Kenya from only the Chyulu Hills and the subspecies concerned in both cases is *griseiceps*.



**Figure 2.** Photographs of Mountain Greenbul *Azielocichla nigriceps nigriceps* (top left: J. Bradley), Stripe-faced Greenbul *Azielocichla striifacies striifacies* (top right: P. Steward), Bar-throated Apalis *Apalis thoracica griseiceps* (bottom left: V. Ikawa) and White-starred Robin *Pogonocichla stellata guttifer* (bottom right: J. Bradley), at Oloitokitok, Kenya.

**African Hill Babbler** *Sylvia abyssinica*

The nominate subspecies is a common and vocal resident of understorey and lower mid-storey tangles in all forest fragments, with a maximum of six birds recorded counter-singing on a site visit in May.

**Broad-ringed White-eye** *Zosterops euryzocotus*

A common resident of forest, forest edge, overgrown coniferous plantations and wooded gardens throughout the study area (Fig. 3). Most birds present at Oloitokitok show the characteristic sepia-brown supercilium of this species (vs. golden-yellow in *Z. mbuluensis*) contrasting with a slightly brighter yellow throat (contrast lacking in *mbuluensis*), as well as some greyish tones on the olive-yellow flanks. Some birds, however, simply show a dull olive forecrown and no obvious supercilium, as in those birds on nearby Mt. Meru (in Tanzania) originally described under the name *Zosterops meruensis*, and which are now universally treated as a synonym of *euryzocotus*. We note, however, that the appearance of the forecrown and/or supercilium in all birds in the field is subject to the angle of view and brightness of light, and that some individuals can be misleading in appearing to show a yellower forecrown, and thus superficially resembling *Z. mbuluensis*.

Broad-ringed White-eye is unrecorded in Kenya previously and the photographs presented here support the first documented occurrences of a species previously regarded as being endemic to Tanzania (Britton 1980, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). Breeding in May is confirmed by way of observations of adults feeding fledged young, and adults tending young in a nest built in an exotic Cypress tree adjacent to indigenous forest.



**Figure 3.** The first Kenya records of Broad-ringed White-eyes *Zosterops euryzocotus* comprising birds photographed at Oloitokitok, Kenya (top left and bottom: T. Davis, top right: V. Ikawa).

**Waller's Starling** *Onychognathus walleri*

A rare visitor from more extensive forests on the Tanzanian side of the border. Our only record is of a singing bird in March at the Outward Bound forest. This species is common in central Kenya but is absent from both the nearby Chyulu and Taita Hills. Birds on Mt. Kilimanjaro are of the nominate subspecies.

**Kenrick's Starling** *Poeoptera kenricki*

The nominate subspecies is presumably an uncommon visitor from more extensive forest on the Tanzanian side of the border, with only two records of birds along the Njoro and Nalemoru Rivers in November. In each case, the birds (a single and a pair) were found perched on dead branches atop tall forest trees, and were identified by way of a pale eye, fairly dull plumage, slender appearance and sweet "turlee" calls most similar to those of Stuhlmann's Starling *P. stuhlmanni*. Elsewhere north of Mt. Kilimanjaro, this range-restricted starling is found only on the south and east slopes of Mt. Kenya, and the south slopes of the adjacent Nyambeni Hills, in central Kenya.

**Abyssinian Thrush** *Turdus abyssinicus*

Common in forest and forest edge habitat, ranging into overgrown Cypress plantations and gardens. The subspecies here, *T. a. deckeni*, is otherwise known in Kenya from nearby Ol Doinyo Orok, but recent photographs of birds from the Chyulu Hills, originally described as *chyuluensis* (Macaulay Library #114614921; S. Dolrenry), suggest those are also best treated with *deckeni*.

**White-starred Robin** *Pogonocichla stellate*

A common but shy resident of thick understorey in all forest fragments, where it commonly forages on the ground (Fig. 2). The subspecies here is *P. s. guttifer*, which is endemic to Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Meru, and is previously unrecorded in Kenya. Breeding is confirmed by way of adults observed feeding recently fledged young in May and August.

**Olive Sunbird** *Cyanomitra olivacea*

The subspecies *C. o. neglecta* is a fairly common resident of forest and forest edge, extending to thickets and large trees in surrounding agriculture. It may have a largely continuous distribution with the population in the Chyulu Hills.

**Abyssinian Crimsonwing** *Cryptospiza salvadorii*

The subspecies *C. s. kilimensis* is a fairly common resident of edge and leafy thickets in all forest fragments but especially along the streams, where up to four have been observed together. Elsewhere in southern Kenya this species has been recorded at nearby Ol Doinyo Orok (Namanga Hill) and on the Chyulu Hills.

**Thick-billed Seedeater** *Crithagra burtoni*

A fairly common resident in singles and pairs, frequenting forest and well wooded areas with some understorey. The subspecies here is *C. b. kilimensis* (type locality Mt. Kilimanjaro), which is common in parts of western Kenya but is unknown elsewhere in Kenya east of the Rift Valley, where it is otherwise replaced by *C. b. albifrons*.

The records presented here confirm the persistence of some indigenous forest remnants and a representative sample of regional Afromontane forest birds at

Oloitokitok. These small fragments are particularly important nationally, in comprising the only site for Broad-ringed White-eye in Kenya, otherwise known from only Tanzania. It seems possible, on occasion at least, that other species known to occur on Mt. Kilimanjaro but as yet unreported in Kenya may also occur in these small forests. Such taxa include Olive Woodpecker *Dendropicos griseocephalus* and Kretschmer's Longbill *Macrosphenus kretschmeri*. Field observers should be attentive to the possible presence of these, and other, noteworthy species. Oloitokitok is also conveniently located between the National Parks of Amboseli and Tsavo West, thus also offering the potential for the development of some ecotourism services to cater to travelling birders.

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