

ETHIOPIA

Birding the roof of Africa

Text by Peter Ryan and Ian Sinclair

Ethiopia is fast earning a reputation as one of the world's premier birding spots. It boasts some 800 bird species, representing a wide variety of families. More importantly, there are 30 endemic species and many more are restricted to the semi-arid area that extends eastwards into Somalia. For people intent on seeing as many birds as possible, it is a must to visit.

However, Ethiopia also has a lot to offer the more casual bird watcher. Situated at the junction of the Palearctic and Afrotropical regions, it offers an intriguing mix of birds in an ageless landscape. Given the remarkable tameness of the wildlife, you could imagine you had stumbled into a forgotten Eden.

The village of Ankober, home to the endemic Ankober Serin, lies perched on an escarpment north-east of Addis Ababa.

PHOTOGRAPH: PETER RYAN



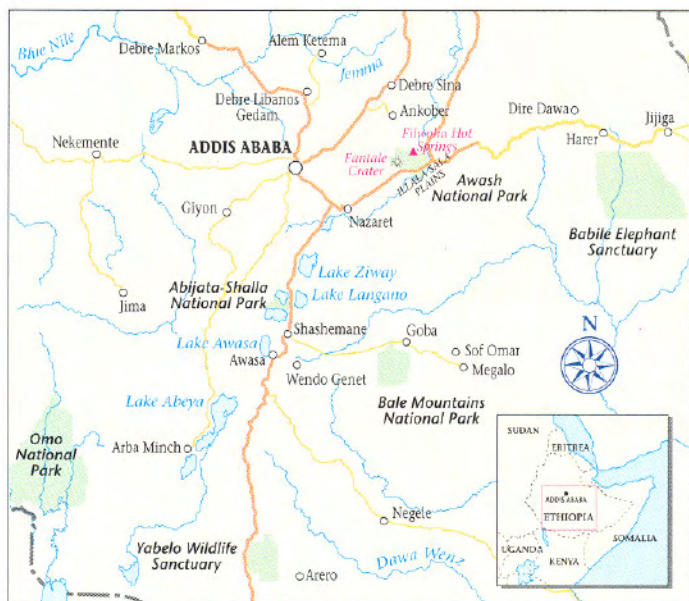
Ethiopia is a vast land of almost one million square kilometres, with habitats that range from lush lowland forest to alpine moorlands, and from papyrus swamps to arid savannas. There is enough diversity to keep a birder occupied for years. Fortunately for the time-limited tourist, however, most of the endemic birds and a fair cross-section of the rest of the avifauna can be seen in a manageable area encompassing the central and southern part of the country.

The Rift Valley divides Ethiopia into east and west, and is flanked by mountains more than 4 000 metres high. These highlands are home to most of the endemic birds. Addis Ababa, the capital and the main gateway for visitors, lies on the western plateau at an altitude of about 2 600 metres. It is a bustling city with more than three million inhabitants, but is not without attractions.

Hooded Vultures and Pink-breasted Turtle Doves share the crowded road verges with pedestrians, and White-collared Pigeons and Brown-rumped Seed eaters fill the niches typically occupied by Feral Pigeons and House Sparrows. Small islands of vegetation support black-and-white colobus monkeys and, at dusk, spotted hyenas scour the market area.

Gerfersa Reservoir, on the outskirts of the town, gives a foretaste of the joys of birding in Ethiopia. Many of the endemic birds, such as Wattled Ibis, Blue-winged Goose, Rouget's Rail, Abyssinian Longclaw and Black-headed Siskin are common here, and allow close approach. The remarkable tameness of the native birds apparently results from strict dietary mores shared by Orthodox Christians and Muslims, which each comprise almost half the population. Unlike most African countries, catapults are rarely seen, and Ethiopians appear shocked if one suggests eating wild birds. Gerfersa also supports many more widespread birds, especially in winter when there are many Palearctic migrant ducks, waders, wheatears and pipits. The migrants are noticeably warier than the resident species!

Many of the highland endemics are forest birds, and the options for finding these in the vicinity of Addis Ababa are rather limited – although Ethiopians don't hunt their wildlife, they are not averse to cutting down trees to meet their tremendous demand for wood. Most of the forests have been felled and replaced by eucalypt plantations, which are a poor substitute for the native



forests as far as birds are concerned. Debre Libanos, a large church compound that protects a patch of forest 120 kilometres north of Addis, is a notable exception. Although some wood is gathered, it is an island of forest in a sea of croplands, and supports a host of endemic species. Rüppell's Chats hop at the feet of penitents outside the church and flocks of White-billed Starlings perch on the domed church roof and adjacent trees. The ringing songs of the Abyssinian Black-headed Oriole and the enigmatic Abyssinian Catbird draw you into the forest, while Erckel's Francolins call from the cliffs that tower over both church and forest.

Debre Libanos provides forest birding at its best: the birds are abundant, confiding, and, thanks to the sloping topography, you don't even have to crane your neck to observe canopy species. Dusky and Abyssinian Slaty flycatchers hawk for insects, Brown Woodland Warblers

and Montane White-eyes glean among the foliage, and Tacazze and Variable sunbirds fight over *Leonotis* flowers. Rüppell's Robins hop boldly on the forest floor, while overhead White-cheeked Turacos clamber around the canopy. Less common, but still worth searching for, are the endemic Banded Barbet and Abyssinian Woodpecker.

Debre Libanos is perched on the lip of a deep gorge cut into the western highlands by the Jemma River, a tributary of the Blue Nile. The

Below *Rouget's Rails are much more confiding than most rails. Almost the size of a Moorhen, they commonly feed in the open. They are restricted to the Ethiopian highlands.*



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cliffs adjacent to the church are frequented by a host of raptors and vultures as well as yet more endemics: the White-winged Cliff Chat and Gelada baboon. Nearby, the road to Alem Ketema drops into the Jemma Valley, and the fields by the bridge over the river are one of the best localities for the extremely local Harwood's Francolin. However, the francolin is seldom seen after the dawn calling period, so it requires a very early start.

Another extremely restricted endemic found in the highlands north of Addis is the Ankober Serin. This species, discovered in 1976, is known only from a 50-kilometre stretch of the eastern escarpment of the western highlands between Ankober and Debre Sina above 3 000 metres. The bird is not much to look at, but that is more than made up for by the spectacular terrain in which it lives. Flocks flit along the near-vertical slopes that fall sheer into the Rift Valley, more than 1 000 metres below.

From the western highlands at Ankober, the intrepid birder can head straight down (almost literally!) into the Rift Valley and head cross-country to Awash National Park. Here, at around 1 000 metres above sea level, the climate is much hotter and drier than the adjacent mountain peaks. The rugged, volcanic landscape is clothed in arid acacia savanna, which feels more African than do the highlands. The diversity of birds is greater here, but there are fewer endemics. The open, grassy Illala Sala Plains near the park headquarters support a variety of mammals, including Beisa oryx, Soemmering's gazelle and lesser kudu. However, much of the 'reserve' is occupied by nomadic Afar and Oromo tribes with their goats and cattle. The men are ►



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Above The forests around the church compound of Debre Libanos can provide great birding.

Below The Rosy-patched Bush Shrike can be found in the acacia savannas at Awash.

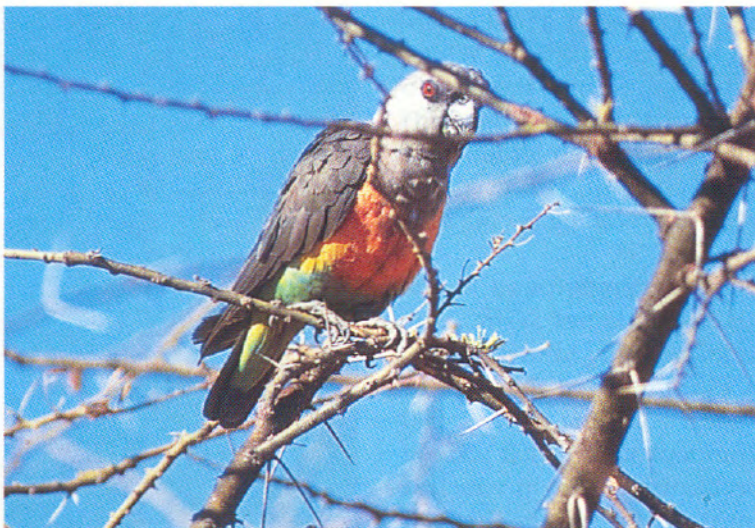
IAN SINCLAIR



armed with daggers and automatic rifles, which can be a little disconcerting, so the authorities insist that tourist vehicles engage an armed guard before heading away from the core region of the park.

Awash is bustard country and five species can be seen in one day, including both the Arabian and Kori. The park's avifauna has a distinctly Afrotropical flavour, with Abyssinian Rollers, Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbills, White-bellied Go-away Birds and Red-winged Bush Larks perched on tree tops. The near-endemic Gillett's Lark performs short, staccato flights over open grassy areas. Rosy-patched Bush Shrikes skulk in the acacias, while Somali Fiscal Shrikes compete for hunting perches with migrant Red-backed, Red-tailed, Woodchat and Great Grey shrikes. Gaudy groups of D'Arnaud's Barbets giggle insanely, watching Yellow-throated Spurfowl scratch their way along the roadsides.

A picturesque oasis of branching doum palms surrounds the hot springs at Filwoha, in the north of the park, but the water is too hot to be inviting during the heat of the day. Other watercourses are characterized by



Above *The male Orange-bellied Parrot.*

ALAN WEAVING

dense thickets, which support a multitude of birds such as Bruce's Green Pigeon, Orange-bellied Parrot, Blue-naped Mousebird, Red-fronted Warbler, Slate-coloured Boubou and Nile Valley Sunbird. Fantale Mountain, an active volcano rising more than 500 metres above the surrounding plain, is one of the few known sites for the endemic Yellow-throated Canary as well as the scarce Sombre Rock

Chat. An evening drive to the waterfall near the park headquarters should produce Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and Slender-tailed Nightjar, while Three-banded Courser and Star-spotted Nightjar are found on the nearby airstrip after dark.

Heading south through the Rift Valley, most land is cultivated. Clapperton's Francolins occur in the fields, and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters and Grey-backed Fiscal Shrikes are common on roadside wires. Remnant patches of tall woodland in the Abijata Shalla Lakes National Park contain species such as Von der Decken's Hornbill, Black-billed and Black woodhoopoes, Abyssinian Scimitarbill and Little Rock Thrush. ▸

Below *Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse can be found near the park headquarters of the Awash National Park.*

ALAN WEAVING



Farther south, forest remnants along the shore of Lake Awasa are worth visiting; the endemic Black-winged Lovebird is particularly common. The Rift Valley lakes support vast numbers of waterbirds, and are important wintering areas for many Palearctic species. Flights of thousands of Common Cranes fill the sky as they commute to the lakes to roost. The marsh fringing Lake Ziway deserves special mention for its dazzling array of pelicans, storks, herons, ducks, rails, waders, gulls, terns and kingfishers, which are unconcerned by the steady stream of human traffic along the road that runs through the marsh.

The south-east highlands rise to the east of Awasa. Wendo Genet, near Shashemane on the eastern edge of the Rift Valley, is a good spot for the endemic Yellow-fronted Parrot, as well as a host of other forest species. It also is a popular holiday destination for its hot mineral springs, and is one of the few places where it may be necessary to book accommodation in advance. Farther east, the Bale Mountains National Park headquarters at Dinsho have confiding populations of mountain nyala and Menelik's



Above *The male Von der Decken's Hornbill.*

CHRISTOPHER BATER/NHPA

land forest birds. Above 3 400 metres the forest gives way to heathlands which contain plant species that wouldn't look out of place in the Cape fynbos, as well as towering giant lobelias. Here the Chestnut-naped Francolin is common, as is a very distinctive form of 'Brown' Parisoma – almost certainly a separate species, differing from typical Brown Parisomas in both plumage and behaviour.

Above 4 000 metres, the land flattens to form the Sanetti Plateau, a gently undulating upland dotted with tarns, where the heathland is replaced by moorland. Here the southernmost populations of Red-billed Choughs and Ruddy Shelducks breed next to the northernmost population of Wattled Cranes in a head-on clash of Palearctic >

bushbuck, as well as forest birds including Abyssinian Owl and White-backed Black Tit. Rouget's Rails and Spot-breasted Plovers are abundant on the adjacent heathlands, and there is a chance of seeing the rare Simien fox.

East of Dinsho the road passes through Goba and then rises up to more than 4 300 metres into the Bale Mountains. The lower slopes are clad in forest, which supports the usual array of high-

Below *The marsh fringing Lake Ziway can produce a dazzling array of pelicans, storks, ducks, rails and assorted waders.*

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Above The Thick-billed Raven, which is endemic to Ethiopia, has to be the most impressive crow around.

TRAVELLER'S ADVISORY

WHEN TO GO?

Birding in Ethiopia is good throughout the year. Most birders visit in winter, when Palearctic migrants are present and there is little rain. Unfortunately, resident species are not breeding then, making ploceids hard to identify. The main rains are during June–September, so May is a good month to visit.

HOW TO GET THERE?

Ethiopian Airlines runs a large fleet of modern airplanes, with regular flights into Addis Ababa from most major centres.

GETTING AROUND

Public transport is slow and doesn't reach many of the best birding sites; rent a car if at all possible. A plethora of tour companies in Addis rent out vehicles with drivers (essential given the lack of signposts and frequent checkpoints). Four-wheel drive is advisable for visiting the more remote sites, including the Sanetti Plateau and the road between Negele and Yabelo.

FIELDGUIDES

Ber von Perlo's 1995 Illustrated Checklist to the Birds of East

Africa is a good start, but you probably still want Mackworth-Praed & Grant as a backup. The new volume *Birds of Kenya and northern Tanzania*, by Zimmerman et al. also covers many Ethiopian species. If you're there in winter, a Palearctic guide covering the Middle East is useful for migrants.

TRAVEL TIPS

Visitors are required to obtain a visa (\$70!) and have a valid yellow fever vaccination certificate. Driving is on the right-hand side (nominally), and AC supply is 220 volts by way of two-pin plugs.

Chloroquine-resistant strains of malaria can be a problem. Suncream and hats are advisable, especially in the highlands. The local food is much more interesting than the stuff served in tourist hotels, but take an adequate supply of anti-diarrhoea pills.

Finally, as our guidebook delicately put it, 'due to the rapid growth in AIDS, visitors are advised to take the necessary precautions in the event of planned or unplanned sexual adventures'!

and Afrotropical avifaunas. The plateau also is home to huge numbers of rodents, including the bizarre giant mole rat, which creeps halfway out of its burrow like a fluffy ginger hand-puppet to gather a huge mouthful of vegetation before retracting. The rodents attract an impressive assemblage of raptors, including Steppe, Greater Spotted, Imperial and Golden eagles.

From Goba, the road continues east to Sof Omar, which is the best known place to find Salvadori's Siskin, a species restricted to the more arid slopes of the south-east highlands. South of the Sanetti Plateau, a track runs downhill through the vast Haremma Forest to Negele. This is the only known locality for the very poorly known Sidamo Lark, apparently a close relative to Rudd's Lark. West of Negele, the road crosses the Dawa River, a good site for African White-winged Dove, and then meanders through open savanna with towering red termite chimneys. A short detour leads to Arero, perched on a low hill capped with the remnants of a juniper forest which still supports small numbers of the endemic Ruspoli's Turaco. However, the main attraction of the far south lies farther west, where two birds are inexplicably restricted to the small area between Arero, Yabelo and Mega: the White-tailed Swallow and Stresemann's Bush Crow.

The White-tailed Swallow is a scarce resident, thought to breed in aardvark holes in termite mounds. It is a dainty bird, resembling a Pearl-breasted Swallow with a translucent white tail. Stresemann's Bush Crow is much more common within its restricted range, with small parties loosely associated with groups of Superb and White-capped starlings. Standing with a flock of these enigmatic birds digging in the ground around your feet is a moment to be relished and remembered! ▷

Below Moorland Francolins *Francolinus psilolaemus*, resembling a cross between Grey-winged and Red-winged francolins (*F. africanus* and *F. levaillantii*), are common on the Sanetti Plateau.



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Above Abyssinian Ground Hornbills, with their plastic-looking casques, are scarce but widespread in Ethiopia.

There are other interesting birds in these southern savannas, such as the rather grotesque Abyssinian Ground Hornbills, the industrious Grey-headed Social Weavers and the incomparably beautiful Golden-breasted Starlings, but these are of secondary interest to the two local stars.

This account mentions an awful lot of birds, which is a reflection of the high quality of birding in Ethiopia. In a two-week trip you should expect to see about 400 species and, because of the approachability of the birds, many species clamour for a mention. However, one bird that perhaps stands out above all others is the Thick-billed Raven. This Ethiopian endemic must be the ultimate crow; the fact that the birds are tame and scavenge in towns adds to rather than detracts from their appeal. Photographs simply don't do the bird justice!

There is still much to be learned about the birds of Ethiopia. Most birders visiting the country merely visit the well known areas looking for the endemics. There are bound to be new species awaiting discovery by the more intrepid birder. But even if you only have time for a quick visit, make the effort. The birding is supremely rewarding, and given the spectacular scenery, a benign climate, and a wealth of cultural and historical interest, you have all the ingredients for an unforgettable birding holiday.

Don't be put off by harrowing images of starving children – Ethiopia has come a long way from the suffering triggered by the combined effects of drought and an uncaring dictatorship. The country's mood is optimistic following political reform, but it needs as many visitors as possible to maintain that optimism. □

BIRD SPECIES

(Listed in the order in which they appear in the article)

Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus*
Pink-breasted Turtle Dove *Streptopelia lugens*
White-collared Pigeon *Columba albitorques*
Brown-rumped Seedeater *Serinus tristriatus*
Feral Pigeon *Columba livea*
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
Wattled Ibis *Bostrychia carunculata*
Blue-winged Goose *Cyanochen cyanopterus*
Rouget's Rail *Rougetius rougetii*
Abyssinian Longclaw *Macronyx flavicollis*
Black-headed Siskin *Serinus nigricaps*
Rüppell's Chat *Myrmecocichla melaena*
White-billed Starling *Onychognathus albirostris*
Abyssinian Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus monacha*
Abyssinian Catbird *Parophasma gallinieri*
Erckel's Francolin *Francolinus erckelii*
Dusky Flycatcher *Muscicapa adusta*
Abyssinian Slaty Flycatcher *Dioptornis chocolatinus*
Brown Woodland Warbler *Phylloscopus umbrivirens*
Montane White-eye *Zosterops poliopterus*
Taczaze Sunbird *Nectarinia taczaze*
Variable Sunbird *N. venusta*
Cossypha *semitrifa*
White-cheeked Turaco *Tauraco leucotis*
Banded Barbet *Lybius undatus*
Abyssinian Woodpecker *Campethera abyssinicus*
White-winged Cliff Chat *Thamnolaea semirufa*
Harwood's Francolin *Francolinus harwoodi*
Ankober Serin *Serinus ankoberensis*
Arabian Bustard *Ardeotis arabs*
Kori Bustard *A. kori*
Abyssinian Roller *Coracias abyssinica*
Eastern Yellow-billed Hornbill *Tockus flavirostris*
White-bellied Go-away Bird *Corythaixoides leucogaster*
Red-winged Bush Lark *Mirafra hypermetra*
Gillett's Lark *Mirafra gilletti*
Rosy-patched Bush Shrike *Rhodophoneus cruentus*

Somali Fiscal Shrike *Lanius somalicus*
Red-backed Shrike *L. collurio*
Red-tailed Shrike *L. isabellinus*
Woodchat Shrike *L. senator*
Great Grey Shrike *L. excubitor*
D'Arnaud's Barbet *Trachyphonus darnaudii*
Yellow-throated Sparrow *Francolinus leucoscepus*
Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waalia*
Orange-bellied Parrot *Poicephalus rufiventris*
Blue-naped Mousebird *Colius macrourus*
Red-fronted Warbler *Spiloptila ruifrons*
Slate-coloured Boubou *Laniarius lunebris*
Nile Valley Sunbird *Anthreptes metallicus*
Yellow-throated Canary *Serinus flavigula*
Sombre Rock Chat *Cercomela dubia*
Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*
Slender-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus clarus*
Three-banded Courser *Rhinoptilus cinctus*
Star-spotted Nightjar *Caprimulgus stellatus*
Clapperton's Francolin *Francolinus clappertoni*
Northern Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicus*
Grey-backed Fiscal Shrike *Lanius excubitoroides*
Von der Decken's Hornbill *Tockus deckeni*
Black-billed Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus somaliensis*
Black Woodhoopoe *P. aterrimus*
Abyssinian Scimitarbill *Rhinopomastus minor*
Little Rock Thrush *Monticola rufocinereus*
Black-winged Lovebird *Agapornis taranta*
Common Crane *Grus grus*
Yellow-fronted Parrot *Poicephalus flavifrons*
Abyssinian Owl *Asio abyssinicus*
White-backed Black Tit *Parus leuconotus*
Spot-breasted Plover *Vanellus melanocephalus*
Chestnut-naped Francolin *Francolinus castaneicollis*

'Brown' Parusoma *Parusoma (lugens) griseiventris*
Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*
Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*
Wattled Crane *Grus carunculatus*
Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*
Greater Spotted Eagle *A. clanga*
Imperial Eagle *A. heliaca*
Golden Eagle *A. chrysaetos*
Salvadori's Siskin *Serinus xantholaemus*
African White-winged Dove *Streptopelia reichenowi*
Sidamo Lark *Heteromirafra sidamoensis*
Rudd's Lark *H. ruddi*
Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii*
White-tailed Swallow *Hirundo megaensis*
Stresemann's Bush Crow *Zavattariornis stresemanni*
Pearl-breasted Swallow *Hirundo dimidiata*
Superb Starling *Lamprolornis superbus*
White-capped Starling *Spreo albicapillus*
Abyssinian Ground Hornbill *Bucorvus abyssinicus*
Grey-headed Social Weaver *Pseudonigrita arnaudi*
Golden-breasted Starling *Cosmopsarus regius*
Thick-billed Raven *Corvus crassirostris*

MAMMAL SPECIES

black-and-white colobus monkey *Colobus abyssinicus*
spotted hyaena *Crocuta crocuta*
Gelada baboon *Theropithecus gelada*
Beisa oryx *Oryx beisa*
Soemmering's gazelle *Gazella soemmeringi*
lesser kudu *Tragelaphus imberbis*
mountain nyala *Tragelaphus buxtoni*
Menelik's bushbuck *T. scriptus menelikii*
Simien fox *Canis simiensis*
giant mole rat *Tachyoryctes macrocephalus*

Right Stresemann's Bush Crow is probably the 'most wanted bird' for visitors to Ethiopia.

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