

IMPORTANT Bird Areas

Conserving Africa's hottest birding hotspots

Since its inception at the 1992 PAOC in Burundi, BirdLife International's African Important Bird Areas (IBA) programme has progressed steadily. It is now on the verge of a defining moment – the launch of a continent-wide directory – in South Africa in October 2001.

Here *Keith Barnes* and *Lincoln Fishpool* explain when an important bird area is an Important Bird Area and how the programme is revolutionising bird conservation throughout Africa.

Above The extensive lowland and montane forest of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda is a prime Important Bird Area, supporting 24 restricted species of the Albertine Rift Endemic Bird Area.

WHAT ARE IBAS?

Put simply, IBAs are sites, either protected or unprotected, that are vital for the conservation of the world's birds. Because IBAs target specific suites of birds, usually threatened, rare or range-restricted species, they often double as some of the finest birding destinations in Africa, particularly for those birders seeking more elusive species. Morocco's Souss and Massa estuaries, the Taï National Park in Côte d'Ivoire (the largest continuous stretch of rainforest in Upper Guinea), Tanzania's Serengeti plains, the proposed Grassland Biosphere Reserve near Wakkerstroom in South Africa, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest in coastal Kenya and the Ranomafana National Park in Madagascar are all IBAs. What makes them IBAs is that they are well-defined sites with boundaries – it is possible to demarcate and conserve them – and they each hold one or more of a particular set of special birds, worthy of specific conservation concern. Also,

because IBAs are selected using identical and standardised criteria, an IBA in Gabon is the same as an IBA in Liberia, Malawi, Iraq or England and as a result they form a global conservation currency.

HOW ARE IBAS SELECTED?

Knowledge about certain sites and species is highly variable across Africa, from the well-atlased provinces of South Africa to the unknown terrain of war-torn Somalia or the unexplored lowland rainforests of the Central African Republic. To be able to select sites across such a variety of areas, with differing levels of information available, emphasis was placed on measurable, but easily and widely applicable criteria. Furthermore, the criteria had to be applied to a host of tropical environments and diverse avifaunas in nearly 55 nation states. As a result, the presence of one or more of the following groups of species can qualify a site as a global IBA.

Globally threatened species

BirdLife International in Cambridge recently compiled a list of all the bird species in the world that are threatened with global extinction. If a site regularly holds one or more of these species it can qualify as an IBA. Of the 1 186 bird species threatened or near-threatened with global extinction, 340 (28.7 per cent) are found in Africa and its satellite islands. Most of these species are threatened by habitat loss. In an effort to conserve them, where these species occur in good numbers IBAs are designated, monitored and protected.

Africa's lowland tropical forests hold two bizarre and magnificent globally threatened species: the rockfowl or *Picathartes*. The Yellow-headed Rockfowl is endemic to Upper Guinea and the Grey-necked Rockfowl occurs from Nigeria to Gabon. Living in the darkest recesses of lowland rainforest, these birds build mud-cup nests and breed colonially in caves or near boulder outcrops. They require

The IBA programme aims to identify and protect a network of sites throughout the world that are critical for naturally occurring bird populations

overhanging rock to protect the nest from rain, and sheer cliffs below to protect it from predators. These highly specific requirements mean that there are massive tracts of pristine rainforest where rockfowl are naturally absent. Specific IBAs protecting areas where they occur, such as Mount Peko and Taï National Park in Côte d'Ivoire, are required if these birds are to persist into this century. To aid this process, the IBA programme promotes surveys to search for, and protect, additional sites where these birds dwell. As a result, several new breeding localities have been found and measures implemented to safeguard them.

The Houbara Bustard, a species of global conservation concern, has long been the

favoured quarry of hunters in the Middle East and North Africa. In particular, habitat degradation and past falconry pressures have exacted a heavy toll on these noble and stately creatures, resulting in their precipitous decline. In Morocco, Tunisia and Libya, IBAs have been designated, amongst other reasons, to help protect them. Also, captive breeding and release programmes have been initiated for this species: hand-reared birds are released into IBAs where local Bedouins act as custodians, ensuring that eggs and nests are not trampled by livestock.

Restricted-range species

This category is concerned with species which have relatively tiny world distributions – less than 50 000 square kilometres. Roughly the size of Sierra Leone, less than half the size of England or one-twelfth the size of Texas, 50 000 square kilometres is a minuscule proportion of the earth's surface area. At first, one would guess that



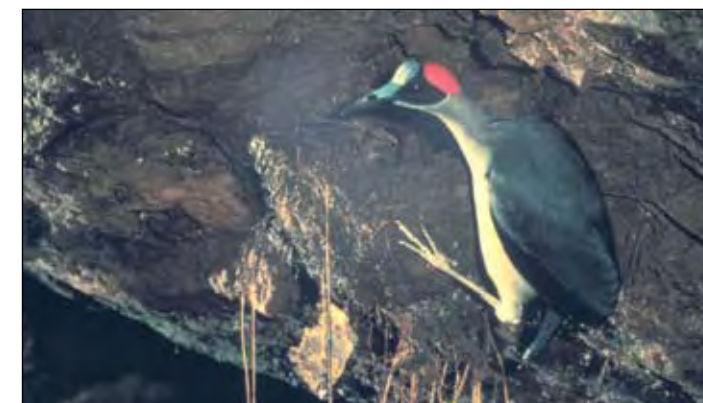
The dainty and delicate Red-headed Bluebill, restricted to the moist Guinea Forest biome.



The Alpine Chat is contained by the alpine zones of East Africa's giant mountains, such as Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya.



The Red-throated Alethe, a restricted-range species of the Albertine Rift Endemic Bird Area.



The Grey-necked Rockfowl, a highly threatened cave-dwelling resident that occurs from Nigeria to Gabon.

Right Fischer's Lovebird, which has a very small global range, is restricted to the Serengeti Plains system.

Right, below Congregatory species, such as the Cape Gannet, breed at only five islands in the world, and number tens of thousands at each island.

Below The Houbara Bustard, a globally threatened species, is being bred and returned to the wild, such as at this facility in Morocco.



KEITH BARNES (4)



very few species in the world have such small distributions, but Africa holds more than 370 of these localised and specialised birds. Europe, by comparison, holds only two restricted-range species.

When two or more restricted-range species overlap, this is thought to represent an evolutionary node holding a high concentration of species with small global ranges, and where it occurs it is termed an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) by BirdLife International. In certain areas, such as in the Albertine Rift in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, up to 37 restricted-range species overlap. The conservation of sites at these EBA nodes is vitally important for long-term biodiversity conservation. Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is one such site, holding 24 of the 37 restricted-range species of the Albertine Rift, including the spectacular Red-throated Alethe and the scarce African Green Broadbill. IBAs in EBAs tend also to be important sites for other animals and plants, and nowhere is that more apparent than at Bwindi, which famously also supports more than half the world's population of mountain gorillas. The African mainland holds 19 EBAs,

including Tanzania's crystalline Eastern Arc and South Africa's Cape fynbos, areas known to hold masses of unique plants and animals.

By identifying IBAs (in EBAs), sites that hold not only endemic birds, but also a host of other endemic biodiversity, can be protected.

Biome-restricted assemblages

Although many bird species have restricted ranges, many others have distributions much larger than 50 000 square kilometres, but are restricted to a very specialised habitat type or biome, and are therefore of global importance. A biome is normally a major regional ecological community characterised by distinctive life forms and principal plant species.

A good example of this might be the Namib-Karoo biome, a large area encompassing western South Africa, Namibia and south-western Angola, but with many species that are restricted to a certain region and found nowhere else in the world. As these countries bear the global responsibility for the conservation and management of these bird species and their biomes, a co-ordinated IBA network

ensuring that all the species restricted to the biome are conserved in a complementary fashion is essential.

Congregations

The final category concerns birds that for one or other reason gather together in large numbers. Congregatory species are often vulnerable to catastrophic incidents that impact on single sites. Flamingos at Lake Natron may be poisoned, Rüppell's Griffon Vultures on a cliff wall may be disturbed during breeding, or Bank Cormorants on Robben Island may be impacted by overfishing. Where birds congregate, they are susceptible to a variety of human-induced impacts.

The African Penguin provides a fine example of this. European sailors arriving at Namibian and South African islands in the 17th century could not believe their eyes when they saw the thousands of penguin eggs, healthy protein for a hungry seaman. Although the nests were plundered, the sheer abundance of penguins, numbering in the several millions, could probably handle the initial predation. But in the 1900s, the harvesting for fertiliser of the metres-thick layers of guano (termed

'white gold') in which the penguins bred, together with over-fishing and increased incidences of oil-spills, eventually took their toll. Between 1910 and 1994 African Penguin numbers declined from 1.45 million to 153 000 individuals. This has had a great deal to do with their congregatory nature. But although this has been a disadvantage for the penguins, such congregations also provide focal areas in which to concentrate conservation efforts. It is easier to have intensive conservation efforts for islands, wetlands or colonial cliff-breeding sites than it is to protect breeding habitat for bustards or cranes. IBAs in these areas thus provide a strong focus for conservation efforts.

HOW ARE IBAS PROTECTED?

Selecting IBAs according to the criteria is probably the easiest part of the process, but the publication of directories documenting the sites is only a beginning. The directories serve to highlight areas requiring additional conservation attention, as a surprising proportion of the sites fall outside the official protected area network. The most difficult job is to get decision-makers to sit up and listen.

The members of the BirdLife Partnership have been most influential in this regard, liaising with government officials, international conservation bodies and key global decision-makers to further the ends of the programme. For those parts of the continent that have been able to publish their own national directories – Ethiopia, Kenya and Egypt, and southern Africa, through the efforts co-ordinated by the Avian Demography Unit – positive spin-offs are already apparent. The considerable work BirdLife South Africa has done to raise the profile of the proposed Grassland Biosphere Reserve centred on Wakkerstroom and Volksrust has had dramatic positive benefits for one of Africa's most threatened IBAs. In Egypt, vital wetland IBAs such as Lake Burullus and the Upper Nile have been designated as protected areas as a result of the Egyptian IBA programme.

With important strides such as this, it is hoped that the publication of the continental directory will spark renewed interest among decision-makers and help drive additional conservation attention into Africa's Important Bird Areas, the continent's hottest birding hotspots. □

The pristine rolling grasslands, broken Acacia abyssinica woodland and montane forests of the Udzungwa Mountains in Tanzania's Eastern Arc supports a plethora of threatened and restricted-range species.

Many national programmes stand to benefit from concerned individuals taking an interest in their local IBAs, as volunteers or custodians. If you would like to become involved, please contact your national BirdLife Partner or the BirdLife International Secretariat, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA, United Kingdom; fax (+44-1223) 27 7200; e-mail birdlife@birdlife.org.uk; website www.birdlife.net for more information.