

## SOME MAKUENI BIRDS

By BASIL PARSONS

A few notes on the birds of Makueni, a very rich area less than 90 miles from Nairobi, may be of interest.

Most of this country is orchard bush in which species of *Acacia*, *Commiphora*, and *Combretum* predominate, with here and there dense thickets, especially on hillsides. Despite Kamba settlement there is still a wealth of bird life. The average height above sea level is about 3,500 feet, and the 'boma' where we live is at 4,000 feet. To the west and south-west are fine hills with some rocky precipices, the most notable being Nzani.

Much of my bird-watching has been done from a small hide in the garden situated about six feet from the bird-bath, which is near a piece of uncleared bush, and in this way I have been able to see over 60 species at really close range, many of them of great beauty.

Birds of prey are very numerous. The Martial Eagle rests nearby and is sometimes seen passing over. The small Gabar Goshawk raids our Weaver colony when the young are fledging, I have seen both normal and melanistic forms. The Black-shouldered Kite is often seen hovering over the hill slopes, and the cry of the Lizard Buzzard is another familiar sound. Occasionally I have seen the delightful Pigmy Falcon near the house.

Grant's Crested and Scaly Francolins both rouse us in the early morning. On one occasion a pair of the former walked within three feet of my hide. Harlequin Quail are at times attracted into houses at night. A Helmeted Guineafowl once hatched 14 out of 16 eggs from a nest in the bush just below the house.

Doves are numerous, and frequent visitors to the bird-bath. The beautiful Emerald-spotted Wood Dove with its prolonged call, gives us one of the most characteristic Makueni sounds. It seems to have wonderful powers of acceleration when flying up from the bird-bath.

Cuckoos are well represented; the Red-chested, the Emerald, Black and white and Black Cuckoos are all to be heard. The White-browed Coucal is another familiar early morning performer.

White-bellied Go-away Birds are often seen in small parties and they come up close to the house when the fruit on the trees is ripe. They and various species of hornbill are seen everywhere. The Ground Hornbill's booming is sometimes heard before dawn. Parties of Crowned Hornbills often come near the house, and they are very clever at hawking for large grasshoppers. I have also seen one having a struggle to remove a full-grown larva of *Bunæa alcinoe* (Emperor Moth) from its food plant. A Red-billed Hornbill nested once not far from the house, but the female broke out of the hole while still flightless, and was killed by a predator after the male had fed her for several days.

The Black-throated Honey-guide is another characteristic bird and a frequent visitor to the bird-bath, where it drives away other birds. I have twice seen it perform a display flight, producing an extremely loud rushing noise, almost a snorting. It appears to parasitise the Spotted-flanked Barbet—our commonest species—as I have seen this bird driving a Honey-guide from its nest hole.

The Red-fronted Tinker Bird is another very familiar member of the Makueni 'bird orchestra'. Unlike the Barbet I have not seen it come to drink. It makes a tiny nest-hole in a dead limb of a large *Commiphora* tree.

Woodpeckers are common, as might be expected. The only one I have been able to identify with certainty is the large Bearded Woodpecker.

Nightjars are often seen on roads, and one of the local varieties is the small rufous Donaldson-Smith's Nightjar.

Larks and Pipits are not very common, and we never see the beautiful Golden Pipit which can be found at Simba in more open country. The Flappet-Lark is the only Lark commonly to be seen with its unmistakable flight.

The Rufous Chatterer is a common visitor to the bird-bath in dry weather; small parties come and bathe until their feathers are completely soaked, after which they retire into a bush to preen.

The common Bulbul appears to be the White-eared (*Pyconotus dodsoni*). It is quick to detect and mob the snakes, in which it is joined by drongoes and other birds. The other common member of the Bulbul family, which is a very persistent singer, is the Zanzibar Sombre Greenbul, but I have never seen it drink or bathe.

Flycatchers are well represented—perhaps the most noticed is the Chin-spot Puff-back Flycatcher with its rather monotonous song. A pair roosted in a *Lannea* tree near the house, so low down that I was able to touch them without waking them up. Pallid, Spotted (on passage) and Black Flycatchers are also common. The Paradise Flycatcher has nested in a wait-a-bit tree near the house. Here the males are of the white form, and very beautiful. They do not alight at the bird-bath, but dash down from a twig and plunge into the water.

The Bare-eyed Thrush is a rather shy visitor which bathes early in the morning. I found one nest in the low fork of a *Commiphora* tree. Smaller members of the same family are among our best singers, as besides a Robin-Chat (? *C. semirufa*) we have the Spotted Morning Warbler; and, during migration, Nightingales sing freely. The Morning Warbler comes to bathe, but is very shy. Its song at a range of some ten feet is very powerful. It inhabits the dense shady thickets of *Acalypha* and *Acacia brevispica*. Two familiar friends among the 'foreign' birds are the Whitethroat and Willow Warbler, of which the latter sings freely. The most conspicuous resident Warbler is the large Moustache Warbler, which utters its cheery song from a bush or the top of a dead stem. Besides singing its phrase I have heard it making a kind of sub-song which included mimicry of other birds, e.g. the call of the White-crowned Shrike, Paradise Flycatcher, Bulbul and Sunbirds. It nests in long grass near the house. Another Warbler which weaves its beautiful nest in rough grass or low bush is the active little Tawny-flanked (*Prinia*). The Red-faced Crombec visits in small parties and hangs its nest, looking like a piece of spider's web, at the end of briars of *Acacia*.

Of the shrikes the Slate-coloured Boubou is often heard giving its 'duets' while the Brown-headed Bush-shrike is a noisy performer. The large Grey-headed Bush-shrike makes a mournful call. I have never seen any shrike either drink or bathe at the bird-bath. Parties of Helmet-shrikes sometimes pass through the bush near the house, looking rather like large butterflies.

Besides the White-breasted Tit, which is fairly common, the Penduline Tit comes to collect cotton-wool from bushes near the house, and I have seen three nests, all high up in wait-a-bit thorn trees (*Acacia mellifera*). This tiny bird has also come occasionally to roost in empty nests in the Weaver colony.

A pair of White-necked Ravens often frequent the hill and scavenge in the incinerators. When we first lived at Makueni it was very unusual to see a Pied Crow, but they are now common around markets, and have probably come here with the advance of 'civilisation'.

The most commonly seen starlings are the Superb, Hildebrandt's and the Blue-eared Glossy. The former seems to be associated with Sparrow Weavers, and it is very local in its movements—it can be seen a few hundred yards from the house, but never comes into the garden or to the bird-bath. Small parties of the delightful

Yellow White-eye also visit the bird-bath in the dry season, but we may go many months without seeing them.

The best place to see sunbirds is when one of the big *Erythrina* trees is in flower, usually in August or September. But we normally have the Scarlet-chested and Amethyst species around the house, where they are attracted to *aloes*, *salvia*, *ipomæa* and banana flowers. Female sunbirds seem much more addicted to drinking water or bathing than the males.

As might be expected in an area with such varied grassland, the family *Ploceidae* is very well represented, and they are frequent visitors for bird-seed and water. Millet is also grown by the Makueni farmers, who have to spend a lot of time frightening flocks of queleas from their fields.

Both the Red-billed and White-headed Buffalo Weaver occur—the former usually nest in baobab trees and the latter in small colonies in *Balanites* or other thorny species, making barricades along the branches between the nest and the main trunk. The Sparrow Weaver's untidy nests are commonly seen, but, like the Superb Starling, this species never comes into our garden. Sparrows and Rock Sparrows seem rather scarce and shy.

Since 1954 we have had a colony of Layard's Black-headed Weaver (*P. nigriceps*) in a tree a few yards from the house. During the breeding season the birds rather monopolise the bird-bath, but they are a beautiful sight. The old males usually return about mid-August, nesting begins with the short rains in October, and birds are in the colony right through until the end of the long rains in May. *Panicum maximum* (Buffalo Grass) and *Acacia brevispica* leaves form the principal nest materials, lined with a few grass heads and ducks' feathers by the female. It is common for the clutch of eggs to be three. Young males not in full breeding plumage are often to be seen in the colony.

Recently there has been a large roost of the Chestnut Weaver, along with queleas, in bush on the western slopes of Unoa Hill. The birds assembled elsewhere and made a noise, rather as starlings do in Britain, before going into the roost. The Black-necked Weaver is, by contrast, a very shy species which sometimes visits the bird-bath in pairs. Its beautifully-woven nest can be found in dense thickets.

The Red-headed Weaver nested very near the house some years ago (1951) and its groups of nests may be seen in a variety of places. Our male built seven nests in all, one of which was used by the female and one by himself. The nests were very low down and the birds extremely tame. There was certainly only one female, and on one occasion only one young bird fledged. The White-winged Widow-bird is the only species of the widow-bird which appears to be common in Makueni.

The Bronze Mannikin places its nest in lemon or thorny trees very close to the house, sometimes near a hornets' nest. The Grey-headed Silver-bill has occasionally visited the bird-bath, but usually only a pair. The Green-winged Pytilia (*P. melba*) is a resident and very regular in its habits. I have noticed that, like many other small seed-eating birds, it remains paired during the dry season. The African Fire-finch is fairly common, making a quite different call from the familiar Red-billed species. The Black-cheeked Waxbill is another species which keeps together in pairs—they are very fond of bathing. Just at dusk a pair often fly up into the Black-headed Weaver colony and roost in one of the empty nests—at times they are chased by the Weavers. Besides the Red-cheeked Cordon-Bleu, the Purple Grenadier is another beautiful visitor to the bird-bath, and has nested in the garden.

Indigo Birds are sometimes seen, and Whydah Birds are well represented, with Pin-tailed, Straw-tailed, Steel-blue and Paradise all to be seen.

The only common finch is the Yellow-rumped Seed-eater, which is a thirsty little bird, often visiting in small parties and nesting in nearby thickets.

These brief notes may give a slight idea of the wealth of bird-life in the 'bush'.