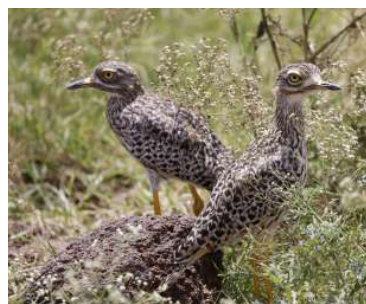
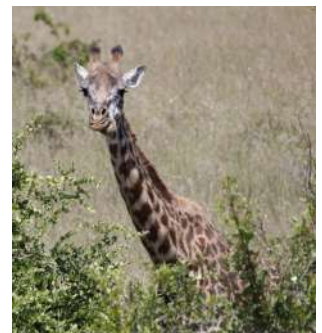


Kenya Extension – Nairobi to Samburu National Park | Feb. 1-8, 2024 | Trip Report by Peg Abbott



Guide Washington Wachira with Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys, and two participants, Elizabeth and Dennis.



Our week-long Kenya extension was designed to highlight habitats we would not encounter on the main Tanzanian safari to follow. We focused on mountain and arid habitats north of Nairobi and had a fabulous week of great birding and wildlife sightings, 310 species of birds in just six full days of birding – wow! It was a small and compatible group and we enjoyed numerous mammals, learning about plants, geology, ecology and more as we explored. Washington is a walking encyclopedia of knowledge and time with him in the field was most enjoyable.

Thurs., Feb. 1 Arrival in Nairobi

Our group for the Kenya extension was small this year, a real luxury for seating in the vehicle and flexibility in our field time. Washington was our driver and guide and we thoroughly enjoyed his guiding skills and commentary. Today was leisurely, to allow everyone to turn their clocks around from the long flight. The Ole Serena is a



gracious hotel and lovely to arrive to, with art, several dining choices, an open air patio, and views of Nairobi National Park from the fourth floor restaurant. The Emara Hotel just next door also has third floor and tenth floor viewing areas and both are joined by some nice grounds on which we could walk and bird. We found about 35 species in easy walks between naps and had fun getting to know each other. Highlights were Speke's Weaver, African Paradise Flycatcher, Abyssinian Thrush, Cape Robin Chat, and by a small pond in the park, Yellow-crowned Bishop and a small group of Kongoni. As we were tired, we kept dinner simple, dining outside on the bar patio.

Fri., Feb. 2 Full Day in Nairobi National Park

We had an incredible first day in Kenya's oldest protected area, and amazing wildlife are now surrounded on two sides by East Africa's major city, Nairobi. We started at 7:00AM and just made it out of the park exactly on time at 6:00PM when they closed the gates. Time passed quickly and we had a steady stream of sightings as Washington took us to varied habitats, including some lakes, grassland, two types of woodland, and acacia scrub. In all we found 127 species of birds, 14 mammals and 5 herps, and several butterflies for a pretty audacious start. Right at the gate we found a family of Warthog feeding on lush grass around the various administrative and educational buildings. The entrance showed recent investments by the Kenyan government in managing the park and its wildlife. We entered slowly; under a thick canopy of trees we kept finding birds that thankfully kept crossing the road so we got good views. Chinspot Batis, Black Cuckooshrike, Brown-crowned Tchagra, White-bellied Tit, Yellow-breasted Apalis, White-eyed Slaty, African Citril and a couple of migrants: Eurasian Blackcap and Garden Warbler. A couple of Variable Sunbirds posed nicely for us and a male Scarlet-chested came in to the Lion's Mane flowers they love. We saw two tiny Suni, the world's smallest antelope. A troop of Syke's Monkeys, the Mt. Kenya Kolb subspecies were very active.

We headed into the open habitats and for the full day, wave after wave of Caper Butterfly, also known as Brown-veined White poured past us. Truly millions of individuals! We found Impala, Buffalo, and got just wonderful looks a mother and half-sized calf Rhino. The young one nuzzled her and walked around, then as she showed no signs of moving, gave up and laid down next to her for a rest. We'd see four others this day, and learned there



were at least 35 White, and 35 Black Rhino here in the park where they were doing well. Individuals from this park have been relocated to other parks and overall Kenya has the highest number of natural population in Africa, living in the wild and spread well around the country.

We stopped at three different water features, dams put in decades ago and quite full with all the recent rains. We had a grand array of shorebirds, Gray-crowned Crane, Malachite Kingfisher, Black Stork, Red-billed Duck and various herons including Black-crowned Night-Heron. We had a White-headed Barbet fly up to an open branch, calling, the Brown-and-white subspecies. Rattling, Winding, Siffling, Croaking, Stout, Pectoral Patch and Singing Cisticolas (thankfully vocalizing) were seen in their respective habitats. We enjoyed good views of Spot-flanked Barbet checking out a nest hole at the Ivory Burning Monument to Elephants and Rhinos, a significant site in the park that marks decades of Kenya's leadership in fighting the poaching and ivory trades. Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater and Dusky Turtle Dove were also seen well there.

We had our picnic lunch in the shade of the new Chinese-built railway. En route to the largest water feature, Athi Dam, we saw a covey of Shelly's Francolin, an often secretive species we were happy to observe and photograph. We had Quailfinch in the road, as well as Fischer's Sparrow Lark and all through the day we heard the lovely call of Rufous-naped Lark, soon to be a split (Sentinel Lark) from the shrubbery. We saw Giraffe feeding, Zebra and Ostrich, and keen-eyed Washington spied a rarer antelope, Chandler's Mountain Reedbuck, which stood like a statue for quite some time.

Remarkably, while enjoying sightings of Little Bee-eater, Gray-headed Kingfisher and Wire-tailed Swallows along the lakeshore, Washington spotted a White-backed Night-Heron pair in branches overhanging the water. We got a clear but distant view to document our finding. Our grand finale species was a Hartlaub's Bustard, right at the edge of the road. It hunkered down in the grasses, but raised its long thin neck up to look out. Framed by flowers, it was a lovely sight and we were thrilled when it puffed up its neck and started calling. What a day! We filled it completely, tallying up our sightings before dinner at the hotel.



Sat., Feb. 3 Nairobi to Naro Moru | Mt. Kenya

We drove out of the city without any traffic hangups, Washington telling us about various buildings and parks we could see from the road. Nairobi is growing so fast, it blends now with the suburb of Thika, where we took a rest break at the Del Monte Pineapple Farm. We had a couple hours' drive before turning off at an agricultural area outside of Naro Moru. We were on the search for one of Kenya's endemic species, a bird with a very limited range, Hinde's Babbler. The area had some well-established coffee farms in full production and we enjoyed walking quiet roads between rows of the coffee shade trees. Many of these were Grevilleas, in bloom, so there were numerous songbirds about. We enjoyed seeing Purple Grenadier, Pale Flycatcher, White-bellied Tit, Yellow Bishop and Golden-breasted Bunting. To our thrill a Red-throated Wryneck flew in and poked and probed in the bark of a tree that was weeping some sap, at very close range — wow! Washington had several territories of family groups of Hinde's Babbler staked out for us to check and the second was most successful. This social and vocal species put on a good show, moving across some open areas to perch where we got great looks. A very successful morning!

We continued on to Naro Moru Lodge, a big lodge complex with very lush grounds perfect for birding. The lodge caters mostly to climbers headed for Mt. Kenya. The bar is full of memorabilia from various climbs and historic photos. We had lunch, then a break and met at 4:00PM to walk around the grounds. We walked well over a mile and were still on the grounds, first following the river that runs through the property and then a road that wound through shrubs and fields, providing a nice mix of species. By dinner time we'd tallied 170 species in just two days, pretty remarkable!

Sun., Feb. 4 Mt. Kenya National Park

Dawn broke with the sounds of many birds, Hartlaub's Turaco, White-browed Robin-Chat, Dark-eyed Bulbul. In the night we heard repeated rounds of Tree Hyrax wailing and around midnight Peg heard Montane Nightjar's high whistle call repeat several times. We had breakfast and left by 7:00AM, heading to Mt. Kenya National Park on the Naromoru Gate Road up to the weather station that climbers start from. We saw one climber and his team walking down as we drove up, and we were thrilled to have great views of the mountain; we photographed



it from several angles. We saw Waterbuck, Bushbuck, Olive Baboons and active troops of Syke's Monkeys. We had wonderful views of Golden-winged Sunbirds, one of the most beautiful, feeding low in yellow flowers. At the gate, a dark morph African Goshawk came flying in to perch, what a stunning bird. We stopped several times, finding Mountain Yellow Warbler, Brown Woodland Warbler, Brown-capped Weaver, Eastern Double-collared Sunbird and overhead and calling, Mountain Buzzard.

We had lunch at a delightful place, the Trout Tree Restaurant, originally a trout farm expanded to a wonderful restaurant with fresh food and tables set up literally within the arms of a huge fig tree. We did a bit of damage in their very nice gift store, and savored our meal and a break.

From here it was about two and a half hours up to Archer's Post where we would enter the Buffalo Springs Game Reserve, adjacent to Samburu Game Reserve, the desert part of our journey.

We entered the gate about 3:00PM, a time we'd chosen knowing animals would get more active. There were native crafts for sale at the gate and restrooms. And guards were eager to talk with Washington, sharing stories and news. There was some good habitat near the gate for our most wanted to see species, and within ten minutes Dennis called out, "I've got a Grevy's Zebra". We were thrilled, this is an endangered species that is still losing ground and this park is one of its strongholds. Close to it were Beisa Oryx and several Bright's variety of Grant Gazelle, a triad of mammals that can tolerate not having access to drinking water every day.

This year they were thriving, the whole park looked like a lush savanna, it was green with flowing grass and thick bushes — food everywhere. The mammals were fat, but still feeding intently. We soon also found Desert Warthog, a species that differs from its cousins, with smaller body and skull and the tips of the ears tipped backwards. We saw them a long way off and at Elizabeth's urging made our way closer.

We enjoyed birding, so many new species popped up again and again as we'd so radically changed habitats since this morning. A lot were small species, Pink-breasted and Foxy Larks, Singing Bush Lark, a Somali short-toed Lark (not expected here, but its flight, singing and landing were in good view), and Donaldson-Smith's Sparrow Weavers. We were viewing larks when we saw Somali Ostrich, a female and farther away, a male. She dropped



and starting waving her wings and in the distance the male noticed. He moved purposefully towards her and Washington pointed out his display, quite vivid with fanning wings, and then as predicted, he caught up to her and they mated. Not an everyday sighting!

There were many Chestnut Weavers and many Wattled Starlings, big flocks of both. We saw Isabelline and Pied Wheatears, both species of buffalo-weavers, Taita Fiscal and one of Elizabeth's favorites, a Nubian Woodpecker. Approaching the lodge we got into a big group of Elephants and were able to stop and quietly watch them approach. They were feeding and many of the females had young of various ages. The light was so lovely on them nearing sunset, they almost took on purple tones. This was a memorable ending to our day.

We filled the day completely, arriving at our lodge after six, but were happy for a full and rewarding day. Dinner was a nice buffet with a carving station, this evening they featured turkey, which was delicious. With full bellies we headed for bed!

Mon., Feb. 5 Full Day in Buffalo Springs Game Reserve, Samburu Area

We had a nice rhythm to the day with a mid-day break for swimming, relaxing or photographing around the lodge. A nesting group of Village Weavers were fun to observe and one of the staff showed us the nest of African Paradise Flycatcher, over the course of the day we saw both female and male incubating.

We had breakfast at 6:30AM, wanting to be out at first good light. Fresh fruits were just at the perfect ripeness, including mango, papaya and watermelon, a nice way to start the day. Almost just out the gate we found a lovely group of Vulturine Guinea fowl, a species we would only see here on our journey. They were in beautiful light and had chicks; we got wonderful looks and photos. So many birds seemed to be nesting, we also saw chicks of Yellow-necked Spurfowl. We started to see sandgrouse, and were lucky to find both species, Chestnut-bellied and Black-faced, the latter far more common on the routes we chose. Lovely small Namaqua Doves joined the more common Ring-necked Dove while Red-eyed were not observed. We were happy to find elegant Gray-



crowned Cranes with chicks, and equally colored, Eurasian (African) Hoopoe. A huge Kori Bustard was strutting about, on display but solo.

We made our way down to the river, enjoyed scenic views of the mountains and decorating the watercourse, Doum Palms with their wide-spreading branches (the only branched palm). We saw African Fish-Eagle and a variety of shorebirds, Common Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper and Little Stint. White-throated Bee-eaters came down to the road, and we were fortunate they kept returning to the same perches, fanning their wings in display.

Raptor highlights today included Eastern Chanting Goshawk and two Long-crested Eagles. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk caused us to flip through field guides, sorting it from Shikra, as it was out of range, but thankfully in close view. At day's end, Dennis spied a Martial Eagle, posing regally atop a tree.

We all enjoyed a break as we'd been filling the days quite full. The pool was refreshing and complete with views of Elephant. A Gambaga Flycatcher was in the parking lot, along with White-headed Mousebirds, two specialty birds of this arid habitat and a good way to begin. We headed out by 3:00PM, and had finding another specialty of the dry zone on our mind, Reticulated Giraffe. First, we checked for the Grevy's Zebra again. Stopping to scan by a gully we heard Red-and-yellow Barbet and were able to call in a Black-throated Barbet, as well as to spy some far off Red-bellied Parrots. We found the Zebra and today they were three, one male and two females, one of which was collared.

We left the grasslands, crossing the Isiolo River that is a tributary to the Ewaso Ng'iro River and flowing with zest today. A Hamerkop stood on the river crossway, and we spied nests of Golden Palm Weaver, a beauty. We found some other colorful species, Rosy-patched Bush Shrike, Vitelline Masked Weaver (making a solitary nest), and Little Bee-eater. We were listening to tones of a Greater Honeyguide when a huge group, almost forty, Reticulated Giraffe came into view. It was magical, so many of them all in one area. We watched them browse the acacia and two young males were sparring. They were on both sides of us but eventually crossed the road,



something alerting them and causing them to canter a short ways. We moved a bit and found a small pond where several were drinking. Mission accomplished!

We wound our way back along the river, and again close to the lodge passed by a big group of Elephant. We gathered for some drinks and then dinner, our checklist (now over 250 species) and rest. In lights by the bar we were able to see Slender-tailed Nightjar. They had roast lamb among the choices at dinner, and all too delicious of a chocolate cake followed.

Tues., Feb. 6 **Buffalo Springs Game Reserve to Aberdare Mountains**

We met at our regular time, 6:30 AM for breakfast, as light arrived, waking up ourselves and the birds. We dined with Superb Starling, Parrotbill Sparrow and two White-rumped Shrikes. Before leaving we tried the call of a Pearl-spotted Owlet, drawing in quite a few small songbirds, Blue-naped Mousebirds and a Pied (Jacobin) Cuckoo, but no owlet this day. A Spotted Morning Thrush did mimic the call.

We went out for a morning game drive, and had a grand time exploring out to the short grass plains. Almost just out the gate we happened on a pair of Kirk's Dik Dik, something Dennis really wanted to photograph and finally this pair obliged.

With all this year's rain there was no short grass but the grassland birds were thriving. We had several Singing Bush Lark and one was carrying food to nestlings hidden deep in the grass. Red-winged Lark and Fischer's Sparrow Larks were all displaying, and when stopped to view various species we heard the lovely call of Desert Cisticola. We wanted to find Beisa Oryx and Grevy's Zebra and were successful, the zebra being a territorial male, sadly no girlfriends yet for him. It is sobering to know they are getting so rare he could not find any for years. This was a fine, fit male and at one point he got alert and gave off some loud braying. Joining these two was a third species much at home here, Grant's Gazelle, Bright's subspecies. A bright male Golden Pipit flew around trees framing views of these mammals.

We saw a Lesser Kestrel that gleamed in the light on its perch, a young Verreaux's Eagle-Owl perched almost at eye-level in an acacia adjacent to the road, and a Tawny Eagle, not full adult yet, on the ground with prey too hidden for us to see. A surprise to us was just how abundant Harlequin Quail were, we saw several coveys, and even one in the talons of a Black-winged Kite, flying away with it.



We were aware of time as we had a drive ahead of us, heading out of the park we were relaxing more on our sightings when eagle-eyed Washington said, “Lions”. Under the shade of a tree we found three, a mother and two 8-month to possibly a year old cubs. We just parked and enjoyed time with them, one of the cubs was quite alert, grooming its paws and looking around, particularly interested when birds flew by. The mother obliged us with a few shots, raising her head to check us out but mostly she slept soundly, as Lions often do.

We closed the roof hatch at the park gate, and wound our way along the main road, making good time. We got to Aberdare National Park in time to have our picnic lunch at the gate, check in, and head back out for some game viewing and birding ahead of dark. We checked out all the various observation points of the lodge while still daylight so if the buzzer went off in the night we could quickly get to where we could see. The lodge has a great system of alerting us in the room, and we all hoped for a 5 buzzer “action at the waterhole” ring. Our afternoon drive was pretty extensive, up and down some wooded areas, and we saw quite a few species including numerous Scaly Francolin. The plant life was lush and intriguing and as we made the loop to return to the lodge, we got excellent and close looks at a family group of Forest Hog in a small clearing.

We enjoyed dinner and tried to stay up as the night seemed promising with the arrival at about 9:45 of a big Elephant to the water hole. There was a steady view of a troop of Spotted Hyena, though they were mainly lounging and two males were attending a female, obviously in heat. Bushbuck and Forest Hog, Slender Mongoose and Scrub Hare were also seen. No five alarm buzzer this night.

Wed., Feb. 7 Aberdare National Park

Our final day was a dramatic one, we covered a lot of ground up and over this lovely national park. We found Jackson’s Francolin, endemic Aberdare Cisticola and Moorland Chat and a host of other species. We enjoyed seeing some of the higher zone vegetation including a large Lobelia and a blooming tall Senecio. A walk was nice to stretch legs and get a view of a lovely waterfall. We were up and over to the exit gate by our picnic lunch, to allow time to see some special birds on the return to Nairobi.

A bird with an extremely limited range is the Sharpe’s Longclaw, and a small NGO supports a reserve along our route. Washington arranged for a local guide to meet us and we had good weather and good luck in finding this rare species. We enjoyed walking through the remnant native grassland patch to find them, as well as to visit a

small pond area, where we had a chance to see Levaillant's Cisticola and a number of water birds, including Lesser Jacana that Peg spotted in floating vegetation that rimmed the near shore.

All day we'd been rooting to cross the 300 species mark, as Peg noted we only need 17 more to make that milestone. Washington took up the cause with skill, stopping at various spots to note some Angolan Swallows or an Abdim's Stork for the cause. We ended the day with a good cushion, and a total of 310 species! All while still having fun, sharing good times and good camaraderie. We returned to Nairobi in time to repack, freshen up and have dinner on the patio. Tomorrow was an early rise to catch our flight to Tanzania so we did not linger long.

Thurs., Feb. 8 Flight to Arusha, Tanzania

With a quick one hour flight, we were in Arusha, Tanzania to start the main safari, meeting up with our full-sized group of ten at the delightful Ngare Sero Lodge where new species awaited in the tall trees and intriguing pond area of the property. Off to further adventure!

Photos by Peg Abbott: Gray-crowned Crane, Giraffe, Zebra, Variable Sunbird, Hartlaub's Turaco, Sombre Greenbul, Black-headed Hero, Black Stork, Gray-headed Kingfisher, White Rhino, Long-tailed Shrike, Blue-headed Tree Agama, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, African Buffalo, Leopard Tortoise, White-backed Night-Heron, Tree Hyrax, Superb Starling, Gray-crowned Crane, Impala w Red-billed Oxpecker, Hartlaub's Bustard, White-headed Barbet, Zebra, Cisticola, White-browed Coucal, Beisa Oryx, African Goshawk, Vulturine Guineafowl, Zebra, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Spotted Thick-knee, Shelly's Francolin, Giraffe

Scenic and Group Photos by Elizabeth Trimble