

Kenya

11–28 August 2007

Participants:

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Von der Decken's Hornbill

Leaders:

Steven Easley and Martyn Kenefick

A tour where even the highlights themselves were almost too numerous to mention. Between us, we found over 620 species of birds and 55 species of mammals. It is impossible to list each one in this narrative – if so, that's all it would become; a "list". High in the ranks of everyone's memories, however would have been daytime roosting Verreaux's Eagle-owl, Greyish Eagle-owl, Mackinder's Eagle-owl, African Wood-owl and Northern White-faced Owl; the sheer size and splendour of the many Great Blue Turacos found at Kakamega; the balance required for those Martial Eagles mating on an Acacia branch and the many confiding bustards and sandgrouse so close to our buses. Almost as important as the birds, are the mammals. We marvelled at African Lion, Leopard and Cheetah with cubs and hit "the Mara" right in the middle of the Wildebeest migration spectacle. More generally, we will remember how every mundane patch of roadside scrub seemed to be full of birds; how every rural road we drove down had columns of people walking to, or from wherever and how, no matter how wild and inhospitable the terrain appeared to be, an off road walk was inevitably accompanied by several charming, inquisitive yet well behaved local children. The group was blessed with several extremely sharp pairs of eyes; an enthusiasm to maximise time in the field despite hot and sometimes inclement weather and an easy-going temperament where everyone became friends very quickly. In Peter and Abdi, we had drivers whose professionalism ensured both our safety in what were sometimes appalling road conditions, yet we were always on time. Finally, our success was due, in no small part, to having in Steven, undoubtedly one of the most accomplished guides in the business. His enthusiasm, energy, patience, and quickness of both eye and ear, combined with extensive up to date local knowledge made all the difference. But most of all, he was great fun.

Days 1-2: Due to an error in Kenya Airlines computer system and subsequent overbooking, part of the group were 'condemned' to a night in Dubai although a couple of local parks produced Grey Francolin, White-cheeked Bulbul, Indian Silverbill, Sooty Gull and Common Mynah as compensation.

Day 3: Whilst six of our party were tucked up into their hotel beds; soon after midnight, in over 100 degrees F temperature, the rest of us finally were on our way with Kenya Airways and arrived at a decidedly chilly Nairobi airport. Steve was there to meet us together with Abdi and Peter, our drivers throughout the tour. The highway into town was choc a block, wall-to-wall traffic that did nothing to deter the blatant recklessness of a number of the local maxi taxis or "matatus". We therefore concentrated on an introduction to Kenya common roadside birds adding Marabou Storks, Sacred and Hadada Ibis, Yellow-billed (Black) Kites, Red-eyed Doves, Pied Crows, African Pied Wagtails and Common Fiscals together with a fleeting glimpse of a Great Sparrowhawk. By 9.00am the whole group was united and the tour commenced with a 30-mile drive north amongst flowering Bougainvillea and Flame trees to Thika. En route, we stopped for a Long-tailed Fiscal (the only one to be seen during the tour), we found our first Yellow-throated Longclaws and the first of many Grey-headed Kingfishers. Flowering trees in a hotel car park produced numbers of Scarlet-chested, Amethyst, Collared and Variable Sunbirds together with "everyday birds" such as White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Speckled Mousebird and Red-cheeked Cordonbleu. Several Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters hawked insects from the treetops and we found not only Red-fronted and Yellow-rumped

Tinkerbirds but also Spot-flanked Barbets. Both Zanzibar Sombre Greenbul and Brown-backed Mannikin were good finds and small parties of Black Saw-wings were flying overhead. Walking down the trail to the Chania River, new birds came through thick and fast. In terms of rarity value, pride of place goes to Grey-olive Bulbul, Trumpeter Hornbill, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Black-throated Wattle-eye and African Firefinch. However for sheer splendour who could forget our first Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike and Klaas's Cuckoo. Not to be forgotten, we found our first Mountain Wagtails, Ruppell's Robin-chats, African Pygmy-kingfisher, White-headed Barbet and rufous morph African Paradise-flycatcher amongst a host of new birds. Several Blue Sykes Monkeys scrambled about in the trees and an Ochre Bush Squirrel preened itself right out in the open. Travelling further north whilst eating our packed lunch, we found our first Long-crested Eagle and an immature Augur Buzzard drifted over. We had planned a very brief stop to look over some arable fields and Lantana scrub beside the Tana River. As it happened, we were still finding new birds an hour later. Hinde's Babbler is both extremely local and critically endangered – we were to find at least three together with one or more of Spotted Morning-thrush, Brown-capped Tchagra, African Moustached Warbler, Tropical and Slate-coloured Boubou. A Giant Kingfisher flew past and the arable fields were alive with parties of Bronze Mannikins, Red-rumped and Common Waxbills and Red-billed Firefinches. Whilst none of the White-winged Widowbirds and Yellow Weavers were in breeding dress, our patience was rewarded with stunning adult male African and Holub's Golden-weavers together with a fine male Red-billed Quelea. Our final scheduled birding stop of the day was to look over the rice fields beyond the village of Mwea. Amongst the Goliath, Purple, Squacco and Black-headed Herons, Hamerkop, Intermediate and Little Egrets, Yellow-billed Storks and African Spoonbills, we found a number of Spur-winged and Blacksmith's Plovers. Far scarcer and much appreciated were the only Long-toed Plovers to be seen on the tour. Hugh found two confiding African Rails; several Purple Swampheens were right out in the open whilst numerous Black Crakes, several White-browed Coucals and a couple of Malachite Kingfishers added to the spectacle. Confusingly rufous breasted resident *rufula* Red-rumped Swallows hawked the fields together with several Banded Martins, a host of Barn Swallows and one White-headed Saw-wing. A couple of Black-shouldered Kites tussled in mid-air; Barry found a Pin-tailed Whydah and we all enjoyed our first Fischer's Sparrow-larks and Yellow-rumped Seedeaters. By late afternoon, we were driving onwards and northwards through rolling wooded fields, coffee and tea plantations before opening out onto upland grassy plains and the entrance track to our base for the night, Naro Moru River Lodge. The last new bird of the drive, a fly over Silvery-cheeked Hornbill brought the running total of species seen during the day to a staggering 144 – not bad for a birding day, which didn't start until mid-morning !

Day 4: A view often expressed about Kenya is that for every hour travelled, so the scenery changes. Never was this more apparent than today. It was still pitch black at 5.30am with a clear, star-filled sky in the grounds of Naro Moru and within 30 minutes, we had found one, or more likely two Montane Nightjars flying around showing extensive white in the outer tail. After a quick caffeine fix, and a chilly if not cold dawn, the trees in the car park were alive with Golden-winged, Tacazze, Green-headed and Northern Double-collared Sunbirds together with Red-faced Crombec and Chinspot Batis. A Brown Parisoma appeared briefly - admittedly rare but sadly downright boring to look at. Elsewhere in the grounds we found our first Montane White-eyes, which Hector, described as "White-eyes on steroids"...so pronounced the orbital rings; our first Hartlaub's Turaco ran along a moss covered branch and flocks of Red-fronted Parrots squawked overhead. A noise likened to a motorbike engine starting up heralded the presence of Eastern Black-and-white Colobus monkeys, a number of which sat out on exposed perches, taking in some rays. Across the stream, we scoured a dry vegetation scrub slope eventually luring out a Brown-backed Scrub-robin and from our vantage point picked out our first African Green and Rameron Pigeons, but sadly that calling Crowned Hornbill stayed out of sight. Back in the riverside woodland, Placid Greenbul showed well to most, but it was just a very lucky few that glimpsed African Goshawk and Black Duck. Following a hearty breakfast, we left this delightful lodge for the slopes of Mount Kenya. Our aim was to reach the Meteorological Station at around 9,000ft but the effect of the recent rains on the track meant we stopped perhaps 500ft short. Nevertheless most of the montane specialities of the area became entries in our notebooks - albeit some far easier than others. Highlights were many:- dazzling White-starred Robins; that incredibly confiding Jackson's Francolin that walked within 5ft of us; the patience and resolve necessary to see an Abyssinian Crimsonwing well and that delightful party of Black-rumped Waxbills will certainly remain in one's memory. If you add excellent views of target birds such as Montane Buzzard, Grey Cuckoo-shrike, Hunter's Cisticola, Cinnamon Bracken-warbler, Brown Woodland-warbler, Thick-billed Seedeater and Black-tailed Oriole, then the visit was undoubtedly a success. But with all such activities, there is a lesson to be learned. This morning's moral turned out to be "if you decide upon taking a comfort break, a quality bird is bound to turn up" - sadly a few missed a flyover Crowned Eagle. From Mt Kenya, we retraced our steps to the main highway and headed north along this upland plateau of cultivation and small settlements, eventually descending sharply to the arid semi desert scrub bordered by the chaotic multi ethnic, multi cultural hubbub that was Isiola. En route, highlights included an African Hawk-eagle, huge flocks of Red-collared Widowbirds and Red-billed Queleas. Following an interesting series of encounters with poor, persistent but smiling children asking for sweets, pens or just about anything, we finally entered Buffalo Springs Nature Reserve. The immediate appearance of wildlife was like turning the proverbial tap on. Within five minutes we were watching Beisa Oryx, Grant's Gazelle, Impala and Kirk's Dikdik. Yellow-necked Spurfowl were everywhere; a pair of White-bellied Bustards crept through the grass mere feet away from us; a Rosy-patched Bush-shrike perched out in the open; we found our first male Black-faced Sandgrouse, literally hundreds of Helmeted and Vulturine Guineafowl and our first Little Bee-eater. It was now 6.30pm; sunset was approaching and local regulations meant a swift drive to our base for the next two night – the sumptuous Samburu Serena Lodge. Today we had amassed another superb total of 124 species; covered a lot of ground and started to enjoy the spectacle that is Kenya Big Game. Almost everyone saw almost everything; the weather was dry changing from cool to downright hot by late afternoon and there was much anticipation as to what tomorrow might bring.

Day 5: All of today was spent in the dry, sand and rock twin reserves of Buffalo Springs and Samburu full of thorn scrub and scattered Acacia. Perhaps the most numerous species in this land are Black-capped Social-weaver, White-headed Buffalo-weaver and White-browed Sparrow-weaver – we were to see many hundreds of each. Our first game drive left at 6.30am and could best be described as “wall to wall birding” within Buffalo Springs where highlights were many. We found our first Pygmy Falcons and Eastern Chanting-goshawks perched out in the open and Red-and-yellow Barbets flitting through the scrub. It is commonplace for adult male birds in full breeding plumage to be particularly attractive - most certainly this is the case for both Kenya Violet-backed Sunbird and Red-headed Weaver; both showed well at close range. Not to be outdone were Bearded Woodpecker, Black-throated Barbet, Northern Brubru, Grey-headed Bush-shrike and parties of dazzling Golden-breasted Starlings. But I could so easily have highlighted another 20 or so – we actually saw over 90 species in two and a half hours! We took breakfast at the Lodge accompanied by inquisitive Rufous Chatterers - an apt name if ever there was one. By 10.15am we were ready to leave once more. Several of the group had found a Water Thick-knee beside the river, and Steve pulled out an Ashy Flycatcher in the lodge gardens – almost certainly a new bird for the reserve. The rest of the morning and early afternoon was spent slowly driving the arid scrub slopes inside Samburu Park. It was hot, dry and bright with temperatures in the late 80's and birds were flicking from one patch of shade to the next. However with perseverance and willing eyes we built up an exceptional list including many “hard to get” species. We found several confiding Buff-crested Bustards, a cryptically plumaged male Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and several Somali Bee-eaters perched inches above the ground. Our only Violet Woodhoopoe and our first Abyssinian Scimitarbill were seen, as were both Nubian and Cardinal Woodpeckers. Under one thorn bush, a strikingly marked Fawn-coloured Lark sought out the shade and after several “fly by's” we eventually nailed our first Brown-tailed Apalis - surely a species in its own right. Around midday, we made a concentrated effort to find localised scrub specialities and succeeded with several White-winged Scrub-robins; Somali Crombec and Pygmy Batis; both Yellow-vented Eremomela and Mouse-coloured Penduline-Tit; adult male Shining Sunbird at this the southernmost extent of its range and a female Pringle's Puffback – the first time this species has ever been recorded on this particular itinerary. So often, the best is left to last. Our return drive was halted to photograph a majestic adult Martial Eagle perched up in a dead tree. There followed lunch and a brief siesta before our final game drive whilst some of us had to thwart both Black-faced Vervet Monkeys and Olive Baboons from entering our rooms. As we re-assembled late afternoon, we were absent one leader - I had inadvertently locked Steve inside our chalet! As temperatures slowly fell, the desert livened up. First to show were a confiding pair of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse feeding on the track in front of us; then a proud adult male Somali Ostrich with two dowdy females in tow; several full adult Bateleurs drifted over; we found our first rather noisy Crowned Plovers and Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbills – and then the real drama started. We were told of a female Leopard sat guarding an antelope kill and arrived to find a whole array of spectators. As expected, she was stretched out along a sturdy bough, some 20ft up in an Acacia tree, totally unconcerned by all of the attention. Unexpectedly, she soon stood up, walked half way down the tree, sat on her haunches and barked to attract the attention of a previously unseen cub, no more than two months old. The youngster calmly, if cautiously, walked in, was greeted by a friendly lick from mum before they both strolled away from their audience. Aside from our Leopard family, we found our first Savannah Elephants, the very localised and delightful Grevy's Zebra, Reticulated Giraffe and African Buffalo. We had watched Gerenuks standing on tiptoes to reach succulent Acacia leaves and found our first Common Waterbucks. What could beat that? Certainly not the perched up Ashy Prinia seen ten minutes later, although the last bird of the day – a confiding Spotted Thick-knee was certainly most welcome.

Day 6: Following an early breakfast, we sadly bade farewell to Samburu Serena, but spent most of the morning driving some of the lesser used tracks in Buffalo Springs, seeking out those dry scrub specialities that had eluded us so far. We also spent time in the richer vegetation beside both the Ewaso Ng'iro and Isiola rivers. We caught up with enigmatic Secretary-birds nonchalantly striding across the plain; Crowned Plovers and White-bellied Canaries. It was also time for the photographers amongst us to get shots of birds only seen distantly beforehand. Who could forget the pair of Martial Eagles mating, totally oblivious of the voyeurism all around. We were allowed access to an abandoned camp site where Golden Palm Weavers nest in the grounds and we quickly added Mariqua Sunbird together with a Pearl-spotted Owlet and attendant host of cursing Parrot-billed Sparrows. Close by, on a flat stony plain, a pair of Somali Coursers and a family party of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse was most welcome. Eventually we reached the park gates and drove back into Isiolo. In just over two days, we had seen no less than 146 species in Samburu/Buffalo Springs. By now, it was seriously hot, dry and incredibly dusty. Lunch was taken in a police station car park (another 1st no doubt for Birdfinders) whilst Abdi attended to the paperwork brought about by a negligent bus driver smashing into the rear of his bus the previous day. Driving south from Isiolo, we climbed the steep escarpment and walked the scrub slopes for an hour or so. Both Cinnamon-breasted and African Golden-breasted Buntings were welcome additions to the checklist, as were Brimstone Canary, the very localised Boran Cisticola, Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Kenya Rufous-sparrow and an immature male Pin-tailed Whydah. Having reached a grassy plateau we crossed the Equator at Nakiyaro, finding perched Augur Buzzard and Dusky Turtle Dove on utility roadside wires en route. Further south still, a stunning adult male Malachite Sunbird (a personal view – the most beautiful of the sunbirds) fed on Lions Ear flowers; three very bedraggled looking Angola Swallows perched up on the wires and, south of the Naro Moru junction, parties of Long-tailed Widowbirds in non-breeding dress flicked too and fro. Amongst them were several males still showing their extraordinary extended central tail feathers. In Nyeri, we turned east, slowly climbing into the hill forest of the Mt Kenya National Park. We stopped to enjoy a noisy feeding flock of at least 15 Silvery-cheeked Hornbills and, a little further on, telescoped an adult female Crowned Eagle stood beside her nest. The heat had most definitely gone out of the day, indeed it was quite chilly in the growing dusk but there was still time for several chance encounters for several of the party. Most saw both Crowned Hornbill and Fine-banded Woodpecker but the Scaly Francolin was only seen by those in Bus No2 as it dashed across the road. We reached the park gates of the Serena Mountain Lodge, situated at 7,200ft virtually at sunset. Directly in front of us, the waterhole surrounded an island of grass moulded into the shape of the African continent where a herd of Forest

Elephants was already in situ. During the course of the evening, periodic glances at the floodlit pool added African Buffalo, Marsh and White-tailed Mongoose, Bushbuck and a small group of Green Sandpipers, whilst a Common Genet tucked into morsels thrown onto a raised feeding platform by the kitchen staff.

Day 7: Mountain Lodge is a fairly small timber built resort built on several floors. All accommodation, and all public rooms overlook the waterhole and there are both upper and lower open air balconies. As dawn broke, we all assembled on the roof balcony just as the summit of Mt Kenya appeared through the clouds. We then spent the first hour of daylight looking over both sides of the forest. Common birds to the area included Cape Robin-chat, White-eyed Slaty-flycatcher and the ubiquitous Baglafaecht Weaver, whilst Red-fronted Parrots regularly screeched overhead. Perhaps the rarest bird on view was a female Oriole Finch clambering about in the undergrowth. We saw our only Cape Wagtails of the tour on the muddy lake fringes; both Rameron and Delegorgue's Pigeons flew over; a handsome adult male Montane Oriole put in a performance and both Slender-billed Greenbul and male Northern Double-collared Sunbird showed in the car park. A short pre-breakfast drive down the entrance road was made more colourful by the insistence of the Park Authorities that we took an armed guard with us (those crombecs are really viscous). En route, eagle-eyed Andrew spotted Alpine and Black Swifts at a phenomenal height (and what's so impressive, from a moving vehicle). In some trees bordering a clearing, a female Little Sparrowhawk was probably the highlight, although an adult Collared Sunbird was pleasing. In this upland forest, ideal weather conditions for watching mixed species flocks would be dull, still and overcast - today it was bright, hot and sunny - and little showed. We decided to cut our losses and leave straight after breakfast. Whilst the vehicles were being loaded, Rüppell's Robin-chats, African Hill-babbler and Montane White-eye performed in the car park. Driving south west down the forested slopes, several Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters perched up on utility wires; a couple of Augur Buzzards soared over and a party of three Grey-crowned Cranes landed in a distant marshy field. From Nyeri, the capital of Central province and heartland of the huge Kikuyu tribe, we journeyed on south to Wajee Nature Park. Right at the entrance road, we found a couple of adult African Harrier-hawks and in the car park both Chinspot Batis and a Tambourine Dove showed well. There are basically two target birds in the park, which comprises wooded slopes and an open valley with scattered trees. We were to be accompanied by local guide Edwin and soon found a pair of African Wood-owls, which sadly were very skittish. They were seen well, but didn't hang around. By contrast an adult Rufous-necked Wryneck was very showy, perching right out in the open for some while. Inevitably there were quality "back up species" on view. Perhaps the best was an inquisitive and scolding Black-collared Apalis; also seen were both Bronze Sunbird and Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird. During the heat of midday, we retraced our steps back to Nyeri and then looped first north, then west around the Aberdares. After an hour or so, a stop alongside some agricultural fields allowed us to view a nesting pair of Mackinder's Eagle-owls on nearby cliff ledges. A little further on, an off-road drive to a secluded lake produced a pair of African Black Duck together with close views of Purple-throated Cuckoo-shrike from the entrance track, whilst a couple of juvenile Martial Eagles soared over and began talon grappling. Then the weather changed. It basically rained all the way to Nakuru but as we descended down the eastern slope of the Rift Valley and looked out over the lake, the setting sun briefly appeared and a dazzling pink border, that is one million Lesser Flamingos, put a smile on everyone's face.

Day 8: On a tour full of fantastic mornings, this has to have been the most amazing so far. The day dawned misty, a little damp and decidedly chilly and we endured our first encounter with mosquitoes. Around the Lodge we found our first Arrow-marked Babbler and Northern Anteater-chats. By 6.30am we were driving south through the Acacia woodland that surrounds part of the lake. Our first highlight, a Dideric Cuckoo calling from the treetops shortly followed by a huge Southern Ground-hornbill slowly flopping past. Eventually we reached the open grassland and our first real introduction to big game en masse. A Spotted Hyena lolloped across the fields; we found our first Elands, a truly huge, chunky antelope; the endangered Rothschild's Giraffe, both Thomson's and Grant's Gazelles, Impala and Common Zebra all feeding right beside the roadside - the latter replete with attendant Red-billed Oxpeckers. A pair of Black-backed Jackals trotted in front of us; families of Common Warthogs stayed amongst the scattered trees and African Buffalo were absolutely everywhere. By far the "star animal" however was a family of four White Rhinos (we were to find an amazing 14 during the course of the morning). Not to be outdone, the birdlife was stunning. Highlights included a pair of photogenic Yellow-throated Longclaws; Rufous-naped Larks; Plain-backed and Grassland Pipits and Pectoral-patched Cisticolas all in the short grass and a pair of rather wet and bedraggled looking Coqui Francolins close to the road. Perhaps the rarest find of the morning was down to Christine - a 1st for Birdfinders on this tour and quite possibly a new species for Nakuru - three Whimbrel sat out in the wet fields. We returned to the Lodge for breakfast just as the sun came out, burning away the mist. We found Mocking Cliff Chat actually inside the dining hall; Little Rock-thrush on one of the roofs; Common Scimitar-bill flitting from tree to tree in the car park together with a supporting cast, which included Tropical Boubou, African Paradise-flycatcher and Bronze Sunbird. Our next drive followed the lakeshore northwards again through Acacia. Several White-fronted Bee-eaters sallied too and fro catching flying insects and we played hide and seek with a Hildebrandt's Francolin. A small bird flock flitted their way through the lower tangles, which included Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Grey-capped Warbler, Tawny-flanked Prinia and White-bellied Tit. By the lake shore we were able to walk to the waters edge with Lesser Flamingos as far as the eye could see. How many were there? - I haven't a clue. People say well over one million birds are present here, and it is well believable. Life took a dramatic twist when an opportunist Spotted Hyena decided to run through the shallows and successfully grabbed a pink mid-morning snack. In amongst the Flamingos were large numbers of White Pelicans and Grey-headed Gulls whilst both White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns swirled around overhead. On the muddy shoreline, several Kittlitz's Plovers fed, some still in distinctive breeding plumage. Whilst walking freely, we had to keep one eye on a herd of African Buffalo, which were slowly wandering in our direction - these animals are extremely temperamental and highly dangerous. A little further north, in another forested belt, a flock of Wattled Starlings contained several well marked adult males and a couple of barking

male Olive Baboons gave away the hideout of a large Lioness, desperately trying to get some sleep in the long grass. Towards the north end of the lake, there were small groups of Greater Flamingos feeding in the more marshy areas together with a few Yellow-billed Storks, Sacred Ibis and Blacksmith's Plovers whilst Black-necked Grebes swam offshore and Gull-billed Terns patrolled the waters edge. We retraced our steps back through the woodland. Both Fischer's Lovebird and Wahlberg's Honeyguide took a while to show themselves to everybody and a few lucky members of the group were looking in the right direction to see a Leopard run across the road in front of Bus No1. Our last port of call was a lookout high on the eastern cliffs. Here both Nyanza and Horus Swifts glided by and Rock Hyrax and Red-headed Agama lizards were sunning themselves on the boulders. Following lunch, we left Nakuru mid afternoon. In Kenya, even something as mundane as a petrol filling stop has birding opportunities. Whilst every possible drop of diesel was being pumped into our vehicles, courtesy of angled mini wheel ramps, we were enjoying several Grey-rumped Swallows feeding over some nearby fields. Shortly thereafter, an opportunist stop on the road north not only provided a superb Silverbird but also Klaas's Cuckoo and a breeding plumaged Yellow Bishop. Around 5.00pm the heavens opened; it proverbially poured down and the excitement was about to begin. Back in May 2003, the only road bridge for miles around collapsed. Nothing has ever been done to rectify the situation and vehicles are now accustomed to traversing the river, normally only a few inches deep. However, our crossing was in a thunderstorm with "stair-rods" rain. We are extremely grateful not only to the driving skills of Peter and Abdi but also to a group of entrepreneurial children who were our guides, zigzagging too and fro from shore to mud bank; mud bank to shore running across boulders bare foot. The rain had eased by the time we reached Lake Baringo Club, our base for the next two nights, but rain in this very arid almost semi desert promises birds a plenty, and the next couple of days were to prove very interesting.

Day 9: The day dawned clear, bright, still and warm - the only evidence of yesterdays torrential downpour being the muddy walking tracks. During the course of the day we never strayed more than five miles from our base; exploring different tracks into the dry thorn scrub, replete with "wait a minute bushes" and gazing up onto Baringo cliffs. The focus of today was a combination of locally specialised species and daytime roosts for nocturnal birds; and we did pretty well with every important species eventually giving excellent views - thanks in no small part to our two local guides Julius and Cliff (remember it was Julius who accompanied us to Baringo cliffs, not the other one!). The one unexpected but key species seen during the morning were Verreaux's Eagle. The cliffs have historically been a good site for this impressive eagle, but in recent years they have been extremely difficult to find. Tied for a close second came stunning views of pairs of roosting Heuglin's Coursers, Greyish Eagle-owls and Slender-tailed Nightjars together with an awesome Northern White-faced Owl - all seen within feet of us. Both White-throated and Madagascar Bee-eaters hawked insects from roadside wires; the very localised Jackson's and Hemprich's Hornbills sat atop bushes around the cliffs. We also found both Magpie Starling and the extremely scarce Northern Masked-weaver (other than a tiny population here at Baringo, this species only occurs in southern Sudan - not currently on birders itineraries!) The "back up list" was equally impressive featuring perched Dark Chanting-goshawk, Gabar Goshawks; several Black-headed Lapwings sheltering in the shade beside a village football pitch; a couple of Jacobin Cuckoos and an adult Great-spotted Cuckoo; African Pygmy-kingfisher perched low over the lake shore; several Rufous-crowned Rollers on the wires; a number of exquisite Lesser-striped Swallows drifting over our heads; a couple of stunning "white morph" African Paradise-flycatchers; numerous White-browed Scrub-robins all calling from the bush tops; our first Little Weavers and gaudy adult Green-winged Pytilias and an adult Somali Golden-breasted Bunting feeding its fledged young. The late afternoon saw a dramatic temperature and weather change. It is fair to say that our last birding walk through the thorny scrub around 4.00pm was hot and humid, enough to be oppressive - within 30 minutes the whole area was subjected to a real downpour, leaving us with a few negative thoughts about tomorrows drive out crossing of the river.

Day 10: An early breakfast was followed by our last "target" Baringo bird - a pair of Verreaux's Eagle-owls, 15 ft over our heads carefully preening each other. For good measure, our first Woodland Kingfishers were found nearby. We departed in bright sunshine around 8.00am on the long drive west with just a little trepidation about the river crossing. As it happens, by comparison with Saturday, the crossing was a pussycat - a lot of sliding around but never anything to worry about. Soon we were climbing the western escarpment of the Rift Valley. At a forested roadside stop overlooking a stream a party of Ross' Turacos together with both Black-and-white-casqued and Crowned Hornbills gorged themselves in a fruiting tree whilst both Variable and Northern Double-collared Sunbirds were found nearby. Past the town of Kabarnet, we descended steeply into the Kerio valley. On the upper rock strewn slopes we found Long-billed Pipits and our only Stripe-breasted Seedeater of the tour and both Andrew and Christine were looking in the right direction to see a Wahlberg's Eagle drift over (fortunately we all caught up with it, and another, further down the valley). We then took a long, hot and weary walk criss-crossing the scrub slopes. Birds were few and far between but we managed to find Spot-flanked Barbet, Black-headed Batis, Pale Flycatcher and Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-weaver together with several African Golden-breasted Buntings. However the rarest of all (and looking very much like a diminutive Spotted Flycatcher) was a Gambaga Flycatcher, which is only the 3rd that Steve has ever seen. Just as we were re-boarding our buses, a Rock Kestrel (considered a species in its own right by some, but a darker more rufous race of Eurasian Kestrel by others) soared and then hovered over the road. Lunch was taken in a wooded glade just above the Kerio river - and it was teeming with birds. The target species here is White-crested Turaco, which took a while to find but eventually showed really well. Other sought after species found included Lead-coloured Flycatcher, Double-toothed Barbet and Black-headed Gonolek but the supporting cast was truly splendid with Meyer's Parrot, Red-chested Cuckoo, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Red-faced Crombec and Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike. We crossed the river and climbed the western wall of the valley to about 7,000ft. At a look out, we watched Fan-tailed Ravens hassled by Pied Crows; a huge adult Martial Eagle soaring high up and Bronze-tailed Glossy-starlings that really didn't have bronze tails, but did have purple extending further up the breast that "Greater Blue-eareds". Historically, this has been a site for White-necked Raven but we understand that they have become difficult to see since the closure of the local abattoir! - one bird was seen distantly but hardly

satisfactorily, being identified solely on shape. As the day wore on, rain clouds began to build. Late afternoon found us overlooking a roadside marsh at about 7,500ft with birds a plenty. For sheer elegance, male Red-collared, Fan-tailed and Jackson's Widowbirds stole the show; we had welcome if extremely brief views of both Black-bellied Bustard and Blue-headed Coucal; excellent close views of Levaillant's Cisticola, Zebra Waxbill and a flock of Cardinal Queleas which included several red headed males. Both Little Rush Warbler and Lesser Swamp-warbler were seen flitting around the reeds whilst we our only African Marsh-harrier of the tour quartered the area and had a couple of Wattled Plovers flew past. We stopped briefly for supplies in the bustling town of Eldoret before our final birding site, a roadside lake further west. Here we were to see our only African Darters of the tour, a few White-breasted Cormorants, but little else. The last stretch of the drive, at night in the rain with no road lighting and pot holes the size of craters could best be described as interesting. (the look on Paul's face when Steve announced that the final 10km stretch to the Rondo Retreat might be a little bumpy was priceless !)

Day 11: Rondo Retreat, replete with flowering shrubs and manicured lawns lies in the heart of the Kakamega rainforest. As everywhere else on the tour, the rooms were comfortable, the food excellent and the service magnificent. As for the birding, how do you begin to describe a place where eleven days into a tour, you still get 44 new birds before lunch! It was still dark when we ate breakfast. As the light gathered, the trees in the car park seemed to be full of Black-and white-casqued Hornbills; a Southern Hylia (soon to be split as Kakamega Hylia) appeared high on an exposed snag and a pair of Chubb's Cisticolas fed along the shrub borders. Now all of the black flycatchers were sooty Northern Black-flycatchers, of much more interest however was the appearance of our first Bocage's Bush-shrike together with Purple-throated Cuckoo-shrike, Bronze and Green-headed Sunbirds. Over the course of the next two hours, we barely walked more than 300 metres along a wide forest track. It was surprisingly busy with traffic – bicycle traffic, but traffic nevertheless and there were the inevitable groups of women and children collecting brushwood for their fires. Initially we couldn't understand why they never met our eyes, nor responded to our "jambo's" until we realised that what they were doing was illegal, and they equated white faces with authority. And the ticks kept coming and coming, Without question, when someone mentions Kakamega, then Great Blue Turaco and Blue-headed Bee-eaters names come to mind. Both were on the list within 30 minutes! Our first Great Blue (we were to see 8–10 during the morning) flew across the road calling before perching high in a series of bare branches; our first bee-eater (we saw at least three), normally shy and a denizen of forest cover, was hawking insects from a roadside perch. Kakamega also equates to greenbuls:- this morning we saw 10 species, all subtly different but without Steve's expertise we would have really struggled. Some birds were real gems but shy and retiring, requiring considerable patience. Our first such Black-faced Rufous Warbler was a case in point. Others showed remarkably well such as Luhder's Bush-shrike, Yellow-billed and Grey-throated Barbets, Snowy-crowned Robin-chat and Equatorial Akalat. One tree in particular was just full of Bronze, Green-headed, Green and Green-throated Sunbirds. We briefly returned to the Rondo for a comfort break (Steve, Andy and I were to strike lucky with an African Emerald Cuckoo right outside our cabins) before driving a mile or so down the track to an area where, whilst Steve called out various greenbuls left, right and centre, we marvelled in particular at a Red-headed Malimbe, climbing down a tree trunk like a nuthatch. Certain birds just did not behave; a Blue-shouldered Robin-chat appeared on a log for a nano-second whilst White-breasted Negrofinch and Brown-eared Woodpecker performed as good as gold. By midday, the birds were getting quieter - a fitting time to retire for lunch. We reassembled again mid afternoon to walk a different stretch of the main track. All was going well with a fine male Petit's Cuckoo-shrike showing at close quarters and a much more skulking Yellowbill (I never did see its yellow bill!). Then the sky turned black and the rain came thundering down forcing us to make a hasty retreat back to the Rondo. The rain lasted for about 90 minutes, leaving enough decent daylight for a walk along Rondo's stream trail. Within a few short minutes, we had found both Grey-winged Robin and White-tailed Ant-thrush feeding along the path. In some dense shrubs we lured out a small foraging party of Brown Illadopsis and, much much rarer a dingy Chapin's Flycatcher. Mammals are not a very prominent feature of Kakamega, although monkeys are conspicuous, with Eastern Black-and-white Colobus, Red-tailed and Blue Monkeys around the Retreat itself, but little else. Despite losing time to the weather, we had amassed an amazing total of 103 species during the day - amazing as we had only covered a distance of little more than a mile!

Day 12: This morning illustrated so clearly the difference between forest and forest edge birding. Yesterday, we had birds, proverbially "coming out of our ears", this morning we worked "the grid" walking single file on criss cross muddy paths through dense forest. We had a "hit list" and saw most of them; but for many in the group it was a case of slowly building up a picture of the specific bird in question from several sightings - rarely did birds give themselves away easily. First up was a "Red-tailed Bristlebill - we eventually saw 4-5 of them but the first was a real skulker. That, however, was extremely straightforward when compared to our next conquest; Scaly-breasted Illadopsis. It didn't get an easier for "target no. 3" – Jameson's Wattle-eye (although at least it was stunning to look at). We eventually saw 2-3 different birds but in between there were many frustrated and worried expressions on people's faces. Today was a time for catch up by some of the party on birds missed (mainly) yesterday. Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher, Blue-shouldered Robin-chat, Grey-winged Robin and Yellow-crowned Canary were all seen again - and this time they behaved themselves. In an open area, designated for a re-afforestation project, a small group of Black-and-white Mannikins fed on seed heads and in bordering trees, we found our only Yellow-crowned Woodpecker of the tour. This led to a short forested trail leading down to the pump house. Here a safari ant swarm led us to an exceptionally obliging group of bristlebills, Equatorial Akalat and a Brown-chested Alethe. It was also the site for our last "mega" of the area - one that probably took the most effort and concentration of all - White-spotted Flufftail. So much credit was due to Steve's determination and patience – he must have made continuous Flufftail whistling noises for over 30 minutes trying to ensure everyone saw the bird. Walking the grounds after lunch, we found Yellow-spotted Barbet and a Tambourine Dove sat above my head – a good omen for the afternoon, according to Mr Easley. We set off mid afternoon in warm sunshine to bird the forest close to the Lusumu river, quickly finding several exquisite Black-throated Apalis; two pairs

of Pink-footed Puffbacks, Luder's and Bocage's Bush-shrikes. A walk up to a cleared area produced a male MacKinnon's Shrike and a few Mosque Swallows soared overhead. Walking back to the road, we flushed a Mountain Wagtail, which dropped down onto the riverbank, and then the clouds darkened and the thunder rolled. The seemingly inevitable rain never really materialised allowing us to walk the main forest road and one narrow track until after 6.00pm. Whilst in the main quiet, we managed to find some exceptional birds including a skulking Grey-chested Illadopsis; at least one, if not two African Broadbills; a decidedly un-cooperative Western Black-headed Oriole; several stunning Red-headed Malimbe and Red-headed Bluebills not to forget repeat showings of the forests main attractions – the turaco and the bee-eater. This effectively brought our birding stay at Kakamega to a conclusion

Day 13: A pre-dawn departure from the Rondo saw us driving to Mumias. The bridge over the Nzoia river is the site for Rock Pratincoles, and here we suffered our first and only real disappointment of the tour. The heavy rains over the last few weeks had raised the water levels to such an extent that there were no rocks visible above the surface! We did find several Red-chested Sunbirds; Lesser-striped Swallows hawked back and forth and an immature Great Sparrowhawk drifted by. We carried on driving through sugar cane country towards Busia before stopping in front of some rather unimpressive looking scrub, weedy fields and riverine bush - but it was alive with birds. The close fields were full of Bronze Mannikins, Bar-breasted Firefinch and a few Fawn-breasted Waxbills. Amongst them were several Pin-tailed Whydahs and a couple of Yellow-shouldered Widowbirds. Atop scattered bushes were Variable, Bronze, Orange-tufted and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds, a Masked Tchagra, a pair of Yellow-throated Longclaws, Striped Kingfisher and an African Blue Flycatcher. Across the road, Wire-tailed Swallows and White-rumped Swifts were ever present overhead; a pair of Red-headed Lovebirds (one with a red head the other orange) fed in the riverine bushes; both Collared and Olive-bellied Sunbirds perched out in the open whilst African Harrier-hawk, Long-crested Eagle, Wahlberg's Eagle and Black-shouldered Kite all soared over. By mid morning it was extremely hot as we continued our drive. Just outside the village of Nanbak, we trudged across some extremely wet and muddy fields; our target, the diminutive Locust Finch. We were to find a group of four birds, regularly flying across the fields and eventually had short but superb views of a full adult male perched up in a grass tussock. The supporting cast here was just as impressive with Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, a Green Crombec singing its heart out, Broad-billed Roller, Hartlaub's Marsh Widowbird and a pair of Double-toothed Barbets perched out on a dead branch. We ate our picnic lunch here, to the delight of the local village children (they loved ham sandwiches) but not before seeing a Grey Kestrel sat atop a telegraph pole. On reaching Busia, following a "discussion" with a pompous, bureaucratic and self opinionated traffic police officer, and with time on our hands, we made what was intended as a short detour to look for Piapiacs - a rare Kenyan corvid, often associating with cattle. We found cows but no such birds, although a pair of Croaking Cisticolas were some consolation. On scouring the area for further herds of cattle, we inadvertently found ourselves a kilometre or so inside Uganda! – it was only realising that all of the vehicles coming our way had Ugandan number plates that alerted us to the situation. The entrepreneurial spirit of the post Amin era is obviously alive and well as Bus No2 was flagged down by a gentleman posing as a Ugandan border security policeman, politely demanding money for transgressing across the border without a visa. I'm not sure if it was the Kampala Finance Co ID card that he produced as evidence of his alleged authority, or the whiskey on his breath, but Abdi soon sent him packing. Having refund Kenya, and retraced our steps back to Busia, we turned south towards Kisumu. At a roadside, reed-fringed pool we found a superb obliging adult Allen's Gallinule together with several Red-chested Sunbirds. On the other side of the road, the agricultural fields revealed Yellow-backed and Black-crowned Weavers and a non-breeding plumaged Black Bishop. Another stop further along the road produced the only Lizard Buzzard of the tour. Once again, late afternoon storm clouds built up and by 4.30pm it was chucking it down. It then turned into a hailstorm making driving visibility all but impossible. However, as quickly as it came, it went. Over the hussling market town of Luanda, a number of Yellow-billed Kites circled, ever expectant; and by Museno, we crossed the Equator once again and were rewarded with our first views of the huge Lake Victoria and in the distance the large town of Kisumu, where the town centre Imperial Hotel was our base for the night.

Day 14: Dawn found us looking into a wall of Papyrus on the shores of Lake Victoria. This is the one part of the tour where mosquitoes are abundant and the choice of diseases they carry include malaria, dengue and yellow fever. Needless to say, on a warm morning everyone wore long sleeves and long trousers. It was a little disconcerting having to walk right through the very poor village settlement of Ahero, effectively birding from their back gardens onto the marsh, but the locals were smiling, inquisitive but friendly as always. Birds are equally abundant. Our first African Openbill glided over our heads; a male Shikra sat atop a roof and both Slender-billed and Northern Brown-throated Weavers perched on the Papyrus fringes. On the one hand, a Black-headed Gonolek was very obliging, right out in the open; by contrast our only Papyrus Gonolek was much more timid, but eventually showed well to all. The huge Greater Swamp-warbler was always partially hidden but over a period of time, almost everyone was content with the views they got. Winding Cisticolas showed well, but their cousins Carruthers's certainly did not. Also in this first area both Yellow-billed Stork and Spur-winged Plovers flew over, a superb White-throated Bee-eater perched on utility wires and the yellow bellied race of White-bellied Canary caused considerable confusion! Slightly further east, two Water Thick-knees preened on a muddy edge and the only African Grey Woodpecker of the tour, here at the eastern edge of its range, showed well in the car park trees. A Malachite Kingfisher posed for photographers and another African Openbill sat atop a fence post. Our final stop by the lake was equally successful. Peter picked out an Eastern Grey Plantain-eater in a wooded grove, a pair of Black-billed Barbets briefly perched up in roadside trees and several Papyrus Canaries, with their pink bills, fed in dank vegetation. There was even time to enjoy a particularly photogenic Klaas's Cuckoo on the overhead wires. We met up and exchanged greetings with five young members of the Lake Victoria Birders Club who census the area each and every Friday. And then it was time for breakfast. We left Kisumu around 10.15am to start the six hour dusty and bumpy drive to the Masai Mara. Just outside of town, the first Bare-faced Go-away-bird of the tour flew across

the front of Bus No2 - fortunately, we were now in their territory and it didn't take long for the other to catch up. The first half of the journey was through fertile agricultural land with scattered villages and small communities. We saw few birds, save for a smattering of Yellow-billed Kites, a couple of Augur Buzzards, several Grey-headed Kingfishers on the wires and a few parties of Little Swifts. We eventually reached the large town of Kisii - and then the road deteriorated. It was now mid-day and extremely hot. We ate, or rather picked at, our packed lunches "on the hoof". Today's offering, cold french fries (replete with sachets of salt and tomato ketchup) and an unidentifiable piece of meat, perhaps less than wholesome. The landscape soon changed and we were driving through grassy hills with scattered trees. After the town of Kilkoris, we entered the Mara region where traditional thatched corral huts became as commonplace as modern buildings. Eventually we descended steeply, and there in front of us the seemingly endless plains of the Masai Mara Game Reserve. Just as we reached the entrance to Kichwa Tembo ("head of the elephant" in Masai) tented camp - our base for the next two nights, a party of Usambiro Barbets were calling from the top of a thicket and a beautifully marked Purple Grenadier hopped along the track. If your image of a tented camp in any way recalls the Boy Scout movement, think again. Each tent is bigger than some apartments I've seen. They are luxuriously furnished with en suite facilities and piping hot water. Common Warthogs feed nonchalantly on the lawns, often walking right past you, totally unconcerned, pausing to consider whether or not to have a dip in the swimming pool. With just over an hour of birding light left, we worked the scrubby hillsides of the Oloololo escarpment. Specialities of the area found included Purple-banded Sunbird and Trilling Cisticola. We enjoyed excellent perched views of both Rameron Pigeon and Wahlberg's Eagle before retiring to savour, for me, the best meal of the tour so far and to listen to Spotted Hyena's howling in the distance.

Day 15: The White-browed Robin-chats started calling well before dawn, all around the camp. This really is the life of luxury with early morning tea and coffee brought to your tent, and at a time that you choose. For our early morning drive, we returned to the scrubby slopes of yesterday evening with perched birds on view of all shapes and sizes from Trilling Cisticolas to Rufous-necked Wrynecks and Brown Snake-eagles. As we rounded our first bend, we were in for a big surprise (literally) as a herd of Savannah Elephants were feeding in the same patch of forest that we had happily, innocently walked through previously. A little further on, a small party of Red-backed Scrub-robins heralded the arrival of a fast moving feeding flock which included Spot-flanked Barbet, Red-faced Crombec, Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike, Black-backed Puffback, both Rattling and Siffling Cisticolas, African Grey Flycatcher, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Purple Grenadier and a few Yellow-fronted Canaries. We wandered over a ridge and found ourselves walking past a herd of Common Zebra. This really was surreal - watching them from a vehicle is one thing, actually walking beside them is something else altogether. We slowly retraced our footsteps when Peter's phenomenal eyesight picked out a Schalow's Turaco preening right in the middle of a densely foliated bush. On one side of the road both Familiar Chat (looking like a female Common Redstart) and Cinnamon-breasted Rock Bunting could be seen; on the other an enormous adult Crowned Eagle perched up. We also experienced the large and the small of the Accipiter world with both Great and Little Sparrowhawks showing well, whilst also overhead the growing thermals enticed Steppe and juvenile Martial Eagles to glide over together with a couple of Woolly-necked Storks and an Augur Buzzard. Close to the camp entrance, a Mariqua Sunbird showed just how much longer its bill is than the Purple-banded's we had seen yesterday; a pair of Speckle-fronted Weavers perched on a tiny sapling - and then it was breakfast. We began our game drive mid morning, and it was already exceedingly warm. After passing through the Oloololo Gate, we were to spend the next three hours in the Saboringo valley of the northwest Mara, an area of quite tall grasses and scattered trees. Here, during the dry season, drivers can exercise a bit of "off road" flexibility. During one such occasion we found a feeding group of perhaps 30 Stout Cisticolas, and of much rarer fayre, a secretive Broad-tailed Warbler. We were driving towards our first Lappet-faced Vulture sat tall in the top of a distant Acacia when our eagle-eyed drivers diverted at right angles; there, sat in the shade, an immature male Lion perhaps three years old and starting to grow a mane. We watched this magnificent creature for several minutes at very close range, before realising that there was a second Lion lying stretched out nearby. Despite the almost fierce mid-day sun, there were still plenty of animals out on the plains; Masai Giraffe, Common Zebra and Common Warthog; the elegant solitary Topi always standing to attention and a Hippopotamus lazing in a shallow pool. Driving further into the reserve, we came across firstly a Sooty Chat sat beside the track, and then a pair of Meyer's Parrots flew over. The next hour or so was spent watching spurs of the winding Mara river from various viewpoints. Amongst the many birds seen here were three Rufous-bellied Herons - a speciality of the area; a party of 19 Spur-winged Geese and probably more White-faced Whistling-ducks. A Southern Ground-hornbill sat 20ft up in a tree, and after much searching we put a face to an elusive calling Greater Honeyguide. The return drive was interrupted firstly by a close perched Dark Chanting-goshawk, then by a couple of Savannah Elephants who decided that the very spot on the track where we were parked, was the place they wanted to cross - in the Mara, Elephants have right of way! We switched off for an hour or so after lunch. Birds in the Kichwa Tembo grounds included Common Wattle-eye, African Paradise-flycatcher, Grey-capped Warbler and Collared Sunbird whilst Brian and Christine appeared to have adopted a Tree Hyrax by their tent. Come late afternoon, a small - but very select - group set off once more to climb areas of the escarpment behind the camp to search for a hard core of localised specialities. First to show themselves were several Rock-loving Cisticolas, flitting from rock to tree. Two new birds then followed quite quickly - and very special they were too. Firstly an Ovambo Sparrowhawk glided straight over our heads (OK, for those looking through binoculars only, we had to listen to Steve's "Birding 101" identification tutorial - was it really that straightforward to identify?) and then a beautiful Yellow-bellied Hyliota appeared in trees on the other side of the gorge. Higher up the road, we hit another two specialities; Greencap Eremomela (which looks surprisingly like a European Wood Warbler) and Pale Wren-warbler, (looking like a drab grey Dartford Warbler with red eyes). Other highlights included a pair of Wahlberg's Eagles, White-headed Barbet, Plain-backed and Long-billed Pipits. As the evening drew in, we were walking the rocky slopes hoping (in vain) to find Flappet Lark but keeping a wary eye on a herd of Elephants grazing not too far away. I can think of no better way to end such a superb day than our *al fresco* King Prawn Kebab BBQ

Day 16: Another excellent start to the day. A pre-breakfast walk around the wooded grounds of the camp quickly produced superb views of Narina Trogon which was almost expected (one had been seen in the vicinity a few days previously) but also a pair of Red-capped Robin-chats, an intra-African migrant, not normally found in the Mara before November. Additionally, Steve and I found a pair of Scaly Francolins shuffling about in the leaf litter outside our tent. After breakfast, we bade farewell to Kichwa Tembo and drove once more into the game reserve. Basically we were to spend the entire day crossing the Mara. First to show were several Little Bee-eaters beside the road and a Red-billed Oxpecker actually sat on the horns of an African Buffalo. Andrew found a secretive female Black-bellied Bustard close to the track but expertly camouflaged in the tall grass. Not to be outdone, Steve found a male equally close on the other side. Perhaps the strangest sight of all was a Little Swift actually perched in the grass. After a while, we came across a pair of Lions feeding on a freshly killed Common Zebra; the male had a full golden mane and was probably about five years old. There is something morbidly fascinating about watching a Lioness with her face covered in blood. In Bus No2, Paul gave a running commentary on what bits of the Zebra were being devoured at any one given moment; Steve commented that "it was perhaps too late to call the vet" whilst Barry photographed the gory remains. About a mile further on, another similarly aged male posed majestically for the cameras. For the rest of the day, both Lilac-breasted Rollers and Sooty Chats (which somehow remind me of Black Guillemots in flight) were a regular roadside feature. We found our first covey of Red-necked Spurfowl and, close to a makeshift airstrip, a real star turn. A Serval Cat leapt across the track in front of Bus No1 with a rodent in its jaws, and proceeded to slink through the grass, often with only its large ears visible. We took a late morning comfort break courtesy of the Serena Mara Lodge, which also produced both White-browed Robin-chat and Arrow-marked Babblers in the car park, and then it was onward, towards the Mara river proper. One of the most difficult birds to get a good view of in the Mara is Flappet Lark, and today proved to be no exception. One bird was flushed from the side of the road and then played hide and seek with us from behind a termite mound. Just beyond, a large mixed herd of Thomson's Gazelle, Impala and Topi fed close to the road; an adult Martial Eagle sat atop a distant bush and a pair of Banded Martins circled around our first Coke's Hartebeest. The highlight of the morning however was a close encounter with a family of Cheetah, a mother and her six-month old cubs taking a midday snooze under a bush. By the time we reached the river, large groups of White-bearded Gnu (Wildebeest) were grazing, some forming the tell tale single file lines of migration. Lunch was taken under the shade of a Desert Date tree on an open plain above the river whilst a small flock of Red-cheeked Cordonbleu, Yellow-fronted Canary and Swahili Sparrow fed in the undergrowth. At the official Mara River Bridge, close to the monument demarking the border between the Mara and Serengeti plains, a huge and exceptionally tame flock of Grey-capped Social-weavers were everywhere with a few Speckle-fronted Weavers admixed. On the banks of the river, the carcasses of at least seven Wildebeest provided lunch for gathering White-backed and Ruppell's Griffon Vultures. Over the course of the next two hours, there were always large parties of Wildebeest and Zebra in sight, many right beside the track. Other notable sightings included a superb perched Black-chested Snake-eagle, three more sleeping Lions and our first and only Oribe antelope. At one point in the tall grass, there seemed to be a game being played between a White-bellied Bustard and a Black-backed Jackal. The bustard was busy feeding on seed heads but plainly aware of the potential threat whilst the Jackal was pretending not to notice anything at all! Sometimes Murphy's Law strikes right out in the middle of nowhere. We hadn't seen any traffic for some while and found a delightful flock of nine African Quailfinches feeding actually on the track. Within literally seconds two, very noisy mini buses appeared and put them to flight. However, for many the best moment of the afternoon was spent in the company of a Lioness and her (probably one month old) cub. For others parking up beside a drinking pond and watching parties of Yellow-throated Sandgrouse fly in to join our first Saddle-billed Stork was a fitting alternative. As storm clouds brewed up behind us, we made our way to Fig Tree Camp, our base for the night but not before finding a very confiding pair of Wattled Plovers, watching a Spotted Hyena wandering through the tall grass, another fine male Black-bellied Bustard and finally several enchanting Coqui Francolins. A fitting end to a most rewarding day spent with African wildlife

Day 17: The conversation over early morning coffee was all about Lion noises in the night. If one didn't know better, from remarks made it seemed as if there was one right outside each and every tent! The Wildebeest were migrating early today - on our pre-breakfast game drive a long orderly line crossing our path, and a baby Thomson's Gazelle frolicking in the fields were early sightings, just as the sun came up. First good birds of the day - a pair of Yellow-throated Sandgrouse feeding beside the road and two separate groups of confiding White-bellied Bustards. A party of rather playful Spotted Hyenas bounded across one of the fields whilst close by a Black-bellied Bustard relied on its camouflage for protection. Much to Hector's delight, a "mythical" immature Rosy-throated Longclaw took a bit of finding in the long grass. Fortunately a full plumaged adult was much more obliging a short while later. Around 7.30am, a Lioness was out walking with her two young cubs, totally unfazed if not oblivious of their admiring audience - she actually walked right past the side of Bus No1. There had obviously been a couple of successful kills during the night - there were vultures left, right and centre. Around the unfortunate remains of a Wildebeest, we got first hand experience of the vulture pecking order: - Lappet-faced take centre stage; Ruppell's and White-backed await their turn (although they get pretty ratty with each other) whilst Hoodeds wait patiently, just out of the way. At the smaller end of things, to some birders, African larks can at first glance, be very confusing. However when you finally get a long look at a Flappet Lark walking along the track in front of you, it is easy to recognise individuality of both plumage tone and jizz. By 8.00am, we were totally surrounded - literally - by Wildebeest and Zebra; thousands upon thousands of them, many with Wattled Starlings and Lilac-breasted Rollers riding shotgun. We just had to bide our time and wait for a slow dispersal westwards. Just as we were heading back into camp for breakfast, a juvenile Martial Eagle sat right beside the road, eyeing up a covey of Helmeted Guineafowl. We departed Fig Tree mid morning, heading northeast. Early birding sights included a Tawny Eagle sat on a nest and three Southern Ground-hornbills actually on the ground. A speculative stop in an area of short grass and Acacia produced a party of Grey-headed Silverbills and directly opposite, a party of at least four

exquisite Silverbirds. In the wooded slopes of the escarpment close to Sienna Springs, we found Tabora Cisticola in proximity to a party of African Golden-breasted Buntings; a couple of Brown-capped Tchagras and a Striped Kingfisher. Walking further on, we picked out the distinctive high-pitched "rattly trill" of Buff-bellied Penduline-tit. These birds are often tricky to pin down, we had 4-5 of them chasing each other right in front of us. In the same trees were several Red-throated Tits, Chinspot Batis, Little Weavers and a female Von der Decken's Hornbill. A singing Magpie Shrike, replete with shaggy beard, perched low in an Acacia and an adult Martial Eagle soared against the hillside. On some flat, short grassed plains above the Mara, Barry earned our thanks for picking out a delightful trip of Temminck's Coursers running around, perhaps 50 metres distant in the company of our first Capped Wheatear and slightly further on a Two-banded Courser crept stealthily away from us on the other side of the road. By now it was midday, and we ate as we drove passing through rather featureless stony scrub plains with the occasional Grant's Gazelle in the fields and Black-shouldered Kites overhead. Brian found one of our remaining real target birds - Kori Bustard standing in the shade of a lone Acacia. A fair chunk of the afternoon drive was reminiscent of the East Africa Rally. A major road construction project for Narok eastwards caused dusty havoc. As Andrew pointed out "they haven't quite grasped the concept of contra flow yet" Four hours after leaving Sienna Springs, we eventually dropped down into the Rift Valley for the final time. Walking out onto the plains at Saswa, we found species No 600 for the tour - Greater Kestrel, perched atop a bush, together with various Grassland Pipits and Capped Wheatears with a couple of Grey-rumped Swallows swooping over for good measure. Almost at sunset, we stopped to look over a dry river gorge at the eastern edge of the plain. Several Schalow's Wheatears were flitting too and fro, and a Barn Owl was found roosting in a cliff face hole. As darkness fell, we completed our journey to Lake Naivasha Country Club - our base for a last night in Kenya.

Day 18: Following a dawn caffeine fix, we walked across the grounds to the lakeshore boat jetty. It was cool, scenic and extremely peaceful with light overnight mist gradually rising off of the water. As the sun burned away the last vestiges of mist, and whilst waiting for our boatmen to arrive, a Giant Kingfisher perched up and both Black and Rufous-bellied Herons (the latter an extremely good record for Naivasha) drifted over. On one exposed stretch of mud, we saw our only Common Ringed Plovers, Little Stints, Curlew and Wood Sandpipers of the tour. Eventually we set off, with Nicholas piloting Steve's boat, and Papyrus handling ours. We coasted along the shore of several grassy islands where numbers of White Pelicans and Yellow-billed Storks were roosting. The air was full of terns; mostly Whiskered but with a few White-winged Blacks admixed. They were almost all in first winter dress, a plumage rarely encountered in the UK and had to be studied carefully. Here, we also found a couple of delightful Marsh Sandpipers. On drier ground, Kittlitz's, Blacksmith's and Spur-winged Plovers sat and preened. Overhead, raft after raft of Long-tailed and White-breasted Cormorants flew over and amongst them a rather strange looking Lesser Black-backed Gull. In east Africa, they should all be *fuscus*; but this one definitely had grey mantle tones - sadly it all too quickly disappeared. Thousands of Barn Swallows and Plain Martins hawked insects over the water together with a few Horus Swifts. The rarest bird of the morning was a Eurasian Curlew - this particular individual had been present since at least June, but was welcome nevertheless. As we approached an area of Papyrus and reedbeds, Lesser Swamp-warblers were calling; two pairs of Hottentot Teals kept very close to the vegetation edge; some White-winged Widowbirds perched up on stalks and large groups of Red-knobbed Coots sat on the water. On *terra firma*, Masai Giraffe, Wildebeest, Grant's and Thomson's Gazelles fed nonchalantly. At this point, Nicholas had an argument with his outboard engine starter cable. The immediate fix involved our boat towing his however mobile phones are a wonderful thing and within 20 minutes the Naivasha boat repair man and boat appeared. Whilst all this was going on, a Black-tailed Godwit walked between the legs of a Defasso Waterbuck; both Glossy Ibis and Purple Heron flew over; Pied Kingfishers were forever hovering in front of the boats and a couple of pairs of African Fish-eagles watched and waited from their perches. Having disembarked around 9.15am, the walk back through the grounds produced several "yellow shouldered" Black Cuckoo-shrikes, a pair of Dideric Cuckoos and a confiding Red-chested Cuckoo whilst Sacred Ibis stalked the lawns and our final Black-and-white Colobus monkey sat in a bird bath. After breakfast, the group split in two. My group had an earlier flight home than Steve's, although some of the sites to be visited on the way to the airport would be the same. Having climbed the eastern escarpment, we made good progress towards Nairobi using a well-maintained highway. In some wet fields close to Kinangop, it took us a mere 30 minutes to clean up with all three target species showing well. Christine found the first of up to five endemic Sharpe's Longclaws scurrying away into the grass, occasionally perching out in the open to show off their "Canada Warbler" like gorgette of breast streaks. In wetter areas further from the road, up to 20 African Snipe were spiralling up and at least two pairs of Wing-snapping Cisticolas sat in the Papyrus tops. Much closer to Nairobi, Limuru pond is a roadside lake with stands of reeds. Two of the most common wildfowl visible were Yellow-billed and Maccua Ducks. Finding White-backed Duck and Southern Pochard took a lot more patience but eventually we found a "White-backed" with four chicks amongst the water lilies, and a female Southern Pochard close to the far shore. After a quick change of clothing at the Liberty Safari office in Nairobi, we arrived at the airport in ample time with Little Swifts flying all around. Needless to say, the check-in process was less than straight forward but after repeatedly commenting about the "joke on the wall" ("Kenya Airways, the pride of Africa"), computers were adjusted and boarding cards issued. After waiting at the gate first for a wheel to be changed, and then for a change of aircraft itself, we eventually departed for the flight (s) home.

Martyn Kenefick