

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 1979–1983 (Dowsett-Lemaire 2006, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2006); the Vwaza Marsh has also been included (Engel *et al.* 2012, Dowsett-Lemaire 2014). However, few observations have been recorded since then, although there has been a recent study on vultures (Galanou 2016). From an ornithological perspective the Nyika is now one of the better-known areas in south-central Africa and, along with Vwaza Marsh, is regarded as an Important Bird Area (Dowsett-Lemaire *et al.* 2001). Given the significant changes in land management practices both inside and outside of the Park, such as annual burning, 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. Populations of Denham's Bustard (Near Threatened) on the Nyika, the most important site for it in Malawi, need monitoring. The species is attracted to burnt grassland and is affected by the burning regime.
2. Much interest has been expressed on the Wattled Crane (Vulnerable), which was one of the Nyika's iconic birds. Populations have greatly diminished over the last 30 years, with perhaps now none remaining (S. Sichinga, pers. comm.). This is possibly as a result of annual burning of the dambos and wetlands. Any future studies on this species should focus on habitat suitability and threats to dambos.
3. 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:

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