

Mozambique

WAITING TO BE EXPLORED

TEXT **PETER RYAN & ETIENNE MARAIS**

SNAKING ALONG Africa's south-eastern coast, Mozambique boasts a list of some 780 bird species. Despite its turbulent history, for birders it is one of the most exciting areas in the region, with many ornithological mysteries still to be unravelled. It is also accessible and safe and its incredible diversity of habitats holds a plethora of sought-after species. Southern Mozambique is the only place to see 15 of the subregion's specials, such as Saunders's Tern, Böhm's Bee-eater, Green Tinkerbird, Green-headed Oriole, White-chested Alethe, East Coast Akalat, Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher, Mascarene Martin and Olive-headed Weaver. And for a further 35 species, including Blue Quail, Eurasian Bittern, African Pitta, Chestnut-fronted Helmet-shrike, Locust Finch and Lesser Seedcracker, it is the easiest place to see them. For the more adventurous, northern Mozambique is home to more than 50 species not found in southern Africa, including the country's two endemics: Namuli Apalis and Mozambique Forest-warbler.

The sandbanks at the tip of the San Sebastian Peninsula offer safe roost sites for thousands of shorebirds and terns, including impressive flocks of Crab Plovers and Little Terns.



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HADORAM SHIRIHAI

Several birds reach their southern limit in Mozambique. The elusive White-chested Alethe (above) and East Coast Akalat (opposite) are resident in coastal forests north of Beira, whereas the only known southern African population of Olive-headed Weavers (top) is restricted to a small area of miombo woodland near Panda.

At just more than 800 000 square kilometres, Mozambique is the third largest country in southern Africa, after South Africa and Namibia. In terms of ornithological exploration, it was the poor relation in the region because the Portuguese were less interested in natural history than the British or even the Germans. Apart from AA da Rosa Pinto's pioneering

studies in the 1950s and 1960s, most of what was known about Mozambique's birds prior to independence resulted from visits by ornithologists from neighbouring countries. Phillip Clancey's landmark *Birds of Southern Mozambique*, published in two volumes in 1970 and 1971, came out just before the start of the civil war that was to plague the country for two decades. For those of us who started birding in the late 1970s and 1980s, Mozambique and its exotic birds were the stuff of dreams.

The end of the civil war in Zimbabwe in 1980 permitted access to the Eastern Highlands, which share numerous localised species with Mozambique, such as Roberts's Warbler, Chirinda Apalis, Swynnerton's Robin, Stripe-cheeked Greenbul and Red-faced Crimsonwing. Lowland areas along the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border, like the Honde Valley and Haroni-Rusitu Junction, provided birds more typical of the Mozambican coastal plain, including Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo, Pallid Honeyguide, Chestnut-fronted Helmet-shrike, Pale Batis, Tiny Greenbul, Short-winged



Cisticola, Black-headed Apalis, Red-winged Warbler, Marsh Tchagra and Lesser Seedcracker. However, the areas became degraded as people returned after the war and these species are becoming difficult to find in Zimbabwe.

As the civil war in Mozambique wound down in the early 1990s, adventurous birders began to explore the ravaged country. Even the threat of landmines failed to deter the early pioneers such as Rod Cassidy. The first birders to visit the Beira area after the war found most people living close to urban centres. Interestingly, Beira itself was devoid of House Crows – now they are the most common bird. Between towns, large tracts of unpopulated woodland and forest teemed with birds, including specials for the

region such as Kirk's Francolin, Speckle-throated Woodpecker, East Coast Akalat and Plain-backed Sunbird. Other common species included Silvery-cheeked Hornbill, Tiny Greenbul, Black-headed Apalis and the ever-active Livingstone's Flycatcher.

Those venturing off the main road into the vast coutadas, or hunting concessions, found more elusive species such as African Pitta and White-chested Alethe. Pittas are only easy to locate when they are calling, which coincides with the first summer rains in late November/early December. Prior to the war, only three specimens of the alethe had been collected south of the Zambezi River: one from Mount Gorongosa and two from coastal forest north of Dondo. Clancey assumed

that the alethe was a non-breeding winter visitor to the coast because it is confined to montane forest farther north in East Africa. However, it is now known to be a fairly common breeding resident in lowland forest – albeit difficult to actually see!

For many southern African birders, the iconic Mozambique special is the Green-headed Oriole, which is confined to Mount Gorongosa in the region (although it is common in montane forests to the north). The mountain lies north-west of Gorongosa National Park and it is quite a hike to access the forested slopes where the oriole occurs. Unfortunately, access to the mountain has been closed for several years as a result of local disputes. Another >



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much sought-after species in this area is the Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher, also known as the Vanga Flycatcher, which circles above the canopy like a helicopter. It is best looked for near tall stands of *Sterculia* trees, where it builds its nest high up on a forked branch.

The Olive-headed Weaver also is a very localised species south of the Zambezi, known only from a small area of miombo woodland near Panda. Clancey first found the weaver there in the 1960s and Vincent Parker rediscovered it in the 1990s during his epic atlasing of southern Mozambique. It favours trees festooned with old man's beard lichen (*Usnea* spp.), which it uses to build its spectacular nest. The woodland where the weaver occurs experiences frequent mist and low cloud, which promotes the growth of the lichen. However, its future here is precarious as the climate seems to be getting warmer and drier and there

is ongoing clearing of the woodland for agriculture.

INTO THE NORTH

Once most of the bird species of southern Mozambique had been traced again after the war, the focus shifted north. Mozambique is divided in half by the Zambezi River and for most southern African birders the north is *terra incognita* because the birds seen there don't count towards their lists. But the north has arguably the country's best birding. Numerous miombo species absent south of the river are found here, including Pale-billed Hornbill, Stierling's Woodpecker, Miombo Scrub-robin, Böhm's Flycatcher and the stunning Anchieta's Sunbird. And many more species absent from the south are found in the northern forests and scrub, including eight species of greenbuls, six warblers, three canaries, two flycatchers, two robins, two



sunbirds, a bunting, a chat and a spurfowl. The montane forests are the most exciting and it is here that the two Mozambique endemics occur.

In 1932, Jack Vincent described the Dapple-throat and Namuli Apalis from Mount Namuli. The Dapple-throat is a thrush-like forest understorey species related to the Spot-throat (formerly known as the more exotic-sounding Spot-throated Modulatrix). Dapplethroats have since been discovered in other montane forests in Tanzania and northern Mozambique, but the apalis was not seen again until 1998, when an expedition from the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology visited Mount Namuli.

The apalis is locally common on Mount Namuli and has also been discovered at low densities on nearby Mount Mabui. However, its habitat is being cleared for agriculture and it is listed as Endangered. Other noteworthy species found at Mount Namuli include the stunning and highly localised White-winged Apalis and the largest remaining population of Thyolo Alethe, as well as Bar-tailed Trogon, Green Barbet, Olive-flanked Robin-chat, Evergreen Forest Warbler, Eastern Double-collared Sunbird and Bertram's Weaver. It was also



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the first confirmed breeding locality for Red-rumped Swallow in the country.

The other country endemic is the Mozambique Forest-warbler (or Tailorbird), only recently split from the Long-billed Forest-warbler. These two species have long fascinated ornithologists as they only occur at either end of the range of their sister species, the African Forest-warbler. Long-billed Forest-warblers are restricted to the East Usambara mountains of north-eastern Tanzania, where they occur at lower elevations than African Forest-warblers. Mozambique >

above *The Green Tinkerbird was rediscovered just north of Inhambane in 2013. A second population has since been found near the Save River.*

top *The Mount Tsetsera area, bordering Zimbabwe, offers all the birds better known from Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands.*

opposite, above *Olive Bee-eaters breed locally along the coast in early summer.*

opposite, below *Böhm's Spinetails are common over much of the coastal plain.*



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above *The Mozambique Forest-warbler was recently split from the Long-billed Forest-warbler to become Mozambique's second endemic bird species.*

top *The coastal lowlands are dotted with thousands of wetlands, which are home to an amazing diversity of waterbirds.*

opposite *Eurasian Bittern is fairly common at some coastal wetlands.*

Forest-warblers are known only from the Serra Jeci region in northern Mozambique, where they occur together with African Forest-warblers. However, the two species occupy different habitats: Mozambique Forest-warblers occur in the forest canopy and mid-strata, whereas African Forest-warblers are in the understorey.

The Mozambique Forest-warbler was first collected by Jali Makawa in 1945 and not seen again until 2002. More

recently, an expedition in 2016 found it to be common at all three peaks surveyed in the region, but it is also listed as Endangered given its very small range. It was split largely because genetic evidence indicates that it has been isolated from the Tanzanian population for about one million years. However, there are equally deep divisions among four populations of African Forest-warblers from the Usambara, Udzungwa–Rubehe, Uluguru and Serra Jeci–Matengo mountains, which probably also deserve species status.

EXPLORING THE SOUTH

In the early 2000s, the deteriorating political and economic situation in Zimbabwe encouraged more South African birders to visit southern Mozambique, where many 'Zimbabwe' species are more readily accessible. For example, the woodlands in and around Chimanimani National Reserve are among the best places to see a host of miombo species, including African Spotted Creeper, Cinnamon-breasted Tit, Racket-tailed Roller, Green-backed Honeybird, Western Violet-backed Sunbird and Cabanis's Bunting. And the higher elevation montane forests contain all the Eastern Highland specials. Parts of the Mozambican highlands have still to be explored. Recently, a healthy population of Blue Swallows was discovered on the Choa Mountains, which is good news given the increasing loss of this threatened species from Zimbabwe's Nyanga National Park, where much of the swallow's grassland habitat has been invaded by pines and Australian wattles.

More birders mean more discoveries, such as finding a resident population of Böhm's Bee-eaters near Sena on the Zambezi River. This was not too unexpected, as the bee-eater is common along the Shire River, just across the Zambezi from Sena. More exciting was the rediscovery of Green Tinkerbirds north-west of Massinga in 2013. One bird was collected in this area in 1958, but it took a protracted search by Greg Davies and Hugh Chittenden to relocate the species (see *African*



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Birdlife 1(4): 26–30). Sadly, much of the habitat at this site has since been cleared, but a second population was recently discovered in the Save River woodlands, 200 kilometres farther north.

Mozambique also offers excellent wetland birding. The broad coastal plain has thousands of pans and even though most rain falls in summer, many wetlands persist year-round. The mosaic of grassland, wetland and riparian woodland at Rio Savane, north of Beira, has become the most reliable place in southern Africa

to see a host of sought-after birds, including Blue Quail, Eurasian Bittern, Black-rumped Buttonquail, Great Snipe and Locust Finch. It can be particularly productive in winter, when large numbers of Short-tailed Pipits visit the area and there's always a chance of Malagasy Pond Heron and Mascarene Martin, which cross the Mozambique Channel from Madagascar. It's also worth keeping an eye open for Madagascar Pratincoles, which are regular winter visitors farther north along the East African coast.

There's an excitement to birding in Mozambique – a sense that something new might be just around the corner. With most birders working the area south of the Zambezi, it's not surprising that this area has delivered the most new vagrants, including several firsts for southern Africa: Red-tailed Shrike at Sena on the Zambezi River and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in the coastal wetlands at Macaneta, just a stone's throw from Maputo. Regular birding at Macaneta has produced other >



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specials, including Mascarene Martin and Great Snipe.

But it's not just vagrants that are being discovered. We now know that Basra Reed Warblers are regular along the lower Zambezi, although they are hard to locate until late summer when they start to call. The large coastal wetlands also appear to be the main wintering area for the relict population of the rare Steppe Whimbrel. Small numbers of Saunders's Tern occur at the San Sebastian Peninsula, near Vilanculos, virtually year round, despite first being recorded there only in 2019. And Forbes-Watson Swift, found at Inhassoro in 2017, may well be a regular summer migrant to forested coastal areas. North of the Zambezi River, there's even more to discover. For example, the 2016 expedition to Serra Jeci added two new species for Mozambique: Montane Nightjar and Dark Batis.

Böhm's Bee-eaters (above, left) are resident at Sena on the Zambezi River. The increase in birding has seen several southern African firsts for Mozambique, including Saunders's Tern (above) and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (left).

opposite Many Mozambicans rely on charcoal for cooking. Huge volumes are transported into towns from rural areas, resulting in widespread habitat loss.



TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Mozambique offers a wealth of birding opportunities, but its biodiversity is under threat, especially from habitat loss. The protracted civil war helped to protect much of the countryside, but the cessation of hostilities in 1992 saw a rapid increase in timber extraction as well as clearing for subsistence agriculture and charcoal production, which continues today. And although the human population density is fairly low in many areas, birth rates are among the highest in the world; almost half of the population is younger than 15. There needs to be a concerted effort to identify and protect the most important areas for birds and other biodiversity. Fortunately, there are inspiring conservation efforts to protect some of the most extensive areas of forest and woodland in southern Africa, such as The Sanctuary at San Sebastian and the new wildlife area in Coutada 12. Birders can help by atlas-ing and birding off the beaten track. Who knows what gem will be waiting for you? ♦



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OFF YOU GO

For the prepared and patient adventurer, Mozambique offers fantastic birding opportunities. Apart from some bad roads, travel in most of Mozambique is trouble-free and safe. Recent terrorist insurgencies in Cabo Delgado Province have destabilised the far north-east, but this is well away from areas where bird tours visit. All the sites mentioned in this article can be visited by independent birders, except Mount Gorongosa, which has been off-limits for several years and prospective visitors need to check with Gorongosa National Park to see if a visit can be arranged.

Birding is rewarding year round. The onset of summer rains in November/December is best for pittas, but it can be very hot and humid. Late summer (January to March) is best for rare migrants like Basra Reed Warbler, but there's always the risk of having your trip disrupted by a tropical cyclone. The climate is more pleasant during the cooler winter

months, when many species are still in breeding plumage. This is also when non-breeding migratory specials like Malagasy Pond Herons and Mascarene Martins visit Mozambique.

It's a good idea to learn about local customs and laws before you visit. The Drive Moz Facebook page has plenty of helpful advice. Portuguese is the official language, even though it is the second language for most people. But, if stuck, you can usually find somebody who speaks at least some English. Mozambican people are hardy and industrious, friendly and generous. Fresh 'paauw' (bread rolls) are available in even the smallest villages, along with delicious tomatoes, pineapples and other fruit and vegetables.

For short trips, birders from nearby South Africa can drive to Macaneta and Maputo Bay for wetland and coastal forest birding. Macaneta is two hours' drive from Komatipoort and offers many specials, including Rosy-throated Longclaw,

Baillon's Crane and Black Coucal in late summer. Other options for shorter visits include flying to Vilanculos and arranging a boat to visit San Sebastian Peninsula or flying to Beira and renting a vehicle to explore Rio Savane and the coutadas towards the Zambezi.

Useful contacts and accommodation

- For birders wanting more guidance in the field, Etienne Marais Birding offers regular trips lasting eight to 21 days, focusing mainly on southern Mozambique. Contact 063 360 4916 or e-mail info@etiennebirding.com
- Mphingwe – mphingwe.com
Rustic cabins on a beautiful forestry concession – the base most birders use to explore the coutadas.
- Gorongosa National Park – gorongosa.org/accommodation-at-gorongosa
- Jacana Camp, San Sebastian Peninsula – mozsanctuary.com/news/jacana-camp
E-mail Taryn Gilroy at operations@mozsanctuary.com