

So we we're off to Kenya for Christmas and New Year. The main mission was to spend time with our Orphans in the Sheldrick Trust's units in or near Tsavo. We had been to both Ithumba Stockades and the lovely Umani Springs Lodge previously and those who know the properties will also know why we keep going back. When Angela Sheldrick first communicated with me in 2007 I was told "Access to the elephants is unique". Never a truer word was written. This trip we decided to see more of Kenya and possibly find some of the special birds that Kenya has to offer such as Blue-headed Bee-Eater and the denizens of Aruba-Sokoke forest.

After a somewhat 'hectic' tour in Uganda we had evolved a more relaxed format of spending more time in each place rather than the usual rush from honey pot to honey pot. We have three basic needs:- **The "3B"s**:- Bed, Balcony and Beer. This concept was named "Whiteknuckles Lite" for last years visit to Tanzania and the formula worked well in Kenya also.

Getting there and around. After a bit of searching we selected SNBrussels as both convenient timings and a fair price.

We used our friends All Season's Safaris in Nairobi when direct arrangements proved cumbersome and this worked well as always. For this trip our 'man in Uganda' **Emmy Gongo** was to come with us as an unsurpassed Bird expert and bring his car too for most of the time.

David had suggested a target of 500 species but we felt this too ambitious and settled for 350. After all there are non birders in the group.

So who are "we"? Well Elizabeth and I of course, plus the Whiteknuckles Safari team of Chris, David and Emmy R Gongo our own Rift Valley specialist. Also along for part of the ride was the admirable Dickson from DSWT who was a great asset as always.

Without going into a day by day account of our 30 days which will bore me as much as you, here is how it worked out. Comments on Lodges will be brief as all have been reviewed.

SN flew three of us from MAN to BRU where, joined by Chris from LHR, we left BRU on time and landed in NBO with all our luggage via a short stop in Kigali. Immigration was swift despite a full plane. We had booked two nights at **Wildebeest Camp** in Karen and, after a delay finding the driver, we arrived, checked in and retired to bed in that order. Emmy would join us in Kakamega later.

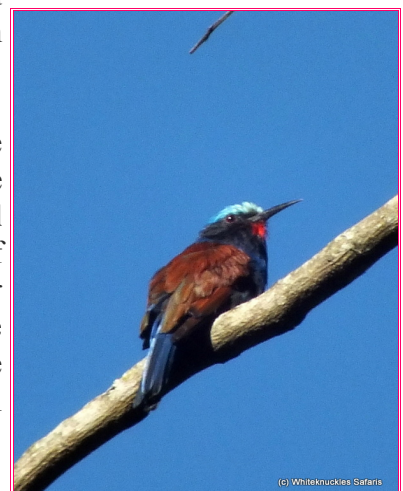
Next day was simply R&R, in reserve for any hiatus in travel, so a nice lie in was called for. Except who can lie in when the sun is up in Africa? So we took breakfast and got the bird list off to a good start with some of the many resident birds of Karen including Sunbirds, Citrils and Indigo birds. Even a Cinnamon Bracken Warbler showed itself. So a lazy day and an early night ready for the drive up to Kakamega scheduled for the next day.

We left on schedule at 8 A.M. and after exiting Nairobi's ever worsening traffic got onto the road north where, after a refuelling stop in Nakuru, we progressed to Kakamega and the excellent Rondo Retreat for three nights. <http://www.rondoretreat.com/> A great place to unwind further whilst seeking out the Forest specials. Even the Lodge grounds was bustling with birds with a nesting pair of



Crowned Eagles and numerous Great Blue Turacos. By now we had been joined by our friend Emmy, who had driven in from Kampala.

Our target was of course the Kakamega Forest where we sought the beautiful **Blue-headed Bee-eater** amongst the horde of Greenbuls, Flycatchers and other avian delights. Day one got us the birds but day two got us the close up views we sought. We were well content with our visit.



With a full bag of birds it was time to leave for our next venue which was the lovely home of Zoe and Andrew Nightingale and their immaculate Kambu Cottages. <http://www.kembu.com/> We had reserved Cedar Cottage to sleep all five of us and this was ideal. Meals were served to order and we had, naturally, ensured ample stocks of “White Cap” and Wine were in the Fridge. We had stayed before and it was like coming home to a Shropshire farm complete with Black and White Cows in the fields. The Nightingales are excellent hosts and Andrew even took time off to show us the resident pairs of Barn Owls in his Barn. (Where else??) We avoided Lake Nakuru NP this time although it is only a short drive away, and opted to explore a nearby forest where Turacos and other specials reside. We also combed the prolific grounds of Kambu farm where we had good views of the many birds there. Emmy was by now well into some Lifers for his growing list.

After Kambu it was north over the Equator to Lake Baringo and Robert's Camp which has kept open throughout the high water levels.. <http://robertscamp.com/> We had reserved Coots Cottage and this was very cosy indeed with its own Balcony/Porch looking out over the lake with nesting waterbirds and attendant Crocs. But we were really here for the special birds such as Hemprich's and **Jackson's Hornbills**, an Owl or two and the endemic Magpie and Bristle-crowned Starlings. Our competent guide excelled himself and our Trip list was growing apace. Even such often overlooked birds as Red-fronted Warbler and Mouse-coloured Penduline Tits came to the camera as well as the disputed “Greyish Eagle Owl”. We were well

pleased once more. A boat trip next day showed the extent of the damage to other properties less fortunate that suffered in the high water.

Now it was time to head back to the southern hemisphere via Nakuru and Nyeri for our next stop at Castle Forest Lodge owned and run by Mrs Melia van Laar. <http://www.castleforestlodge.com/> We had booked the new Chalet Montane with its lovely view straight to Mount Kenya. Perfect. Again we took many walks in the Forest with a guide and our tally of birds was moving along very nicely. We had some more forest specials although there is only so long I



can take of forest birding. Some rare Apalis and lovely views of both species of Trogon, Jardine's Parrot and the best ever of **Hartlaub's Turaco** where it posed nicely for some great photographs. At Castle Forest Lodge you can even see good birds from the outdoor dining area so we had to impose a 'no binoculars at mealtimes' rule. Oh, how we must suffer.

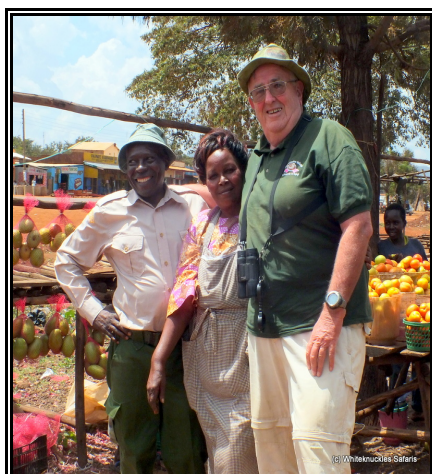
After a fulfilling stay, in every sense it was time to return to Nairobi, never high on my list of things to do, and finalise plans for the next part of the trip. This was of course our eagerly anticipated return to the DSWT properties of Umani Springs, for Christmas and the unique Ithumba Camp for New Year. After an excellent spell of birding it was time for some Elephant encounters. So back to Nairobi via Thika for another night at Wildebeeste and a “parents evening” at the Orphanage where I have visiting rights with my Rhino friend Maxwell.



The Elephants have Right of Way.

We met our additional driver Dickson at the Galleria complex in Karen and stocked up with provisions for the next part of our trip. Umani Springs and Ithumba Camp are self catering and we find it more fun to buy what we like when we like and plan accordingly. Frozen meats from a reliable source such as Nakumat but fresh veggies, fruit and bread from roadside stalls and Dukas in the small villages. This way we feel we are bringing trade to the locality where we are staying and not funding a large conglomerate. Buying and trying from roadside stalls is all part of the fun of African travel although sometimes the purchase of Beer etc., can be protracted.

So fully provisioned and fuelled up, our small convoy of two cars now headed out of Nairobi on a true "Safari" to the wilderness of Kibwezi forest and the delightful Umani Springs 'Lodge.' This was developed by the Sheldrick Organisation to part fund the Reserve and is now also home to the new release stockade for elephant orphans who might need closer care than can be given at either Voi or Ithumba. We made good time down the horrendous Mombasa Highway with the planned stops at various stalls for fresh Mango and Bananas etc., as well as bread in Kibwezi before turning off the highway for the short 8km track to Umani. We were advised to wind up our windows against the Tsetse fly menace but in truth we soon wound them down again and were never troubled. I did get a nip on one foot one morning when out with the Orphans but that was the only encounter. They are present but not a problem.



Our prime reason to return to Umani Springs was to do more birding combined with participation with the, currently five, Orphans being rehabilitated into the wild. So our routine was to rise early and go to the stockades to start their day and then return for breakfast and some birding before rejoining the Ellies at the morning mudbath. We also went for walks in the woods,

usually but not always accompanied by a ranger armed with what looked to be a large threaded bolt. We never worked out what he intended to do with this if any dangerous animals were encountered so it remains a mystery. We also went off for bird drives into the very tough terrain where 4wd was often needed. We encountered Bushbuck, Klipspringer and both Colobus, Vervet and Sykes Monkeys from time to time as well as Yellow Baboons. Of course many birds were added to our growing list which had now exceeded our target of 300 so it looked like David's initial target of 500 might have been realistic after all. Not to bore with a list of species but we did see Purple-crested Turaco, Eastern Paradise Whydah, Yellowbill and Western Banded Snake Eagles here. The grounds of Umani are very bird rich and reward just sitting in an easy chair and watching what comes by. Mfuwe Lite indeed. Mention must be made of the resident Crocodile in a small pool and the White-tailed Mongoose that come to the feed station each evening along with the occasional **Genets**.



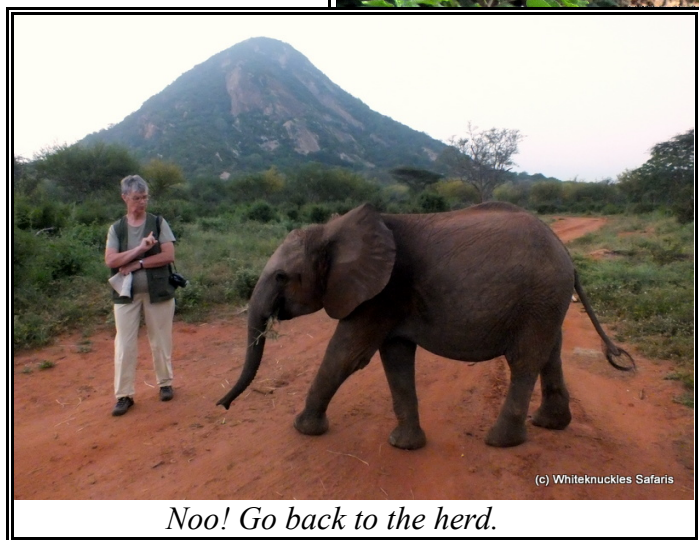
We had an excellent Christmas here and soon it was time to move north to a remote area of Tsavo East via the dirt road called B7. After stopping for a minor repair to our car and a futile search for fresh yoghurt (one of our team had developed a passion for fresh mango and yoghurt for breakfast and dessert and we like to keep everyone happy.) we arrived at Ithumba Gate and signed in before heading for the camp. During this drive the lead car saw a Leopard cross the track but the 2nd car missed it. Lots of Elephant signs around but no sightings. We arrived at our new base and met the resident staff some of whom remembered us from our last visit in 2011. We soon settled into our tents which are of course reviewed separately as is Umani Springs and indeed all places we stayed. Tents are not huge but well laid out with open air facilities to the rear. (There is a box so the Loo paper does not get soggy if it should rain.)

And it was off to the Stockades to meet the Orphans as they came home from their day in the bush for milk in some cases and browse in all pens. Mention of one bird must be made. A young **Amur Falcon** had claimed the stockades as her territory, presumably for the ready supply of small critters inadvertently brought in with the browse. She was quite used to people around and posed nicely for us during our visits each day. An **Ovambo Sparrowhawk** also shared the feast from time to time

The daily routine, what a grind, was to walk with the Orphans after morning release for as long as it was possible, then return to camp for breakfast and some birding before heading to the large pond to meet the Orphans as they came for 'elevenses' and a wallow/swim/dust depending on their mood.



Sometimes some of the Ex Orphans would show up too and this could be great fun as some are now quite big. Our mentor and friend, Benjamin Kyalo, took care of “the introductions” for us. Then after our lunch and maybe a post repast snooze we would do a game drive prior to heading back to the stockades for evening “roll call and lock up”. Again it sometimes transpired that some Ex Orphans would wander back with the young ones and cause mischief.



Noo! Go back to the herd.

For those who may not know details about the re-introduction and release the idea is that the Orphans gradually mix with any elephants they encounter whether Ex Orphans or indeed wild elephants and stop out a night or two with their absences becoming longer until they 'graduate' to “Ex Orphans”. This can happen at any age and is a gradual learning process for them. Nobody makes a decision one day that “little Jumbo” has to be locked out. Sometimes “little Jumbo” tries the night out routine, finds out there is no large bottle of milk in the morning and heads off 'home' to the stockade for a few weeks more. Several of the Ex Orphans have formed their own sub groups, and some have had youngsters to wild Bulls of the area. What impresses most visitors is that some of these truly wild elephants feel confident enough around the stockades to stay with the Ex Orphans whilst humans are also present. A wild animal that if met out in the bush would at best run away or, at worst, attempt to flatten you, can be moved by a keeper simply waving his arm or broom. And even the biggest of them will defer politely to the young orphans for water at the stockades. I have first hand experience of this and it is an awesome sight.

And so our wonderful five days and nights at Ithumba came to an end once more. We had added several new birds to the growing list and were through the 400 mark and had had sightings of several mammals including the beautiful Lesser Kudu, a Leopard and what we all claim was the rarely seen Golden Cat (*Felis aurata*). Most of all we had had a terrific time with the Orphans of Ithumba memories of which will linger long after the photographs have faded.

So having said our goodbyes to everyone at Ithumba we made a final check with the Kenya Wildlife Service Office as to the level of the Galana river after the recent rains in Nairobi. We needed to cross the river by the causeway at Lugard falls and we did not want to arrive there and find the river

too dangerous to cross. Our destination was Watamu on the coast and any diversion would mean at least a 300km longer drive.

We got the necessary approval and set off south through the little travelled area of North Tsavo. We crossed the smaller Tiva river after 30km and this was encouragingly low. There were some buffalo wallowing in the main pools but they hardly looked up as we passed. This is very wild country and you are very much on your own on this road. Due to the distance of today's run we had agreed to minimise stops for birds but broke the rule for some lovely **Lesser Kudu** a Buff-crested Bustard. and many Sandgrouse and Wattled Starlings.

We arrived at the river on schedule to note a new bridge being built. The Causeway at Lugard Falls was passable with care so no long diversion was needed. Once across the river we took more time to look for wildlife but it has to be said that apart from elephants using the river we saw only a few Impala, Zebra, Grants Gazelle and Kongoni. We had hoped to find some Gerenuk which are often found just north of the river but it was not to be. Perhaps the bridge works had disturbed them?

However birds came thick and fast with Taita Fiscal, Pygmy Falcons and our only Hooded Vulture of the trip.

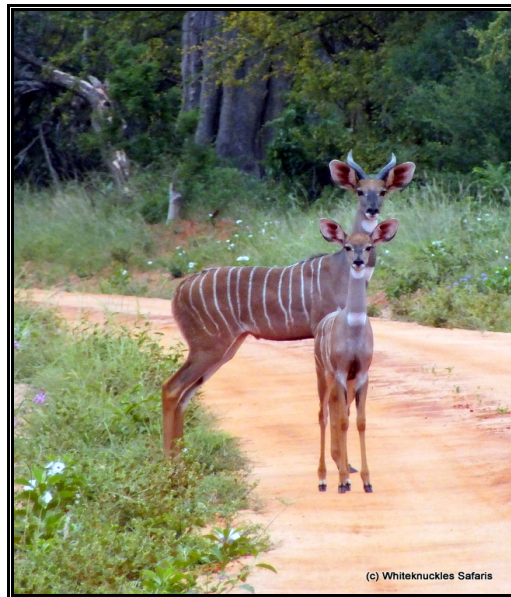
More memorable was our stop for a suspected Longclaw only to discover to our joy that we had at long last found the beautiful Golden Pipit which actually posed nicely for us. As if this was not enough we also had good views of Golden-breasted Starling too but it was gone too quickly for photographs. A bold Slaty Boubou made up for this.

And so we arrived at Sala Gate and the C103 for Malindi. During our signing out we learned, with thanks, that KWS had monitored our progress as the guards here knew we had come down from Ithumba. Also at the gate was a small pool from which some nice Cut-throat Finches were drinking.

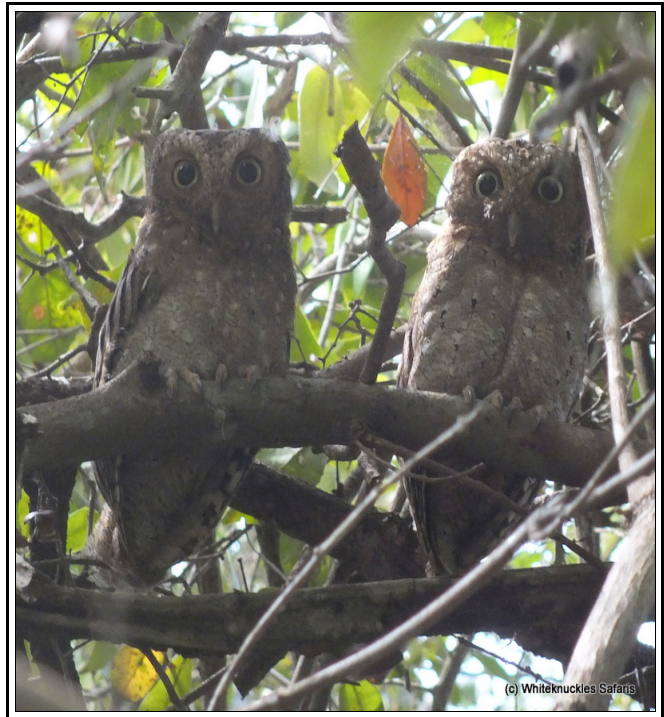
And so to the C103. This looked fine on the map and is after all a main artery for Safari goers from the coast to access Tsavo East. Well it has to earn the accolade of the worst road bar one, later, we travelled in Kenya. It was dusty, it was corrugated, it had a mind of its own. It was anything BUT a main road. The tracks in the Parks were better. It ran more or less straight in an easterly direction otherwise we might have had problems believing we were actually on the correct road. Several sections were so bad that vehicles had made their own 'diversion' to the left or right. Just as well it was too dusty to see many birds as we needed to press on due to the slow going. 20kph was deemed speeding. Our eyeballs needed Image stabilisers. The GPS got so fed up it fell off the windscreen when we refused to take a right turn that was indicated. This was just a track through the western forest but who knows, it may have been better than the main road? After 70km in three hours we reached the turn off south to Gedi and Watamu and the going instantly got better. 16km of gravel and we found the B8 and lovely tar the rest of the way to Watamu where we turned right for our base at Mwamba Retreat a few km down the road. This was to be our base for four nights and was quiet and comfortable. <http://www.arocha.org/ke-en/work/centre.html> It is reviewed.

Next morning we made contact with our guides and spent some time on the totally empty beach picking up shorebirds before lunch. Then we went to Mida Creek "sanctuary" where there is a Ropewalk through the mangroves to a hide. We paid our fee to the conservancy and headed out to await the tide. We were told not to bother with long distance photos as the birds would be pushed towards us as the tide came in. Sadly our guide had not reckoned on some noisy locals joining us for some R&R and frolics on the sand, so needless to say we got only long shots at the very birds the sanctuary was designed to protect. So we had to make do with some flying shots and 'crowd scenes' before leaving the poor birds to get what sanctuary they could.

Next morning was our first entry into the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Reserve. This is to protect one of the few remaining coastal forests in East Africa and is home to some specials including the enigmatic Golden-rumped Elephant Shrew which is the size of a small rabbit. We entered the forest,



birding as we went, paid our fee and caught up with some good birds including Sokoke Pipit, Forest Batis and Green Barbet. After a bush breakfast we drove north out of the true forest to the home of our 2nd Target bird. The lovely endemic **Sokoke Scops Owl**. Expecting, nay, hoping to see one we were very lucky and actually saw four. Two of the **Rusty Brown morph** and just a short distance further, two **'Grey' ones**. Sincere thanks to our guides, Jonathan and David for their local knowledge.



Back at base we spent the heat of the afternoon being lazy after our morning's successes.

Next day it was back to the forest. We entered on trust as the Office was not yet open and quickly found more Elephant Shrews, and some real Elephants too, as well as Chestnut-fronted Helmet Shrike and a few other birds. To the north was Turaco country with fruiting trees and we sought out the local speciality of the red headed Fischer's Turaco. We also amused a local lady by trying to get close to a Malindi Pipit that was feeding on her Maize seedlings. Success.

So having achieved most of our targets we left the coast for our return. We stuck to the lovely tar of the B8 towards Mombasa at first but just south of Kilifi we took the 'short cut' towards the A109 Mombasa-Nairobi highway. I said there was one worse road than C103 and this was it. Only 19km but what a road. But all bad things come to an end too and we got to the road works and then shortly thereafter some new tar all the way to Mariakani and the Nairobi highway.

We had booked an overnight at Voi to break the long drive and had chosen the Voi Safari Lodge. We were quite surprised at how nice it was and so arrived at our last balcony of the tour. www.voiwildlifelodge.com The balcony did not let us down and we found Spur-winged Lapwings and Sacred Ibis just outside whilst Marsh Harriers patrolled the bush and Black Storks circled overhead. The bonus was of course the Elephants that came to drink the fresh water and mud bathe at the waterhole. All this without leaving the property. I might have to return.

Our last morning started well with at last getting decent photographs of the Golden-breasted Starling that had eluded us for so long. And so to Nairobi and the traffic. We had a social call with our friends Alex and Meshack from All Seasons Safaris to thank them for their services followed by dinner at the Carnivore before heading for JKIA and our plane home which left late because the crew could not get through the Airport Security melee.

For those still awake our total bird count was a splendid 479.