



Malawi Trip Report, 20 November - 2 December 2010

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Dates: 20 November - 2 December 2010 (13 days)

Areas visited: Dzalanyama Forest Reserve, South Vipya Plateau, Nyika Plateau NP, Vwasa Marsh, Lake Malawi, Dedza area, Zomba Plateau, Liwonde National Park, Lilongwe Sanctuary

Total number of species recorded: 395 bird species (with 19 heard-only)

Top 10 birds: Lesser Seedcracker, Black-lored Cisticola, White-winged Apalis, Pennant-winged Nightjar, Boulder Chat, Lillian's Lovebird, Sharpe's Akalat, Yellow-throated Apalis, Black-fronted Bushshrike, Anchieta's Sunbird

Highlight mammal species: Roan and Sable antelope, large herd of Eland, Gentle/Samango Monkey, Elephant and Hippo

Detailed Trip report:

This busy, 13-day tour to the little-birded country of Malawi provided some superb sightings of rarely seen species. Our birding focussed on the highland grasslands, shrublands and forests of the Nyika and Zomba plateaus, and the miombo woodlands of Dzalanyama Forest Reserve and Vwaza Marsh National Park (visited very briefly). We also had time for short stops in Lilongwe, on the South Viphya plateau, along the shores of Lake Malawi, and in the Dedza area.

This report, hopefully a welcome change from the standard report format, is based around the top ten species (as voted for by the participants and myself) seen on the trip. In total, we amassed a respectable total of 395 bird species (with 19 heard-only).

Mammals were also a feature of the trip, and sightings were enjoyed of species such as Roan, Sable, African Elephant, Gentle/Samango Monkey, Spotted Hyaena, Zebra, Eland (a massive herd of more than 200!), Blue Duiker, Common Reedbuck, Lesser Bushbaby and South African Porcupine.

Together with the spectacular scenery, comfortable and well-situated lodgings and good food, Malawi offers an all-round nature experience that is hard to beat!

The top ten bird species were as follows:

1. Lesser Seedcracker

Although most of Dzalanyama is cloaked in closed-canopy Miombo woodland, it is worthwhile also birding along the drainage lines that cut through the landscape. These riverine features called dambos can be covered in short grassland or, as is the case with the 'main dambo' at Dzalanyama, dense tangles and some riparian forest. Here we found displaying Broad-tailed Warbler, bright Yellow-throated Longclaw, Holub's Golden Weaver and Southern Citril, thicket-loving African Firefinch, Grey-rumped Swallow, Pearl-breasted Swallow and Croaking Cisticola, amongst others. The more forested areas held African Emerald Cuckoo, Grey-olive Greenbul, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Bar-throated Apalis and White-tailed Blue Flycatcher. However, the star of the show was a pair of Lesser Seedcracker, very rarely-seen birds, which put in no less than three appearances during our brief visit! The first was frustratingly fleeting, but on our second morning we were treated to prolonged views (long enough for Jan to sprint all of 100m in time to see it!) of a striking male perched up on some dry twigs, and later some very close views of a female feeding in the dense undergrowth. This brilliantly coloured bird, very rare and secretive, gave excellent views and is a worthy bird of the trip, although it shared honours with...

2. Black-lored Cisticola!

In over ten years of leading trips around sub-Saharan Africa, this is the first time I have ever had a cisticola in the top ten! Never mind a tie for first! But this large, highly excitable and equally musical cisticola put on its superb clock-work displays at close range, creating one of the most memorable sightings of the trip. In Malawi, Black-lored Cisticola is confined to the Nyika plateau, where it favours thickets at the forest-grassland interface and around drainage lines, rocky outcrops and dams. In this habitat at Nyika we also found the localised and unobtrusive Yellow-browed Seedeater, Baglafetch Weaver, here at the southern limit of its distribution, numerous Churring Cisticola, dozens of bright, full-breeding-plumage Mountain Marsh Widowbird, delicate Yellow-bellied Waxbill and Yellow-crowned Canary. In the surrounding grasslands we tracked down several smart Red-winged Francolin, a pair of regal Wattled Crane feeding very near the track, numerous bright Blue Swallows, Pallid Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Denham's Bustard, Wing-snapping Cisticola and Rufous-naped Lark. Dusky Turtle Dove also favoured the forest edge, and around our cosy accommodation we grabbed a last-minute sighting of Ruwenzori Nightjar feeding along the edge of the plantation, spotted pre-dawn by Andrew. Three cheers for Andrew!

3. White-winged Apalis

The upper edge of Zomba town holds a few small patches of large trees consisting mostly of exotic Eucalypts and Jacarandas, with the odd Albizia and Fig tree representing local tree species. Rather surprisingly, and despite its location right on the edge of town, this spot produced some very productive birding, with sightings of Dark-backed Weaver, a perched Verreaux's Eagle Owl, sought-after White-eared Barbet, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird right under our noses, and a Black-backed Puffback feeding an oversized juvenile African Emerald Cuckoo. However, the undoubted highlight was a pair of confiding White-winged Apalis, deservedly punted as Africa's most beautiful warbler.

We enjoyed eye-level views of a pair, showing off all aspects of their perfect plumage. Fantastic!

4. Pennant-winged Nightjar

Although the shores of Lake Malawi are densely populated by people and the habitat largely converted to farmland, a couple of special birds can still be found here. We tore ourselves away from swimming in the lake and lying around in deck chairs on our private beach to admire colonies of bright, fiery-eyed Yellow Weavers and skulking Grey-olive Greenbul in the gardens. And just five minutes from our comfortable accommodation, we watched Square-tailed Nightjar churring away in the spotlight beam, followed shortly by the strange and incredible display of several male Pennant-winged Nightjars, buzzing like insects as they went. At times it was hard to believe we were actually looking at birds! We also made a pre-breakfast outing to the nearby Mukwadzi forest, where we tracked down the desirable East Coast Akalat. Initially it remained well hidden for some of the group, but after some perseverance gave superb views for everyone. Red-capped Robin-Chat also put in a brief appearance here.

5. Boulder Chat

A chain of rocky hills runs along the western border of Dzalanyama Forest Reserve, forming the frontier with Mozambique. Although it was hard work getting into this habitat, our sweat was greatly rewarded with superb views of a pair of Boulder Chats, which sang loudly and excitedly just above our heads in the crisp morning light. This was Paul's favourite bird, and one he worked hard for. The species is not only unusual, belonging to its own genus, but is hard to see on any regular birding itineraries, as most of its distribution lies within Zimbabwe. Nearby we found another trip favourite, Whyte's Barbet, in the tall miombo woodland, and the rocky slopes were home to Striped Pipit.

6. Lillian's Lovebird

Draining from Lake Malawi southwards to the Zambezi River, the lethargic Shire River is surrounded by pockets of riverine forest and thicket, with Mopane woodlands set slightly further back from the river banks. These lowland habitats are diverse in birds and large mammals, and are best accessed at Malawi's showcase national park, Liwonde. During an early-morning bird walk from our tranquil, river-side camp we found flocks of brightly coloured Lillian's Lovebirds coming to pools to drink. Other highlights of our walk near camp included several fine Dickinson's Kestrel, Red-necked Falcon, the pretty Livingstone's Flycatcher, flocks (and I mean flocks) of Purple-crested Turaco, Brown-hooded Kingfisher, many dainty Boehm's Bee-eater, Collared Palm Thrush which sat on the breakfast tables, Southern Brown-throated Weaver and Burnt-necked Eremomela. Nearby, the forested river banks were home to roosting White-backed Night Heron which sat tight just metres away, a trio of Pel's Fishing Owl which were watched at length through the scopes, Palm-nut Vulture, Trumpeter Hornbill, Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robin and the localised Brown-breasted Barbet. The river and river banks were home to Giant Kingfisher, Long-toed Lapwing, Spur-winged Lapwing, Water Thick-knee, African Skimmer, Gull-billed Tern, Black Egret, and numerous other waterbirds, all enjoyed on a relaxing evening boat cruise. And after we departed, Dale also added Rufous-bellied Heron and Allen's Gallinule to the list.

The Mopane woodlands also had its share of worthwhile sightings, and were home to Western Banded Snake Eagle (one carrying a metre long snake in its talons), several Speckle-throated Woodpeckers, many Meves's Starlings, Red-billed Hornbill, colonies of busy Red-headed Weaver that added a splash of colour to the baobab trees, Brown-headed Parrot and the scarce Thick-billed Cuckoo, which gave prolonged perch views through the scope. And at a small pond in the woodland we were lucky to find a lone Dwarf Bittern. Perhaps the greatest frustration of the trip was spending several hours scouring these woodlands, finding many European Roller, Broad-billed Roller and Lilac-breasted Roller, but no Racket-tailed Roller this time. Finally, when leaving Liwonde, we found singing Purple Indigobird and Village Indigobird, although they were not yet in breeding plumage.

7. Sharpe's Akalat

This localised and secretive forest robin is very rare in Malawi, although it is regularly recorded from Manyerere forest on the Zambian side of Nyika National Park. A steep embankment formed by grading the main road through Nyika meant that we could not drive onto the track that leads to Manyerere, so a few brave souls opted for the long walk to the forest. Those who put in the effort were amply rewarded, and within 30 minutes of arriving in the forest we had enjoyed close-up and clear views of a bright Sharpe's Akalat, a species which can otherwise be seen only in Tanzania. Following hot on its heels was another trip favourite, the beautiful White-chested Alethe, which also gave better-than-hoped-for views, and a very confiding Olive-flanked Robin-Chat (it was a good morning for skulkers, wasn't it Andrew?). We took our time in walking back to the main track, stopping to admire Moustached Green Tinkerbird, Cinnamon Bracken Warbler, Wailing Cisticola, Ludwig's Double-collared Sunbird, Fülleborn's Boubou, and several bright Scarlet-tufted Malachite Sunbirds in some flowering Proteas.

8. Yellow-throated Apalis

Although not rare in its habitat, the bright Yellow-throated Apalis, a Malawi endemic, was one of the trip highlights at Zomba. And Helen's favourite for co-operating with the camera! Here the small patches of montane forest were home to other exciting forest birds, and we were lucky to obtain great views of Red-faced Crimsonwing, Olive-headed Greenbul, Placid Greenbul, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, at eye level for a change, Black-headed Apalis, Orange Ground-Thrush (watched singing its sweet song through the telescope), Tambourine Dove, Olive Bushshrike and Livingstone's Turaco. Perhaps the greatest success at Zomba was finding the very rare Cholo Alethe, a species hardly ever seen on the Zomba Plateau these days. Paul probably had the best views of the bird perched at eye level, just on the verge of the road, although some of the group were a bit too relaxed this morning (no names mentioned) and missed the show. At the forest edge another favourite was the localised Bertram's Weaver, especially for John. Another highlight was watching both Red-backed Mannikin and Magpie Mannikin going to roost near our accommodation. And we spent some time watching large, black swifts calling like Little Swifts. I first recorded these birds in Angola (published on my bird calls CD of Angola), and Callan has now seen them in Uganda. Hopefully we'll be able to put a name to them one day...

9. Black-fronted Bushshrike

Chow forest was the main focus of our forest birding at Nyika, with a full morning spent in its dark interior. Forest skulkers proved hard to see, but with some perseverance we enjoyed good views of the secretive Evergreen Forest Warbler and Olive-flanked Robin-Chat. The mid-storey highlights included several bright Bar-tailed Trogon, less vividly-coloured Sharpe's Greenbul and Southern Mountain Greenbul, pretty White-starred Robin, furtive White-tailed Crested Flycatcher and local Malawi Batis. In the canopy were Chapin's Apalis, Brown-headed Apalis and the shaggy-crested Schalow's Turaco. But the highlight was a striking male Black-fronted Bushshrike, which for a long time remained entirely hidden behind leaves. We hung around in hope, and suddenly it popped out into the open and fed in bright sunlight for several minutes, allowing us to study its smart plumage in full detail. Overhead we saw displaying Crowned Eagle through the canopy, and the much smaller Scarce Swift. And at the forest edge we watched White-headed Sawwing, Red-rumped Swallow, Angola Swallow, Bronzy Sunbird and Forest Double-collared Sunbird.

10. Anchieta's Sunbird

Birding in the tall miombo woodlands of Dzalanyama Forest Reserve was one of the highlights of the trip. Although most birds were breeding and hence foraging flocks not as active as normal, we picked out a great range of miombo specials. These included Southern Hyliota, Yellow-bellied Hyliota, three young, noisy Ovambo Sparrowhawk, perched and in-flight Grey-headed Parrot, two circling Ayres's Eagle, Spotted Creeper, Cabanis's Bunting, minute Red-capped Crombec, sought-after Souza's Shrike (on the nest), Pale-billed Hornbill, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Grey-headed Kingfisher, chattering Green Woodhoopoe, Common Scimitarbill, Green-backed Honeybird (one young bird following a pair of Yellow White-eye), Green-backed Woodpecker, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, the localised Stierling's Woodpecker, Eastern Sawwing, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Black Cuckooshrike, Miombo Bearded Scrub Robin, Miombo Rock-Thrush, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Green-capped Eremomela, Stierling's Wren Warbler, Rufous-bellied Tit, Miombo Tit, Western Violet-backed Sunbird, White Helmet-Shrike, Retz's Helmet-Shrike, African Golden Oriole, Miombo Blue-eared Starling and shy Orange-winged Pytilia. Whew. The star of the show, however, was the vivid, blue-and-red Anchieta's Sunbird, of which several were seen glowing in the bright sunlight. After dark we found African Wood Owl. Thanks to Ken Longden and Lizanne Roxburgh from Lilongwe for joining us here for the day, and sharing their expertise!

The only other areas visited that did not feature top-ten birds were:

1. The *South Viphya plateau*, where Southern Ground Hornbill, the smart Anchieta's Tchagra and Trilling Cisticola were highlights,
2. The *Dedza area*, where we found a flock of eight Locust Finch, seen very well in flight but which vanished from sight as soon as they hit the ground,
3. *Vwaza Marsh*, where we had an excellent morning tracking down several Chestnut-mantled Sparrow-Weaver, the very desirable White-winged Babbling Starling (although John had expected more from this unusual species), Coqui Francolin, which flushed from our feet, a very co-operative Miombo Pied Barbet, Greater Honeyguide on its song perch, Bennett's Woodpecker, Boehm's Flycatcher and Collared Flycatcher, and
4. *Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary*, where Hildebrandt's Francolin stalked along the forest paths, dazzling Red-throated Twinspot fed at close range, at least two male African Broadbills were watched performing their strange display flights, and the river held Mountain Wagtail and African Black Duck.