



U Want It, U Asked For It, U Got It!

Usambaras, Ulugurus, Udzungwas. (“U” want to talk about getting someone's attention!) These mountain ranges constitute a portion of the Eastern Arc Mountains. The majority of these broken arc montane islands reside in NE Tanzania with a treasure trove of endemism; having some of the highest densities in the world. It contains ancient relic species along with those that are more newly evolved. Many schools of thought believe these forests go as far back as 30 million years and were a part of a complete extension across the entire tropical region of Africa. Its survival is due to its proximity to the Indian Ocean that prevented the Ice Age's extreme weather fluctuations from having too much causal effect to its rainfall patterns. Nowhere else in East Africa can you travel, uninterrupted, from lowland forest communities at below 250km to montane communities at over 2,000m. Today, however, with an increasing population has come the inevitable resultant degradation of habitat. These factors became my driving force to visit the Eastern Arc escarpment, home to the greatest altitudinal range of forests in East Africa.

After a tough drive up to 2000m from the town of Lushoto we reached the Grewal sawmill 'track' in the West Usambaras. Several anxious stops unveiled feeding birds among the moss-laden branches which included Shelley's and Mountain Greenbuls, a pair of tail-flashing White-tailed Crested Flycatchers, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, African Hill Babbler and a regal long-tailed Paradise Flycatcher. Higher up a noisy trio of Square-tailed Drongos actively swept thru the understory while perched above in the highest branches were two species of starlings: a couple of Kenrick's mixed among a noisy flock of Sharpe's. We listened to the ascending call of a Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo as we quickly made camp before dusk. These groups of birds became the "regulars" throughout most of the trip, especially the songs of Olive Sunbirds and Little Greenbuls. Almost on cue, just as we finished, several Montane (Usambara) Nightjars chimed in with their tremulous whistling call. It is rather easy to imitate and I managed to call in a pair of birds from across the clearing. This species is lumped/split depending on which authority you choose to accept.

Early morning had us trekking into the dark understory for the regions most elusive and sought after birds: Spot-throat, Dappled Mountain-Robin, Pale-breasted Illadopsis, Sharpe's and Usambara Akalats and White-chested Alethe. Playbacks of their calls allowed discernible looks for some, but a fleeting glimpse is generally the rule of thumb for this group of thrush-like birds. Sometimes good fortune at the start of a trip is a tough act to follow. We must have been blessed the following day! After performing the same song and dance as the previous morning, we decided to hike further up the road. The nearby pond hosted a pair of A. Black Ducks with Mountain Wagtails excitedly pumping their tails as they fed along its banks. Red-capped Forest Warbler and Bar-throated Apalis noisily duetted in the roadside scrub along with the ubiquitous Evergreen Forest Warbler – sounding very much like North America's Ovenbird. This cacophony contained unabated and our resultant find was spectacular! A troop of siafu (army ants) was marching along an exposed ridge that had a large window for ample viewing. Below the wall it was barren with a few tangles and exposed tree roots, but the remaining



"room" had scattered brush and trees arching up and over the flurry of activity overhead. I quickly radioed the others and promptly set up my camera and let the motor drive sing.

Pale-breasted Illadopsis were the most numerous, flitting above and below at eye level. White-tailed Crested Flycatchers and Yellow-throated Woodland Warblers snapped fleeting insects from the air. Cape Robin-Chats and White-starred Robins added flashes of color while Fulleborn's Black Boubou and an Olive Thrush kept to the shadows. A White-chested Alethe skulked just in back of the ridge as African Hill Babblers, Northern Brownbills, Mountain Greenbills and Evergreen Forest Warblers came and went at their leisure. The big miss was the Usambara Weaver. Other common roadside birds included Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Streaky Seedeater, African Citril, Mottled and Scarce Swifts, Long-crested and A. Crowned eagles, Hartlaub's Turaco, Yellow White-eye, Scarlet-chested, Collared and Eastern Dble-collared Sunbirds, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater and Moustached Green Tinkerbird.

Fully sated on our first stop, it was time to cross over the Lwengera Valley, exit the tarmac once more and work our way up towards the Amani Nature Reserve on the eastern slope of this range. [On the drive we saw a couple of large raptors with a distinctive underside pattern of an all white belly and wings with narrow black bars across the flight feathers with a contrasting black head, throat and upper breast quickly determined it to be a Black-chested Snake Eagle and the long, flat wings and long, narrow accipiter-like tail easily identified the common dark morph of a Wahlberg's Eagle.] At half the elevation of its western counterpart, the East Usambaras is a larger mosaic of scattered tea plantations and forest tracts with its very own local specialties as well. Green-headed Oriole's are commonly heard singing throughout the day. Walking along the road of the Botanical Gardens we zeroed in on the "tok,tok" call of a Green Barbet along with a foraging Mombasa Woodpecker and also managed to find one of the resident Cabanis's Buntings along a hillside. Billy Munisi, our guide, led us to one of the many different flowering trees for a quick lesson in Sunbird identification. Not only does he visually differentiate the females and immatures but he can also do so by their calls! A local bird guide is key to a successful trip and with that philosophy; we immediately hired him for the rest of the trip. Within that short walk we were able to observe seven species of sunbird: the diminutive Amani and Green-banded, a male Collared radiating its iridescent plumage in full sunlight, Uluguru Violet-backed, Amethyst, Purple-banded and the ever present Olive!

The forests were always challenging; be it the access roads, the trek, the birds or a combination thereof. This type of safari requires you to do your research; to be prepared mentally and physically, if you wish to pursue all of these birds - let alone see them. Spot-throat and Dappled Mountain-Robin are easier to find here than in the West Usambaras but are still difficult. Our early morning jaunts to Ngua and Turaco trails produced Sharpe's Akalat, Orange Ground-Thrush, Bar-tailed Trogon and Red-faced Crimsonwing, along with Tiny, Yellow-streaked and Cabanis's Greenbills and everyone's favorite, the African Broadbill! This bird is generally crepuscular, but it will display any time of day. Your first encounter is with its mechanical ascending-descending "brrrrr sound." This it makes in flight as air passes thru its stiff primaries. Even more entertaining is to witness its marionette-like action as it bounces twice on its perch prior to launching itself into the air and completing a tight circle as it returns to its platform; each time displaying a large white fuzzy patch on its backside.



The entertainment is short-lived but soon after, loud braying from up in the canopy reveals two prehistoric-looking species of hornbill: Silvery-cheeked as well as a pair of passing Trumpeters. More raucous calls are exchanged between couples of feeding Fischer's Turacos and Forest Batis, all seemingly trying to compete with the Black-and-White Colobus and Blue Monkeys for bragging rights as to has the most "guttural" call in the forest. Returning along the forest edge we are fortunate to find the critically threatened Long-billed Apalis & Kretschmer's Longbill and a very cooperative Southern Banded Snake-eagle perched on a lone tree smack in the middle of the tea plantation! Other avian delights included Black-bellied Glossy Starling, White-eared Barbet, Red Ant-thrush, Black-backed Puffback, Tambourine Dove and Brown-hooded Kingfisher. The evening produced a pair of duetting A.Wood-owls and the calls of a Usambara Eagle Owl could be heard far off beyond the tea plantations.

The next stretch of driving brought us to the city of Morogoro where we promptly obtained our permit and fueled and rested our weary bodies in preparation for the following day's journey into the Uluguru Mountains. At Tegetero we collected our porters and proceeded to ascend to the first campsite. Much of the forested slopes at the submontane level are disappearing at an alarming rate. Agriculture and charcoal are the primary causes and now water catchments issues have come to light due to the resulting erosion of hillsides. *The increasing populous continues to degrade these forested slopes not only threatening their own livelihood but the biodiversity unique to this region. Fortunately, organizations like Bird Life International, is working with local organizations to design conservation methods to insure the survival of the forests. Among these open areas we found a lone Striped Pipit, African Yellow Warbler, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Klaas's Cuckoo, Yellow Bishop and Peter's Twinspot. Our choice of campsites for the second day proved to be a test of our physical abilities, but we managed to find the impressive Uluguru Bush-shrike along with its close relative the Black-fronted, two nesting Loveridge's Sunbirds, Olive Woodpecker, Chapin's Apalis Lemon Doves exploding into the air from the forest trails and superb views of a pair of elegant Livingstone's Turacos.

One of our colleagues had business to attend to in Iringa, which managed to save us an entire day driving and waiting there to obtain permits for our most challenging safari yet – in pursuit of the Udzungwa Forest Partridge. We exited onto the dusty, red clay road at Ilula as the sun was about to set. A combination of thick fog, mist and badly aligned headlights brought this leg of the journey virtually to a crawl. Even though we had to regularly inquire about our location, we still managed to identify another trip bird enroute, a Slender-tailed Nightjar. Just before the red clay became too slick to clear the last ridge, we found the Chui campsite and the Udzungwa National Park headquarters. Another species of Caprimulgus was to be found here, the small Donaldson-Smith's Nightjar.

The following morning one porter/person was provided; we reorganized our packs and set out for Mufu camp. This site was recommended by the various trip reports and feedback we received from the local birding community. Unfortunately, a day was lost but a lesson learned as to taking some of this information literally. Due to the difficult terrain and the physical limitations of some of the group, we only made it to the halfway mark. However, we did manage to entertain ourselves scrutinizing over those indiscernible, little brown annoyances, a.k.a., Cisticolas! There such skulking little

bast.... and can be quite frustrating. In actuality it comes down to doing your homework and utilizing the process of elimination to narrow it down to species. It's when you are stuck between two species that it can really wrangle your nerves. Black-lored was the only species we managed to i.d. Other anxious moments materialized swiftly as beautifully plumaged Malachite and Variable sunbirds zipped overhead in these highland fields of grass. Others included Brubru, E. Bronze-naped Pigeon and Oriole Finch. There were signs of buffalo and elephant but neither transpired; we were told that the elephants last passed through here in April.

The next half of the sojourn was within the confines of the cool remnant patches of forest. A Swynnerton's Robin called just below along one of the slopes as White-winged Apalis and Brown Parisomas noisily flitted within the canopy. I was surprised as we entered the Mufu camp. At 1900m we couldn't ask for a more angelic setting. I was taken aback by it not having been used for quite sometime; my inquiries revealed it was last used two years ago! My contacts via e-mail made it sound like a regular outing for intense birdwatchers, but I guess looking back at some of the rather daunting logistics, I could understand its dormancy.

I felt embarrassed with my little pup tent as I watched the porters effortlessly erect a lean-to (shelter) utilizing materials gathered from the forest. An African Wood-owl called every evening, but it was barely discernible. This was not due to its location, but rather, it was difficult to isolate over the incessant barking of Eastern Tree Hyraxes seemingly in every tree! Our early morning alarm was provided by the battling repertoire of Spot-throat and Orange Ground-thrush right behind our tent! Today's agenda was to reach the bamboo line at around 2000m. Several mixed flocks along our ascent revealed the usual assortment of greenbuls: Stripe-cheeked, Shelley's and Mountain, plus Iringa Akalat, White-chested Alethe and Moreaux's Sunbird (which is nearly identical to Loveridge's which is nearly identical to Eastern Double-collared but its identification based solely on differences in altitude/location. I still have some difficulty accepting these splits.). Another stop offered good looks of Red-capped Forest Warblers below the trail with Chapin's and Black-headed Apalis' high above along with Gray Cuckoo-shrikes, Olive Pigeon and a Scaly-throated Honeyguide. Some of these trees are very impressive, towering as much as 30 meters, their canopies obscured by morning fog. A bamboo mosaic carpeted the forest floor alongside some of these still standing, leafless giants. Here we discovered tell tale scrapings and droppings of our quarry. As our focus became more intense, our senses seemingly became more acute; as we scanned with every step, alert of the slightest rustle, locking in towards the slightest noise. As we approached a split off the main trail, Billy grabbed my arm and directed my gaze with a nod of his head. There, about 20m away, a trio of Udzungwa Forest Partridge darted in earnest. They paused for a few seconds to look back before turning their heads and scuffling off, deep into the forest below. For two more days we searched up and down in hopes that I would obtain a photograph of this elusive species. It wasn't meant to be, but how could I bicker after partaking in such a wonderful experience. To be able to explore such a pristine setting where other unique species like Red-faced Crimsonwing, Rufous-winged Sunbird, and Mrs. Moreaux's Warbler can be found. Where Red-capped Colobus monkeys crash through the canopy and cry out in alarm as African Crowned eagles soar overhead.



This trip through the Eastern Arc is not one to add big numbers if listing is your game. This is more of an adventure, a passion to explore out of the way places and experience some of its unique and little known inhabitants. Who knows, you may even make a new discovery yourself!

From dust to tarmac, and back to another long and dusty drive to our next destination, Ifakara, for three more endemics. A few kilometers beyond the town are the now patchy remains of the once vast reedbeds of the Kilombero floodplains. Billy and I barreled straight into the surrounding vegetation of the Kibasira swamp while Mike shouldered the road that led to the ferry allowing him good views of both of the endemic cisticolas: Kilombero and White-tailed. We managed to only scare up the latter while the Kilombero Weaver was very common, but in non-breeding plumage it was not an exciting bird by any means. Among the dank vegetation we also found Coppery-tailed Coucal, Collared Pratincole, Lesser Swamp Warbler, flocks of Zebra Waxbills, Grassland Pipit and as the sun set, flock after flock of White-faced Whistling and Knob-billed Ducks, African Skimmers, along with Open-billed and Yellow-billed Storks, Black Egrets, and African Darters.

The next destination was to overnight at the coastal town of Tanga and fly out to the spice island of Pemba for four more endemics. Sadly we were low on funds and any means for a cash advance basically didn't exist in but a few select towns within the entire country! Based on past reports and word from fellow colleagues, these four birds: the Pemba – White-eye, Sunbird, Scops Owl and Green-Pigeon, are all quite easily seen in a day at the Ngejo Forest on the NW portion of the island.

*Notes:

Some of the world's poorest peoples inhabit these regions. It is very difficult to have them think of sustainable resources while their low-living standards forces them to desperately over-use what's available today. Historically, the government has created a silent hostility among communities: empty promises, not to be trusted, etc. I've been fortunate to have traveled the world and experienced firsthand the frustrations of bureaucracy and corruption surrounding these environmental doctrines. Sadly, the local communities are hit the hardest. They only wish to be given an opportunity to better their lives. The local community needs to be shown that they must preserve what natural resources they have; to maintain it as a sustainable resource that will last much longer rather than to turn it into a quick, short term profit; to have them realize that they are the guardians of the land. And in doing so, that they will reap its rewards and sustain a better quality of life! Granted, this is an ideal scenario. It takes a great amount of time through the adjustment, transition, and to win over the "trust" of the community. It becomes very difficult for them to accept this concept of change. Today, however, sees a resurgence of collective and mutual empowerment by all parties to support the necessary research and installment of these conservation principles. This combined assistance of government aid, educational programs, and private support and tourism dollars for local communities is the start of a healthy and fruitful relationship. Bottom line is this: It takes the collective efforts of the individual that will bring conservation issues to the forefront of today's global concerns – meaning you!

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