

Mafinga Mountain Survey – birds, bats and other discoveries

-By Leslie Reynolds

At the head of Zambia's Luangwa Rift Valley, the Mafinga Mountains rise to over 2330 metres above sea level. They boast the highest point in Zambia (Namtawa peak, at 2336m), support several very localised species and nourish one of the earth's richest ecosystems with their waters. Remote and hard to reach, they command that familiar tug, the sense of awe and mystery that only far-away mountains can.

In April 2018, experts from BirdWatch Zambia (BirdLife in Zambia) set out to unravel some of that mystery on a twenty-day vertebrate survey of the Mafinga Mountains KBA (Key Biodiversity Area). The project was supported by BirdLife International through a grant under the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund's investment in the Eastern Afromontane hotspot. The BirdWatch Zambia team worked from eight different bases and obtained records for 43 kilometre squares ranging in elevation from 1536 to 2336m above sea level, recording 207 species of birds. They went further north and spent longer at the site than any previous birding expeditions.



Mafinga Hills (photo by Leslie Reynolds)

The KBA has the Malawian border for its Eastern limit and is bound to the west and south by the 1500m contour. Rising high above the neighbouring Makutu Hills, it shares much of its

ecological character with the Nyika Plateau to the south and Tanzania's Southern Highlands to the north. Previous trips by birders have been very infrequent with only one known visit after 2000, which incidentally turned up the first (and only) Zambian record of Sharpe's Starling. Long considered the best site in the country for Silvery-cheeked Hornbill, the KBA is also Zambia's only location for Yellow-throated Woodland-Warbler and Placid Greenbul (often lumped with Cabanis's).

What's new?

New findings started from day one: at the first base camp at the Kaila homestead, lying on the south bank of the Zinsa Stream, the team spotted a Blue-spotted Wood-dove - the first of fifty-two additions to the KBA's bird list. Some after-dark snooping higher up along the stream revealed the Spotted Reed-frog (*Hyperolius puncticulatus*): a species never before recorded in Zambia.

Mulangale, the largest block of montane forest in the KBA and a Mecca for any naturalist exploring the mountains, gave up another new non-avian record for the country: the Long-haired Rousette Bat (*Rousettus lanosus*). Forest-typical birds at the site included Bar-tailed Trogon, White-chested Alethe, Malawi Batis and the noisy and ubiquitous Forest Double-collared Sunbird.

A suite of miombo-typical birds worked the neighbouring hillside scrub and moved surprisingly deep into the forest on occasion: Spotted Creeper, Rufous-bellied Tit and Yellow-breasted Hyliota, to name a few.

Blue Swallows and Churring Cisticola

After Mulangale, the team set their sights north, to the source of the Luangwa River. While they set up camp on the Musipizi Stream to the south of the Luangwa Source, they had one of the most important sightings of the trip: a couple of Blue Swallows briefly seen flying above the extensive grasslands. Coming at the tail-end of the season it may indicate an unrecorded breeding population of this embattled and declining migrant, which is known to breed in southern Tanzania, the Nyika Plateau and several other highland spots in Malawi.



*Mulangale forest canopy view
(photo by Leslie Reynolds)*

At over 2200m, the team made another important addition to the Mafinga list: the Churring Cisticola, an Afromontane endemic with a very restricted range.

Summary results

All in all, the field survey yielded valuable discoveries comprising of multiple range extensions, new national records, and the presence of globally threatened species. 52 bird species were added to the existing Mafinga bird list, bringing it to a total of 207 species. A total of 15 mammal species was recorded, including the Chequered Giant (Sengi *Rhynchocyoncirnei*) and the Long-haired Rousette (*Stenonycteris Lanorus*).

Seven reptile species were recorded, including Grey-bellied (*Skaapsteker Psammophylaxvariabilis*) and Nchisi Pygmy (*Chameleon Rhampholeonchisiensis*). The latter is a highly localised species, which was so far only known within Zambia from the Nyika plateau. Among eleven amphibian species recorded, are Spotted Reed Frog *Hyperoliussubstriatus* and Taita Dwarf Toad-*Mertensophrynetaitana*. Please find the full survey report [here](#) (PDF, 7.02 MB)



New for Zambia: the Spotted Reed Frog, photo by Leslie Reynolds

BirdLife International is the Regional Implementation Team (RIT) for the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) investment in the Eastern Afromontane Hotspot (2012 -2019). The investment supports civil society in applying innovative approaches to conservation in under-capacitated and underfunded protected areas, Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) and priority corridors in the region.

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Note: Some hyperlinks may no longer be active

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation. More information on the CEPF can be found at www.cepf.net.