



ON A high

MALAWI'S NYIKA NATIONAL PARK

'Rolling, folding grass-covered country; deep in the heart of Africa and filled with animals of Africa, yet covered with the grasses, the flowers, the colours of Europe...' This was how Laurens van der Post described the Nyika Plateau, which he saw during his 1949 expedition to Malawi and later documented in his book *Venture to the Interior*. Those visiting today will find that very little has changed.

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Nyika, situated in northern Malawi, is a stunning national park that protects the rare montane grassland biome and a rich collection of associated habitat types. The high Nyika Plateau is so dissimilar to the rest of Malawi (or the rest of Africa for that matter) that I felt that I was experiencing a vivid, high-definition birding dream. The rolling grasslands afford impressive mountain-top

vistas and, were it not for the proliferation of big game, you could be forgiven for imagining that you were somewhere in the northern hemisphere. While there are obvious affinities with the rest of the continent, the ecological diversity, phenomenal birding opportunities and sheer beauty found at Nyika are likely to impress even the most blasé visiting birder.

This remote 3 134-square-kilometre wilderness was proclaimed Malawi's first national park in 1966 and to date more than 400 bird species have been recorded here. The Nyika Plateau forms part of the Southern Rift montane forest-grassland mosaic and although it supports fewer endemics than the Albertine Rift and Eastern Arc forests further north, it by no means plays second fiddle when it comes to localised species. With the continuing destruction of afro-montane grassland elsewhere in the immediate region, Nyika provides an important refuge for range-restricted species such as Black-lored and Churring cisticolas, Chapin's Apalis, Blue Swallow, Jackson's Pipit, Scarlet-tufted

Sunbird, Yellow-browed Seedeater and Montane Widowbird. Nyika also contains a number of endemic subspecies, such as Red-winged Francolin *Scleroptila levailantii crawshayi*, Baglafaecht Weaver *Ploceus baglafaecht nyikae* and Rufous-naped Lark *Mirafra africana nyikae*.

Grassland mosaic has the dubious distinction of being one of the most fragmented and threatened habitat types in Africa. Nyika Plateau is one of the few protected areas of grassland in this part of the continent, which makes the continued conservation of the national park critical. Similar grassland systems in southern Tanzania are almost entirely unprotected and are considered to be in a state of rapid decline, while most of Malawi's second largest plateau, the Viphya, has been converted into exotic timber plantations. It was thus refreshing to be in an upland area where the human footprint is so negligible and where ecological processes and species assemblages remain mostly intact.

During the past few years I have had the privilege of visiting Nyika in both wet and dry seasons, and so have come to know the park's various moods. Summer rainfall in Nyika is high (particularly from December to March) as a result of its elevation (for the most part higher than 2 000 metres above sea level). Much of the run-off feeds into Lake Malawi and the plateau thus serves as one of the country's most important water catchment areas. Early summer (October and November), when the plateau is still fairly dry at the end of winter, is probably the best time for birding, as breeding activity is at its peak in the forests and grasslands and there is an influx of migratory species.

After you enter Nyika at the Thazima gate, it is a long drive to the park headquarters and Chelinda Camp. Miombo woodland, comprising mostly *Brachystegia*, *Julbernardia* and *Isobertinia* trees, dominates in the lower altitudes (below 1 800 metres), particularly for the first 15 kilometres from Thazima. As we drove through this pretty woodland type, several mixed feeding flocks whizzed across the road and we followed them on foot. Exciting ticks included White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, Souza's Shrike, Red-capped Crombec, Anchieta's Sunbird, Spotted Creeper and Rufous-bellied Tit – all common flock members. The trick to effective miombo birding is to locate as many of

these feeding flocks as possible and to stay with them on foot as the various species pass through. The action is fast-paced and birds forage at various strata in the vegetation: Trilling Cisticola, Cabanis's Bunting and Wood Pipit prefer the lower levels, Miombo Rock-Thrush the mid-stratum where it often perches unobtrusively, while species such as Yellow-bellied Hyliota and Green-capped Eremomela glean insects at the upper canopy level. Ensure you leave sufficient time to bird this stretch when driving into and out of Nyika.

Eventually, as you climb in altitude, the miombo begins to give way to protea woodland and bracken, and you reach another worthwhile stop at a grove of unmistakable flat-topped *Acacia abyssinica* trees, approximately 20 kilometres from Thazima. Brown Parisomas (resembling tit-babblers) can often be seen in these trees, as can Brown-headed Apalis in the adjoining pocket of forest. If there are any flowering plants in the vicinity, be sure to look out for Green-headed Sunbird as well.

High-altitude grassland is the most obvious habitat of the Nyika Plateau and is increasingly evident as you continue towards Chelinda. During a memorable March visit, the grassy hills and vistas were swathed in green, a scene that seemed to be straight out of the temperate northern hemisphere. In summer, the plateau has an added captivating adornment in the form of vibrant alpine flowers, and Nyika is in fact renowned for its incredible diversity of orchids: more than 200 species have been recorded here. Yet, for birders, it is undoubtedly the abundant avian diversity in summer that is most noteworthy in the grasslands.

Nyika's grasslands harbour Africa's largest breeding population of Blue Swallows – around 300 pairs (see *Africa – Birds & Birding*, 4(5): 36–40). Watching significant numbers of these elegant birds swooping low over the grasslands, the males a stunning iridescent blue-black with long tail streamers, is one of my abiding Nyika memories. This is not the only summer hirundine of note, though, as mixed swallow flocks can include White-headed Saw-wing, Red-rumped and good numbers of Angola, which also breeds at several sites in Nyika. Small coveys of Hildebrandt's Francolin are often seen along the roadside, as is Jackson's Pipit. ▷



Opposite Nyika's grasslands harbour Africa's largest breeding population of Blue Swallows.

Below Bar-tailed Trogon is restricted to isolated montane forests in Africa and can be found at Nyika.





Above In summer, Nyika's grasslands are the perfect playground for visiting harriers, such as this Montagu's.

Opposite, above The forests harbour several star species, for example Chapin's Apalis, which is endemic to montane areas in Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia.

Opposite, below A number of localised specials, such as these distinctive Black-lored Cisticolas, can be found at Nyika.

Several other vegetation types are contained within the grassland environment, the most noticeable being afro-montane forest. These forest patches constitute possibly less than five per cent of the landscape and are confined to fire-sheltered valleys and watercourses between 2 250 and 2 600 metres above sea level. Although relatively small, they offer exciting birding and contribute to the area's diversity.

Key forest pockets we explored included Zovo-Chipolo, Chowo and Manyenjere. As we descended into their tangled depths on indistinct trails, incessant birdsong penetrated the still morning air. Ancient trees festooned with epiphytes and lianas towered around us, while the thick undergrowth was replete with creepers and delicate flowers. Common tree genera such as *Podocarpus*, *Ekebergia*, *Akocanthera* and *Juniperus* all occur. In no time we saw our first Bar-tailed Trogon, Fülleborn's Boubou,

Moustached Tinkerbird, Mountain Thrush and Forest Double-collared Sunbird, widespread residents in all these forests.

Focusing our binoculars on slight movement in the dark understorey revealed a quick sighting of an African Hill Babbler, while Southern Mountain Greenbul crept above us at the same time. The endemic Malawi Batis put up a good showing, as did White-tailed Elminia, Olive-flanked Robin-Chat, Red-faced Crimsonwing and Chapin's Apalis. Forest birding can often be an exercise in patience and dogged determination, but the beauty of exploring the interior of these forests and the birds we succeeded in finding more than compensated. Knowledge of the common calls is a considerable help in identifying species.

In Manyenjere, we came across a marching ant column. As we watched quietly, we saw an inconspicuous Sharpe's Akalat following the column as it disturbed insects,

and caught a glimpse of the stunning White-chested Alethe. Often, as at Chowo, huge granite boulders tower above these forests and they provided the ideal platform to scan for Scarce Swifts. Protea trees at the edge of the forest are frequently visited by sunbirds such as Malachite, Bronzy and Ludwig's Double-collared. Be sure to check all such areas for the prized Scarlet-tufted Sunbird as it occurs in low numbers.

Located in the centre of the plateau, Chelinda Camp (2 300 metres above sea level) is situated at the edge of a pine plantation, a remnant of an agricultural experiment from the 1960s. Although exotic, these trees are not invasive and I must admit, despite my better judgement, that they lend a wonderful ambience to the camp. Chelinda is the perfect base from which to explore Nyika, and even its immediate surroundings offer prime birding. The pines seem to be a haven for raptors, and notable sightings were Augur Buzzard and European Honey-Buzzard. The calls of Dusky Turtle-Doves competed with those of flocks of Yellow-crowned Canaries, and Tree Pipits were a common sight on the forest floor during summer. At dusk, Rwenzori Nightjars became active and, with the aid of a spotlight, we managed to see one right outside our cottage.

A stroll through the *Hagenia* woodland and marshy vegetation below Chelinda Lodge delivered other localised specials, such as the Black-lored Cisticola (with its distinctive 'squeaky-gate' call), Montane Widowbird, Baglafaecht Weaver, Ludwig's Double-collared Sunbird, Mountain Yellow Warbler, Cinnamon Bracken Warbler and Yellow-browed Seedeater. There is a series of small dams nearby, imaginatively named Dams 1, 2 and 3. It is a nice grassland walk to Dam 1 and there is a productive marshland below the dam wall.

We also spent time driving around the grasslands and could not help but marvel at the impressive herds of large mammals found there: roan, eland, Crawshay's zebra, southern reedbuck, bushbuck, wart-hog, spotted hyaena and side-striped jackal all occur. Elephants can be seen on occasion (we caught sight of a distant herd) and one memorable afternoon we located two leopards. The first dashed across the road while the other settled down and lay in >





KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Access and accommodation

From Malawi's capital city, Lilongwe, there is a tar road all the way to Rumphi, after which you realise why it is advisable to be in a 4x4, particularly in summer. The town of Mzuzu is a good place to stock up on any last provisions, and fuel is still available in Rumphi. An airstrip at Chelinda facilitates private charters.

Chelinda Camp and Lodge are run by Wilderness Safaris and both were extensively refurbished in 2010. Chelinda Camp is a charming cluster of cottages fronting onto a dam. Most have two double bedrooms, en-suite bathrooms, a lounge with fireplace, and a kitchen. The best part was that the cottages are 'supplied' with your own resident cook and attendant, so that, although you bring your own food, it can be prepared for you while you are out birding. Chelinda Camp was perfect for us, and probably for most birders on a tighter budget. The luxury log cabins of Chelinda Lodge, which boast panoramic views over the grasslands, are a fully catered option. A campsite is also available.

Useful contacts

www.malawitourism.com,
www.wilderness-safaris.com
 or e-mail info@wilderness.mw

Above Montane Widowbirds are restricted to the highlands of south-western Tanzania and Nyika. The males, resplendent in their breeding plumage, are a common sight during summer.

Below Pristine pockets of indigenous forest yield exciting finds, such as Schalow's Turaco.



front of our vehicle for at least 10 minutes. It was very unusual to see 'high-altitude' leopards, so far from their savanna counterparts, but when we discussed our sighting with Malawian David Foot, a long-time pioneer of Nyika, we learned that the area had once supported one of the highest densities of leopards in Africa.

One of the best plateau drives is the Chelinda circular route, which takes in dams and open grasslands. Both the declining Wattled Crane, which breeds in Nyika's marshy areas, and the locally rare Denham's Bustard are often seen on this road. We were astounded at the number of harriers displaying above the grasslands: Montagu's, Pallid and Western Marsh- are relatively common in summer, providing plenty of opportunities to get comparative views of their tricky diagnostic features. Migrant Lesser Kestrels and Eurasian Hobbies were seen at

a termite emergence, affording amazing photographic chances as they went about catching their prey, and a visit to Chisanga Falls gave us a sighting of Slender-billed Starling.

Another good outing was Fingira Rock (check access with park staff) for Stone Age rock paintings, klipspringers and more grassland bird species. The northern circular route, which gets to Nganda Hill (at 2 607 metres the highest point in the park), allows breathtaking views of Nyika and even of Lake Malawi on a clear day.

The overriding impression of any Nyika visit is one of diversity. The park supports a significant array of range-restricted bird species that are often easier to see there than in southern Tanzania. This northern plateau of Malawi may just be one of the premier grassland destinations left in Africa and is possibly the ultimate high-altitude birding rush on the continent. □

BIRDING NYIKA

You can experience Malawi's Nyika Plateau for yourself by joining our specially arranged tour. See overleaf for details.

Crawshay's zebras and other large mammals are an added attraction in the grasslands.

