

A future for Kenya's largest freshwater wetland - Yala Swamp



PHOTO: JOHN MWACHARO

A section of the vast Yala Swamp. The swamp provides numerous ecosystem services and other vital resources like water, food, medicine and wood for over 250,000 people who live around it.

BY EMILY MATECHE

Yala Swamp is one of Kenya's important ecosystems. The wetland lies on the north-eastern shore of Lake Victoria, cutting across Siaya and Busia counties. The swamp is Kenya's largest freshwater wetland, and an internationally recognized Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). Yala Swamp is home to the nationally threatened Sitatunga antelope and other large mammals, numerous wetland birds (including the vulnerable Papyrus Yellow Warbler), and is a refuge for cichlid fish endemic to Lake Victoria that have become extinct in the main lake. In addition, the swamp provides numerous essential ecosystem services and vital resources such as water, food, medicine and wood for over 250,000 people who live around it. The wetland, however, faces many threats, including increasing human population, over-exploitation of its natural resources by the competing local communities, habitat degradation and biodiversity loss.

During the years 2014-2018, Nature Kenya successfully implemented a project titled "Balancing development and conservation in

Kenya's largest freshwater wetland". The Darwin Initiative, MacArthur Foundation and USAID-PREPARED jointly funded this project. The main outcome of this project was that key steps were taken to safeguard the future of Yala Swamp, putting into consideration development and conservation needs. Nature Kenya worked in collaboration with the Siaya and Busia county governments, local communities and the national government to develop a Land Use Plan (LUP) for Yala Swamp, informed by a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), and borrowing lessons learnt from the award-winning Tana Delta land use planning process.

The Yala Swamp LUP seeks to balance the various interests in the wetland. It involves addressing the needs of communities, their settlements and livelihoods, equity and fairness in land resource allocation (for both investors and communities), while protecting the wetland's unique biodiversity through embracing strong conservation ethics. This approach is supported by evidence that conservation of significant areas of

the swamp is critically important for the sustenance of ecosystem services that support the economy, biodiversity and livelihoods. The endorsement of the Yala Swamp LUP by the Siaya County Governor H.E. Cornel Rasanga and his Busia counterpart H.E. Sospeter Ojaamong' in July 2019 marked a milestone in development towards the implementation of the wetland's land use planning process. Both the Siaya and Busia county assemblies have also expressed commitment towards the adoption of the Yala Swamp LUP.

With funding from the Darwin Initiative, Nature Kenya is still working to secure a sustainable future for Yala Swamp. Towards this, a three-year project is currently underway. The project, which started in April 2019, will support the adoption of the Yala Swamp LUP as a county government policy, formalize the creation of Community Conservation Areas (CCAs) through gazettelement, and develop a management plan to be implemented by a multi-stakeholder committee.

Community livelihoods are also

set to be enhanced through empowering households to establish nature-based enterprises (making of papyrus and palm leaf products, fish farming, bee-keeping, chicken rearing, vegetable gardening and eco-tourism), setting up producers' cooperatives and opening a 'market hub' in Siaya town. Management of Community Conservation Areas will be sustainably financed, in part through contributions from the cooperatives. Project lessons and experiences will be widely shared through meetings, conferences and awareness events. The project will directly benefit over 635 households and indirectly benefit 250,000 people and ensure continued provision of vital ecosystem services. The project will also advance the listing of Yala Swamp as a Ramsar (wetland of international importance) site in addition to furthering the objectives of international biodiversity conventions ratified by Kenya such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and a number of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The project's implementation partners at the community level include the Yala Ecosystem Site Support Group (YESSG) who are community conservation champions and local beneficiaries. Their role involves supporting CCA management through proceeds derived from livelihood enterprises. Other partners are the Yala Planning Advisory Committee (YPAC), whose role is to promote integration of the LUP/SEA into county plans and budgets, and represent communities on the multi-stakeholder CCA Management Committee; and Lower Nyandera and Muweri Water Resource Use Associations (WRUAs), whose role is to champion implementation of the water-sharing regime recommended by the SEA/LUP. Other local partners include Beach Management Units (BMUs) and Community Forest Associations (CFAs). 🌱



Members of the Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group carrying out biodiversity monitoring at the Dakatcha Woodland Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). PHOTO: NATURE KENYA ARCHIVES

Promoting conservation at grassroot level

BY JOHN MWACHARO

Safeguarding Kenya's sites of global biodiversity conservation importance - Key Biodiversity Areas - is crucial to the country's well-being. The ecosystem services and goods provided by these sites are invaluable. Forests for instance, supply us with timber, food, fuel, and bioproducts, not to mention provision of ecological functions such as carbon storage, water storage and release, soil protection and nutrient cycling. Wetlands purify and replenish our water, reduce the impacts of drought and flood, and provide us with food and fibre. Putting in place good mitigation strategies to conserve these sites is key to their survival.

Local communities residing around such important sites play a big part in sustaining them. Engaging these communities positively in conservation activities is a sure way of ensuring ecological sustainability of these areas.

The site support groups (SSGs) model being promoted by Nature Kenya is an approach aimed at enhancing community engagement in conservation at site level. This model entails working closely with groups of local volunteers at Kenya's Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs). Currently, there

are 26 SSGs spread across the country. These groups act as an entry point for wider community engagement in the conservation and management of biodiversity. The SSGs are actively involved in site patrolling, policing and monitoring, habitat management and restoration, and environmental awareness and advocacy. These groups employ simple, inexpensive tools and methods to collect vital data through citizen science initiatives. This level of engagement underscores the value of voluntary public participation in conservation.

In 2013, a monitoring team comprising of members of the Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group (the Dakatcha Woodland KBA site support group) discovered

the nesting site of the endangered Clarke's weaver, a bird found only in Kilifi County, Kenya. This discovery was a major milestone for conservation of this threatened bird, warranting international attention. No known account of the species' breeding grounds had been reported prior to this discovery.

Late in 2017, some members of the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest Adjacent Dwellers Association (the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest KBA site support group) went public to decry unabated illegal logging activities in the forest. Their exposé triggered a chain of events which culminated into a national logging moratorium. Through their voices, these community members drew national attention to a serious threat facing one of Kenya's iconic coastal forest.

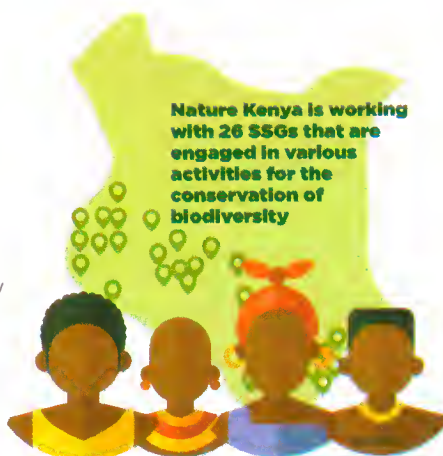
Last year, a local community member stumbled upon a dead hyena somewhere in the Maasai Mara. Suspecting the wild animal to have been poisoned, he immediately alerted relevant authorities. Through his swift action, hundreds of secondary wildlife poisoning deaths, including those of critically endangered vulture species, were averted. Several other wildlife poisoning incidents in the area have been reported

by community members and promptly addressed, leading to fewer deaths. These are just a few examples of the important role played by local communities in the conservation of key sites and biodiversity in Kenya.

A healthy environment means a better life for people. As such, conservation and human development need to be mutually reinforcing. Linking community livelihoods with conservation is another way of incentivizing people to take action. Establishment of nature-based enterprises such as beekeeping, butterfly farming, ecotourism, among others, has provided opportunities for local communities to sustainably harness available natural resources. The Kipepeo butterfly project in Gede near Malindi, for instance, is enabling hundreds of local community members to earn livelihoods while conserving the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest.

There is no doubt that community-based approaches have the potential to spur conservation action at key sites. The recently released Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services by the UN Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) acknowledges this point. The report recognizes contributions by local communities in limiting deforestation. These local governance regimes, IPBES notes, have been proven to be effective in mitigating habitat loss, at times even more effective than formally established protected areas.

Local community engagement in the protection of nature needs to be encouraged. Communities need to be empowered to effectively take conservation action. Conservation policies also need to take into account the needs of local communities by providing some form of benefit mechanism for the locals. At a time of increasing pressure on the world's biodiversity, community-based conservation approaches deserve full support.



For updates visit www.naturekenya.org

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Mt. Mtelo: haven for flora and fauna in Central Pokot

■ BY TIMOTHY MWINAMI

Kenya's fourth-highest and biodiversity-rich mountain you may never have heard of.

Amongst the hills and valleys of West Pokot, part of the Sekerr Range, rises Mount Mtelo, a sacred mountain to many local communities.

Take the Kitale-Lodwar road, branching at Maarich Pass. After passing Maarich, as you start going up those hills, you will get to view the unique peak of Mt. Mtelo, Kenya's fourth-highest mountain. It has unique microhabitats, ranging from patches of highland forest, riverine forest, woodland, grassland, moorland and wetland to farmland.

Our recent two-day birding expedition revealed the uniqueness of Mtelo, its various species of conservation interest and its biodiversity. From the slope at Maarich pass, the altitude varies between 1,400m to 3,336m above sea level in a very short distance, changing from arid dry to highland cool. That explains why it is a haven for biodiversity.

During the trip, we recorded 113 bird species in almost two days of birding. The sharing of a micro-habitat between White-crested Turaco and Hartlaub's Turaco alerted us at the start. In the sky, a Crowned Eagle persistently called at around midday. On the mountain, two pairs of Augur Buzzard soared with the thermals above farmlands, and further up, a Lizard Buzzard hovered over a fantastic view. On a steep slope from the peak of Mt. Mtelo, a flock of both Red-winged and Slender-billed starlings roosted together on three trees. There were approximately 1,500 individuals, probably the largest crowd of starlings we have ever seen.

The crowning of our birding trip was when we spotted a pair of Lammergeier (or Bearded Vulture). The birds were gliding from Mt. Mtelo rocks, through a foggy, misty sky down the valley while making sharp, loud, display calls. This made the trip special. The sighting was supported by raptor expert Simon Thomsett who has studied the birds' movement from 2002 to 2007. The birds probably use the Sekerr range for foraging, with one unsuccessful attempt at breeding.

Mtelo is a unique hotspot, sheltering a rich diversity of avifauna and other flora and fauna, yet to be sampled. It is a catchment of streams that flow to the Turkwel River, and other sources of water. It's a dynamic mix of micro-habitats including Afromontane in remnant forest patches and Somali Maasai on the slope of Mt. Mtelo towards Turkana. Overlapping species within the region create a scenario where one wonders in which ecosystem he or she is in.

But is there hope for this ecosystem? The highland forest has been overexploited. What remains are farmlands, settlements and deep gullies of erosion. The remaining fauna is on the run or hiding. Hope for the ecosystem lies in the hands of the government, conservation organizations and community members within the region. 🐦

eBIRD BIG DAY 19 OCT 2019

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<https://ebird.org/news/october-big-day-19-october-2019>



Focus on Mercury

■ BY FLEUR NG'WENO

Earth is a planet, traveling around the sun in a year. Two other planets orbit the sun between Earth and the sun – Venus and Mercury. As a result, we always see them fairly low in the sky, over the sunset or sunrise. Well, almost always. On clear, clear days we may see Venus shining in the daytime sky. And next month, on November 11, Mercury will pass across the face of the sun during the day.

Mercury is so small that we cannot see its transit across the sun with the unaided eye. Astronomers will use telescopes to view this rare event. Also, from East Africa the transit will happen close to sunset, and the weather may be cloudy. So look online for photos!

You can watch Venus and Mercury above the sunset during October 2019. At the start of the month, big bright Venus is low over the western horizon. Mercury, small but bright, is higher than Venus. Mercury rises quickly, reaching its highest position on Mashujaa Day. Then it dips back towards the horizon as Venus continues to rise slowly. The two planets pass each other on Oct. 29-30. Venus will be prominent in the evening sky for several months.

Jupiter, second to Venus in brightness, is high in the west, escorting the constellation (star pattern) of the Scorpion. It sets during the evening. Saturn, less bright, is high above, escorting the constellation of Sagittarius the Archer, setting later in the evening. The moon is near Jupiter on Oct 3 and 31. It is near Saturn and the star Nunki on the 5th. And the slim new moon joins Venus and Mercury on Oct 29.

October Stars

Sagittarius the Archer follows the Scorpion to the west. The bright star Fomalhaut is further left, high in the south. Still further left in the southeast, lower in the sky, is the bright star Achernar.

On a clear night later in the evening, you may see what looks like two small clouds below Achernar, low in the southern sky. These are the Small and Large Magellanic Clouds. They are in fact two galaxies, each consisting of millions of stars.

Across the sky in the northwest, to the right of the sunset, the bright stars Altair, Deneb and Vega form a huge triangle. Vega is very bright and low in the sky. Deneb is east (right) of Vega. Altair is high above them and flanked by two smaller stars. Overhead, to the east of Altair, five small bright stars form a shape like a leaping dolphin.

To the east (across the sky from the sunset) is the constellation that the ancient Greeks called Pegasus, the Flying Horse. Four fairly bright stars form the corners of a giant square, the body of the horse. Below Pegasus, low in the southeast, is an M-shaped group of stars, the constellation Cassiopeia.

Look carefully among the stars between the square of Pegasus and the M of Cassiopeia, for a hazy, blurry spot of light. This blurred light too is a galaxy, the Great Spiral Nebula M31 in the constellation of Andromeda.

Moon, Oct '19

First quarter, Oct 5. Full moon, Oct 13. Last quarter, Oct 21. New moon, Oct 28. 🌕

IN THE FIELD

OCTOBER 2019 AT A GLIMPSE

- Oct 2nd Morning Bird Walk
- Oct 5th FoNA Tree Walk
- Oct 9th Morning Bird Walk
- Oct 16th Morning Bird walk
- Oct 19th FoCP Nature Walk/Members Trip
- Oct 20th Sunday Bird Watch/Members Trip
- Oct 21st Members Trip
- Oct 23rd Morning Bird Walk
- Oct 28th FoNA Tree Walk
- Oct 30th Morning Bird Walk/Public Talk

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 Schuale <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



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