

# Southern Tanzania: Wildlife & Birding Safari

## Sept. 22 – Oct. 5, 2023 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



**Guide Washington Wachira and Martin Joho with Peg Abbott and 8 participants:  
Ty, Bev, Steve, Lise, Jeff, Tammy, Steve and Brian**



### **Pre-tour Extension: Pemba and Zanzibar Islands Sept. 17-22**

**Mon., Sept. 18 – Wed., Sept. 20**

**Three Days on Pemba Island, Tanzania**

Five of our group arrived early, wanting to see as much of the region as we could after the long flights. From Dar es Salaam we took a short, scenic flight out to Pemba Island, north of Zanzibar and rimmed by a turquoise reef. We stayed three nights at Pemba Paradise Resort, an easy and relaxing place to base on with ocean sunsets, nice food and a pool. The island was green in contrast to other regions we'd visit, and a lot of the trees and flowers were in bloom. We visited several birding hotspots on the Ngezi Forest Reserve and had great fun watching a colony of Fruit Bats, beautiful African Paradise Flycatcher, two loudly calling Mangrove Kingfisher in the canopy, and best of all, Pemba Scops Owl, great views. Our local guides keep a very good eye on the four endemic species we hoped to see, and we were successful at all of them. The Pemba Sunbird was right there to greet us



in the garden of our hotel! We found the Pemba White-eye near the Makamgale Community where we had a great show provided by a mated pair of Gray Kestrel. Brown-headed Parrot, Black-bellied Starling and Black-winged Bishop were all nice finds. Washington knew right where to find roosting Java Sparrow waking up to feed and we had fun with the local school kids as we did so. We saw Madagascar Bee-eater and numerous wading birds and White-backed Duck, African Pygmy Goose and White-faced Whistling Ducks (300+) at Vuma wimbi and Makangale Ponds.

We did not have to go far to bird. Water Thick-knee roosted along the shoreline at our hotel, Pied Kingfisher hovered and called their twittering notes in quiet coves and African Pied Wagtail paraded around by the pool. At the northern tip of the island, Msuka Beach, we passed through a lively group of fisherman and fish mongers as the catch came in and walked out onto vast tidal flats just loaded with birds. Over a thousand White-faced Whistling Ducks, Black-bellied and Common Ringed Plover, both species of Sand Plover, Whimbrel, Terek Sandpiper, Greenshank, Sanderling and Curlew Sandpiper were some of our finds this day.

Pemba was delightful, very peaceful, tucked away from the world, green fields and our memories will be of kids running out to greet us, colorful fruits for sale, birds present in good number as our exciting trip unfolded.

## **Thurs., Sept. 21                      Flight to Zanzibar | Cultural City Tour & Exploring**

The short flight to Zanzibar was great as it gave us a view of Pemba Island from the air, so beautifully rimmed by turquoise-colored reefs. It was a short flight and soon we were heading to our hotel in the historic district, where we could walk into the historic parts of town. Town was most lively after sunset, by day the market vendors waited for buyers, leaning against century-old walls and for us coming from vibrant Pemba, it had a bit of a sad and worn-out feel. We loved our hotel, its historic furniture, grand patio to dine on and sense of being right in the midst of history. We had a city tour with a guide, and a fun meal, then headed to bed as we wanted to be out birding early.

## **Fri., Sept. 22                      Zanzibar | Flight back to Dar es Salaam**

We packed up and headed for Jozani Chwaka Bay National Park where we took the South Forest Walk trail. Right out of the bus we found two elusive Red-capped Robin-Chats, one singing and perching in the lush vegetation.



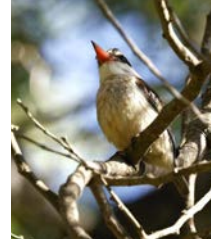
We started sorting greenbuls: Little and Zanzibar Somber here and marveled at the beauty of Scarlet-chested and Purple-banded Sunbirds. Zanzibar Boubou and our first Lilac-breasted Roller of the trip were memorable. Shy Tambourine Doves called; we studied the Zanzibar form of Black-backed Puffbird and were entertained by Green Malkoha trying to stay out of our view. There were lovely butterflies, and a troop of Zanzibar Colobus Monkeys with their lovely rust pelage. The morning passed quickly but we were due to fly back this afternoon to meet up with Ty who had flown in for the full main tour, and later Jeff, Tammy, Steve and Brian who would join us a few days later. Dinner at our modern hotel was fun, with fresh crab featured in many of the dishes selected that night.

**Sat., Sept. 23**

## **Dar es Salaam to Saadani National Park | Coastal & Savanna Birding**

We headed north of the city this morning, driving through bustling commerce and street life so typical of Africa. Gradually urban gave way to rural and we were in an agricultural area of extensive rice fields. We stopped at the Ruvu River, getting permission from the local administrator to park and bird. We quickly found the namesake endemic Ruvu Weaver, African Golden Weaver, White-browed Robin Chat and a calling Gray-headed Kingfisher. It was fun to see the local vendors selling dried fish, fruits and more, watching us for entertainment. Our lodge was a welcome sight, right on the ocean with a pool, restaurant and bar all open air with ocean view—nice! We had lunch, settled in and then headed out on our first safari drive into Saadani National Park. We found a number of species, including Swallow-tailed Bee-eater and Eastern Black-headed Batis, when quite a ways off Peg spotted a Saddle-billed Stork. We headed that way and were able to get quite close to it at a small pond where fish were concentrated. We watched it catch a fish and eat it, passing it up and down its beak to tenderize, then gulp—down the hatch. A Hamerkop shared the pond, and in a little channel of water nearby, a pair of Malachite Kingfishers caught tiny fish. There was so much to see at one stop ... we marveled!

Several of us could not resist a cocktail by the pool, gathering at the ocean edge as local fisherman hauled their hand nets in from the sediment-laden ocean waters. We watched sunset over the pool, with waving palms, and the lovely ocean breeze. Nice! Dinner included some very fresh fish options, and the night air cooled, a lovely beachside evening.



**Sun., Sept. 24**

## **Wani River Delta Boat Tour | Saadani National Park | Morogoro Hotel**

At Washington's urging we left very early to be on the river at dawn. It was so worth it! Just into our boat and casting off we disturbed a group of Hippo lounging out of the water and they rushed to return, splashing as they went in the early light, impressive! We saw 11 African Wooley-necked Storks, regal along the shoreline. The water level left good sand bars and we sorted shorebirds, getting fine views of Water Thick-knee, Three-banded and White-fronted Plovers, Terek Sandpiper and alongside the more numerous Whimbrel, a Bar-tailed Godwit. Gull-billed Terns hovered overhead, Yellow-billed Stork waded alongside Hamerkop and Striated Heron, and we saw Black-crowned Night-Heron and Little Egret. We returned for an ample breakfast served oceanside and gathered our gear for a morning safari drive. With almost 40 species sighted in the next few hours, we were immersed into African avifauna quickly. Highlights included a Bateleur in flight, Blue-naped Mousebirds, massive Southern Ground Hornbill, two radiant Malachite Kingfishers, three species of bee-eater (Little, Swallow-tailed and European) and a host of smaller songbirds. After lunch we packed up to head west, but we truly hated to leave!

Our drive filled the afternoon until almost sunset and we got a hint of just how big this country is. In future years we will add some flights to the route to ease travel, with new speed limits in each small village, the driving time extended a couple of hours on each travel day, and some felt a bit brutal. Still, we saw a lot of fascinating geography, village life and some good birds along the routes.

We checked into our hotel, and saw a few quick birds on the grounds, inspired to wake early the next day to check them out. It was Washington's birthday and we celebrated with cake and candles (more like fireworks!) which brought us all smiles.

**Mon., Sept. 25**

## **Morogoro Hotel Grounds | Park Gate of Mikumi National Park | Ruaha River Bridge**

Walking around the grounds of our hotel proved to be very productive. We found Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove on its nest, African Golden Oriole in the large trees, Spotted Morning-thrush, Striped Kingfisher and a Golden-



tailed Woodpecker. Views from the hotel grounds of towering, isolated mountain ranges were lovely and intriguing. We'd made it to Tanzania's Eastern Arc chain of mountains and soon we'd be exploring them. We had a rest stop at the gate of Mikumi National Park, which we would return to later to explore. There were Zebra, Giraffe and some Wildebeest in view along with attendant Oxpeckers. We spied Lesser Striped Swallow, Superb Starlings and White-browed Sparrow Weavers building nests. By 4PM we had checked into our lodge and ventured out to Udzungwa Mountains National Park where our forest birding commenced with some spectacular species including Livingstone's Turaco, Klaas's Cuckoo, Black Goshawk, Crowned Hornbill, White-eared Barbet, Green-backed and Golden-tailed Woodpeckers, Black Cuckooshrike, Eastern Nictator, Waller's Starling, and the range-restricted Uluguru Violet-backed Sunbird. At dusk we watched almost 30 Trumpeter Hornbills return to their roosts, saw the Udzungwa Red Colobus climb into big open trees to roost, and watched a pair of Palm Nut Vultures fly by, one carrying a large palm fruit that quick Steve snapped a photo of! We stayed out past dusk hoping for some night birds but this evening they were quiet—home to dine and bed!

## **Tues., Sept. 26                      The Kilombero Floodplain Endemics Ramble | Udzungwa National Park**

We left this morning to drive about an hour to the Kilombero River, where a relatively new bridge spanned the crossing. On both sides we ventured out between agricultural patches under the watchful eye of local fruit, herb and fish vendors to walk among native reedbeds and grass patches where birding was fast and furious. Washington was focused on our quest to find endemics, and in no short order was calling our attention away from the abundant waterbirds to study three prize species: White-tailed Cisticola, Kilombero Cisticola, and Kilombero Weaver. We got cracking views of all three, noticing that the several White-tailed Cisticola we saw were solitary, perhaps indicating their mates were on nests. The weavers were in small flocks moving with Fan-tailed Widowbirds. And the Kilombero Cisticola stole our hearts, so engaging was its behavior. Both members of the pair defended territory, and as we stood between two territories, our bit of quick playback set off both pairs. They posed up on reeds, cocking their tails aloft to sing loudly. They moved everywhere two by two and seemed to erupt into song and display.



We also found African Wattled Lapwing, Purple Heron, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Black-crowned Night-Heron, African Openbill and more. We could see that farming along the new road was quickly bringing small farms, pushing the native habitat of these birds further away. Washington told us the habitat does follow the Kilombero River and extends down into Selous National Park but this accessible patch is a treasure for birders in the region. We found Lesser Swamp Warbler and Common Reed Warbler in the mix and found our first African Darter and African Sacred Ibis of the trip.

One can't help but marvel at daily life here. A woman was sorting greens to sell, a mix of vegetables and herbs, men were fishing in dugout canoes, and a woman hauled heavy water jugs up from the river by pushing them on her bicycle. Walking in between them nodding our greetings, we found Red-billed Firefinch, Indigo Village Weaver, and Little Bee-eater, Black-winged Bishop and more of the three endemics, including a White-tailed Cisticola that posed up on a reed across the path to the river for some time. Washington's familiarity with the area made this all too easy!

We returned for lunch, some down time, and gathered again at 2:45 to return to the park for another forest walk. Our expectations were high based on the day previous, but today's walk was notably quiet. So quiet we turned back and went to where we'd had a Square-tailed Drongo and attendant flock. We found many of the same species, enjoying a chance for second looks, and added African Crested Flycatcher and better looks at the turacos to our sightings.

Tonight, the rest of our group would join us, driving from Dar es Saalam with Martin to catch up to us. They had seen a number of species along the roadway, and we compared sightings as we made introductions. Brian arrived but his luggage did not, he was remarkably cheerful and adaptive, and Washington promised once in Tanzania he would get it to us. So, we were ready now for the full adventure ahead!



**Wed., Sept. 27**

## **Hondo Hondo Farm | Crocodile Rest Stop | Ruaha River Travel Day to Ruaha National Park**

We woke to the sounds of Red-capped Robin Chat and the barks of Skye's Monkeys active in trees around the pool. Breakfast was quick and efficient, and we were soon on our way—bound for safari days ahead. Ruaha National Park is remote, part of its magic, but it's a long way to get there!

Best to start a travel day with good birding! We drove a short way to a farm where we could walk between the harvested fields and the margin of a small creek and woods. We had hoped for a few five-star species seen on past trips, but luck was not with us today for them. But we found 24 species with ease, one of the best found by Jeff perched in a palm in the shade, a Lizard Buzzard. We got good looks at African Golden Oriole and African Golden Weaver. The bird colors were rivaled by the dresses of women working in the fields alongside the men, hoeing, weeding and harvesting lady fingers, a vegetable quite similar to okra.

With an impressive background of the rugged Udzungwa Mountains behind us, we had much to admire. But we had to pull ourselves away as we still had many miles to go, so off we went, next stop Mikumi for a pit stop, then over the Ingira Highlands to drive through the Baobab Valley, a remarkable density of this iconic species. We had lunch and time for some birding at Crocodile Camp, a lovely oasis on the river where we enjoyed cold drinks, views of four sunbirds: Beautiful, Eastern Violet-backed, Scarlet-backed, and Purple-banded. Posting nicely for us were both Spot-flanked Barbet and Little Bee-eaters. Our lunch was chicken, a sweet crepe type of pancake and vegetable samosas, and crisp fresh apples.

We drove along the Ruaha River and past dense groves of Baobabs. White-necked Raven appeared, and we saw several raptors along the roadside. Most of the locals here live in brick homes, some with metal roofs, and every twenty miles or so we would pass a small market where they sold sugar cane, vegetables, some hardware and farm implement and street food.



We then had to climb out of the long Baobab Valley and on this hill, we hit a frightful snare of traffic, backed up by an overturned truck, that cost us over an hour. By the time we entered the park gate around 5PM, we were dragging! We did rally to pop the tops of our Land Cruisers and catch as many species as we could as we neared the lodge, including Black-faced Sandgrouse, Helmeted Guineafowl and Tanzanian Red-billed Hornbill, an endemic. We saw Giraffe and at a river crossing, Waterbuck. As we checked in at reception, we spied Hippos in the river, Giant and Pied Kingfishers; the scenery was sublime, and wildlife seemed promising—we had arrived at Ruaha National Park at last!

## **Thurs., Sept. 28                      Ruaha National Park**

We woke in our spacious safari rock rooms at Ruaha, built to blend in with the terrain. Spread out along the Ruaha river and built creatively around a rock kopje, our rooms were spread for a fine sense of privacy. How wonderful to wake up as the night sounds of African Scops and Pearl-spotted Owls and wailing Water Thick-knees changed to sounds of Hamerkop, Giant Kingfisher, duetting African Fish Eagles and chortling Hippos returning to the water.

We met up at breakfast, birding as we waited for the meal to begin. Saddle-billed Stork, a noisy White-crowned Lapwing, Hadada Ibis, Giant Kingfisher, and Slate-colored Boubou were all in good view.

One the morning game drive, we passed through brushy terrain that was hilly enough to give good views. There are many small mountains rimming the horizon, but the focal point of the park is the winding course of the Ruaha River. This time of year, the water is steady, but low, with many rounded boulders forming the matrix of the stream bed. In between there are open beaches, some have luxurious green grass. We saw Defassa Waterbuck, Impala, Egyptian Geese, several massive 60" tall Goliath Herons and large troops of Yellow Baboon. Closer scanning revealed short birds, including Three-banded Plover, Greenshank, and three species of sandpipers: Wood, Common, and Green.

Various small dirt tracks led us through the bushes, which are spaced wide enough to allow viewing between them. And in one such a cluster our keen-eyed guides spotted a Leopard. It blended in beautifully, and after a few moments slipped away, but this glimpse was our first cat and very exciting. By listening to agitated Ashy Starlings and Red-billed Queleas we could trace its path as it headed for a large baobab tree.



There were loads of Tanzania Red-billed Hornbills, and over the course of the morning we saw quite a number of raptors, including African Hawk Eagle, Eastern Chanting Goshawk, Brown Snake Eagle, African Harrier Hawk, and Gray Kestrel. Brian's lost suitcase was being flown into the airstrip, so we headed that direction and were very pleased to see the caravan plane come in to score its return. There was a great viewpoint of the river, where we got views up and down as well as a stop and a bridge where we could get out for a pitstop and leg stretch. Here we saw a Yellow Baboon catch a fish and run away quickly to eat a prize in secrecy.

Little Bee-eaters were common along the river as were Pied Kingfisher. We found the beautiful Swallowtail Bee-eater, a colorful gem of a bird that sallied out to feed from tall tree branches. But stealing the show so far in color was the Yellow-collared Lovebird, which gleamed in the sun. We sorted through flocks of sparrows and finches, little bird parties here and there. Greater Kudu were fairly common and quite elegant in their movements when crossing the river. The morning pass quickly and we were back for lunch about 1PM. Lunch was served as a buffet in a different dining area perched up in the kopje, and held several options, including some lovely fresh vegetables. Dessert was very creative, little banana pancakes topped by soft chocolate, a banana glaze and nuts. We met again at 3:30 and as we gathered three BIG bull ants, one probably 30+ years old, came quite close, working the near shore of the river, within a stone's throw away. We stayed quiet and let them drink water, and spray mud on themselves. One was obviously dominant. We watched a show of dominance and submission at a particularly clear pool, then they ambled along on their way, dangling their male "business cards" to cool off a bit.

We saw a lot of birds this afternoon, and stopped repeatedly to scan the trees. But for many, the highlight was seeing four female lions; they were wary of the vehicles and kept a keen eye on us. Ruaha is not full of tourists and these lions can go many days without seeing cars. Still, they just moved at a steady pace between the river and the road and we were able to see their faces. One female sat down in the shade, panting, and then we watched them cross the road. Fantastic! We then had time with Elephants and Dwarf Mongoose. A wonderful afternoon. A near full moon rose to light our dinner of stuffed chicken, roasted potatoes, vegetables, homemade herbed rolls and for dessert, a custard with a fruit glaze. The dining was in the open-air patio, so we could hear the night sounds begin, including the long trail of the Square-tailed Nightjar.



## **Fri., Sept. 29                      Ruaha National Park**

We woke early to enjoy the view and birds from our patios, then gathered about a half hour before breakfast where our guards in native dress were ready to walk with us, a nice way for us to catch up with some of the smaller songbirds. We found Mosque Swallow, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Slate-colored Boubou, a flock of noisy Arrow-marked Babblers and Jameson's Firefinch. While dining we watched Waterbuck, Pied and Giant Kingfishers, several heron species and Hadada Ibis. Several films have been made at Ruaha, with film crews staying in our same lodge. The park is known for sightings of Wild Dog, but we were not fortunate enough to find them. We did hear Hyena in the night, and plenty of game animals. And there was plentiful birds; we had 78 species on our morning game drive! Highlights included Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Von der Decken's Hornbill, D'Arnaud's Barbet, Bearded Woodpecker, White Helmetshrike and White-headed Buffalo-Weaver.

The lunch break was welcome, a bit of time to regroup, and with the view so lovely from our patios several sat out the afternoon. Ty was entertained at very close range by a herd of Elephants, mother and young, drinking and lounging along the river. The rest of us headed off to find Bare-faced Go-Away Bird, Namaqua Dove, Crowned Lapwing, Martial Eagle, Magpie Shrike, and Speckle-fronted Weaver. The highlight was a surprise find by Brian of a Verreaux's Eagle Owl, just after Peg had commented, "at times we find the large owls in trees like this". We laughed and wished all birds could be found on wishful thinking! Seeing this huge owl with pink eye lids was a treat. Back to a moonlit dinner, what a place to be at full moon!

## **Sat., Sept. 30                      Ruaha to Vuma Hills | Mikumi National Park**

We started the morning with early birding optional from the lodge, before packing luggage and getting ready to depart. A Mocking Cliff-Chat posed nicely for us not far from the Rock Hyrax and Yellow Baboons that liked to soak up the morning sun. They were joined by three Red-necked Spurrow—all seemed to like the high perch view. Walking with the guards today we saw Green-winged Pytilia and Swahili Sparrow and they found a roosting African Scops Owl we got fine view of, wow!



What comes in must go back and this travel day turned out to be a bit of a test of endurance, next time when we go to Ruaha, we will fly! Thankfully the first part of our drive was in the park, where we did get to see three species of vultures (White-backed, Hooded and Lappet-faced) gathered around something we could not spot in the riverbed, and a perched Long-crested Eagle.

We stopped at the park gate, about two hours later at a gas station, and returned to the Crocodile Camp and its shading Baobabs for lunch and a leg stretch with a view. There was a lot of slow truck traffic on the road, and we got hung up coming down into the Valley of the Baobabs by a banana truck flipped over and blocking a lane. Alas, our slow progress would cut into our time at Mikumi National Park this afternoon. Tanzania is a big country and with only two-lane roads ... Google Maps timing is not correct here! Washington was our commander and kept us on the move, thankfully finding us some good birds along the way.

As we turned into the park and headed to our lodgings at the Vuma Hills, several Zebra posed up nicely on the hillside. We had excellent looks at Black-bellied Bustard, a Shikra, Stiped Kingfisher, Eurasian (African) Hoopoe, and Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow. The Vuma Hills Tented Camp was delightful, perched on an escarpment with a view and nice casitas and open-air dining. We enjoyed good food, a try at some night birds, and rest.

## **Sun., Oct. 1                      Miombo Forest Birding at Kilosa Road | Mikumi National Park**

Today was a nice change of pace as we were able to do a walk in a patch of Miombo forest that Washington describes as one of the most productive in Africa. This habitat type follows the coast from Kenya south and has a number of specialty birds. This southern part of Tanzania has always felt like a mix of East Africa, meeting up with Southern Africa, and the integration with Miombo forest is a big part of the biodiversity pattern that links them.

We left early after coffee, tea and some muffins and biscuits, and were happy to have a cloudy sky. While it felt a bit gray and difficult for photographers, cloud cover kept the bird activity at a high throughout the morning, and we did extremely well in finding the specialties. Almost right after making the turn up Kilosa Road we found an energetic mixed flock, locally called a bird party. We encountered several other such flocks that day, often by first spotting the black and white pattern of low feeding Arnot's Chat. We had a loud pair of Red-necked



Wryneck put on a spectacular show. One of the first species seen was new for Peg, and all of the group, Yellow-bellied Hyliota, a snappy-looking canopy songbird in black-and-white attire with its namesake bright yellow belly below. These were joined by Stierling's Wren Warbler, bright Miombo Starlings and a Violet-backed Starling. Jeff spotted a Reichenow's (Speckle-breasted) Woodpecker out in the open on a prominent snag. Birds came in for the next hour as we walk the wooded road, challenging our observation skills fast and furiously.

We found two pairs of bold, noisy Racket-tailed Rollers that chased each other around, showing off their agility and the namesake roll. There were Broad-billed Rollers in the forest as well, Kurrichane Thrush, Rufous-bellied Tit and Crested Barbet. We stopped for coffee and breakfast snacks, and to listen for Red-faced Cisticola, which we found in a patch of grass. Just as we dove into our boxes of goodies, food spread out in all directions, in came two fabulously-colored Purple-crested Turacos. Bev got so excited she ditched her box onto the road to get a shot. We then walked a bit and found Shelley's Sunbird feeding in flowers of a mistletoe in the trees, what a beauty. We found Pale Batis, and in time, Pale-billed Hornbill, a group of seven calling loudly and perching in view.

This excellent morning passed quickly. We walked about 3 miles at a birder's pace, and we saw about 55 species, many of them specialties of Miombo forest. The cloud cover had probably afforded us a couple of additional hours of comfortable walking, and we were quite grateful for a break from the heat. Back to lunch, which was two kinds of pizza, some fish fingers, a mango and beet salad, fresh avocado and fruit for dessert. We felt so welcome and well taken care of at Vuma Hills, second of three Fox Camps we'd experience while here.

After a nice break, we met at 3:30 PM to game drive into the open grassland section of Mikumi National Park. We found a Warthog with small piglets on the way out from the lodge and then just inside the park gate, Bushbuck, Zebra and Brindled Gnu, also called Blue Wildebeest. A Black-winged Kite was harassing a young Martial Eagle and Greater Blue-eared Starlings shone in the sun. We found Long-tailed Fiscal, but while watching it noticed two Land Cruisers parked for longer than normal by a tree rimmed by thick brush. We rounded the corner to find four lions doing what they too best, sleeping! They were sacked out and barely raised their heads. One female was exposed to the sun and panted heavily. In time they woke up and moved about. A young male gave us four big yawns in a row, showing its massive teeth. Sleeping Lions allow time for birding the small species, this time both Desert and Rattling Cisticolas and Tawny-flanked Prinia. We watched the lions groom, then toss themselves back to sleep. As they were obviously comfortable there and not moving, we headed on.



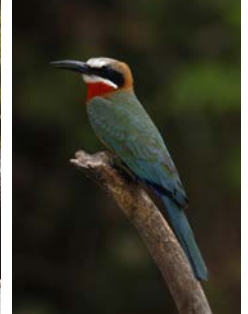
The next stop was a water area overgrown with Nile Cabbage, large enough to hold several Hippos. A Malagasy Pond Heron hunted in soft afternoon light. On a muddy shore at the far end, White-faced Whistling Ducks, a Three-banded Plover, and Marsh Sandpiper were active. Elephants grazing behind the pond moved in, we thought to drink but this quickly turned into swimming and a mud brawl. What a joy to have ample time to watch behavior. One young one seemed determined to submerge itself, another tossed cool mud on its belly and boy parts with glee. One we estimated to be five made several rushes at African Jacana which had flown in when the herd entered, happy to pick up insects they disturbed and seemed pleased to make them fly. A huge female laid down against the mud bank, rubbed and rolled. In time they returned to the grass; with sunset approaching they also had to go.

Dinner was presented so nicely, with mashed potatoes, two vegetables, and beef stew in a luscious broth, this seemed to be a popular dish in Tanzania. A rich chocolate lava cake brought a few groans, Lise had two. African Barred Owl and Fiery-tailed Nightjar on the grounds called into the night.

## **Mon., Oct. 2                      Vuma Hills to Nyerere National Park**

We left Vuma Hills early, passing through Mikumi and back to a junction near Morogoro, where we took a break at a gas station, watching the buzz of the city. Once we left town, driving south on a dirt track around the Uluguru Mountains we had wonderful views of the forests and peaks. It was fascinating watching rural life, all the farms, modes of transport, goods being carried to and from, kids waving and yelling as we drove by. We passed through lush forests with cool shade and were stunned a bit when we dropped down in elevation—out of the mountains and into the river plains—the terrain we'd be in for the next three days to explore Nyerere National Park (Selous). It was dry season so sparse vegetation, and it was going to be HOT.

With the drop in elevation came new species, and right away we noticed the abundance of huge Baobab trees. This was another long travel day, and it was late afternoon when we turned into the Rufiji River Lodge parking area, where a massive Baobab provided shade. This lodge location is primo, right on the river with a wonderful view up and down. We were so happy to have cold drinks and scan from the patio. We spied African Skimmers, White-headed Lapwing, a Goliath Heron, Openbill Storks, Hippos grazing and both Giant and Pied Kingfishers in the short time we had before dusk. The sunset was lovely, marked by waves of Cattle Egret going to roost. Across



the river a fire burned; its orange glow more prominent as darkness arrived. The common area of the lodge was expansive, with a large patio, tables for dining, and couches for relaxing. Angolan Colobus Monkeys appeared several times in the large shade trees. The troop had several babies that played, making daring moves and leaps between adults. Our meals were very creative and always had choices, with lots of fresh cooked vegetables in addition to fish, beef, lamb and pork. One night was Indian food and another Moussaka for an international flair. The lodge was not busy, and we worried this park could suffer from being so remote. While that is part of the charm, it seemed perplexing to have this gracious lodge not be full when northern Tanzania parks are loved to death.

## **Tues., Oct. 3 & Wed., Oct. 4**

## **Two Full Days in Nyere National Park**

In contrast to the open savanna of northern Tanzania, this park is heavily wooded, so we worked for our mammal sightings, but did see a Red Duiker, and numerous Zebra, Impala and Waterbuck. We were not able to find Roan or Sable Antelope, but had a real thrill one morning at a big lagoon when we found a Bushpig, normally quite secretive, right out in the open. Sunlight came through the bristly hair on its back, and we watched it feeding. Wow!

Our first full morning we headed over to an area by the gate and were surprised when they got us out for a walk. We were at the campground, so there were rangers around and enough activity that with care, we did not fear large predators about. We admired Little and White-throated Bee-eaters, but were raised to full attention when Washington called out our first Böhm's Bee-eater. We got fabulous views, including one that caught a Striped Policeman butterfly and eventually gulped it down. A pair was courting, and we lingered watching these beauties and others.

We enjoyed a boat trip on the Rufiji River immensely. We were out much of the morning with a picnic breakfast break. We threaded our way between well over 100 Hippos and were able to stall in the current to watch a tower of giraffes—just a beautiful site with a dozen graceful giants wanting to come to drink, holding back due to our presence but curious, not willing to leave. The birding was terrific, we found Yellow-billed Stork with recently fledged young and big colonies of White-throated Bee-eaters using holes in the bank. Malachite Kingfisher posed well—such jewels! African Spoonbill gleamed in the sun as they plied their bills back and forth, filter-feeding in



the shallow water. Lake Mzizimia was our favorite spot when not on the river. While we watched birds and had the rare sighting of a Bushpig, two big male Elephants walked by. In a quiet cove there were shorebirds in profusion, Little Stint, Ruff, Marsh and Wood Sandpipers, Three-banded Plover and seen from a distance, Black-tailed Godwit among the more abundant Black-winged Stilts. Photography was fun due to beautiful reflections. Both Pink-backed and African White Pelicans floated regally and fished. An Osprey came by overhead, and African Fish Eagles chirped to each other, such a recognizable call.

## **Thurs., Oct. 5                      Return to Dar es Salaam**

After a last, wistful morning watching an African Fish Eagle, water birds and Hippos from the lodge patio, we left the park birding our way out, seeing Southern Ground Hornbills, Purple-banded Sunbird, and Marabou Stork along the way. It was a bit of a shock to re-enter civilization in Tanzania's largest city, but the amenities of our city hotel were welcome. We took long showers, repacked and met for dinner to celebrate seeing such a remote part of the world and all the birds and mammals we'd encountered. Not without effort, we congratulated ourselves for enduring the drives but savoring the experience. It was tough to name our favorite moments, and favorite birds, and tough to bid adieu to our own flock, having banded together for two weeks. Jeff and Brian went out the next day for more birding at a local forest ahead of their flights and five of our group flew on to Ghana for chapter two of their African adventures.

*Photos by Peg Abbott: Giraffe, Zebra, Elephant, Southern Ground Hornbill, Lilac-breasted Roller, Lion, Mangrove Kingfisher, Angola Colobus, Primate, Saddle-billed Stork, Broad-billed Roller, Purple-banded Sunbird, Lodge Walkway, Group Lunch, Lounging, African Spoonbill, Malachite Kingfisher, Weavers, African Fish Eagle, Scenic, Water Thick-knee, Weaver, Striped Kingfisher, Hippos, Birthday Celebration, Kilomero Cisticola, Ty, Sykes Monkey, Kilomero Cisticola, Daily Life, All Smiles, White-tailed Cisticola Kilombero, Kilombero Weaver, Relaxing, Group Birding, Zebra, Elephant, Hamerkop, Lion, Von Der Deckens Hornbill, Giraffe, Gray Kestrel, African Scops Owl, Lodge, Fork-tailed Drongo, Helmeted Guineafowl, Nile Crocodile, Zebra, Verreaux's Eagle Owl, White Helmetshrike, Black-bellied Bustard, Bare-faced Go Away Bird, Elephant, New Friends, Enjoying the evening, Long-crested Eagle, African Scops Owl, Black-bellied Bustard, Racket-tailed Roller, Warthog family, Kurrichane Thrush, Giraffe, Collared Palm Thrush, Impala, Little Bee-eater, Safari Drive, Sunset, African Buffalo, Elephants, White-throated Bee-eater, Safari Guides, Brian, Bev, Fire*