

NYIKA-VWAZA TRUST (UK)

CONSERVATION RESEARCH NOTE No. 4

BIRD STUDIES AND CONSERVATION ON THE NYIKA PLATEAU

The Nyika National Park in northern Malawi (with a small part also in Zambia) contains a wide range of habitats including extensive upland grasslands and dambos, as well as miombo woodland, montane moist forest patches and even remnant juniper forest. This range of habitats gives rise to a rich bird life, with around 430 species having been recorded. Detailed studies on the species present and their distributions and habitats were carried out by Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire and Bob Dowsett from 1979–1982 (Dowsett-Lemaire 2006, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2006); the Vwaza Marsh was also included (Engel *et al.* 2012, Dowsett-Lemaire 2014). From an ornithological perspective the Nyika is now one of the better-known areas in south-central Africa; it is regarded as an Important Bird Area (Dowsett-Lemaire *et al.* 2001). However, little data has been recorded since then. Given the significant changes in land management practices, such as annual burns, both inside and outside of the Park, there are now concerns over the conservation status of some of the globally-threatened species.

The following proposals are focussed on particular species that are believed to be threatened in order to more clearly understand their current conservation status and possible threats to them. The proposals form part of a wider conservation programme addressing some of these threats.

1. Investigate the status of vulture species. All vultures are now considered endangered in Africa through poisoning or a decrease of large mammal populations; it is known that they are all decreasing in Malawi. Particular species of concern are:
 - White-backed Vulture (Endangered) – decreasing in several parts of Malawi including the Nyika, possibly following decreases of large mammals. Numbers should be monitored – what are the actual maxima observed at carcasses, how does this vary with seasons; what are the age classes observed; do they ever attempt breeding here?
 - Lappet-faced Vulture (Vulnerable) – probably comes in from the Luangwa; numbers need to be monitored,
 - Hooded Vulture (Endangered) – breeds on the Nyika, but is decreasing elsewhere in Malawi,
 - White-headed Vulture (Vulnerable) – known to breed on the Nyika.
2. Populations of Denham's Bustard (Near Threatened) on the Nyika, the most important in Malawi, need monitoring. The species is attracted to burnt grassland and is affected by the burning regime.
3. Much interest has been expressed on the Wattled Crane (Vulnerable), one of the Nyika's iconic birds. Populations have greatly diminished over the last 30 years, with only 1–3 pairs now being recorded, possibly as a result of annual burning of the dambos. The remaining breeding pair(s) should be closely monitored. Any study on this species should link in to research on dambos and wildfires.
4. The Blue Swallow (Vulnerable) is a grassland species breeding in stream-banks, etc. A seasonal breeding visitor to the Nyika, which supports the largest breeding population in Africa (about 300 pairs), its numbers are probably limited by the availability of nest sites. However, this needs to be recorded and monitored.

5. Establish a documentation centre at Chelinda for birds and birders, including relevant reports and papers and a selection of field guides. Copies of the checklist should be made widely available.

These projects, which are primarily documentation or research-orientated at this initial stage, could be implemented separately by a range of people, ranging from National Parks or TFCA staff, visiting foreign students or researchers, Malawian university students, members of the Wildlife and Environmental Society of Malawi (which is the BirdLife International partner). Some aspects could be implemented by local school children.

References:

- Dowsett-Lemaire, F., Dowsett, R.J. & Dyer, M. (2001). Malawi. In: *Important Bird Areas in Africa and Associated Islands* (editors L.D.C. Fishpool & M.I. Evans), pp.539–555. Pisces Publications & BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK.
- Dowsett-Lemaire, F. & Dowsett, R.J. (2006). *The Birds of Malawi*. Tauraco Press and Aves a.s.b.l., Liège, Belgium.
- Dowsett-Lemaire, F. (2006). An annotated list and life history of the birds of Nyika National Park, Malawi-Zambia. In: *A contribution to the ornithology of Malawi*, pp.1–64. Tauraco Research Report No.8. Tauraco Press, Liège, Belgium.
- Dowsett-Lemaire, F. (2014). The avifauna of Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve, northern Malawi. Unpublished checklist, www.nyika-vwaza-trust.org/Library/Vwaza%20Marsh%20bird%20checklist_Dec%202014.pdf
- Engel, J.I., Bates, J.M., Weckstein, J.D. & Gnoske, T.P. (2012). Avifauna of Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve, Malawi. *Journal East African Natural History Society* **101**: 223–240.
- Galanou, E.P. (2016). Vulture's Ecosystem Services Valuation: the case study of Nyika National Park. MSc dissertation, Cranfield University, UK/Nyika Vwaza Trust Research Study Report. <http://www.nyika-vwaza-trust.org/Library/NVT%20UK%20Research%20Study%20Vultures%20Ecosystem%20Services%20Report%202016.pdf>