

BIRDING

Birding the Rift: From Baringo to Lake Victoria

A two-week road trip from Baringo to Lake Victoria reveals shifting landscapes, rich avifauna, and the quiet rewards of patient birding.



STORY &
PHOTOGRAPHY
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In October 2025, my partner Amar and I set off on a two-week road trip in Kenya. At first, we considered heading south towards the coast, but having taken that route a few years ago, we decided to explore the Rift Valley and western Kenya instead. Our route took us from our home in Nanyuki to Soysambu Conservancy, then on to Lake Baringo through the Kerio Escarpment to Kitale and Saiwa Swamp, before continuing to Kakamega Forest, Takawiri Island on Lake Victoria, and finally back via Kericho and Lake Elmenteita.

Our plan was simple: to explore new places, revisit some childhood favourites, and for me, as a relatively new birder, to grow my list and photographic collection. Having reached 227 species earlier in the year, I wanted to see how many new bird species I could spot and photograph.

Lake Baringo – A bird buffet

After a night in Soysambu Conservancy, where I was over the moon to spot a Montane Nightjar on a night game drive, we continued to Lake Baringo. I had eagerly anticipated this place and hoped to see some new species.

An early morning boat ride with local guide and bird expert Jones Kitaiya was like drifting through a living aviary. Squacco, Purple, and Striated Herons stalked the reeds, while Pied Kingfishers and Great Cormorants perched on every branch within sight. Highlights included a beautiful Osprey balanced on a pole and the ever-elegant African Jacana stepping daintily over floating lilies. The African Fish-Eagles didn't disappoint either – we even watched a juvenile feeding on its catch.

Yet Baringo is a lake in flux. Water levels have risen by almost eight metres in recent years, swallowing buildings and changing

BELOW

Hamerkop - Brown wader with a distinctive hammer-shaped head; famous for constructing enormous multi-chamber nests.





TOP LEFT
Nubian Woodpecker - with a red crown and strong bill; often feeds by tapping methodically along acacia trunks.

TOP MIDDLE
Greater Painted Snipe - Wetland wader with females more colourful than males; known for the male's sole parental care.

BELOW MIDDLE
Osprey - Large fish hunting raptor; plunges feet-first to grasp prey from the water.

TOP RIGHT
Kenya White-eye - Small greenish songbird with a bright white eye-ring; moves in active, noisy feeding flocks.

BELOW LEFT
African Fish Eagle (immature) - Brown-plumaged juvenile lacking the adult's white head; often practices shallow fishing dives.

BELOW RIGHT
Angola Swallow - with dark blue upperparts and forked tail; commonly forages low over water.

Next came Kakamega Forest, which is more than a birding stop; it's a living remnant of what was once a vast rainforest stretching across central Africa.

the shoreline. The shallow feeding flats that once drew waders have vanished, and with them, many species have moved on. It was a stark reminder of how shifting environments reshape bird habitats – sometimes quietly, often dramatically.

Through the Kerio Escarpment to Kitale and Saiwa Swamp

From Baringo, we drove west across the Kerio Escarpment, a road that felt suspended between earth and sky. The views were sweeping, the cliffs dramatic, and though we didn't stop to take any photographs, the journey itself felt cinematic.

Kitale offered a brief pause before we ventured to Saiwa Swamp – the smallest

Kenya Wildlife Service National Park and home of the swamp-dwelling Sitatunga Antelope and several wetland species. We saw a few new birds, including Holub's Golden Weaver and the Grey-Capped Warbler, but it was clear we needed more time on another trip to fully explore this quiet, underrated gem.

Kakamega Forest – patience rewarded

Next came Kakamega Forest, which is more than a birding stop; it's a living remnant of what was once a vast rainforest stretching across central Africa. Today, it is Kenya's only true tropical rainforest – rich, humid, and humming with life and yet just a fraction of what it once was. Over the decades, farming, logging, and encroachment have eaten away at its edges, leaving behind pockets of green that still fight to survive. As we walked through it, I felt both awe at the density of life and a quiet sadness knowing how fragile it has become. For birders, it's a paradise; for



conservationists, a reminder of what we've already lost and what we still stand to protect.

Our local guide, John Atsango, whose profound love and reverence for the forest, introduced us to a completely different rhythm of birding. Baringo had been abundance; Kakamega demanded patience. The forest is alive with sound but cloaked in green shadow, and birds reveal themselves only if you wait.

With John's expertise, we identified 25 new species, including Ross's Turaco, the Eastern Yellow-billed Barbet and the very difficult to spot Banded Prinia. My personal triumph was the elusive White-spotted Flufftail. The photograph I took is blurry, but the moment was pure gold. On the beautiful grounds of Rondo Retreat, where we were staying, we also saw a Crowned Eagle, several species of Greenbul, and the Mackinnon's Shrike – each sighting earned through quiet attention.

Takawiri Island – On the shores of Lake Victoria

From Kakamega, we journeyed to Takawiri Island Resort on Lake Victoria. This was my first time at the lake, though Amar had been many times before. The island moves at its own unhurried pace. Birdlife here is plentiful, and there were a few distinct species, including the Angola Swallow, Swamp Flycatcher and the Red-chested Sunbird, each adding its own note of life against the vast stillness of Africa's largest lake.

Kericho and Lake Elmenteita – A grand finale

After a night in Kericho, surrounded by endless tea fields and mist, we drove to Lake Elmenteita, our final destination before we headed back home. We stayed at Serena Lodge, where we met Aloise Garvey, a young naturalist and photographer featured in Swara earlier in the year. Spending a morning with him was both instructive and inspiring.

With Aloise, we spotted several more lifers, including the Cape Teal, Little Grebe (my 300th photographed bird of the year), Pied Avocet, and the Greater Painted-Snipe – a rare and satisfying sighting. The lake's flamingos were fewer than we had hoped; the rising water levels and shifts in the lake's chemistry have diluted the shallow alkaline flats that once teemed with algae and attracted vast flocks. When those feeding grounds fade, the birds move on. Yet watching the few Greater and Lesser Flamingos together felt like a very poignant nod to our childhoods.

TOP LEFT
Montane Nightjar - Cryptic nocturnal bird that roosts on the forest floor; relies on exceptional camouflage during daylight.

TOP RIGHT
Red-chested Sunbird - Metallic green male with a bright red breast band; frequently visits flowering shrubs for nectar.

BELOW LEFT
Yellow-whiskered Greenbul - Dull olive-green with a distinctive yellow whiskers; emits soft chattering calls while moving through foliage.

BELOW MIDDLE
Red-headed Weaver - Male shows vivid red head and builds suspended grass nests; commonly found in acacia or woodland edges.

BELOW RIGHT
Mackinnon's Shrike - A quiet bird of forest-edge with grey crown; typically perches prominently while scanning for insects.



Reflections on the road

Two weeks later, we had travelled over 1,500 kilometres through nine counties, stayed in seven locations, photographed 86 new species, and gained a deep appreciation for the extraordinary diversity within Kenya’s borders. Each region carried its own rhythm requiring a different kind of focus, a different way of listening.

What stood out most was the power of local expertise. Without the skilled eyes of guides like Jones in Baringo, John in Kakamega, and Aloise in Elmenteita, our bird count would have been far smaller. They know the calls, the nesting habits, the small movements in foliage that reveal a bird’s presence. They



TOP LEFT

Crowned Hornbill - Medium hornbill with a chestnut casque and white belly; frequently seen in small forest flocks.

TOP RIGHT

White-spotted Flufftail - Secretive forest rail with distinct white spotting on males; usually heard more often than seen - hence this blurry photo as it scurried across the path.

BELOW

Yellow-billed Stork - Large wader with a yellow bill, red face and pinkish legs; feeds by sweeping its open bill through shallow water.

made me realise that this journey wasn’t just about ticking boxes or taking photos, but rather about learning to see our natural world differently. They showed me how to slow down, to listen, to observe both silence and song. Kenya’s beauty lies not only in its landscapes but in the people who help us connect with them.

As we look ahead to this year, we are already planning the next chapter – perhaps one new birding destination every month. But for now, this journey is a reminder that wonder is everywhere. The key is to simply pay attention. ●

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