



Birding Africa

The Africa Specialists

Trip Report: Malawi tour in October 2007

A trip with Birding Africa guided by *Michael Mills*

Overview

This was a two week tour in October 2007, tailored to sample the best of Malawi's birds.

Highlights at Dzalanyama, a miombo-hotspot, included the local **Stierling's Woodpecker**, **Little Spotted Woodpecker**, **Red-capped Crombec**, **Yellow-bellied Hyliota**, **Bohm's Flycatcher**, **Souza's Shrike**, **Orange-winged Pytilia**, **Black-eared Seedeater**, **Boulder Chat**, **Miombo Rock Thrush**, **Thick-billed Cuckoo**, **Scaly-throated Honeyguide**, **Whyte's Barbet**, **Pale-billed Hornbill**, **Green-backed Honeybird**, **Stripe-breasted Seedeater** and **Anchieta's Sunbird**.

En route to the famed Nyika Plateau we stopped at several localities, including South Viphya and Vwaza Marsh, notching up **Fischer's Sparrow-Lark**, **Parasitic Weaver**, **Ruwenzori Nightjar**, **Southern Citril**, **Bertram's Weaver**, **Southern Mountain Greenbul**, **Singing Cisticola**, **White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher**, **White-winged Babbling Starling** and **Chestnut-mantled Sparrow-Weaver**.

Nyika offered superb grassland and forest birding, with the most memorable species including **Black-lored Cisticola**, **Churring Cisticola**, **Mountain Marsh Widow**, **Hildebrandt's Francolin**, **Moustached Green Tinkerbird**, **Olive-flanked Robin-Chat**, **Sharpe's Greenbul**, **Fullebourn's Boubou**, **Malawi Batis**, **White-tailed Crested Flycatcher**, **Bar-tailed Trogon**, **White-headed Sawwing**, **Ludwig's Double-collared Sunbird**, **Wattled Crane**, **Blue Swallow**, **White-chested Alethe**, **Sharpe's Akalat**, **Orange Ground-Thrush**, **Denham's Bustard**, **Dusky Turtle Dove**, **Yellow-browed Seedeater**, **Red-winged Francolin**, **Chapin's Apalis**, **Forest Double-collared Sunbird** and **Brown Parisoma**.

Our journey down to the southern highlands was interrupted with stops in the Nkhata Bay area (**Gunning's Akalat**, **Grey-olive Greenbul**, **Yellow Weaver**, **Pennant-winged Nightjar**) and at Liwonde National Park (**Bohm's Bee-eater**, **Grey-headed Parrot**, **Lillian's Lovebird**, **Southern Brown-throated Weaver**, **Pel's Fishing Owl**, **Brown-breasted Barbet**, **Livingstone's Flycatcher**, **Speckle-throated Woodpecker**, **Racquet-tailed Roller**, **White-backed Night Heron**, **Collared Palm Thrush**, **Dickinson's Kestrel**).

Zomba Plateau was notable for **White-winged Apalis**, **Red-faced Crimsonwing**, **Olive-headed Greenbul**, **Yellow-throated Apalis**, **Olive Bush-Shrike**, **Green Twinspot**, **Red-throated Twinspot**, **Livingstone's Turaco** and **Pale Batis**.

At Mount Thyolo we found **Cholo Alethe**, **Green-headed Oriole**, **Grey Cuckooshrike**, **Black-fronted Bush-Shrike** and **Silvery-cheeked Hornbill**.

To end with, a final mourning of birding around Lilongwe produced **Half-collared Kingfisher**, **Temminck's Courser** and **Caspian Plover**.

Detailed trip report

DAY 1: ARRIVE AND DRIVE TO DZALANYAMA

An early afternoon arrival at Kumuzu International Airport, Lilongwe, gave us enough time to shop for supplies in town and head to Dzalanyama, arriving at sunset. We settled into our comfortable forest lodge for a 2-night stay, although the birds would have to wait for the next morning.

DAY 2: DZALANYAMA FOREST RESERVE

Situated besides a forest stream and surrounded by Miombo woodland, Dzalanyama Forest Lodge is a perfect base for exploring this area. As we stepped out onto the veranda, the dawn calls of Schalow's Turaco could be heard nearby. The first two hours of sunlight were particularly productive, and we found

it hard to move at all. Eastern Sawwing flitted overhead, Green-capped Eremomela called excitedly from the treetops and Cabanis's Bunting sang nearby. The river-side trees were home to Little Spotted Woodpecker, and we soon spotted also our first Stierling's Woodpecker, Dzalanyama's number one specialty. Before brunch we managed to notch up also Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Rufous-bellied Tit, African Golden Oriole, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Miombo Bearded Scrub-Robin, Red-capped Crombec, Yellow-bellied Hylia, Bohm's Flycatcher, Souza's Shrike, Orange-winged Pytilia and Black-eared Seedeater. Most of the rest of the day was focussed on rocky areas. While searching for our main target, Boulder Chat, we found Miombo Rock Thrush, Striped Pipit and Lazy Cisticola. A Thick-billed Cuckoo put in a brief appearance, a flock of Red-backed Mannikin was active in some riverine thickets and we watched a Scaly-throated Honeyguide calling from its canopy-perch. Eventually we found a pair of Boulder Chat, agitated by the presence of an intruder from across the valley, and a more sedate Whyte's Barbet.

DAY 3: DZALANYAMA TO SOUTH VIPHYA

With a long drive ahead of us we had just a couple of hours to explore the miombo woodlands once more. The highlight of our 4-hour walk was a group of 5 Pale-billed Hornbill, with other species including Green-backed Honeybird, Neddicky, Stripe-breasted Seedeater, a stunning pair of Anchieta's Sunbird and a confiding Thick-billed Cuckoo. After breakfast we returned to Lilongwe, this time heading north out of town. Roadside stops turned up Fischer's Sparrow-Lark, a healthy flock of Parasitic Weaver, European Honey Buzzard, Miombo Blue-eared Starling and Little Sparrowhawk. Our sunset arrival at Luwawa Forest Lodge was greeted by singing Ruwenzori Nightjar, one male giving spectacular views in the spotlight.

DAY 4: SOUTH VIPHYA TO VWAZA MARSH GAME RESERVE

We awoke to strong, gusty wind and drizzle. Birding was slow, but on a prolonged walk we manage to spot several local specialities, including our first Southern Citril, Red-rumped Swallow, Bertram's Weaver, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Southern Mountain Greenbul, Broad-tailed Warbler, African Yellow Warbler, Singing Cisticola, White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher and Bronzy Sunbird, and the only Olive Woodpecker of the trip. From South Viphya we continued north and then west to Vwaza Marsh Game Reserve. We quickly settled into our spectacular lodge-accommodation, spotting Collared Pratincole on the adjacent Lake Kazuni before heading off to explore the surrounding woodlands. We stopped near a large herd of buffalo to admire both them and their flock of Yellow-billed Oxpecker. This turned out to be a mistake, as the rest of the afternoon was focussed on squashing tsetse flies in our vehicle. Our attempts to reach the north of the park failed due to a burned bridge, but the flies and a 2+ metre black mamba that reared up at our vehicle ensured that the drive was not uneventful.

DAY 5: VWAZA MARSH TO NYIKA NATIONAL PARK

A super-early start found us at the northern Kawiya entrance of Vwaza Marsh shortly after sunrise. It was rather quiet, so we decided on a long walk through the miombo woodland. After some patience and focus our persistence was rewarded, as we spotted a bird with white flashes in the wing flying from the ground to its mid-storey perch. White-winged Babbling Starling! For the next hour we managed to follow a pair for superb repeated views, and I managed to record both the contact call and song of this scarce species. Our attention was diverted by our other target, the unobtrusive Chestnut-mantled Sparrow-Weaver. Further searching revealed another pair of Babbling Starlings and another party of Sparrow-Weavers before it was time to head for the hills of Nyika. Our first stop on the plateau produced Black-lored Cisticola, near Chowo forest we found a small group of Scarce Swift and Baglafecht Weaver was spotted at the roadside. Our arrival at Chelinda was greeted with the first rain storm of the season, with drizzle continuing for most of the afternoon. However, a short walk in some Haegenia forest and surrounding thicket did turn up our first Churring Cisticola and striking Mountain Marsh Widow, and our only Mountain Buzzard and Mountain Yellow Warbler.

DAYS 6-7: NYIKA NATIONAL PARK

With a long list of forest birds to be tracked down, there was no time to be wasted and we found ourselves on the border of Zovo-Chipolo forest shortly after sunrise, having seen en route Hildebrandt's Francolin feeding at the roadside. Here we spotted our first Moustached Green Tinkerbird feeding at the forest edge, alongside Waller's Starling. It was windy, making forest birding difficult, but we managed to spot White-starred Robin in the under-storey. Olive-flanked Robin-Chat also obliged with good views, but White-chested Alethe remained no more than a whistle. In the mid-storey we found our first Sharpe's Greenbul, Fullebourn's Boubou, Malawi Batis, Mountain Thrush and White-tailed Crested Flycatcher, with a splash of colour added by a pair of very co-operative Bar-tailed Trogon. And at last we put a

face to the loud, explosive call of Evergreen Forest Warbler. Back at the forest edge we found Angola Swallow and White-headed Sawwing before heading for the Zambian rest house where a male Ludwig's Double-collared Sunbird was feeding on some flowering plants. The rest of the day was spent scouring the grasslands in the vicinity of Chelinda. The two undoubted highlights were a lone Wattled Crane, watched at length feeding and preening, and several shimmering Blue Swallow. Yellow-crowned Canary, Augur Buzzard, Rufous-naped Lark, African Pipit (very dark subspecies) and Banded Martin were also added to the list.

On our second morning we made an even earlier start for the Manyanjere forest in Zambia, stopping to pick up our guide at the Zambian guest house, where Yellow-bellied Waxbill was seen. We followed the track to the forest edge and fought our way through the forest wall to its damp interior. Once inside, moving was easier and we soon located a striking White-chested Alethe, which gave superb views. Brief views of Sharpe's Akalat frustrated at first, but with much patience we were all rewarded with excellent views of this scarce species, which sang beautifully for the tape recorder. On our way back to the forest edge we craned our necks to see Brown-headed Apalis in the canopy and in the mid-storey spotted a singing Orange Ground-Thrush. Once in the open grasslands we found a lone Denham's Bustard and Wailing Cisticola. Windy conditions made the more open areas rather unproductive, but during the rest of the day at Chelinda we enjoyed views of Dusky Turtle Dove, the very local Yellow-browed Seedeater and a pair of curious Red-winged Francolin. Most of the group had a miserable evening, as South Africa defeated England in the Rugby World Cup final.

DAY 8: TO NKHATA BAY

A slightly later start saw us in very windy conditions at Chowo Rocks. Attempts to find sunbirds were frustrated by the poor weather conditions, but we did flush a covey of Shelley's Francolin. In the forest itself Chapin's Apalis provided further frustration, calling unseen from the canopy, although our first Forest Double-collared Sunbird and African Hill Babbler were welcome. From here we continued towards the edge of the plateau, stopping at a large patch of Acacia abyssinica. Here, a calling Chapin's Apalis finally co-operated and allowed us to snatch a last-minute scope view, Green-headed Sunbird was watched feeding in a flowering Erythrina, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher flitted in the treetops and a pair of Brown Parisoma was spotted feeding discreetly in the crown of a tree.

We arrived in the Nkhata Bay area in the mid-afternoon. A quick stop at Kalwe forest produced little, so we decided to continue to our accommodation. In the gardens we spotted an angry African Barred Owlet, a whining quartet of Grey-olive Greenbul, Black-throated Wattle-eye and a healthy breeding colony of Yellow Weaver. After dark a nearby outing produced a spectacular male Pennant-winged Nightjar. Wow!

DAY 9: TO LIWONDE NATIONAL PARK

An early morning wrestle with a flat tyre delayed our start somewhat, although it was only 05h45 by the time we reached Mkuwadzi forest. We soon heard the calls of Gunning's Akalat and quietly stalked after it. The first bird was not particularly co-operative, allowing only brief views, but a second bird found shortly afterwards was far more confiding and we all enjoyed superb views. The forest was pretty quiet and produced little else besides Eastern Nicator and Olive Sunbird, so we returned to our accommodation for breakfast before continuing southwards along the shores of Lake Malawi to Liwonde National Park, where we arrived at Mvuu Camp shortly before sunset.

DAY 10: LIWONDE NATIONAL PARK

First light saw us gather on the banks of the Shire River. Bright Southern Brown-throated Weaver hopped in the thickets, joined by Collared Palm Thrush, while striking Bohm's Bee-eater darted from their perch in pursuit of breakfast. The highlight was a quartet of Grey-headed Parrot that perched in the treetops across the river before flying back across the river, straight at us, passing low over our heads and disappearing into the surrounding Mopane woodlands. Numerous waterbirds commuted up and down the river, including a flock of Gull-billed Tern. The remainder of the day, bar a prolonged siesta around midday, was spent scouring the surrounding woodlands where highlights included hundreds of vivid Lillian's Lovebird, a few shrieking Brown-headed Parrot and a party of Jameson's Firefinch.

DAY 11: LIWONDE TO ZOMBA

Our final morning at Liwonde was kicked off with a super productive walk. On the outskirts of camp we found our first Livingstone's Flycatcher twittering excitedly, followed shortly by African Wood Owl and two roosting White-backed Night Heron. After this we popped across the river to find Brown-breasted Barbet, Purple-crested Turaco and a calling juvenile Pel's

Fishing Owl, all before breakfast. After breakfast we quickly located a trio of Speckle-throated Woodpecker and a confiding Dickinson's Kestrel perched in some tall Mopane woodland before packing and heading for Zomba. The drive out produced the only Western Banded Snake Eagle and Long-toed Lapwing of the trip.

At Zomba the cool mountain air meant activity was high even in the middle of the day and a short stop just above town was rewarded with Square-tailed Drongo, Red-throated Twinspot, our first Placid Greenbul and a pair of very elegant and localised White-winged Apalis. A late afternoon walk on the plateau itself produced our first Livingstone's Turaco, angry-eyed Yellow-throated Apalis, several Black-headed Apalis, a pair of noisy Bertram's Weaver and Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler.

DAY 12: ZOMBA TO MOUNT THYOLO

Our early morning outing started slowly as we unsuccessfully chased after calling finches. Eventually Red-faced Crimsonwing relented as we enjoyed great views of a female perched low in a thicket; Green Twinspot was a little easier, although only a twinspot-less juvenile showed well. Other highlights included Olive-headed Greenbul and Olive Bush-Shrike, before we returned for breakfast where we watched Pale Batis from the dining balcony. Back on the lower slopes of the mountain we found a female Green Twinspot feeding at the roadside and a distant flock of Magpie Mannikin, before continuing to Blantyre and on to Mount Thyolo where an almighty storm greeted our arrival. When the rain abated we headed up the mountain where a forest patch produced a stunning Green-headed Oriole perched atop a tall forest tree in a bright shaft of sunshine, chattering Yellow-streaked Greenbul, a party of four Green Twinspot feeding at the edge of the forest (our third sighting of the day!), including a red-faced male, and a displaying African Broadbill in the fading light.

DAY 13: MOUNT THYOLO

We awoke to a misty, drizzly morning and our pre-breakfast outing proved damp and unproductive, so we returned for an early breakfast that included several Silvery-cheeked Hornbill in the garden. Fortunately the rain abated and we were soon back up the mountain watching White-eared Barbet and Grey Cuckooshrike in a large foraging flock. A Cholo Alethe called nearby, so we dropped the flock and rapidly stalked in the directions of the whistles. A short bout of playback of its own call quickly brought in the culprit, and we enjoyed fabulous views as it perched in the mid-storey, giving repeated back, front and side views before disappearing back into the foliage. Once we'd recovered from the latest highlight we caught up with our foraging flock, finding also White-winged Apalis, Green-headed Oriole and a female Black-fronted Bush-Shrike. At the forest edge a Black Sparrowhawk unsuccessfully pursued a Red-necked Spurfowl across the tea and we found a male Black-fronted Bush-Shrike calling from its partly-hidden perch. But the rain and mist soon set in again and put an end to the day's birding, before midday.

DAY 14: THYOLO TO LILONGWE

By the next morning conditions hadn't changed and the mountain was blanketed in a dense layer of mist and drizzle, so we decided to cut our losses and start a leisurely drive to Lilongwe. The most productive stop was near Dedza, shortly after lunch, where a dambo was home to at least 20 Locust-finch and several flocks of Orange-breasted Waxbill. A short while later we found several Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark in a recently-burned field. At Lilongwe a river-side outing produced a trio of African Black Duck. In the evening we were joined for a relaxed dinner by Ken Longden, a local bird expert.

DAY 15: LILONGWE AND DEPART

Our final morning in Malawi proved very rewarding, thanks to the assistance of Ken. The Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary turned up a stunning Half-collared Kingfisher and a flock of dozen Magpie Mannikin feeding in a stand of bamboo. To end with, on a nearby farm we found three Caspian Plover and a party of 11 Temminck's Courser that allowed us to approach within 15 metres!

Besides all the fantastic birds, Malawi produced a number of other memorable wildlife sightings. Perhaps the best mammal sightings were of a pair of African Palm Civet chasing each other through the tangles of Mkuwadzi Forest and a large male Bushpig in Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary! Other noteworthy mammals included Elephant, Greater Kudu, Buffalo and Banded Mongoose at Vwaza Marsh, Eland, Roan, Side-striped Jackal, Spotted Hyaena and Tanzania Mountain Squirrel at Nyika, majestic Sable at Liwonde, and Mutable Sun Squirrel, Blue Duiker and Blue Monkey at Mount Thyolo. Other highlights included the biggest Black Mamba I have ever seen.