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February 2018

Balancing Conservation and Development in Yala Swamp



Yala Swamp, predominantly comprised of papyrus, forms a distinctive habitat for papyrus specialist birds, including restricted range endemics such as the Near Threatened Papyrus Gonolek. PHOTO: I. CADDICK

By E. Mateche and J. Mwacharo

February 2 every year is World Wetlands Day. It marks the date the Convention on Wetlands was adopted in 1971 at the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea. The day is used to raise public awareness about the importance and value of wetlands. Wetlands cover about six per cent of the world's surface. They provide a range of environmental services, including water filtration and storage, erosion control, a buffer against flooding, nutrient recycling, biodiversity maintenance, carbon storage and a nursery for fisheries among other benefits. Unfortunately, up to 60 per cent of global wetlands have been destroyed in the past 100 years as people search for land to settle on, farm and establish other types of investments.

In Kenya, Yala Swamp is one of the wetlands of great importance. The swamp is the country's largest freshwater swamp and is crucial to Lake Victoria's survival. It's Kenya's largest papyrus wetland, acting as a filter for rivers flowing into Lake Victoria. And it's an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) for its large flocks of birds and species restricted to papyrus swamps.

Nature Kenya, in collaboration with partners including the national government, County Governments of Slaya and Busia, non-government organizations and local communities (through the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group), has been working to put Yala Swamp on a sustainable footing. Three years after the initiation of a project titled "Balancing development and conservation in Kenya's largest

freshwater papyrus wetland in Yala Swamp" the gains are quite evident. Here are some of the achievements:

1. Stakeholders conducted an ecosystem services assessment of Yala Swamp in a highly consultative manner and published a report. The report provides a business case for Yala Swamp, and gives evidence that the conservation of significant areas of Yala swamp is crucially important for the sustenance of ecosystem services that support the economy, biodiversity and livelihoods.
2. The Siaya and Busia County governments, through Nature Kenya facilitation, have formulated a Land Use Plan (LUP) for the Yala Swamp informed by a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). The Yala Swamp land use plan is a negotiated document which provides a framework on how land within the swamp and the surrounding areas will be used. The LUP/SEA process is at an advanced stage and is based on the findings of an Ecosystem Services Assessment.
3. Criteria have been formulated for selection of community conserved areas (CCAs) within Yala Swamp to safeguard crucial wildlife habitats that maintain and stabilize populations of key wetland species. This was done as part of the ongoing land use planning process. Using these criteria, community conserved areas (CCAs) with a total acreage of 8,404ha were selected. Within the CCAs, 443.8ha were identified as degraded areas, out of which 300ha have been restored through papyrus planting. A management plan for the CCAs is under development.
4. Upstream of Yala Swamp, 14 Community Based Organizations

- (CBOs) were trained in principles of tree nursery establishment through partnership with the Kenya Forest Service. As a result, farmers have raised more than 186,293 indigenous tree seedlings in nurseries; collected 33,386 wildlings; and grown 1,200 bamboo seedlings. Some 70,500 seedlings have been planted in the River Yala riparian area (175.41ha already rehabilitated) and 34,586 seedlings used to establish own farm woodlots.
5. Energy saving stoves have been installed in 2000 households and 177 schools (with a combined population of 36,915 pupils who are on the government-sponsored school feeding programme). From an assessment conducted in April 2017, the consumption of wood fuel both in households and schools has been reduced by 50%. The reduction in consumption of wood fuel, together with efforts in tree and papyrus planting, has contributed significantly to increased forest cover in the 2 counties.
6. Through the implementation of various sustainable nature-based enterprises (NBEs), the wellbeing of Yala Swamp communities has improved. A total of 156 households have benefitted through establishment of 11 fishponds. A total of Ksh. 224,950 was earned by 89 households from sale of high value papyrus and palm products. Over the last 12 months, 13 of the trained community guides earned a combined income of Ksh.120,650 from guiding tourists visiting the Yala Swamp.
7. A sustainability strategy has been developed where proceeds from income-generating activities are divided three ways: among the individual beneficiaries, wider

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Charity Golf Tournament

DATE: FRIDAY 23RD MARCH 2018 | VENUE: KAREN COUNTRY CLUB | TIME: 10:00AM - 7:00PM

Date To register contact: 0780 149 200, EMAIL: office@naturekenya.org

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SILVER SPONSOR: KSH. 250,000 | BRONZE SPONSOR: KSH. 100,000 | HOLE SPONSOR: KSH. 50,000

INDIVIDUAL PLAYER KSH. 2,500 (NK MEMBER), KSH. 3,000 (NON MEMBERS) | TEAM ENTRIES KSH. 10,000





Weavers engaging in sustainable harvesting of papyrus along the shores of Lake Karibohi

Balancing Conservation and Development in Yala Swamp from pg. 1

community projects and to support conservation work through a conservation fund administered by the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG).

8. The Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG) is now an integral part of this success story. With training and support, they are now the local conservation champions not only within the Yala Swamp IBA but also within the larger Yala Ecosystem.

9. Capacitated communities, through the Yala Ecosystem SSG, have been able to negotiate and claim for their rights from leaders. In August 2016 when the County Government of Siaya moved to initiate a process to allot land within the Yala Swamp to an Indian company, the leadership of the SSG wrote to the National Land Commission to object to the move and held a media interview featured in a national newspaper. During the media interview, the SSG strongly advocated for the completion and implementation of the land use plan for Yala Swamp, which provides clear guidance on areas to be put under commercial development, areas to be put under subsistence and commercial agriculture and areas to be conserved to continue providing critical ecosystem services.

10. In June 2017, Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group was awarded a certificate by BirdLife International as "Nature's Heroes" in recognition of outstanding commitment to conservation and helping local communities work in harmony with nature.

Clearly, there are lots of gains from aiming to strike the delicate balance between conservation and development, as evident in the case of Yala Swamp. However, there are challenges associated with all the progress. Poverty, like in many other parts of Kenya, remains a key driver to environmental degradation at the Yala Swamp. Poverty has driven people to exploit natural resources to fulfill their immediate human needs such as food with little regard to the consequences of uncontrolled overexploitation of resources. Ironically, this threatens their very own future existence and the existence of other biodiversity within the Yala Swamp ecosystem.

All the same, working through the challenges and with concerted efforts, there is still an opportunity of surpassing the gains already made, hence ultimately striking the elusive "balance" between conservation and development within the Yala Swamp. 🐦

In praise of wetlands and wetland birds

By F. Ng'weno and O. Nasirwa

January is the season of the annual African Waterbird Census. It's a time to meet old friends as volunteers come together to monitor our precious wetlands. The counts are organized by the National Museums of Kenya, Kenya Wildlife Service and Nature Kenya in collaboration with local institutions and volunteers. Thanks to AFEW and others who supported the counts this year.

Lake Bogoria was the first Rift Valley lake to be counted, and some 2,400 Greater and 160,000 Lesser flamingos were estimated. Compared to January 2017, Lesser Flamingos recorded an almost three-fold increase. Contrary to a recent report in the press, there is no water hyacinth in this alkaline water – the water hyacinth is invading neighbouring Lake Baringo.

At Lake Nakuru, the north end of the lake still looks like another world, with part of the acacia woodland still flooded – standing dead trees in the water, fallen dead trees on the land. A wide variety of water birds, including African Darters (and land birds such as parrots, rollers, woodpeckers, oxpeckers) were making use of the standing dead trees.

At its southern end, however, Nakuru seems to be reviving as an alkaline lake: Thousands of Greater and Lesser Flamingos, brilliant in the golden light; Great White Pelicans, including a brown immature, fishing together; a family of Pink-backed Pelicans in breeding plumage, with black "eye make-up" and a little dark crest, also with an immature; a line of African Spoonbills fishing intensively behind the pelicans; rows of silvery gulls and terns on a sandbar; Pied Avocets and Black-winged Stilts foraging in the shallows; and more!

Greater Flamingos still outnumbered Lessers, and both flocks included greyish immatures. Some of the Greater Flamingos were mating. To top it all, a small flock of African Skimmers, also with an immature, flying right in front of us, slicing through the water with their brilliant red beaks.

Elementeita and Naivasha with its associated lakes were next. The water levels were still high, but going down. The weather

featured hot sunny mornings and scattered thunderstorms in the afternoon. Highlights at Naivasha included large numbers of African Fish Eagles, a flock of about 250 endangered Grey Crowned Cranes, an even larger number of Spur-winged Geese, several Giant Kingfishers and again a small group of African Skimmers.

Lake Ololdien at the tip of Lake Naivasha was still fresh water, and teeming with Tilapia. While counting there, an intrepid member of our group waded out into the shallow water to rescue an African Grey Woodpecker that had become trapped in an old fishing net tangled in a flooded low acacia bush.

At Lake Ol'Boლოსat in the highlands, the water level was low and the surrounding grassland was dry. There were small flocks of migratory ducks – 20 Northern Pintail, over 200 Northern Shoveler, a few Garganey – and large numbers of some local species: 4,000 Red-knobbed Coot, over a thousand Glossy Ibis, over 500 Yellow-billed Duck. It was encouraging to observe about 450 Grey Crowned Cranes, some with chicks.

Wetland sites near Nairobi were counted during Nature Kenya's regular Wednesday and Sunday bird-watching outings. The counts continue as we go to press.

What do the bird counts tell us? They remind us that our wetlands are places of incredible beauty and inspiration. Wetlands also regulate our water, provide food and support agriculture, tourism and biodiversity. However, we noted that our wetlands are under intense pressure – siltation and wastes in Nakuru, invasive species in Baringo and Naivasha, encroachment by settlements on lakes Naivasha and Elementeita and in Limuru and Kiambu, climate change all over.

The counts also recorded very few migratory ducks from the north. Was this due to a change in migration patterns because of climate change, a change in food availability in our wetlands, a change in the breeding habitat or increased killing of birds along the migration route? Only further research and monitoring will tell.

Wetlands desperately need to be given the priority and care that they deserve. 🐦



An African Skimmer at Lake Nakuru. PHOTO: P. WAIRASHO

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Brilliant February Skies

By F. Ng'weno

February stars

On a dark, clear February evening, face east - with your back to the sunset - and look up at the sky: You will see the brightest star of the night, Sirius, high in the southeast. The second brightest star, Canopus, is to the right, in the south.

Directly overhead is the constellation, or group of stars, that the ancient Greeks called Orion, the Hunter or Warrior. Three bright stars in a row form Orion's belt, and three fainter stars in a row are his sword. Four bright stars mark Orion's shoulders and knees. An orange-coloured star, Betelgeuse, forms one 'shoulder' in the east. A blue-green star, Rigel, marks one 'knee' in the west. A group of fainter stars are Orion's head. With binoculars, you can see the glowing nebula M42 in Orion's belt.

The ancient Greeks saw two hunting dogs following Orion the Hunter in the sky. One the dogs is Sirius (the brightest star). Imagine Sirius as the dog's eye, and a line of stars below it as the body and legs. The other dog, Procyon, is east of Orion, and less bright than Sirius.

On the other side of Orion, in the northwest, is the reddish star Aldebaran. Beyond Aldebaran is a group of several stars close together: the Pleiades or Seven Sisters. The moon is near Aldebaran on Feb 23.

Further north, lower in the sky, five bright stars mark the corners of a pentagon shape. This constellation is Auriga, the Charioteer. The brightest of the five is the star Capella.

The Milky Way, a broad pale band made up of millions and millions of stars, runs across the sky from southeast to northwest. The Milky Way passes between Sirius and Procyon, touches Betelgeuse on Orion's shoulder and continues past Capella and the zigzag shape of Cassiopeia.

Moon, Feb '18

7 Feb - last quarter. 15 Feb - new moon. 16 Feb - Lunar or Chinese New Year, celebrated as the new year or spring festival in many parts of Asia. 23 Feb - first quarter. There is no full moon this month; the full moons are on Jan 31 and March 2.

February Sun

This is the time of the latest sunrises and sunsets of the year. In the first 3 weeks of February, the sun sets as late as 6:51 in Nairobi.

Feb '18 Planets

In mid-month, you may see bright Venus emerge from the glare of the sunset. It climbs a little higher each evening. The thin crescent of the new moon is near Venus on Feb.16. In March, little Mercury also rises above the sunset, passing Venus on March 5.

The other visible planets are in the eastern sky before dawn. Bright Jupiter is high in the east, almost overhead. It seems to form a giant triangle with the bright stars Arcturus high in the north and Spica high in the west. Reddish Mars is below Jupiter in the east, and golden Saturn lower still.

The waning moon is near Spica on Feb 5, near Jupiter on Feb 7 and 8, near Mars on the 9th and near Saturn on the 11th.



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1. Waterbird count in progress at Dandora Sewage Works ponds.
2. Egyptian geese spotted during the count. PHOTOS: S. SHEMA

ANNOUNCEMENT

The second issue for Volume 106 (2017) of the Journal of East African Natural History has just been published.

The following papers are now available from BioOne (<http://www.bioone.org/toc/eanh/current>) or African Journals Online (<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jeanh>)

Two Red-Capped Robin-Chats *Cossypha Natalensis* Imitate Antiphonal Duet of Black-Faced Rufous Warblers *Bathmocercus rufus*
Thomas T. Struhsaker

The Reptiles of the Uzungwa Scarp Forest Reserve (User): An Updated Checklist with Notes on Dagger-Tooth Vine Snake *Xyelodontophis uluguruensis*
John Valentine Lyakurwa

Sympatry among Three Suid Species (Family Suidae) on the North Coast of Kenya
Rajan Amin, Tim Wachter and Thomas M. Butynski

World Wetlands Day 2 February

Wetlands for a sustainable urban future
Urban wetlands making cities liveable



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World Wetlands Day
2 February 2018
Wetlands for a sustainable urban future



in the FIELD

FEBRUARY AT A GLIMPSE

Feb 3rd FoCP Nature Walk
 Feb 7th Morning Bird Walk
 Feb 10th FoNA Nature Walk
 Feb 14th Morning Bird Walk
 Feb 17th FoCP Nature Walk
 Feb 18th Sunday Bird Watch
 Feb 21st Morning Bird Walk
 Feb 28th Morning Bird Walk

Bird ringing every Tuesday morning (check with Ornithology section, National Museums).

Birders Please Note! The Wednesday Morning Birdwalks meet at 8:30 am at the Nairobi National Museum. Transport is on a self-help basis. The group meets in the courtyard of the Nairobi National Museum, past the entrance to the galleries. We normally return at about 12:30 pm.

The Sunday Birdwatch on the THIRD Sunday of each month now also meets at 8:30 am, at the same location. It is a day trip; please bring water and lunch.

Mombasa Birdwalks On the 3rd Saturday of each month. For meeting time and place, please contact Taibali Hamzali <thamzali@gmail.com> / 0733-980540; or Doris Schaule <dorischaule@gmail.com> / 0722-277752. Or check Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/FFJmombasa/>

Contact the office for information on other birdwalks in Kakamega, Kisumu, and other sites

Ngong Forest walks - 1st and 3rd Saturday at 9.00 am. Contact Simon 0729-840715

Biology of Amphibians and Reptiles Course



Kindly register for the Biology of Amphibians and Reptiles Course that will take place at the National Museums of Kenya, Invertebrate Zoology lab from 26th Feb - 2nd March 2018

Participation fees is Kshs 7,000

For inquiries contact, Vincent Muchai
 Tel: 0722279090
 Email: muchaiw@gmail.com

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For details on associated groups such as Youth Committee, Succulenta, and Friends of Nairobi Arboretum, City Park or Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, contact office@naturekenya.org