

Forest Birds Research and Training of Community Bird Guides in Nyahururu, Kenya

Field Report No. 1: June-July 2008

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Bird research and community bird guides training gets airborne at Nyahururu, Kenya

This report gives a summary of major events that have taken place during the first and second field seasons in June and July 2008 respectively. Both took place at South Marmanet Forest Reserve station in Nyahururu.

First session - June 23-27 2008

It all begun with the arrival of the facilitators on 22nd to fix some ground logistics with the participants joining them at camp the following day. Right from the word go, the camp was given the name "Bush Academy" from its expected delivery of ultimate skills and knowledge in ornithology and African ecology. We stand for this dream that one time in the history of our locality, such a facility will be put for the benefit of the children of Kenya and world at large: where they can learn the blissful secrets of the intricate nature of our world.

The objectives of the first session were as follows:

1. Introduce participants to the project i.e. overall and specific objectives, situation analysis, bird watching ethics, research methods and to the equipment to be used for research and training.
2. Conduct bird watching in and around the forest station as part of the long-term building up of area's checklist.
3. Analyse the expectations of the participants, facilitators and society at large to prepare on how to accomplish them.
4. Introduce participants to life in a bush camp e.g. tents pitching.



Photo 1: Setting up "Bush Academy" facilities at South Marmanet Forest Reserve Station, Nyahururu.

Who are the participants?

The "Bush Academy" has nine (9) students drawn from the area surrounding South Marmanet Forest Reserve (Ewaso Narok block), Lake Ol' Bolossat and her catchments ridge. It comprises of two females and seven males. They are all having a minimum of form four secondary school educations and can read, listen, speak and understand English confidently as is the main language of teaching. During the first two days, we were joined by an undergraduate forestry student from Moi University who has been at the forest for his field or industrial attachment.

L-R Wanyoike Wamiti (Facilitator/Team Leader - NIMK); Samwuel Githinji (Lake Ol' Bolossat Conservation Network-LOCN); Amina Njoki (LOCN & Ol' Bolossat Community Forest Association); Geoffrey Kahura (LOCN); Kimani Kamau (Facilitator - NIMK/Earthwatch); Timothy Mwangi (LOCN - Ndaragwa Environmental Conservation Volunteers); Catherine Wambui (Ranger Kenya Forest Service, Marmanet); Peter Karani (Ewaso Narok Community Forest Association-ENCFA); Joseph Maina (Boiman Catchment); George Ndung'u (LOCN); & Tirus Rukwaro (ENCFA).



What did they learn during their first semester?

This field season was mainly theoretical since it was felt necessary to give a sound background of the broad aims and specific objectives of the bird research and bird guides training. It was meant to prepare participants for future sessions that will only have few hours of indoor learning and lots of field observations to enhance the indoor teachings.

The following subjects were covered in depth:

- Research & Training Objectives.
- Situation analysis – what are the potentials of Nyahururu area as a tourist's destination?
- The importance of this research and training.
- Assessment of the expectations of the participants, facilitators and the society at large.
- Expected outputs or results of the project.
- Expected difficulties or unforeseen circumstances.
- Introduction to bird watching – Ethics & Equipment.
- Introduction to Research Methods – bird ringing & equipment.
- Conservation/Environmental Films.



Photo 3: Participants during a theory session in June 2008.

Some results of the discussions arising from the above are given below.

Expected outputs or results of the project

- Regular field reports for RSG's website.
- Checklist of Birds of Nyahururu and its Environs.
- Scientific publications – forest birds, grassland bird surveys etc.
- Baseline data for monitoring (esp. for grassland birds).
- Professional bird guides (9).
- Qualifications to serve as a research assistant in disciplines such as ornithology, social and natural sciences.
- Establishment of a Ringing station at Nyahururu– for regular ringing, training, refresher courses, and forest birds study.

Expectations (Participants/Society/Facilitators)

- How to establish an attraction site and a community resource centre within Nyahururu area.
- Suggestions from facilitators on how to go about tackling environmental problems locally.
- How to change the attitudes of the trainees not only to have interest to learn about nature but also how to trade and market the skills they shall acquire during the training.
- Marketing the area as a tourist destination in order to give the guides an opportunity to earn a living.
- Acquire general knowledge especially in biology and ecology.

- A smooth completion of the course work as scheduled preferably.
- That everyone stays in the course since this is a rare opportunity coming along.
- A certificate for recognition/participation and marketing of the skills.
- Techniques for approaching and changing the attitudes of the local community to realise the value of birds and other natural resources around them e.g. during government field days.
- Provision of an identification tag during excursions where the team is expected to meet other people.
- Field practical on conducting a guided trip or bird walk.
- Visit all areas mentioned in the situation analysis lecture i.e. Thomson Falls, Lake Ol' Bolossat, satima escarpment view point and others.
- How to identify birds individually.
- Find a way forward regarding birds conservation in the area.
- Learn the values of birds (economic, social and ecological).
- How to reduce predation of birds by wild and domestic predators.



Photo 4: Participants share duties in the “Bush Academy” – preparing dinner. Duties are equally shared.

Conservation/Environmental Films

The following titles of films were watched courtesy of African Environmental Films, Nairobi, Kenya and EarthWatch Institute (last title).

- **Walking Birds** – the breeding and feeding ecology and difficulties of the Southern Ground Hornbill.
- **Natural Security** – how man and wildlife all depend on the environment for survival, and interactions of animals in the environment.
- **The Keepers of the Kingdom** – role of the African Elephant in shaping and influencing the plants and animal diversity in the Tsavo National Park.
- **Lake on the Edge** – the problems and conservation of natural resources and the waters of Lake Naivasha.

Bird Ringing and Walks

A demonstration of bird ringing as the principal study method for the forest birds was done with a single morning of capture and marking. A total of 21 individuals from 11 species were ringed. See table below.

A few morning and afternoon sessions were dedicated to bird walks around the camp where a total of 63 species of birds were observed.



Photo 5: Participants experiencing a hands-on experience in setting up mist nets.

On closing the June field season, participants were given a take-away assignment to research on and report back in July. This was on finding out what values birds had in the traditional communities, what are some of the folklores that have birds in the central theme, and a meaning of a local name. The objectives of this assignment were as follows;

- Initiate an interaction of the participants with the rest of the community back at home.
- Initiate an interest in finding about birds within the community and assess how much knowledge people still have about birds and the environment.
- Increase participants' knowledge on birds from the traditional point of view.
- Create an opportunity for developing self confidence while sourcing information from people and presenting it to an audience.

Second Session - July 27th - 2nd August 2008.

By way of having most of the logistics been fixed in June, it was easier to settle down for activity in July. We arrived at the camp in the afternoon of 27th and set up camp and got down to work with a discussion of what had transpired over the past three weeks of break from the "Bush Academy".

Most of the time was spent in the field for bird walks and bird ringing. The following are the areas where training was emphasised:

- **An introduction to the birds of Kenya** – statistics on total species, number of endemics, comparison of Kenya with other African countries, major bird habitats in Kenya, etc.
- **A revisit to what creatures birds are?** – Characteristics, main features.
- **Introduction to Ecology** – definition and demonstration of some common terms e.g. ecology, species, population, community, ecosystem, biome, niche, competition, food chains, adaptation etc.
- **The values of birds** – socio-cultural, economic and ecological values.
- **Bird ringing and bird walks** – enhance identification skills using various features; what is moulting and how does it take place in a bird; different feather tracts in a bird; age categories for Afro-tropical birds.
- **Environmental Films** - Wild Africa series by BBC on Coasts, Deserts, Rivers & Lakes, Jungle (Tropical Rainforests) and Mountains.



Photo 6: Sorting out what species it is from the birds of Kenya and northern Tanzania. From left: Timothy, Kahura, Catherine and Karani.

We also had a session on **individual and group's progress** during the 3 weeks break. Overall, the participants made the following progress and observations;

- Made presentations to their host groups and during other gatherings or informal meetings with friends. The reactions were mixed with some people wondering why should they spend time in learning birds and others expressing interest to join the academy too.
- Some community members had fears that this training may lead to repossession of their land around Lake Ol' Bolossat. However, this was made clear when such suspicion arose.
- Exploring ways of to integrate what they are learning with their other activities e.g. religious teachings and environmental days.
- They would like to have an introduction letter to enable them seek permission or convince suspicious people that their bird walks are meant for personal developments and has nothing to do with land.
- The assignment was very interesting and helped them realise how much knew about birds and what place birds had in society except a few species that are causing problems e.g. foraging on commercial crops like wheat and fruits.
- They needed more time in the "Bush Academy" to learn all what it takes to be a good bird watcher.
- They together had a joint bird walk to the lake (at Kasuku) on 12th July where they met an immature Buzzard that had been persecuted by being 'crucified' on a barbed wire fence for having done a wrong. They were not able to however establish real reason for this inhuman treatment or who had done it.
- They also learnt that some of the community members had problems with wildlife (Hippopotamuses) and were not happy with bird shooting in the Lake and would be happy to have the problems fixed.
- The community would be pleased to have seedlings of indigenous trees to plant on their farms.

The findings of their ethno-ornithology assignment will be collated from all participants and shared among themselves so that they can all learn what others found out.



Photo 7: Wamiti and participants during a “Bush Academy” session under the shade of a canopy tent at the South Marmanet Forest Station, Nyahururu.

Bird ringing and checklist

Two mornings until noon were dedicated to mist netting where a total of **32 individuals** were newly ringed. None of the 21 birds ringed in June was recaptured despite the fact that nets were set up in the same site. This may suggest that birds have a high mobility in this part of the forest reserve.



Photo 8: White-starred Forest Robin *Pogonocichla stellata*, one of the birds observed, caught and ringed in July.

An extended bird walk into the wetlands, grasslands, forest edges and interior yielded **50 new species** for our observations, bringing the list for the two field seasons to 113. This new addition included the rare African Black Duck *Anas sparsa*, the endangered and endemic Sharpe’s Longclaw *Macronyx sharpie* and the gorgeous Malachite Kingfisher *Alcedo cristata*.



Photo 9: Bird walk at the northern end of Lake Ol' Bolossat .

For the July home assignment, they were asked to read on the following:

- **Succession in Ecology** – who are pioneers? What is a climax community?
- **Fundamentals of Flight** – the Bernoulli's Principle of fluids mechanisms, Aerodynamics. This will help them understand how birds made and control flight.
- **Classification & Taxonomy** – also to choose an organism of their and classify it. They will be presenting their findings to the group in August. This is also in preparation for a session on the same in August.



Photo 10: Heavy rains in the area are one of the challenges we're facing in the camp. The participants are seen here erecting a polythene paper roof to provide a cover for the fire.