

TANZANIA

ENDEMIC OF THE EASTERN ARC MOUNTAINS & PEMBA AND THE NORTHERN CIRCUIT

NOVEMBER 01 – 20 2022

PARTICIPANTS

TOUR LEADER - Peter Roberts

LOCAL GUIDES – Kombo (Pemba) & Martin Joho (Eastern Arc Mountains)

DRIVER – Geitan

GROUP – Gil Ewing, Fred Homer, Geoff Pollitt

TOUR NOTES

1st November: By the late evening we had all arrived into Dar Es Salaam – Gil and Fred a day or two early and Geoff and I barely before midnight today.

2nd November: To Pemba Island: A late morning flight allowed us to meet up, have breakfast and do a bit of birding in the grounds of the Mediterraneo Hotel before setting off on the long drive across the busy city of Dar to the airport.

The flight out to Pemba via Zanzibar was on a small single-prop 15 seater plane, getting us in at about 3pm. We met up with our local guide Kombo and set off about 40 miles up the length of this quite large island to reach the Pemba Paradise Resort on an attractive bit of coastline.

Pemba with its extensive clove plantations lies about 50 kilometres off the Tanzanian coast and is particularly well known for its superb coral reef diving. But we were here to see the four endemic birds and set out again before dark to the Ngezi forest to search for Pemba Scops-Owl. Just beforehand we stopped at a nearby wetland with many Black-winged Stilts and then went into the forest hearing the owl soon afterwards as dusk set in. We ended up hearing several quite close by and eventually managed fleeting, but OK views of a perched bird in the spotlight before giving up and returning to the hotel for supper at 7.30pm.

3rd November: Pemba Island: We were up and ready for a 7am breakfast – sadly the staff weren't - so we were half an hour late departing to meet up with Kombo for a morning's birding. We'd already seen the endemic Pemba Sunbird in the hotel grounds and were now concentrating on finding Pemba White-eye and Pemba Green Pigeon. We were joined by another local bird guide and between him and Kombo they made our walk interesting as we meandered past villages, down tracks to plantations of cassava and sweet potato and naming local trees, flowers and more. Our first attempts at the Pigeon were frustrating, with heard birds close by, but none seen. We did find other interesting birds on our target list – Black-bellied Starling and Brown-headed Parrot both seen well. The Pemba White-eye was found fairly quickly and other nice sightings were Crowned Hornbill and African Pygmy Kingfisher. We eventually found great looks at Pemba Green Pigeon at a later stake-out where Mangrove Kingfisher was a further major bonus. Here too

was our chance to get up close to a large roost of the endemic Pemba Flying Foxes – all leathery and ginger-furred hanging upside down from a large tree in the forest.

We were back at the hotel by 11.30am for an early lunch and a bit of a break in the heat of the day. During our time back at the hotel the grounds produced a few further birds of interest: Violet-backed Starlings along with more Black-bellied; better looks at Pemba White-eye and Pemba Sunbird plus a Thick-billed (Grosbeak) Weaver.

After lunch and a catch-up bird list we headed out again at 3pm for a change of venue and some coastal watching. Although our hotel is on the coast, we drove for over half an hour to a different area where the birds were indeed a lot better and more abundant. The extensive mudflats along this stretch of coast produced plenty of Crab Plovers – such unique, distinctive and special birds. Also here were Sooty Gulls – one of the more interesting gull species to my mind. A good selection of shorebirds included Terek Sandpipers, Greater Sandpipers, lots of Whimbrel, a few Common Sandpipers, Common Greenshank, Black-bellied (Grey) and Common Ringed Plovers and Bar-tailed Godwits. There were masses of Dimorphic Herons and in their midst a lone Great Egret and two unexpected Black Herons. Another great find here was our first two Palm-nut Vultures. We were back at the hotel by 6pm, with time to clean up, do bird notes and have supper before getting back to our rooms to pack for tomorrow's departure.

4th November: Pemba to Amani: Breakfast was a much more organised and prompt affair this morning and we were packed and away by a little after 8am as planned. We met up with Kombo who was trying to find us just two remaining target species in the hour or two we had to spare this morning before heading for the airport.

Our first stop was in one of the many large areas of cultivation for cassava, sweet potato, tomatoes and fallow sandy soil to seek out Black-winged Bishop. We found a perched up female almost immediately, but never did manage to find a bright red and black male here or at other sites we popped into later. However there were other bonus-birds to be had – a couple of Water Thick-knees in rather drier habitat than I'd expect them, a lovely perched up Broad-billed Roller and fly-by Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. We had a look back at the little wetland we'd checked out on our first evening and found plenty of Wood Sandpipers present today. Our other target was the introduced Java Sparrow and Kombo stopped at a number of places along the way to the airport to check them out but we couldn't locate any.

The remainder of the day was unfortunately spent in hours of travel. The unavoidable schedule of flights meant that we left Pemba at 12.25pm to go south to Zanzibar where we waited for 2-3 hours for a connection back north again to Tanga, which is just on the mainland opposite Pemba – very frustrating! Once at Tanga we met up with Geitan with his Landcruiser to set off the two hours up into the hills at Amani, arriving at about 7pm. The drive up was twisting, tortuous and very bumpy, through little villages, areas where the road looked as if it was being totally rebuilt and through large areas of deforestation until we reached the Amani Forest Reserve. We arrived in the dark to some quite basic, but “best available” accommodation with a meal just about ready to go. We met up briefly with our local bird guide Martin Joho and worked out a plan for tomorrow morning, which mercifully doesn't involve too much driving!

5th November: Birding Amani: The Eastern Usambaras are an isolated group of elevated uplands - part of the Eastern Arc mountain range which extends from the Taita Hills of southern Kenya to the southern highlands of Tanzania. The area hosts a surprising biodiversity, from plant and insect life, to special bird species. The Amani Nature Reserve and accompanying Rest House offers us a good chance to find many endemic and highly localised bird species.

After a 6.30am breakfast we set off with Martin to see what we might find. Our first efforts were based around the accommodation itself where groups of noisy Trumpeter Hornbills grabbed our attention. Martin was picking out plenty of other more hidden gems in the tall surrounding forest trees – albeit some of them exotics as we were in or adjacent to the old Botanical Gardens. Moustached Tinkerbird and Green Barbets showed up well, followed by Dark-backed (Forest) Weaver nest-building and a pass-by of Red-tailed Ant-thrush. Green-headed Oriole came in to view high in the canopy, while the first of a range of localised sunbirds popped up – Amani, Purple-banded, Uluguru Violet-backed and Banded along with more widespread Collared.

We spent much of the morning gently wandering forest trails and open forest edge admiring the flora, butterflies and whatever birds came our way. Pale Batis, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Red-faced Cisticola, Kenrick's and Waller's Starlings, Yellow-rumped and Green Tinkerbirds, White-eared Barbets, Black-backed Puffback, Scarce Swift, Mottled Spinetail, Fischer's Turaco, a flock of 30+ White-throated Bee-eaters, Fasciated (Southern Banded) Snake Eagle, Black Sparrowhawk, African Harrier-hawk, Little Greenbul, Southern Yellow White-eye, Black-and-White Mannikin all put in an appearance along with our first monkeys - Syke's. We were back by late morning as it heated up and the bird activity diminished.

After a leisurely lunch we reconvened at 3pm to do a gentle walk through more forest habitat. It was a wide track with motorbikes zooming up and down to their villages, with 2-3 people and lots of goods on each. However, it was a pleasant, easy and fairly productive walk adding numerous good birds to the list. There was plenty of reasonably good forest with some huge trees, but small areas cut over suggesting that this habitat is still under threat and slowly being eroded by an ever-increasing population of people needing somewhere to cultivate crops and firewood to cook them with. We had several views of Black-fronted Bush-shrikes, Black-headed Apalis and other goodies such as Fischer's Turacos, Shelley's and Stripe-faced Greenbuls, Lead-coloured (Grey Tit-flycatcher) Flycatcher, Square-tailed Drongo, Black Cuckoo-shrike and more. We managed some good looks at the very localised Long-billed Tailorbird (Forest Warbler) almost entirely restricted to the Amani area. Geitan drove out to pick us up at a little after 5pm, giving us time to shower and get a beer before waiting for the hoped-for Olive Ibis fly-over at the lodge. Sadly that didn't happen, there being just one pair of birds regularly making this roosting flight – but not tonight. After supper some of us wandered out along the road with Martin to look for Usambara Eagle-Owl, but had no luck with that either.

6th November: Amani and the Eastern Usambaras: Just as Martin had said, the Usambara Eagle-Owl was calling at 4.15am this morning. I couldn't wake the others, but went out myself to try my luck. I didn't disturb it too much by playback, so didn't see it, but it was calling quite close by for 45 minutes before dawn kicked in and it went silent. African Wood Owl was also calling, but further afield.

Gil, Geoff and I met Martin for a short pre-breakfast ramble in very nice light and cooler temperatures from 6 – 7am. A few different birds were seen including better looks at Silvery-cheeked Hornbills, African Golden Oriole and Banded Sunbird.

After breakfast we set out driving a way down the bumpy, dirt road to some lower forest on the edge of an extensive area of tea plantations. Martin worked hard in this lovely forest to find us a selection of the special bird species here – but it was slow going and required plenty of concentration and determination. In the end we did find Sharpe's Akalat and Usambara Thrush, but only heard White-chested Alethe and Mountain Tiny Greenbul. Shelley's and Eastern Mountain Greenbul showed up along with Mountain Wagtail and a splendid African Broadbill was called in to give good scope views. We were back for lunch at the Amani Resthouse by a little after 12.30pm and had a break in the heat of the day until 3pm.

The afternoon birding was a stroll along various other nearby forest trails. It was a sultry, cloudy couple of hours with rain threatening but holding off. The birding was slow with very few birds or species seen. However, this is fairly typical of birding in African forests. We did manage 1-2 birds of interest from migrant Spotted Flycatchers to Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Amethyst Sunbird and a pair of East Coast (Zanzibar) Boubou – a split from Tropical. There were large numbers of noisy Trumpeter and Silvery-cheeked Hornbills to keep us amused.

We watched again in vain hope of an Olive Ibis fly-by at 6.30pm, had supper, paid bills and got to bed early in anticipation of a rise at 4.30am for Usambara Eagle-Owls.

7th November: On to the Western Usambaras: Rain overnight and into the morning stopped any attempt at a pre-dawn Eagle-owl hunt. We had an early breakfast and set off, bags packed down a very muddy road with the locals on their Chinese motorbikes slithering all over the place, heavily laden with bananas, bottles, bags of rice, wood and often three people too! We were supposed to be making birding stops along the long way down, but rain messed things up a fair bit. We waited it out at times in a steamy vehicle, ventured out with raincoats and umbrellas up at times and did what we could under difficult circumstances. The birds seemed reluctant to show in the damp, and we only glimpsed a few odds and ends such as Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher and Little Yellow Flycatcher. Usambara Hyliota performed much better, sitting, singing and preening at the top of a bare tree for a long while.

We had to eventually make tracks by mid-morning, driving out of the good forest with its massive trees into more cultivated lowlands. But Martin had a stake-out for us which produced a sudden flush of good birds in dry sunshine, albeit muddy underfoot. We called out Coastal Cisticola and had brilliant scope views of this split from Winding. There were flocks of Common Waxbills and the Red-backed form of Black-and-White Mannikin here in the damp grassland vegetation and nearby was an unexpected bonus of a Collared Palm Thrush.

From then on it was a longish drive back along a good paved main road that runs between Dar and Arusha, stopping at a large, but fairly empty roadside buffet restaurant for a quick lunch. Further along and we were turned off back up into the nearby hills again, towards and eventually through Lushoto to Muller's Mountain Lodge, arriving by about 5.45pm. Along the way we had a very productive break in open rocky valleys that wound up and up towards the hills. There was a quick succession of good birds, mostly all of them seen well. Martin's sharp eyes had us looking in all directions at brightly coloured Mocking Cliff Chats, Brown-breasted Barbets, African Golden Weavers, East Coast Boubous, Blue-mantled Crested Flycatchers, Little Yellow Flycatchers, Rock Martins, Grey-Olive Greenbills, a pair of Lanner Falcons. High in the rocky crags were our first Rock Hyraxes.

We arrived at the very pleasant Muller's Mountain Lodge in time to settle in, link up to wifi after three days of deprivation and then enjoy a good supper in the old German colonial main house.

8th November: Birding the Western Usambaras: It was a relief to wake this morning to a sunny dry day as there was a lot to try and fit in to our single full day in these mountains with their mosaic of forest remnants, small villages and cultivation. Regardless of the sunshine, at c.5-6000 feet asl. It was pleasantly cool. We had a 6am breakfast and were away a little after 6.30am, driving a fair way (15km or more) up the road to spend the morning wandering a good wide dirt road in the forest for a good variety of scarce and endemic species present. At the forest reserve entrance we did our first bit of targeted birding at a fairly ordinary-looking piece of forest where Martin had Spot-throat staked out. This worked very well, with everyone getting brief but decent looks at this highly localised forest floor skulker. Here too were our first Fulleborn's Boubou, Usambara Double-collared Sunbirds and Cabanis's Buntings.

Once out of the vehicle further up inside the forest proper, we walked gently up with Geitan following. It turned out to be an extremely productive few hours seeing many of the special target species and numerous “bonus birds”. We managed to find Delgorgue’s (Eastern Bronze-naped) Pigeon along with other nice, more interesting colourful species, many seen well and in the scope – Augur Buzzard, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, White-starred Robin, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher, Black-fronted Bush-Shrike, Usambara Weaver, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Bar-tailed Trogon and Hartlaub's Turaco. There were of course lots of confusing greenbuls such as Montane Tiny (split into Montane and Lowland from the original Tiny), the distinctive Usambara race of Eastern Mountain (likely to be split into Usambara Mountain Greenbul), plus Shelly’s, Yellow-streaked and Stripe-cheeked. Other more specialised and skulking stuff took us time and a little patience - Usambara Akalat, Cinnamon Bracken Warbler, Bar-throated Apalis, African (Red-capped Tailorbird) Forest Warbler and African Hill Babbler. By the end of the session, when we wended our way back to the Lodge at about 11am, we'd happily left only a fairly small list of endemic/sought-after species missing – though several of these such as Evergreen Forest Warbler, Pale-breasted Illadopsis and White-chested Alethe had all been heard.

After lunch and a bit of down-time at the lodge, Fred and Geoff decided to take down-time to a new level and opted to stay back and relax and enjoy the lovely grounds of the lodge. This left myself and Gil to return to the same trail as this morning to see if we could winkle out a few additional goodies. It turned out to be another very useful and productive session. We drove towards the top of the same trail where an old sawmill was now a bit of a campsite with a few tents. Here Martin once again showed his great knowledge of the birds and local area. First on the list was an African Black Duck sat on the edge of a small dam. In the large trees around we scoped a very fine Olive (Rameron) Pigeon, followed by Eastern Bronze-naped. The tops of the trees also produced easy Waller's Starlings and several scarcer Sharpe's Starlings. Wandering up the trail, we found great views of Hartlaub's Turacos, while Martin was keen to find us Red-faced Crimsonwings that he knew occurred regularly here. We spent a lot of time peering into dense undergrowth seeing vegetation move but rarely if ever these highly secretive, furtive birds. On our return towards the vehicle, we were pleasantly surprised to find a male of the species going back and forth nest-building and showing really quite well. Equally, (or more) skulking was the Evergreen Forest Warbler heard on several occasions and calling back quite close at times. Typical of *Bradypterus* warblers it kept extraordinarily well hidden and low to the ground for most of the time, but eventually, at the very last minute or two of our time here, we managed some full views when a pair broke cover. Other good finds included Grey Wagtails, Yellow-bellied Waxbills and a fleeting Oriole Finch.

We stayed out late enough to be down towards the forest office area of open plantation and scrub at dusk to try for Usambara Nightjar, split by some from Montane/Rwenzori Nightjars. We heard a distant bird, but nothing came in to playback. After supper, on my way to the room I heard African Wood Owl making its distinctive call and went to find it with Geoff and Gil who were still up and about. We managed some lovely looks at a pair – one calling falsetto, the other more baritone.

9th November: To Mkomazi National Park: We had a 6.30am breakfast and were away down the long winding road to the lowlands from the West Usambaras by 7.15am. We had time to stop for a short birding break in the same area that we'd been in on the way up two days ago. Here we found a couple more good species – African Yellow Warbler and gorgeous bright little Peter's (Red-throated) Twinspots, expertly picked out as always by Martin.

Once down at Mombo on the main road we had to say cheerio to Martin who was heading back to Amani after guiding us so very well through all the complicated places and birds of the last few days. We then set off along the main road towards Arusha with Geitan in dry, hot conditions for 2-3 hours to Same and the

Elephant Motel. We had time for a couple of roadside birding stops that Geitan suggested in dry scrub and by a small dried up river. A whole range of new species showed up – not many of them particularly special. We heard Rosy-patched Bush-shrike but couldn't call it in. I did see a couple of Taveta Golden Weavers, but the others didn't get much of a view. 4 African Openbill Storks were a welcome find and Gil had a Pygmy Batis. In between were plenty of common species – Village, Lesser Masked, Black-necked and Spectacled Weavers, Red-billed Queleas, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Namaqua Dove, Klaas Cuckoo, Pale Flycatcher, Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird all making their first appearances.

We arrived at the Hotel by about 1pm and took a break with lunch until 3.30pm, when Geitan drove us the 40km up into the S. Pare Mountains for our last venture into the Eastern Arc Mountain chain. A hot and dusty upward drive got us to about 6,000 feet asl. Where some small remnants of forest presented themselves at the roadside and beyond amidst a lot of cleared hillside for agriculture. We stood and watched this area throughout our time here, which is apparently the stake-out site for the extremely localised endemic South Pare White-eye. We saw a few other birds, but nothing particularly spectacular (other than Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters glinting in the sun) until the very last 15 minutes when, mercifully a mixed group of Southern Citrils, Red-backed Mannikins and White-eyes came through. The White-eyes included all yellow Southern Yellows, plus grey-bellied South Pare White-eyes, so the day was saved!

10th November: Mkomazi National Park: Mkomazi National Park, located in North Eastern Tanzania, borders Tsavo National Park in Kenya, with no fences or barriers between the two. We spent the whole day in the Park, taking a picnic lunch with us from the hotel, which gave us the best chance of finding some of the special wildlife that we'd not encounter further into the tour. However, it was still very dry, with parched vegetation, large areas of controlled grassland burning and very little water, which meant fewer bird species being very obvious and longish spells of little happening. However, there were "purple patches" and despite missing a number of the hoped-for birds, we came away with a good selection and 2-3 very special finds.

Mkomazi National Park covers over 3,200 km² dominated by Acacia – Commiphora vegetation, so we only scraped the surface as we slowly drove around the tracks and trails. We started off well with Geoff spotting our first really good mammal – a fine Lesser Kudu. We found and photographed several more of this impressive antelope during the day – a species we'd not find further west. There was a small handful of the more regular mammals present to start our true safari experience off – a couple of Elephants, small groups of Cape Buffalo, Eland, Cokes's Hartebeest, Zebra, Giraffe, Warthogs and Impala. The other really exciting find was a group of 9-10 Oryx towards the end of the day – again a species I've only encountered a few times in all my Tanzania visits.

The birds weren't all bad either. We added significantly to the list today, with lots of commonplace species that we'd see often on future days – Tawny Eagles, Bateleur, Ruppell's Vulture, Yellow-necked Spurrow, Superb and Hildebrandt's Starlings, Northern White-crowned Shrikes, Long-tailed and Common Fiscals, White-browed Coucals, Red-and-Yellow Barbet, Red-billed, Von Der Decken's and Grey Hornbills, White-bellied Go-away-bird, White-headed and Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers – and of course Lilac-breasted Rollers. But other species were a bit more unusual, with good sightings of Orange-bellied Parrots, Saddle-billed and Woolly-necked Storks, Verreaux's Eagle, Shikra, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Martial Eagle, White-crested Helmet Shrikes, Fischer's Starlings, Isabelline Wheatear, Blue-naped Mousebird, White-browed Sparrow Weavers, and Tsavo Sunbirds. Playing Pearl-spotted Owlet calls helped bring in a few of these close enough for decent looks and photos. We had a couple of chances during the day to get out of the vehicle, stretch legs and do a little bit of birding on foot, but not much as it is a National Park. Our final

leg-stretch, at the campsite just before leaving the Park before 6pm proved to be a “grand finale” with Gil finding us a couple of brilliant Golden-breasted Starlings that we managed super scope views of in good light – the first for me ever in Tanzania.

11th November: Mkomazi to Ndarakwai: It was a fairly long run of several hours to Ndarakwai, so we left after breakfast and a little before 8am on our journey. We had a couple of short scheduled stops along the way to break the journey up and try for a few more special birds of the area that we'd not have a chance for after the next day or two. We got very lucky indeed with a roadside flock of about 20 Vulturine Guineafowl not long after we'd set off – the birds feeding on the busy roadside of the main highway from Dar to Arusha. Further along was an area of dry Commiphora habitats with none of the settlement that fringed much of our way. Here we had a frustratingly short time to do a quick wander through the very dry, spiky scrub, open patches and bush to try for a number of special birds. We managed to find a few of these - Pink-breasted Lark, Pygmy Batis, Grey Wren-Warbler, Tsavo Sunbird and Red-fronted Prinia – before jumping back into the landcruiser and heading further west. Geitan had a last-chance stake-out for Taveta Golden Weaver along the Jipe River and we spent another 45 minutes or so wandering the banks edged with papyrus and bulrush in search of our target. We came across first African Jacanas and Malachite Kingfisher and eventually found several of the weavers in good plumage; so job done and on our way.

We arrived at the secluded Ndarakwai Lodge quite late for lunch at about 2pm, the weather having changed from hot and dry to heavy rain and the parched land now running with streams of rain running off in all directions in a sheet of mud. The way in to Ndarakwai is always a mystery to me after leaving the paved roads as there are few signs and, to the untrained eye in a rainstorm, not much of an obvious track. However we made it OK, were given a lovely welcome and a great lunch as we sat in the open dining area under the thatched roof watching the rain bucket down. At one point we heard a distant, but ever-nearing rumble and rush and witnessed a remarkable flood and wall of water suddenly appearing down the dry river channel by the dining area. It was a fast and furious torrent taking with it tree trunks and all sorts as it washed past for several minutes before slowly subsiding a little.

After lunch we waited out the rain in the covered dining area until it dried up and finally allowed us a walk from about 3.30pm until dusk out to the raised viewing platform in the bush, birding as we went. Ndarakwai is an 11,000 acres chunk of private land area bordering close to Amboseli National Park in Kenya, and we were only able to stroll a mile or so into it, but did find some interesting birds.

We were the only people staying here tonight and the service was good, with an excellent supper during which the resident fairly tame Bushbaby (Galago) came in for a feed. Afterwards, as this is private concession land, it gave us the only opportunity on our tour of a night drive for chances of a variety of nocturnal animals. We set out at 8.45pm, returning by 10.15pm, finding not a huge variety, but better to have tried at least. We did see 1-2 genets, another Lesser Kudu, an unidentified nightjar, two Cape Hares and a single Spring Hare.

12th November: Ndarakwai via the Lark Plains to Tarangire: I was awakened at 4.45am by a Spotted Eagle Owl outside my tent which I briefly called in. We had a 7am breakfast and sadly had to head off promptly to make the journey along the tiny tracks and trails through the bush to the Lark Plains by mid-morning. Despite the heavy rain that had fallen here, the route westwards was still starkly dry and dusty. They have apparently had no rain since April and everywhere looks exceptionally parched. We found a few birds of interest along the way and arrived in the area in good time, meeting up with local Masai, Patrick – one of the “Beesley Boys” who walked out with us across the dry, flat, dusty plains. None of the habitat looked

particularly inspiring, but within a short distance we were looking at a trio of Beesley's Larks at good close range. The so-called "Lark Plains" are made famous by the discovery of what is now a full endemic and extremely scarce species – Beesley's Lark. This is possibly the rarest bird in East Africa with estimates of its population rarely going above a hundred individuals. The local Masai are aware of this bird's importance and have realised it is a good business opportunity to preserve them! After watching the larks we strolled back down to the vehicle through a line of thorn bush where we found a good supporting cast of other LBJs in amongst the many Capped Wheatears. 2-3 Short-tailed Larks showed well and a slightly out of range Red-winged Bushlark was found – only the 3rd time I've seen it on this route. We also managed to find a more flighty Somali Short-toed Lark. Patrick invited us to his Boma where we might see some other birds, so we drove him across the plains to the thorn-encircled huts where he and his extensive family live. We found White-headed Mousebird, but no Rosy-patched Bush-Shrike. Of course, we also had a good opportunity to find out more about the Masai way of life and make a few purchases of Masai craftwork.

We set off from here by about 12.30pm and drove along good paved roads towards the outskirts of Arusha, linking up with the road running west to Tarangire National Park. After a stop to pick up picnic lunches at a new flashy shopping centre where we ate, used the facilities (loos and ATM) and got a good coffee, we continued on our journey to Tarangire National Park, arriving by about 4pm. A gentle drive in to the nearby Safari Lodge gave us our first proper safari experience with plenty of Zebra, Wildebeest, Elephants, Impalas, Waterbuck, Warthogs and other odds and ends. First photos were taken and a few bird firsts logged – Ostrich, Secretarybird and Ashy Starling included. Once settled in to our tents we took time off before supper and the bird list. An African Scops-Owl sat in the tree opposite my tent.

13th November: Tarangire National Park: We had a full day out in Tarangire after a 6.30am breakfast and a 7.30am departure. On departure one of the staff showed us the roosting African Scops Owl in a tree at the car park. Our aim was to wander further into the Park to Silale Swamp in the morning, drop in to the Sopa Lodge for a break in the early afternoon and wend our way back by early evening. We managed to do all this and had a pretty good session, with our first Lions seen on the way out (and on our return). It was, like so much of the rest of Tanzania we've travelled through so far: very dry and dusty, with no green grasses or leaves on many of the trees. However, Tarangire, with its more or less permanent water via the Tarangire River is a magnet for animals in these conditions and we saw this effect in full force today. Along the way to Silale it was fairly quiet for birds – Crowned Lapwings, Northern Pied Babblers, White-crested Helmet-shrikes, Magpie Shrikes, Red-headed Weavers, Yellow-collared Lovebirds and Bare-faced Go-away-birds popped up, Coqui and Red-necked Francolins appeared and I called in Greater Honeyguide. There were fly-bys of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse going to water and a few other bits and pieces, such as a family of Ostriches with 8 small chicks, along with a few game animals. On reaching Silale I was initially dismayed to see how utterly parched it was – far drier than I've ever seen it before. This meant no breeding plumage bishops, widowbirds or weavers. A few birds of interest were a fine pair of African Hawk Eagles being mobbed first by Eastern Chanting Goshawk then a Gabar Goshawk. As we went further south along the edge of the swamp we began to come across a little greenery and water which developed into a substantial strip of open water several miles on. Geitan told us that this odd phenomenon of drought yet plenty of standing water was due to exceptional flooding last year, so that Silale holds water despite no rains since last April. This meant a completely different wildlife experience here for me after many visits. There were huge numbers of game animals all crowding in to the wetland that was providing them a life-line. There were far more Wildebeest than I've ever seen here, along with masses of Zebra, Elephants wandering far out into the swamp, plus good numbers of Bohor Reedbuck. Equally inspiring was the number of water-birds. Masses of egrets and herons of all sorts – including 4-5 Rufous-bellied Herons paraded in the muddy margins. The largest gathering of Saddle-billed Storks I've ever seen were present, with Marabous and Openbills, plus masses of Glossy and Sacred Ibis, and a majestic pair of Grey Crowned

Cranes amidst densely packed very mucky/muddy looking White Pelicans. Where there was a little open water we found our first ducks and waders – White-faced Whistling Ducks mostly, with a few Hottentot Teal, Spur-winged and Egyptian Geese. African Jacanas and shorebirds were abundant and it was a surprise to see a few Hippopotamus wallowing in the mud. With such a big concentration of animals there were inevitable fatalities being consumed by a goodly number of White-backed and Ruppell's Vultures plus the Marabous and a couple of very large Monitor Lizards – gruesome but all part of the system.

We had to drag ourselves away by midday to go to the nearby picnic site to eat our box lunches. Much of the area was taken up by a mass of tables with cloths, barbecues being set up and masses of attendant staff preparing for the arrival of an enormous contingent of French tourists. We managed to eat our food, use the toilets and get away before they descended on us. We arrived at the Sopa Lodge, as planned, at 2pm, seeing a first Black-breasted Snake Eagle and a Steppe Eagle en route. At the lodge I met up with my friend Lillian and the lodge managers who have worked there for many years. We received a warm welcome and while I chatted with Lillian, Gil, Geoff and Fred stretched their legs and wandered the grounds catching up on some good photo opportunities for 45 minutes and seeing our first Speckled Pigeons of the tour. We made our way back towards the Safari Lodge along a very rutted, washboard road on the other side of the river to which we'd ventured out this morning. We made a few pauses for photos of 9 Southern Ground Hornbills and Elephants and then diverted down onto one of the river circuits where we watched a selection of waders – Wood, Green and Marsh Sandpipers, Greenshank, Ruff and Little Stint all feeding as a lovely extended family of Elephants came down to drink and splatter cooling mud over themselves. At this point the Landruiser refused to start and Geitan called over another nearby vehicle to give us a push start. With the engine running again, it was prudent to not stop too much and return to the Lodge where Geitan could sort out the problem (apparently a new battery needed). This allowed time for a cup of tea, relaxation, and a break from a very full-on and busy day.

14th November: Tarangire to Ngorongoro: We had a brief spell of pre-breakfast birding this morning which produced several interesting birds. Best of all was an Eastern Nicator – a species I've rarely encountered in Tanzania. Other good finds included close views of Purple Grenadiers, Black-backed Puffbacks, a nicely perched Slender-tailed Nightjar and first Marico Sunbird.

After breakfast, Gil opted out of the morning game drive as he had a slight stomach upset. The rest of us set off with our Landcruiser on a borrowed battery, until a return for lunch at about midday. Geitan took us around various of the circuits into dry country and along the Tarangire River. Out in the dry areas were Meyer's Parrots, Reichenow's (Yellow-rumped) Seedeaters and small groups of European Bee-Eaters. Where the river is forded a little way from the lodge we were pleased to find a pair of Hamerkops and even more pleased to find no less than 5 Greater Painted Snipes out in the open, feeding. Along the river circuits we had our first Black-faced Sandgrouse and noted a good number of vultures and Marabous feasting on the remains of several different, presumed Lion kills. After a while of gentle meandering, stopping for photos and with no specific targets, Geitan got a radio alert about possible Leopard sightings. We diverted to the other side of the river and came across a few other minibuses with folks peering up into a nearby Baobab. There in a very comfortable spot was a female Leopard lounging with her quite small cub. It is always a tour-leader's relief to find Leopards as it is one of those species high on the "most-wanted" list and never that easy to find. We enjoyed some lovely views through the scope and loaned it to a couple in an adjacent vehicle who seemed to appreciate the better views afforded by a bit of extra magnification. We finished the morning at a picnic site overlooking the river where our first Lappet-faced Vultures were perched up by an old kill and a Red-chested Cuckoo made a brief appearance.

Back at the Tarangire Safari Lodge we vacated our tents and had a pleasant lunch, and saw the roosting African Scops Owl again found by staff member Jacob and set off towards Ngorongoro by 1.30pm. Once

out of the Park and up to the main road, Geitan met with the guy who had bought a new battery from Arusha. Once fitted we sped on our way west, up the Rift Valley escarpment, stopping briefly for a view, then on to Karatu for fuel and into the NCCA, where the inevitable paperwork was done. Here, at this bottleneck of landcruisers going in and out of the Conservation Area, there were plenty of witless tourists taking selfies with the plenty of not so witless Olive Baboons loitering in the road and in our midst waiting to grab food. The road winding up into the Crater Highlands doesn't seem to have had much attention in recent times and was badly rutted and bumpy. We arrived in this chilly 7,500 feet altitude at our lodge by about 5.30pm. This gave Gil and just enough time to stake out likely birding spots and see a few new interesting species. Top prize went to a superb Schalow's Turaco called in to almost eye-level in a thin tree just feet away.

The Serena Lodge is very well-appointed, but very busy and a bit of a culture shock after the low-key, very quiet places we've stayed in so far. The hordes of noisy French tourists seem to be following us about, but a very good evening meal went down well and made us all a little more tolerant and sanguine.

15th November: The Ngorongoro Crater: Pre-breakfast was all too brief, but got us a few additional species including Eastern Double-collared and Bronze Sunbirds. The lodge grounds border fairly rich forest cover, but have been cut back a bit and hold alien species so the potential variety of birds isn't as good as it might otherwise be.

We grabbed a fairly rapid breakfast by about 7am and were away with picnic lunches to spend the day in the Crater by a little after 7.30am. Ngorongoro Crater is sometimes called "the eighth wonder of the world" and it didn't disappoint today. The views from the crater rim alone are fairly awe inspiring, but we had a rather longer look from the rim than anticipated when it turned out that our paperwork was not quite in order. Geitan had to return to one of the offices to sort it out and left us for 45 minutes birding from the entrance to the Descent Road. It was a moderately fruitful delay with Wailing, Stout and Red-faced Cisticolas seen closely, some half-decently plumaged Yellow Bishops dashing about along with Northern Anteater Chat.

The Descent (and Ascent) Roads are now paved and much smoother – unlike the dreadful current state of the roads into and out of Serengeti. The steep drive down produced Abyssinian Wheatears as hoped for. Once at the bottom we began our leisurely all-day rambling circuit of the crater floor passing herds of the resident population of Wildebeest, Thomson's and Grant's Gazelles, Common Zebra and Warthogs – all wonderfully close. We motored close along the edge of the big soda lake, which is still bigger than usual due to rains, diluting its soda content and making it less attractive for flamingos. However there were a good few of both Lessers and Greater to keep us happy. Where the fresh water enters the lake it was very birdy with masses of Ruff, Blacksmith Plovers, Kittlitz and Common Ringed Plovers, 1-2 Chestnut-banded Plovers, Curlew Sandpiper and a few ducks – wintering Northern Shovelers alongside Red-billed Ducks and Hottentot and Cape Teal. There were also some lovely views of flocks of Gull-billed Terns at rest with a few almost breeding plumaged Whiskered Terns with them. A great huddle of brightly coloured Great White Pelicans were edged with a fine show of close African Spoonbills – all in all a very fine spectacle that it was difficult to drag ourselves away from. We were treated here to a rare sight of Hippopotamus walking about during the day – right across the road in front of our vehicle. It was a cool day, so a little less imperative for the Hippo to stay submerged in water. Down at the lake's edge was a dead Hippo being put to good use by a large assembly of 22 Spotted Hyenas, some still feasting, others bloated and resting and others wandering off with large chunks of the unfortunate deceased Hippo.

We continued on to the Hippo Pools, where even larger numbers of these massive beasts were submerged and enjoying the cool Hippo effluent-infused water. They were squashed in cheek by jowl, splashing,

farting and rolling over thoroughly enjoying this fetid environment. The birding continued to be very productive with the usual Black Crakes, Common Moorhens and Red-knobbed Coots present along with a called-out African Rail. Fan-tailed Widowbirds in partial breeding plumage were present plus Lesser Swamp Warblers, Black-crowned Night Herons, and more waders, egrets and ducks.

Continuing on our circuit we went into open grasslands full of Kori Bustards and impressive numbers of Grey Crowned Cranes (c.150 in total). Yellow Wagtails of all races were ever-present wherever we came across Wildebeest or antelopes in good numbers. Towards our picnic lunch stop we found our Lions for the day – 3 young males typically doing very little but sleeping, despite Zebra wandering dangerously close. Lunch was at the usual lakeside site where remarkably large, brand new toilets had been built since my last visit in early 2020. There was a fairly large gathering of Landcruisers here, but the Crater was surprisingly quiet today, with no traffic jams or feeling of overcrowding. The usual Speke's and Rufous-tailed Weavers entertained us during a quick picnic stop, then we were off to complete the circuit for the remainder of the afternoon.

One of the main goals in Ngorongoro was the chance to find Black Rhinoceros that survive here. Sadly, today there were no sightings – possibly the grassland still too dry and the Rhinos browsing in the more lush forested crater slopes? But the birding in the Crater is always rewarding, with fresh and soda lakes, swamp, and Yellow-bark Acacia forest. We finished with a short run through the forest finding Hildebrandt's Francolins, before driving up the steep Ascent Road to the top again.

We were back at the Serena Lodge by about 4.45pm and Gil and I opted for some further birding from 5-6pm within the lodge grounds. This did prove well worthwhile. It was a pleasure and relief to find a few more of the special high forest birds – 3 gorgeous male Golden-winged Sunbirds, plus very close studies of Thick-billed Seedeaters and the beautifully bright Mbulu White-eye.

16th November: To the Serengeti at Ndutu: We did a very short bit of birding before leaving at about 7.45am. This produced (for me) a lovely pair of Tacazze Sunbirds and Eastern Mountain Greenbuls and happily a catch up for everyone with Golden-winged Sunbird.

Then it was time to leave the Ngorongoro Crater on our continuing journey west, descending from the highlands on to the flatter plains of the Serengeti. By about 8.45am we were at Olduvai Gorge – a novelty and pleasure to be the only people there due to this early in the day visit. At Olduvai Gorge we had a brief orientation talk and then visited the field museum overlooking the layered rocks of the gorge where these discoveries of mankind's evolution were made. The Museum had masses of details on the life and times of early hominids. We also did a quick bit of birding, but the continuing extremely dry conditions here meant that the best birding was immediately around the buildings. Non-breeding Black Bishops mixed with Swahili, House and Rufous Sparrows, Speckle-fronted Weavers and various other small birds. The cliffs of Olduvai were alive with Little Swifts and a few European (Common) Swifts with them.

We left Olduvai at 10am and headed further into the Conservation Area along a horribly rutted and dusty road, keeping the roof down until we got to the turn off to Ndutu Lodge. From here we drove across the flat, bare short-grass plains with just a few scattered gazelles and Zebra, but finding species new for us – Cape Crow, Greater Kestrel and Yellow-throated Sandgrouse (the latter with Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse right by the roadside). It was a delight to arrive at the Lodge by midday, relax a bit before a 1pm lunch and downtime until a 3.30pm game drive. Birds around the lodge were good, with the little ponds attracting Crimson-rumped Waxbills and overhead Black-shouldered Kite.

There had been Cheetahs seen at Ndutu this morning, so we set out with that aim in mind this afternoon. Not far from setting out we got stuck in mud, but it wasn't long before our called-for assistance came and pulled us out and we were properly on our way. Apart from a brief stop for the endemic Grey-breasted Francolin and a magnificently large scorpion, later identified by Gil as *Pandipalpus viatoris*, we kept on going out onto the many miles of open short grass plains in search. Vehicles ahead of us tipped us off about Bat-eared Fox, which is always best seen around Ndutu. We found one tucked up in a grassy tussock and watched it for a good while until Geitan received a message that the Cheetahs had been relocated. Off we went, off road, across the Serengeti, finally catching up with the other vehicles who were watching a pride of eight Lions. We admired these for a while, but it was by now 5pm and with cloud in the sky, it was becoming quite twilight. So we headed on, guided the short distance to a fine family of Cheetahs – a female with 3 large cubs. They got up and walked a few yards looking exquisitely elegant, before flopping down into the tall grass again. With light fading we started back to the lodge. In the half-light, Geitan missed a turn in the barely discernible track. Once rectified we got to within a kilometre or so of the lodge, by the airstrip then sunk into deep mud again – the vehicle totally bogged down. By now it was virtually dark and late enough that any communication via the radio was unlikely as most other drivers had already returned to their camps. This seemed serious! Geitan tried digging beneath the wheels and putting brush and logs in to give the wheels some purchase, resulting in several attempts with no luck. Gil was all for walking to the lodge for help, overlooking the density of Lions in the area. This idea was overruled by Geitan, so blasting the horn to attract attention as tried along with attempts to get a phone signal to call or message for help. By now we were anticipating a night sat in the Landcruiser. By about 8.30pm we saw lights coming our way. A message we'd tried had got through to Athony Raphael in Arusha who called the lodge. The lodge Landrover duly appeared and debated our plight at length. They dug and they tried pulling us out, to no avail. Eventually it was decided to transport us all back to the lodge and sort the stuck Landcruiser out tomorrow morning. Needless to say, once the worry was over and we were safely back eating a late supper at 9pm, the story became more funny and an adventure to remember, rather than the miserable disaster it had seemed earlier on.

17th November: Ndutu: Geitan was out early rescuing the Landcruiser and was back with the unstuck vehicle by a little after 8am. We had the chance to do some birding around the lodge grounds beforehand and found lovely close-up Nubian Woodpeckers, Red-fronted Barbet, Pearl-spotted Owlet and Woodland Kingfisher. Ndutu in the vast short grass plains offers some excellent wildlife and birdwatching opportunities and it is always tricky to decide where to concentrate our efforts. However, Geitan was keen to steer clear of anywhere too muddy, so we drove along edge of Lake Ndutu for a while then across to the Big Marsh for the morning. Soon after leaving we came across some bird activity with feeding Blue-capped Cordonbleus, and our first Black-faced Waxbills. The lake edge provided great looks at an immature Martial Eagle perched up, flying and sitting on the lake shore – also a female Montagu's Harrier. There were masses of both flamingo species present and offering some good photo opportunities. Down at the marsh we watched the usual variety of waders in the muddy margins and were pleased to find Greater Painted Snipe again along with first White-winged Tern. While there Geitan heard on the radio of a nearby trio of male Lions, so we motored over and spent some quality time with these three very magnificent and regal-looking beasts. Although spending much of the time asleep as most Lions do, they did sit up and look about and yawn on occasions, offering up some great photos again. Apparently these three are a wandering trio of young males in from Maswa Game Reserve. While watching these we also saw first Grey-backed Fiscal Shrikes. On our way back we noticed the group of keen British photographers stopped, so we went over to take a peep. They were watching a small den with a couple of quite young Spotted Hyenas poking their heads out – still with the solidly grey fur of very young animals.

Back for lunch we ate, watched the little pond for birds and took a break before going out again at 3.30pm. With a longish drive tomorrow right up through the Serengeti National Park, we decided to just potter about fairly locally this afternoon and drove over to check out nearby Lake Masek. The lake was very full of water, but not very full of birds – other than lots of Little Grebes. In the very dry acacia scrub surrounding the lake we found a few species of interest and some more photo catch-ups. Very close grazing Giraffes were fascinating to watch as they delicately stripped the tiny green leaves from sharply spiky acacia branches. One or two puddles in the track attracted a good mix of birds such as White-bellied Canary, Fischer's Sparrow-larks, Namaqua Doves and a fleeting look at Chestnut Sparrow. We found our first Dark Chanting Goshawk and on our return a nice pair of Abyssinian Scimitar-bills.

The evening was enlivened as usual by the appearance of the tame Small-spotted Genets in the lodge, plus another appearance of the scorpion *Pandipalpus viatoris*; the latter gently escorted off the premises/

18th November: To the northern Serengeti: The Serengeti is a vast preserve of 5,675 square miles, with a further 3,200 sq. miles protected in the surrounding Ngorongoro Conservation Area – the whole ecosystem is the size of Belgium! Today's journey seemed like we'd driven over most of it! Setting off a little after 7am from Ndutu we arrived at Kogatende in the far north at about 5.30pm. By arranging to leave early, we allowed time for a fair bit of birding and game-watching up to the Seronera area. Out on the immense, flat, short grass plains we came across Pallid and Montagu's Harriers and a good look at a Long-crested Eagle. Once through Naabi Gate on the long straight, main road to Seronera we began to find some great mammals. First was a large, lone, adult Lion lounging by the roadside. A little further on were no less than five Cheetahs – apparently a mother with four well-grown young. They were in hunting mode as the plains here held large numbers of Thompson's and Grant's Gazelles. We watched them stalking for a while – the mother out on her own and trying to circle the gazelles back towards the young. This didn't work too well as the young were far too visible – but it was fascinating to watch. Further along another male Lion showed up, walking close by across the road. Then another trio of Cheetahs – probably a group of related males – that again showed some interest in the gazelles around them, but giving up to walk wonderfully close to us past the numerous assembled Landcruisers. Interesting birds included our best Secretarybirds so far, plus Greater and Lesser Kestrels and Grey Falcon. I was also pleased to hear and see Pectoral-patch Cisticolas while the others admired Cheetahs and Lions. We had a short break at the Seronera Visitor Centre before heading to Kubu-Kubu Camp for lunch. It is a lovely lodge on a fine overlook where the staff greeted us with a glass of Bubbly and then produced a very good lunch. Sadly we had to leave all too soon as we had many miles to go, firstly through the Serengeti to Ikoma Gate, then out of the Park to avoid particularly bad roads. Then back in the Park further north where, by good fortune, one of the staff vehicles of the Kati-Kati Camp where we were due to stay was checking in. We learnt here that the original campsite had been closed and we were staying at another location not known to Geitan who rarely comes up this way. Thus we followed all the way for 20 or more km to Mara Mara Camp and then on to our tented camp in the middle of nowhere, with only 4 other guests staying, on a gentle slope with panoramic views across the seemingly endless Serengeti below.

19th November: The Northern Serengeti: Depending on rains and resulting condition of vegetation, the Wildebeest should be in this area and heading south on their legendary 500-mile circular migration all the way from the Mara area of Kenya down to the short grass plains of the south-eastern Serengeti around Ndutu to calve in February. But the Wildebeest can range and wander over huge areas and change direction at a whim. There had been a 4 day visit to this northern region recently, by the group of keen photographers we'd met at Ndutu. They had seen virtually nothing. The local reports were equally disappointing about there being no large numbers of Wildebeest in the area. Thus we were fairly resigned to not seeing much – just the luck of the draw – and quite OK to just take a non-targeted drive seeing a

few new birds. We did indeed see a nice selection of birds – some new for the tour – most showing well in the sunny conditions to allow some good photos to be taken. Violet-backed Starlings, Temminck's Courser, Spur-winged Plover, displaying Black-bellied Bustards, African Green Pigeons, a rare Temminck's Stint (identified by Gil when checking his photos back at the lodge), Sooty Chat, Isabelline Shrike, Rufous-chested Swallows, Silverbird, Yellow-throated Longclaw (looking identical to a Meadowlark from N. America), the funny buzzing flight of Flappet Larks – even a distant Croaking Cisticola or two.

However, all this good stuff paled into the background after reaching the Mara River. It was interesting enough just to be there and see this oft-filmed site of where Wildebeest cross in their thousands. Geitan got word on the radio that Wildebeest had been seen coming close to the river on the west side and may cross. So we moved into position and quietly watched for a while a fairly small group, while other vehicles watched upstream and kept in radio contact. Our group eventually turned around and went back into the thick, low acacia bush, so we joined just 4-5 other vehicles upstream where a much bigger gathering was taking place. Out of the bush poured thick streams of Wildebeest, making an ever-tightly packed vast herd on the steepish banks of the river. This spectacle alone would have more than justified our time here. After watching for a while as these nervous beasts went back and forth not wanting to be the first to cross, some of them did! All of a sudden there we were, truly in the midst of just about one of the most amazing wildlife spectacles on the planet – a mass river crossing of Wildebeest. For the next 20 minutes a continuous mass of plunging, swimming, scrambling Wildebeest came across the river to our side, passing just feet away. The dust, grunting, splashing and fervour were palpable and utterly riveting. Many thousands crossed over, eventually leaving a good few hundred still at the other side as they'd spotted a very large Nile Crocodile in the river. It was an absolutely awesome sight, but nerve-wracking too as these seemingly hapless animals crowded into one another, over one another, toppled onto and leapt off rocks in the river to awkwardly scramble up the other side. Inevitably there were casualties – but for the more sensitive of us, not as many as we feared. Six poor Wildebeest were left floating dead in the river and two wandered off on our side with a broken or damaged leg apiece. Horribly sad, but all part of the life cycle of this fantastic, huge, intact ecosystem. No doubt the crocodiles, vultures and hyenas will eat well for the next few days – and they have to survive too, even if it is at other's expense.

This is my 35th trip to Tanzania and I've often marvelled at the sheer numbers of Wildebeest when calving in the Ndutu area, but this life and death river crossing reaches another level – I can't think of any other wildlife experience to top it. Visits to over 100 countries all over the world, 300 or more wildlife tours done and I scratch my head to think of much to rival what we saw this morning. Some whale-watching experiences, Gorillas, the vast penguin colonies of Antarctica are absolutely world-class, but this morning's experience leaves me lost for any more words!

We took a lunch break back at the Camp and did a short game drive from 3.30pm, knowing that almost certainly it was going to be an anti-climax! We returned to the river where the crossing had taken place, seeing a couple of new bird species on the way – both with somewhat underwhelming/anticlimactic names: Plain-backed Pipit and African Plain Martin. The martins were gathered in large numbers on the rocks in the river where a couple of Crocodiles had hauled out onto sand banks and no more Wildebeest were attempting to cross. We paused by the pool where Gil had photographed the Temminck's Stints this morning and had some very nice looks side-by-side with Little Stints of 3 Temminck's. Further pottering along taking a few last photos of birds and mammals, such as Topi, passed the time pleasantly. It was good to see a last group of 20 African Elephants of all ages saunter past in the open woodland. The skies were full of heavy storm clouds increasing rapidly and looking very threatening. As we returned to Camp at 6pm, it turned cold, windy with thunder – all very ominous for a heavy downpour.

20th November: Return to Arusha and homewards for most: The storms produced some heavy rain overnight and into the early morning, producing a cool cloudy start to our day of departure. It also prevented any thought of early morning birding. We made our way, all packed up, to the airstrip at Kogatende by about 8.30am. This gave us options to stop along the half hour route and perhaps do some birding at the airstrip while waiting for the plane at 10.20am. Geitan was duty bound to stay with us until we had safely taken off. Then he was facing a very long drive back all the way to Arusha – poor him.

The plane came ahead of time and set off with us and a few others via Seronera to the domestic airport in Arusha. From here we were transferred to the nearby “Cultural Heritage Centre” for lunch. It was a delight to meet up all too briefly with Anthony Raphael, owner of our ground agent Tanzania birding. He spent much time trying to sort out the chaos of rescheduled and cancelled flights to Uganda via Rwanda for Fred.

At 2pm we transferred to the KIA International Airport for Gil and myself to check-in for our late afternoon flights homeward. Geoff (and now Fred on yet another revised schedule) were taken to the nearby KIA Lodge to overnight, ready for an early departure tomorrow.

In Conclusion: This was planned as a trip trying to combine a chance to see some of the endemic birds of less well-travelled parts of Tanzania with a good taste of the wildlife spectacle of the famous Northern Circuit National Parks. Knowing the country well after 34 previous visits, I was aware of what we had to leave out – that was frustrating. But in the end I believe it worked quite well, with a large tally of birds seen – some of them very special to the area. We also managed to find all of the major game animals with the exception of Black Rhino. Of course the most memorable and spectacular element of the whole tour was the river-crossing of Wildebeest – so very lucky with that!

We recorded a cumulative total of 471 species of birds, of which 10 were “heard only”. I even managed 4 lifers myself and saw 2-3 species I’d never encountered in Tanzania before, so each trip produces interest and surprises. Being so very dry in some areas meant fewer species in breeding dress and calling. Thus we were short on cuckoos, bishops, widowbirds and whydahs.

The only taxonomic updates relating to birds that I can see since I published the checklist are:

- Woolly-necked Stork has been split into two species – Asian and African
- Beesley’s Lark, formerly considered an endemic species, is now lumped back with the Spike-heeled Lark of S. Africa
- Foxy Lark has been lumped back with Fawn-coloured Lark
- African Reed Warbler is lumped with Eurasian Reed Warbler, which is now called Common Reed Warbler
- Usambara Eagle Owl is considered by some taxonomies a full species, others consider it a subspecies of Fraser’s Eagle Owl
- We were seeing the Grey-backed form of Green-backed Camaroptera, which some taxonomies split into a full species
- We were seeing the Yellow-billed race of Black Kite, which some taxonomies split into a full species
- We saw the Wailing subspecies of Lyne’s Cisticola, which some taxonomies split into a full species
- We saw the African race of Eurasian Hoopoe, which some taxonomies consider a full species
- We saw (I think), both subspecies of D’Arnaud’s Barbet – D’Arnaud’s and Usambiro – which some taxonomies split into two species