

blue swallows

IN THE MASAI MARA

The Blue Swallow *Hirundo atrocaerulea* is one of Africa's most threatened intra-continental migrants. It is globally red-listed as Vulnerable, but the South African and Swazi breeding populations are considered Critically Endangered and are within a hair's breadth of becoming extinct. Two of the most significant obstacles to conserving the swallow are a lack of data on its migration routes and limited information concerning the threats it faces in the Lake Victoria region, where it spends the non-breeding season.

ORNITHOLOGISTS WERE EXTREMELY SURPRISED TO RECEIVE A REPORT OF A SUBSTANTIAL NUMBER OF BLUE SWALLOWS IN KENYA'S MASAI MARA NATIONAL RESERVE

It turns out that our current knowledge of the extent of the species' non-breeding range may be far from complete. In mid-July 2012, ornithologists were extremely surprised to receive a report of a substantial number of Blue Swallows in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve. Adam Scott Kennedy and his wife Vicki initially encountered the birds among a foraging flock of Lesser Striped, Mosque and Red-chested swallows. Many of the Blue Swallows were immature individuals in the process of moulting their wing feathers. Two weeks later, the Kennedys counted 30 Blue Swallows a few kilometres from the earlier sighting. These birds were very likely

A Blue Swallow in the Masai Mara, Kenya, photographed in July 2012.



ADAM SCOTT KENNEDY/RAWNATUREPHOTO

the same individuals as those seen previously, as the moult process was well advanced compared to two weeks earlier.

The Kennedys' observations have a number of implications for our understanding of Blue Swallow movements. Firstly, the timing of the sightings, combined with the fact that the birds were moulting, strongly suggests that they are spending the non-breeding season in the Mara rather than just passing

through the area on migration. This represents a significant geographical expansion of the species' known non-breeding range. Secondly, the habitat in which these individuals were foraging and roosting is quite different from the moist grasslands with which the species is usually associated, revealing the utilisation of a wider variety of habitats than previously thought.

ANDREW McKECHNIE

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On Thursday, 15 November 2012 we will be hosting workshops on birding photography, with a specific focus on utilising your Nikon equipment. The workshops will run from 18h00 to 21h00 in both cities. As seating is limited, please e-mail workshops@nikon.co.za to reserve your place. 'Like' the Nikon South Africa Facebook page for more information on additional workshops taking place in November.

