

Some noteworthy distributional records from the Gwasssi Hills area, Homa Bay County, Kenya

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Summary

A preliminary inventory of birds occurring in the Gwasssi Hills area was compiled by Bradley *et al.* (2015), following surveys between 2011 and 2014, which focused on sub-montane forest (1800–2000 m). Here I detail a number of additional interesting distributional records made principally in montane forest (above 2000 m) and foothill woodlands (1200–1600 m) during birding visits to the area in October 2015, October 2016, March 2017 and November 2017.

Keywords East Africa, forest birds, distribution, inventory, conservation

Introduction

Unfortunately, very few observers currently visit the Gwasssi Hills region, and the little indigenous habitat remaining continues to undergo significant clearance and/or modification in the absence of sustained outside interest (Fig. 1). A distinct habitat type of particular concern is the very small area of humid montane forest above 2100 m on the highest ridges and summit of the Gwasssi Hills, now almost completely destroyed. Undoubtedly, several of its avian inhabitants have already been extirpated or irretrievably diminished in number. Species accounts below follow the nomenclature and taxonomy of the *Checklist of the Birds of Kenya* (EANHS 2009).

Species accounts

Ayres's Hawk Eagle *Aquila ayresii*

Two individuals (a presumed pair) of this distinctive forest raptor were closely observed soaring over the main ridge at 2200 m in the Gwasssi Hills on 28 October 2015. One adult was a very pale morph, with a white head and black 'teardrop' through the eye, while the second bird was a more typical dark morph individual, heavily speckled with black

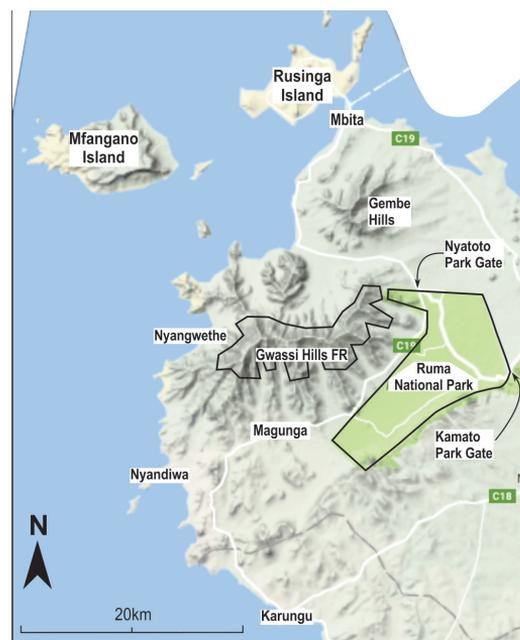


Figure 1. Terrain map of the western parts of Migori and Homa Bay Counties, including locations mentioned in the text.

underneath, and with white restricted to just the throat and chest. This individual was photographed and the identification is supported by B. Finch (pers. comm.). A pale morph individual was observed again at the same location on 27 March 2017. In western Kenya this eagle is known from areas to the east around the Mau highlands (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996) as well as from the Kakamega–Nandi area 120 km to the northeast (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989).

Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*

An immature of this species was seen well and photographed at 1150 m in the western Gwasssi foothills at Nyangwethe on 29 October 2016 (Fig. 2). It was noted to have heavily barred underwings and tail, spotted flanks, a streaked breast and thin central throat stripe, and all three observers (S. Carter, T. Davis and the author) agreed on the identification. The appearance of the bird in circling flight was of a long – though fairly pointed-winged – accipiter, superficially resembling a Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* in shape. The identification was supported by D. Forsman (pers. comm.) who notes a wing-formula and dusky primary fingers, which are diagnostic for this species. This is a scarce species in Kenya, although recent reports of multiple migrating birds in western Kenya and nearby Tanzania suggest it may occur more regularly than records suggest.



Figure 2. An immature Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* in flight over the Gwasssi foothills at Nyangwethe, 29 October 2016 (photo: Simon Carter).

Buff-spotted Flufftail *Sarothrura elegans*

A single, distant bird, was heard at 2200 m in the Gwasssi Hills on 28 October 2015. An audio recording of the bird, albeit of poor quality, permits certain identification and has been confirmed as this species by D. Turner (*in litt.*). The nearest records of this species in western Kenya come from Kakamega Forest 120 km to the northeast (Zimmerman 1972), and it may only be a seasonal visitor to the Gwasssi Hills.

Swamp Nightjar *Caprimulgus natalensis*

This species was audio recorded in Ruma National Park on 22 February 2012 by D. Bradley and the author, though the record has been unpublished until now. The calls included a steadily repeated “chuk” note and a short churring phrase ending in a series of lower bubbly notes, both vocalizations matching well with the known voice of this nightjar. These audio recordings have been deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (id# 101209 and 101210). South of the Winam Gulf, this species was first recorded in the Serengeti–Mara ecosystem of northern Tanzania and southern Kenya in 2005–2007 (Kilpin 2011), and our records document an additional site where the species occurs between this distribution and the formerly known Kenyan range to the north of the Winam Gulf (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996).

Freckled Nightjar *Caprimulgus tristigma*

A single individual was audio recorded singing from steep and rocky slopes at 1500 m in the Gembe Hills on 27 November 2017. This record represents a first occurrence in the Kenyan Lake Victoria basin and the audio recording has been deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (id# 395924). Elsewhere in western Kenya, this nightjar is readily found 100 km eastwards in the western Maasai Mara (JB, pers. obs).



Figure 3. Pallid Honeyguide *Indicator meliphilus* perched in a large tree in remnant sub-montane forest in the Gwasssi Hills, 29 October 2016 (photo: Simon Carter).

Pallid Honeyguide *Indicator meliphilus*

The distinctive “fwee...fwee...fwee’ep....” call of this species was first heard in riverine forest at 1150m at Nyangwethe on 30 October 2015 and was also heard in riverine figs outside the Kamato Gate of Ruma National Park on 25 November 2017 (JB pers. obs.), though the bird was not seen. It has only been seen and photographed on one occasion in remnant sub-montane forest at 1750m in the Gwasssi Hills on 29 October 2016 by S. Carter (Fig. 3). The squat appearance, short stubby bill, pale underside and absence of a dark malar stripe are all evident from the photograph and the bird was confidently identified as this species. Pallid Honeyguide is unknown from elsewhere in the Kenyan Lake Victoria Basin, but does occur in the western Maasai Mararegion 110km to the southeast (T. Davis pers. comm.).

African Grey Woodpecker *Dendropicos goertae*

This species is known to occur in the Lake Victoria basin (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996), but the subspecies involved to the south of the Winam Gulf has been unclear in the literature. Following recent observations in Homa Bay (S. Carter pers. comm.), and the western foothills of the Gwasssi Hills (JB pers. obs.), birds in this part of Kenya can be confidently assigned to the race *D. g. centralis* and not the highland occurring, *D. g. rhodeogaster* (considered separately as Highland Grey Woodpecker by some), on the basis of a paler grey head and underparts, and the absence of a red wash on the belly of the male.

Brown-backed Woodpecker *Picoides obsoletus*

This local and scarce species was found at 1250m in *Acacia* woodland at the Ruma National Park Nyatoto Gate on 25 November 2017 (Fig. 4). A second individual was found on the following day in mixed woodlands at 1400m in the eastern Gwasssi foothills. Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) map an isolated record of this woodpecker from 75km to the northeast at Kisumu but the species appears to be rare in the Kenyan Lake Victoria basin, and observations around the Gwasssi Hills likely refer to a small but resident population.

Grey Cuckooshrike *Coracina caesia*

Unseen birds were audio-recorded in closed canopy forest at 2200m on the Gwasssi Hills on 28 and 29 October 2015. The calls include chattering and high pitched “tsip-tsip” and “sueet” notes typical of this species, as well as a very high and descending “peeoooooooo” call, which is otherwise known only from birds in South Africa (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996; e.g. id# 313513 at www.xeno-canto.org). It was not found in November 2016 by which time most forest habitat at the site had been felled, though it is possible the birds were only visitors to the Gwasssi Hills as the species is known to make local movements elsewhere in its’ African range (Keith *et al.* 1992). Audio recordings have been deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (id# 313513 and 316139), and these records represent a range extension of roughly 110km from the nearest known populations in the western Maasai Mara (Macaulay Library photo #58001021; S. Carter) and Nandi Forests (Zimmerman 1972).



Figure 4. A male Brown-backed Woodpecker *Campethera caroli* at the Ruma National Park Nyatoto Gate, 25 November 2017 (photo: James Bradley).



Figure 5. One of a pair of Rock-loving Cisticolas *Cisticola aberrans* found atop a rocky knoll in the lower Gwasssi Foothills, 31 October 2015 (photo: James Bradley).

Rock-loving Cisticola *Cisticola aberrans*

This species was reported in Bradley *et al.* (2015) from the Gembe Hills on the basis of audio recordings of unseen birds, and was extensively audio recorded at the same location on 27 November 2017 (id# 395937-395942 at www.xeno-canto.org). On 31 October 2015, a pair was well observed and photographed in the western Gwasssi foothills at 1320 m (Fig. 5). They were found at the top of a small knoll inhabiting shrubs and small trees surrounding a large exposed granite outcrop, and responded aggressively to tape of this species' song and calls made in the Sitebe Mountains in west Tanzania (audio recording by D. Moyer). The subspecies here, *C. a. emini*, is considered separately from those of southern Africa

by Gill & Donsker (2017), which may be warranted on the basis of consistent vocal differences. It is probably a locally uncommon species in any rocky habitat between the Gwasssi Hills and its nearest known site of occurrence 100 km eastwards in the Maasai Mara (Finch 1987).

Pale Wren Warbler *Calamonastes undosus*

A bird was briefly seen and audio recorded at 1270 m in the eastern Gwasssi foothills on 26 March 2017 and again at 1300 m in the Gembe foothills on 28 November 2017. The first bird was found in an area of open woodland on lightly grassed rocky slopes with a gentle to medium gradient, where it was briefly observed flitting between the tops of thickly foliated trees. In flight it appeared quite dark, similar to a Grey-backed Camaroptera *Camaroptera brachyura*, and was likely of the nominate race. Audio recordings of this individual, as well as [possibly] a second individual, have been deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (id# 363170 and 364255). The calls noted in the field were similar to those of Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor*, but slower and with a variable rhythm and clicking quality. This record represents a 95 km range extension to the northwest of the nearest known population around Lolgorien (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996).

Cinnamon Bracken Warbler *Bradypterus cinnamomeus*

An unseen bird in thick secondary growth at 2100 m in the Gwasssi Hills repeated a characteristic song phrase three times after a heavy rain shower on 27 October 2015, and was independently identified by D. Chesire and the author. The song was typically loud and punchy, consisting of three introductory notes, followed by a higher pitched trill... "TCHU-TCHU-TCHU-treeeeeeee". A second bird was heard at 2200 m the following day singing the same phrase, but with only two introductory notes, while another was audio recorded making the nasal and camaroptera-like "peeet" call (id# 316684 at www.xeno-canto.org). Elsewhere, this upper montane forest species has been known from the Kisii area approximately 80 km to the east, as well as the North Nandi Forest 120 km to the northeast (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989).

Brown Woodland Warbler *Phylloscopus umbrovirens*

Unseen birds were audio-recorded in forest at 2100–2200 m on 28 and 29 October 2015. The voice, though weak for this species, includes the typical mixed and stuttered phrases of high thin whistles and wandering trills, while the call of repeated see-sawing "tee-too" notes is noticeably *Phylloscopus*-like. The audio recordings have been confirmed as this species by B. Finch (pers. comm.), and are deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (id# 313530 and 319249). It was not found in November 2016, by

which time most forest habitat at the site had been felled. The nearest known populations of this upper montane forest species are known from the Nandi Forests and the Mau highlands, both more than 120 km from the Gwasssi Hills (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996).

Green-capped Eremomela *Eremomela scotops*

Two birds were closely observed foraging in a leafy *Ficus* sp. at 1270 m in the eastern Gwasssi foothills on 26 March 2017. The yellow-green head and throat, and whitish belly suggested the birds were of the expected western race *E. s. citriniceps*, and a photograph was obtained (Fig. 6). This is a scarce species in Kenya, with records of this subspecies from the Maasai Mara (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996), an old specimen from Kendu Bay, 50 km to the northeast (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989, D. Turner pers. comm.), and a more recent record from the Kavirondo Escarpment 110 km to the northeast (Bradley & Bradley 2014).



Figure 6. One of a pair of Green-capped Eremomelas *Eremomela scotops* foraging in a leafy fig tree in the Gwasssi foothills, 26 March 2017 (photo: Nathan Hentze).

African Hill Babbler *Pseudoalcippe abyssinica*

An unseen bird was heard singing clearly from thick forest understorey at 2200 m in the Gwasssi Hills on 28 October 2015, and was independently identified by D. Chesire and the author. The song heard was a short version of the typically longer phrases, but the lazy and sweet quality was instantly recognizable as this species. A short audio recording has been deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (id# 316046) and other than an isolated record near Loggoren, this occurrence comprises a 120 km westerly range extension from the species' known Kenyan range in the forests of the Nandi Hills and Mau highlands (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). It was not found in November 2016 by which time most forest habitat at the site had been felled.



Figure 7. One of a group of Brown Babblers *Turdoides plebejus* in scrub at Magunga, 29 October 2016 (photo: Simon Carter).

Brown Babbler *Turdoides plebejus*

A group of eight or more birds was observed closely, photographed and audio-recorded at 1300 m near Magunga on 29 October 2016 (Fig. 7). They were seen to be very similar to Arrow-marked Babbler *T. jardineii*, which is fairly common in nearby areas, though with pale, not dark lores, and with a higher pitched, scratchier call quite different from the low and grating call of Arrow-marked. An audio recording has also been deposited at www.xeno-canto.org (id# 344214), and while occurrence south of the Winam Gulf was correctly noted by Lewis & Pomeroy (1989), it was omitted by others, presumably in the absence of specimen evidence.

Mocking Cliff Chat *Thamnolaea cinnamomeiventris*

A male was seen well alongside cliffs and farmland at 2100 m in the Gwasssi Hills on 27 March 2017. The bird was first seen in flight and noted to be as large as an African Thrush *Turdus pelios*, with a longer-appearing tail, and an all-black upperside, but for a conspicuous white wing patch. When seen from the front, the underside was mostly a dull rufous, delineated from a black chest and head by an indistinct white line. Elsewhere in western Kenya this species is known from the western Mara escarpment 120 km to the southeast (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996), and from the Maragoli escarpment

100km to the northeast (D. Turner, pers. comm.). There is also a recent record in the Lake Victoria basin from north-central Tanzania (Werema *et al.* 2017), and a credible report in an internet database from Mfangano Island, 20km to the northwest of the Gwasssi Hills (eBird).



Figure 8. One of a pair of Ashy Flycatchers *Musci-capa caerule-scens* foraging in riverine forest at Nyan-gwethe, 28 October 2016 (photo: Simon Carter).

Ashy Flycatcher *Musci-capa caerule-scens*

A pair was observed closely and photographed at 1150 m in the western Gwasssi foothills at Nyangwethe on 28 October 2016 (Fig. 8), while a second pair was found in riverine figs immediately outside the Ruma National Park Kamato Gate on 28 November 2017. The birds were found in remnant gallery forest, where they foraged from fairly concealed perches in the mid-storey of large fig trees. This flycatcher is known in southwest Kenya from the Mara River area, 125 km to the southeast (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996) and in Uganda from Mabira Forest, near Jinja, some 160 km to the northwest (Britton 1980), but this appears to be a first record for the northeastern Lake Victoria basin. These birds appeared slightly darker with more slaty tones in comparison with birds seen in coastal Kenya, and can be tentatively referred to the western subspecies *M. c. brevicaudata*.

African Dusky Flycatcher *Musci-capa adusta*

A pair was observed closely in forest edge habitat at 2200 m in the Gwasssi Hills on 28 October 2015. All three observers (D. Chesire, Y. Muhingi and the author) concurred on the identification, and an audio recording of the descending spitted call was made (id# 333785 at www.xeno-canto.org). This record represents a 95 km range extension to the northwest of the nearest known population around Lolgorien (JB, pers. obs.).

Black-necked Weaver *Ploceus nigricollis*

This species is known to occur in the north-eastern Lake Victoria basin to the south of the Winam Gulf, though the subspecies present has been unspecified in the literature. On 31 October 2016 a pair of the eastern *P. n. melanoxanthus* was seen well and photographed at Karungu, approximately 20 km south of the Gwasssi Hills (Fig. 9). From the photos it is evidently this taxon, and not the expected western nominate form, on the basis of a solid black versus a sepia-brown mantle, and an extensive black bib on the male (typically smaller in nominate birds). The habitat was also more appropriate for this form in being dry scrub and not woodland or forest as favoured by nominate birds. Previously, *P. n. melanoxanthus* has been known from no closer to the Gwasssi Hills area than the Lake Natron basin 280 km to the southeast (D. Turner, pers. comm.), although birds reported from nearby Rusinga Island, as well as from Muhoro Bay (M. Coverdale, unpub. data) likely also refer to this form. Of interest, is that Black-necked Weavers of forested and wooded areas above 1600 m in the northwest Maasai Mara, only 110 km to the southeast, appear to belong to the nominate form (JB, pers. obs.).



Figure 9. An adult male Black-necked Weaver *Ploceus nigri-collis* of the eastern dry country form *P. n. melanoxanthus* at Karungu, 31 October 2016 (photo: Simon Carter).

Green-backed Twinspot *Mandingoa nitidula*

This species was audio-recorded in streamside undergrowth at 1850 m in the Gwasssi Hills on 2 November 2014, though the bird was not seen. The songster remained a mystery until identified with the assistance of B. Finch in 2015. While the sound quality is not good, the stuttered rhythm, drawn out “tseeuuu”, high “tsit” notes and rattled trills making up the song of this species, can be clearly heard. This widespread, but local forest species is known from no closer than Kakamega Forest 120 km to the northeast (Zimmerman 1972), and from the Mara River 125 km to the southeast (B. Finch pers. comm.).

Black-rumped Waxbill *Estrilda troglodytes*

Six individuals were encountered feeding on seeding grasses along the roadside near the northwest gate to Ruma National Park on 26 March 2017, and a photograph was obtained (Fig. 10). In the field they were noted to be similar to Common Waxbill *E. astrild*, but with a pink wash to the underparts, and a black rump and tail, the outermost rectrices being white. This species has previously been reported from the area at the nearby Lambwe River Estuary in November 2016 (W. Wachira, pers. comm.), although the birds were not photographed. These records comprise only a 30 km southerly range extension from the nearest known populations in Siaya County, but are the first from the south side of Winam Gulf.



Figure 10. One of a small flock of Black-rumped Waxbills *Estrilda troglodytes* foraging in roadside grasses in Ruma National Park, 26 March 2017 (photo: James Bradley).

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