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Birds and Natural History of Kenya August 14-27, 2005

What an incredible two weeks in a land that has it all! Thanks to one and all for making the “trip of a lifetime” more than live up to its billing. The African skies, plains, mountains, lakes, and forest made for breath-taking backdrops for one the most natural history-rich places on the planet. The trip list of 478 birds and nearly 50 mammals was enough to make anyone’s head spin. Fortunately, all were made palatable with the patient expertise of Joseph and Edwin, great weather, and relatively easy viewing conditions in a pleasant climate. The accommodations and food were consistently first rate, as were the ever-dependable Land Rovers from which we did more than 50%(!) of our field work. Kenya is definitely on my list for a return trip!

Day 1 - Sunday, August 14 Nairobi - Karen Blixen Cottages, KB Museum, Nairobi National Park

One by one our jet-lagged group emerged from their comfortable cabins after an all too brief night’s sleep. The first birds most of us saw were on the feeders including Bronze Mannikin, Red-billed Firefinch and Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu. After becoming familiar with the Common Bulbul, we were treated to looks of Variable and Collared Sunbirds, our first of that hummingbird-like family. Also added were Hadada Stork, Black Kite, African White-backed Vulture, Red-eyed Dove, Speckled Mousebird, Olive Thrush, White-bellied Tit, and both Abyssinian and Montane White-eyes before we headed off to the Karen Blixen Museum.

The museum tour was pleasant and, thanks to a knowledgeable guide, quite informative. Out on the grounds many of the birds we had seen at the cottages were present along with a few new ones including Augur Buzzard, African Pied Wagtail, White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher, Common Fiscal, Tropical Boubou, and both Amethyst and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds.

We experienced our first game drive in the afternoon at Nairobi National Park just on the outskirts of the city. Despite its close proximity to the city, this is a very wild place! African Fruit Bat, Spotted Hyena, Black Rhino, Massai Giraffe (seen very close), Cape Buffalo, Wildebeest, Common Eland, Bushbuck, among others were spotted. Avian species included Saddle-billed stork, Marabou Stork, Egyptian Goose, Helmeted Guineafowl, Common Moorhen, Grey-crowned Crane, Three-banded (Heuglin’s) Courser, Hartlaub’s Turaco, African Palm Swift, Blue-naped Mousebird, Malachite Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher, White-browed Coucal, Little Bee-eater, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, Rufous-naped Lark, 5 swallows, Long-billed Pipit, Northern Pied Babbler, Ruppell’s Robin-Chat, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Singing Cisticola, Winding Cisticola, Stout Cisticola, Siffling Cisticola, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Black-backed Puffback, Hildebrandt’s Starling, the similar and very Superb Starling, Baglefecht Weaver, Holub’s Golden Weaver, White-winged Widowbird, Red-collared Widowbird, Purple Grenadier, Common Waxbill, Zebra Waxbill, African Citril, Brimstone Canary, and Yellow-rumped Seedeater. First day total bird species: 77!

Day 2 - Monday, August 15 KB Cottages; Karatina Ponds; Mt. Kenya - Mountain Lodge

We headed north on Highway A2 towards Mount Kenya after breakfast, though not before many of us enjoyed our first looks at the spectacular African Paradise Flycatcher. En route we stopped at Karatina Ponds picking up several new birds including Little Grebe, Grey Heron, Hammerkop, Yellow-billed Duck, White-faced Whistling-Duck, African Jacana, Red-knobed Coot, White-starred Robin-Chat, Hunter’s Cisticola, and Bronze Sunbird. Before arriving at Mountain Lodge a Long-crested Eagle was spotted. Though our guides did little to disguise their indifference, the rest of us were thrilled to see this absolutely spectacular, yet common raptor.

Mountain Lodge (alt. 7200 ft.) was a beautiful place to stay with all of our rooms facing the mineral-rich ponds in the back. Birds’-eye-views of African Elephant, Defassa Waterbuck, Bushbuck, and Cape Buffalo among others were enjoyed from the comfort of our rooms while Syke’s Monkeys cavorted on and around the lodge. While we were there a rescue team sedated and removed an injured baby elephant. The mother also was darted making an afternoon walk in the forest too dangerous. We s□

Bronze-naped Pigeon, Red-fronted Parrot, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Black Saw-wing, Cape Robin-Chat, African Dusky Flycatcher, Eastern Double-collared Sunbird, and Yellow-crowned Canary. The final bird of the day was a distant, though very cooperative Verreaux’s Eagle-Owl. As we drifted off to sleep we were “serenaded” by a group of Tree Hyrax whose strange calls commence with groans and creeks, rising to a climax of eerie screams and shrieks! These odd creatures are much like large rodents in appearance, but are thought to be more closely related to elephants.

Day 3 - Tuesday, August 16 Mountain Lodge; Naro Moru River Lodge

We met before breakfast on the observation porch and recorded Cape Wagtail and Red-billed Oxpecker before departing on a short forest walk, the highlight of which was brief looks at White-headed Wood-Hoopoe and Silvery-cheeked Hornbill as well as a somewhat chaotic mixed flock consisting of Cardinal Woodpecker, Slender-billed Greenbul, Mountain Greenbul, Brown Woodland Warbler, Mountain Yellow Warbler, Buff-throated Apalis, Gray Apalis, Black-headed Apalis, Montane Oriole, and Brown-capped Weaver.

After a hearty breakfast we bid a fond farewell to Mountain Lodge. We didn’t get far before we saw a Hartlaub’s Turaco then a raptor-in-flight extravaganza that included Mountain Buzzard, Verreaux’s Eagle, Ayre’s Hawk-Eagle, Long-crested Eagle, African Crowned Eagle, and Martial Eagle! Shortly after we were treated to looks at a juvenile African Crowned Eagle standing a few feet from its massive nest located in a tree right over the road. En route to Naro Moru we encountered African (Common) Stonechat, Red-backed (White-browed) Scrub-Robin, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Yellow Bishop and the bizarre Secretary Bird.

Day 3 continued...

We arrived at Naro Moru River Lodge in time for lunch. Birding the lodge grounds that afternoon yielded first (or better) looks at Sacred Ibis, African Goshawk, Crowned Hornbill, Alpine Swift, Mosque Swallow, Mountain Wagtail, Yellow-whiskered Greenbul, Blue-naped Mousebird, Grey-backed "Camera-Operator", Gray-capped Warbler, Red-faced Crombec, Chin-spot Batis, African Black-headed Oriole, Green-headed Sunbird, Tacazze Sunbird (there were seven (!) sunbirds present), Gray-headed Negrolark, Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Village Indigobird, and Thick-billed Canary. The outstanding mammal for the day was Tree Hyrax - an adult with a youngster peering out a tree cavity.

Day 4 - Wednesday, August 17 Naro Moru; Solio; Quarry; Reservoir; Thomson's Falls; Lake Nakuru

Many of us took advantage of the early morning light to photograph two Crowned Hornbills before breakfast. The walk that followed didn't add anything new except Lesser Honeyguide for most of us, while Chris and Jack picked up Black Cuckoo-Shrike on their unintended private walk. After breakfast, we were off to the Great Rift Valley and our next destination.

The drive to Lake Nakuru proved very birdy indeed. The wide-open Solio Ranch, owned by none other than Warren Buffet, pr

Quail (by some), Helmeted Guineafowl, White-bellied Bustard, Spotted Thick-knee, Three-banded Plover, Blacksmith Plover, Black-winged Plover, Crowned Plover, Rufous-naped Lark, Red-capped Lark, Grassland Pipit, Plain-backed Pipit, Rosy-breasted Longclaw, Capped Wheatear, Rattling Cisticola, Zitting Cisticola, Tawny-flanked Prinia, and Wattled Starling.

Next stop was a quarry where we encountered Little Rock Thrush, Long-billed Pipit, Red-rumped Swallow, and African Sand Martin. A short distance up the road we were shown a Cape Eagle-Owl on a distant cliff. For lunch, we turned off Highway B5 down a long, bumpy dirt road to a reservoir in the foothills of the Aberdare Mountains where we scoped African Black Duck, Yellow-billed Duck, Black Rail, Purple Swamphen (Jerry), Common Moorhen, Holub's Golden Weaver, and a distant view of a Martial Eagle. After a pit stop at the spectacular Thomson's Falls, we picked up the lovely Golden-winged Sunbird near the side of the road before settling in for the rest of our drive to Lake Nakuru.

Day 5 - Thursday, August 18 Lake Nakuru - Lion Hill Lodge

Waking up to the sight of "Lake Pink" was incredible! Seeing several hundred thousand Lesser and Greater Flamingos feeding on the Brine Shrimp in this huge saline lake was something that none of us will ever forget. Great White Pelican, Great Cormorant, Little Egret, Great Egret, Saddle-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Stork, Glossy Ibis, African Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Gray-headed Gull, Gull-billed Tern, Whiskered Tern, White-winged Tern were among the water, shore, and seabirds present.

The lightly wooded borders of the lake proved species-rich as well. The only Leopard seen on our safari was spotted in the morning. It was a two-year old slinking in the grass that I believe (and hope) everyone saw. Primates included Baboons and Vervet Monkeys, while antelopes were represented by the elegant Impala. Five cuckoos were seen that morning: Black and White, Black, Red-chested, Klaas's, and Dieterik. Also: Nyanza Swift, Horus Swift, Broad-billed Roller, Green Wood-hoopoe, Greater Honeyguide, Nubian Woodpecker, Gray Woodpecker, Barn Swallow, Angola Swallow, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Arrow-marked Babbler, Northern Anteater Chat, African Thrush (by some), Pale Flycatcher, Gray-backed Fiscal, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Northern Puffback, Black Cuckoo-shrike, Common Drongo, Gray-headed Sparrow, Spectacled Weaver, Speke's Weaver, Red-headed Weaver, Jackson's Widowbird, African Firefinch, and Golden-breasted Bunting. A before lunch visit to the sewage treatment ponds yielded Cape Teal, Hotentot Teal, and Southern Pochard. As we started back a Little Sparrowhawk, with what looked like a fiscal in his talons, was spotted.

The afternoon found us heading to the western end of the lake. Our vehicle's first sighting was a Striped Kingfisher, then an African Fish Eagle, followed by a Coqui Francolin. We were allowed out of the vehicles on this end of the lake where we enjoyed our first looks at Hippopotamus, Kittlitz's Plover, (with Blacksmith Plover), and yet another perspective of the flamingos. Heading back to the lodge we were treated to great views of White Rhinoceros and our first African Hoopoe.

Want to take a guess at how many birds were seen?.....136!!!!!!

Day 6 - Friday, August 19 Lake Nakuru; Mogotio; Lake Baringo - Island Camp

The Helmeted Guineafowl honked good-bye as we departed Nakuru. Leaving Nakuru we picked up Black-headed Lapwing, Yellow-collared Lovebird, Bearded Woodpecker, Scaly-throated Honeyguide (Jerry), and Red-fronted Barbet. In the area around Mogotio we logged Black-throated Barbet, Pin-tailed Whyda, Silverbird, Jackson's and Hemprich's Hornbills, Maraco and Violet-backed Sunbirds, Jackson's Golden-backed Weaver, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, and Village Weaver. Around Baringo we added White-throated bee-eater, White-headed Buffalo-Weaver and White-billed Buffalo-Weaver before we reached the boat launch. While waiting to board our boats, we enjoyed looks at Purple Heron, Madagascar Bee-eater, and White-fronted Bee-eater.

Island Camp was arguably our group's favorite digs. Spacious private tents, all with views of the lake, made for a delightful setting. Namaqua Dove, Speckled Pigeon, African Mourning Dove, Laughing Dove, and Spotted Morning Thrush were among the first birds seen on the island. The wind kicked up with a rain storm that lasted about as long as lunch. After a siesta we met at the feeders to practice sorting out Little, Lesser Masked, Northern Masked, and Village (Black-headed) Weavers as well as enjoying up-close looks at Beautiful Sunbird. While a striking Yellow-headed Agama Lizard provided photo-ops for all, Joseph spotted a pair of Cabanis's Greenbuls near the boat. The late afternoon boat ride was a delight! Highlights: Common Squacco Heron, Madagascar (Squacco) Pond-Heron, Intermediate (Yellow-billed) Heron, Goliath Heron (we had 9 herons on the day!), diving African Fish Eagle,

Day 7 - Saturday, August 20 Lake Baringo - Island Camp, Escarpment

The hot and dry area around Lake Baringo, at about 3300 feet, was the lowest in elevation for our tour. Our day started with a very pleasant wake-up “call” with coffee or tea, followed by breakfast. About half of us elected to remain at our island paradise, while t□

part) at the base of a large escarpment. Seen from the boat (and by the rest of the group the next day) were African Darter, Striated Heron, and Purple Heron. Joseph and Edwin enlisted the aid of several local “scouts”, the first two of which were picked up in Baringo, while others mysteriously appeared wherever we found ourselves.

Non-avian finds: Rock Hyrax; 12+ butterfly species in a roadside mud hole.

Avian highlights: Black-shouldered Kite, Brown Snake Eagle, Pygmy Falcon, Three-banded (Heuglin’s) Courser (found in the scrub with Slender-tailed Nightjar!), Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, White-faced Scops Owl, Spotted Eagle-Owl, Little Swift, Red-billed Hornbill (also Jackson’s and Hemprich’s), Red and Yellow Barbet, Pink-breasted Lark, Fischer’s Sparrow-Lark, Lesser Striped Swallow, Brown-tailed Rock Chat, Mocking (White-shouldered) Cliff Chat, African Gray Flycatcher, Desert Cisticola, Pale Prinia, Gray Wren-Warbler, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Red-fronted Warbler, Buff-bellied Warbler, Northern Gray Tit, Mouse-colored Penduline Tit, Brubru, Fan-tailed Raven, Bristle-crowned Staling, Magpie Starling (by some), Kenya (Eastern) Violet-backed Sunbird, Hunter’s Sunbird, Chestnut Sparrow, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Chestnut Weaver (by some), Red-billed Quela, Green-winged Pytilia, Crimson-rumped Waxbill, Black-cheeked Waxbill, Blue-capped Cordonbleu, Gray-headed Silverbird (by some), Paradise Whydah, and White-bellied Canary...!!!! Finishing with the courser and the nightjar under the baking sun, we returned to the rest of the group, many of which were relaxing by the pool, and decided to take advantage of the island paradise for the rest of the day.

Day 8 - Sunday, August 21 Lake Baringo - Escarpment; Kerio Valley; Kakamega - Rondo Retreat

Boarding the boats Sunday morning, we began the second half of our safari. First stop on the mainland was The Reptile Museum where we were treated to a tour of the outdoor facility. We learned about snakes (and handled some) and crocodiles while we strolled the lightly wooded grounds enjoying the sunbirds and weavers flitting about. Special attention was paid to the striking Red and Yellow Barbet.

We birded the escarpment from the road and picked up Woolly-necked Stork, Pygmy Falcon, Great Spotted Cuckoo, D’arnaud’s Barbet, Northern Brownbul, Ganbaga Flycatcher, Northern White-crowned Shrike, Gray-headed Bush-Shrike, Slate-colored Boubou, and Rufous-crowned Roller. A short distance later we saw Edwin showed us our first Pearl-spotted Owlet (with a Black-headed Oriole) in a lightly wooded area.

Heading west out of the Great Rift, we climbed up to and crossed the scenic Kerio Valley. Pausing along the road in the mid-day heat, most of us enlisted in what later became known as “The Death March” through a dry scrub area. Species seen: African Pygmy Kingfisher (fly-by), Spot-flanked Barbet, Pygmy Batis, Black-crowned Tchagra (by some), and Black-headed Golonek (by some). We drove to a lightly wooded area nearby for lunch. Several birds interrupted our picnic: White-crested Turaco (spotted by Judy), African Gray Hornbill, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, Nubian Woodpecker, Rufous Chatterer, Wahlberg’s Honeybird, Violet-backed Starling, Red-headed Weaver (Jerry), and Chestnut Weaver. Then we settled in for the long drive west to Kakamega, picking up Red-winged Starling along the way.

Day 9 - Monday, August 22 Kakamega - Rondo Retreat

Kakamega is the eastern most remnant of the West African equatorial rainforest. Rondo itself is used as a host to religious retreats as well as the occasional bird tour. It was quite comfortable and homey. Our morning started with a short drive to nearby river, where we birded from the road. Among birds seen in the morning were: Great Sparrowhawk (largest accipiter), African Pygmy Kingfisher, Blue-headed Bee-eater, the strange Black and White-Casqued Hornbill (lodge), Gray-throated Barbet, Yellow-spotted Barbet, Yellow-billed Barbet, Brown-eared Woodpecker, Plain (Cameroon Sombre) Greenbul, Shelly’s Greenbul, Toro Olive Greenbul, Joyful Greenbul, Northern Black Flycatcher, Green Hylia, Chubb’s Cisticola, Banded Prinia, White-chinned Prinia, Black-throated Apalis, Southern Hylia, Yellow White-eye, Dusky Tit, African Blue Flycatcher, Dusky-crested Flycatcher, Common Wattle-eye, Chestnut Wattle-eye, Gray-green (Bocage’s) Bush-Shrike, Lühder’s Bushshrike, Square-tailed Drongo, Petit’s Cuckoo-shrike, Stuhlman’s Starling, Green Sunbird, Green-headed Sunbird, Black-necked Weaver, Black-billed Weaver, Vieillot’s Black Weaver (lodge), Dark-backed Weaver, Black and White Mannikin, and Oriole-Finch.

The after-lunch drive to the forest yielded our only good looks at Great Blue Turaco. Our forest guide, David, introduced us to many new species including: Blue-spotted Wood Dove, Levillant’s Cuckoo, African Emerald Cuckoo, Gray-chested Illadopsis, Brown Illadopsis, Scaly-breasted Illadopsis, White-tailed Ant Thrush (by some), Uganda Woodland Warbler (Jerry), Pink-footed Puffback, and a gaping Purple-throated Cuckoo-shrike.

A late afternoon walk netted Equatorial Akalat, Snowy-headed Robin-Chat, and Turner’s Eremomela. The monkey seen in the Kakamega area was the Black and White Colobus.

Day 10 - Tuesday, August 23 Kakamega, Lake Victoria, Masai Mara - Mara Intrepids Camp

Departing Rondo after breakfast, we stopped at the river which again proved to be very birdy. All four new species added were knock-outs: Hairy-breasted Barbet, Black-billed Barbet, Double-toothed Barbet, and Red-headed Blue-bill.

We headed south to Lake Victoria, where we spent a few (perhaps a few too many) hours rooting out the specialties of the area: African Open-billed Stork (Ahero at lunch), Lizard Buzzard (Edwin’s vehicle), Water Thick-knee, Collared Pratincole (by some), Long-toed Lapwing, Eastern Gray Plantain (Plantation)-eater, Swamp Flycatcher, Greater Swamp Warbler,

Day 10 continued...

Carruther's Cisticola, Black-headed Gonolek, Papyrus Gonolek, Red-chested Sunbird, Slender-billed Weaver, Yellow-backed Weaver, and Papyrus Canary. After lunch in Ahero we settled in for the long (longer than our guides had anticipated) drive to the Masai Mara sans one backpack.

It was dark by the time we reached the entrance to the Mara, with many kilometers to go before we reached the camp. Dirt roads, sometimes very muddy, slowed our progress. Who would have known that the safari's most memorable experience would occur at this point? We drove through the tail end of an enormous Wildebeest herd that was moving right. A few animals turned back as we approached. A Lioness streaked out after one of the stragglers and tackled the Wildebeest right before our eyes! Grasping the doomed animal by throat the two fell to the ground - Wildebeest on top of Lion. The Wildebeest struggled to its feet with the Lioness still maintaining her asphyxiation hold. They "danced" then fell again. This time she was on top. Two young male Lions approached, one of which "helped out" by neutering the prey. While the scene was unfolding, a pack (50!) of Spotted Hyenas slowly moved in to rob the cats' dinner. WHEW!!!

Finally reaching our destination after 11:00 pm, we were treated to a cooked-to-order feast. We finally retired to our luxurious tents (the hot water bottles were a nice touch) and were serenaded to sleep with the roars of distant lions.

Days 11, 12, 13 (am) - Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, August 24, 25, 26 (am only) Masai Mara - Mara Intrepids Camp

The grand (near) finale of our Kenyan Safari more than lived up to its billing. The Masai Mara is what most people envision about Kenya, and with good reason. The abundant wildlife under clear African skies, on the seemingly endless plains, provided one of the most spectacular habitats one can experience on earth. It certainly caused Janet and I to pause and reflect just how fortunate we were to have experienced this natural wonder. The tent camp was first class as was the fine cuisine.

Numerous antelopes including gazelles and great herds of Wildebeest, Cheetah, Lions, Hyenas, Warthogs, Banded Mongoose

enjoyed. Sadly, Jack had to fly back to Nairobi for his passport on the 25th, but fortunately he was back in about 24 hours thanks to an efficient Origins effort. Luckily, Jack didn't miss many birds or mammals in his absence.

The following is a list of new (or almost new) birds seen during our stay. Some of them were seen from only one vehicle.

Ma

Vulture, Ruppel's Griffon Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, White-headed Vulture, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Brown Snake Eagle (better looks), Bateleur, Pallid Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Gabar Goshawk, Tawny Eagle, Gray Kestrel, Crested Francolin, Red-necked Spurrow, Kori Bustard, White-bellied Bustard (better looks), Black-bellied Bustard, Temminck's Courser, Caspian Plover (by some), Green Sandpiper, Yellow-throated Sandgrouse, Schalow's Turaco (outside Jerry's tent), African Grass Owl (Joseph's vehicle), African palm Swift (better looks), Striped Kingfisher, Little Bee-eater (better looks), African Hoopoe (first looks for half group), Southern Ground Hornbill (by some), Red-fronted Tinkerbird (Mark and Chris), White-tailed Lark, Red-capped Lark (better looks), Fischer's Sparrow-Lark (better looks), Yellow-throated Longclaw (better looks at meadowlark look-a-like), Rosy-breasted Longclaw (better looks), Sooty Chat, Southern Black Flycatcher (better looks), Pectoral-patch Cisticola, Sulphur-breasted Bush-Shrike, Gray-headed Bush-Shrike (better looks), Slate-colored Boubou (better looks), Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Fan-tailed Widowbird, Yellow-mantled Widowbird, and Quail Finch (by some).

Days 13 (pm), 14 (pm) - Friday, Saturday, August 26 (pm), 27 (am) Siana Springs Camp, Nairobi - Karen Blixen Cottages

Our final destination was the Siana Springs Tent Camp just outside the Mara. We arrived for lunch, then some of us birded the grounds. In the late afternoon we visited a nearby scrub land, which was bird-rich. After supper (and an enjoyable Masai dance), most

again was "stolen" by Spotted Hyenas. Dennis tells me that he captured on video the gory blow-by-blow, though I've not seen it yet. The next morning we birded the camp grounds, ate breakfast, and returned to the nearby scrub land before we finally began our return trip to Nairobi. As usual we were running late and had just enough time to shower, gobble a delicious farewell dinner, thank our wonderful guides, and rush off to the airport. Only after we were safely on the plane were we able to begin to contemplate just how absolutely mind-blowing the past two weeks had been - truly A TRIP OF A LIFETIME!

The following birds were new or almost new for the trip:

Coqui Francolin (first looks for half group), Two-banded Courser (ride back to Nairobi), Brown Parrot, Bare-faced Go-away-bird, Dusky Nightjar (night drive), Abyssinian Scimitarbill, Von der Decken's Hornbill, Red-fronted Tinkerbird (by rest of group), Scaly-throated Honeyguide (Mark and Chris), Bearded Woodpecker (by all), Bush Pipit, Mourning (Abyssinian Black) Wheatear, African Bush (Little Rush)-Warbler, Long-tailed Cisticola, Pale Wren-Warbler, Yellow-bellied Eremomela (by some), Red-throated Tit, African Penduline Tit, Magpie Shrike, and Gray-headed Silverbill.