

## Short communications

### Miombo Blue-eared Starlings *Lamprotornis elisabeth* in Dakatcha Woodland, coastal Kenya

Dakatcha Woodland (3°01' S, 39°51' E), northwest of Malindi, Kenya, is a mosaic of extensive *Brachystegia spiciformis* forest, interspersed with farmland, thicket, abandoned farmland, *Cynometra* forest, mixed forest, mixed woodland, some tree plantations, patches of grassland, and small seasonal wetlands. It is also a Key Biodiversity Area (an Important Bird Area) because it shelters populations of several threatened birds. Naturally, birders tend to focus on Clarke's Weaver *Ploceus golandi*, Sokoke Scops Owl *Otus ireneae* and Sokoke Pipit *Anthus sokokensis*, each considered endangered, or the beautiful Fischer's Turaco *Tauraco fischeri* and the Southern Banded Snake Eagle *Circaetus fasciolatus*, which are considered near-threatened (IUCN 2021).

Greater Blue-eared Starlings *Lamprotornis chalybaeus* tend to be viewed as a common generalist species in Kenya, seen in farmland and bush as well as at forest edge. According to Zimmerman *et al.* (1996), Greater Blue-eared Starlings of the subspecies *sycobius* range throughout the coastal lowlands south of Malindi (3°22' S, 40°11' E), while there are also very old coastal records of the much rarer Miombo Blue-eared Starling *Lamprotornis elisabeth* from south coastal Kenya at Vanga, from Mombasa and from Mongeya Hill at the western edge of Sokoke Forest, again all south of Malindi. Neither of these blue-eared starling species are expected, therefore, north of the Malindi area in central coastal Kenya. In addition, it should be noted that Miombo Blue-eared Starling was formerly considered a sub-species of Lesser Blue-eared Starling *L. chloropterus* (e.g., see Zimmerman *et al.* 1996, Fry *et al.* 2000). While mostly treated as a distinct species today (e.g., see Stevenson & Fanshawe 2020, Gill *et al.* 2021) some authorities still include it with Lesser Blue-eared Starling (Clements *et al.* 2021).

When Nature Kenya and Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group began to monitor birds at Dakatcha fifteen years ago, blue-eared starlings were occasionally observed, and they were included as Greater Blue-eared Starling, being 'regular' in frequency, in the *Checklist of the Birds of Dakatcha Woodland* (Nature Kenya 2009). They were thought to be Greater Blue-eared Starlings on the basis of expected presence of this species only 40km to the south of Dakatcha. Whenever we had good views of these birds, we tried to see the features of the coastal subspecies *sycobius* (vs. the inland subspecies *cyaniventris*) but did not spend much time on this or reach any definitive conclusion. In the past five or six years, blue-eared starlings have been seen more regularly, possibly because more forest has been cleared for farmland.

On 22–29 March 2018, Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group and Nature Kenya carried out several days of Common Bird Monitoring, part of the IBA Monitoring protocol. *Brachystegia* trees were in bright new leaf, and on our way back from monitoring a seasonal wetland, we saw a large tree full of starlings, some distance away above a thicket. These birds looked much like Greater Blue-eared Starlings, but we could see patches of reddish colour among them. With binoculars, we saw that some birds were immatures, and showed rufous-brown underparts. We were confused because we knew that Greater Blue-eared Starling immatures have dark 'sooty' brown underparts, having seen them elsewhere in Kenya. This was the second time we had

seen such a flock in Dakatcha, and despite seeing the birds quite well on this occasion, we were unable to obtain photographs to help with the identification of these unusual starlings.

Three years later on 18 June 2021, while monitoring birds with the Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group, we finally obtained photographs of the starlings at Nature Kenya's Kamale Nature Reserve in Dakatcha (2°43.3' S, 39°56.8' E). The photographs, taken by JM (Fig. 1), were shared with local birders and the identification was suggested to be Miombo Blue-eared Starling on the basis of the rusty underpart tones of the immature birds, with patches of glossy-blue growing in (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2020).



**Figure 1.** Immature Miombo Blue-eared Starlings *Lamprolornis elisabeth* at Dakatcha Woodland on 18 June 2021, showing the characteristic rusty underparts with glossy-blue adult feathers growing in (photo: J. Mwambire).

This record of Miombo Blue-eared Starling was subsequently submitted to the East Africa Rarities Committee and accepted in September 2021 as the first confirmed record in Kenya for many decades (N. Hunter, pers. comm.). Monitoring of blue-eared starlings in Dakatcha will now be undertaken with specific attention to vocalizations, in an effort to determine the status of the Miombo Blue-eared Starling and Greater Blue-eared Starling north of the Sabaki-Galana River.

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*Scopus* 42(2): 51-52, July 2022

Received 17 February 2022