

Counting Wetbirds 2005.

Nyumba ya Mungu and Upper Ruvu Valley



“Is it a Sanderling or a Curlew Sandpiper???” – the canoe comes in useful again!

“Just put your foot down, it will be fine” was the last thing I heard before disappearing axle deep (that’s both axles) in mud at the edge of Nyumba ya Mungu.

There was something familiar about this, a certain sense of *déjà vu*? Of course, it was barely a year before that both myself and Marc had bravely led a group of nature enthusiasts from the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania on a bird watching day in the very same place, and on that day the “experts” had contrived to get not one, but two vehicles stuck in the treacherous mud-cum-sand at the edge of the man made dam not far to the south of Moshi.

This time we were on our own in a single Land Rover and after three hours of jacking, digging and stone collecting we gave up and sat in our rooftop canoe drinking a rather warm beer. Our mistake – trying to drive out forwards! The next morning we set to work and after another 3 hours of jacking, digging and road building, using the ancient techniques of dry-stone walling, we simply reversed out of the mire and carried on counting.

A few hours later we had reached the dam wall and concluded our count for Nyumba ya Mungu – 18 hours of which had been spent enjoying a Grade A Stuck.



“I think it’s definitely down to the axles, Jo?”

Counting Nyumba ya Mungu is not necessarily the easiest task – in common with other shallow man-made dams and natural shallow wetlands there are often large areas of tall grasses and reeds at the intake end, or much of the lakeshore is obscured where silting has allowed vegetation to take root. Seeing into the marsh or swampy areas from dry land is almost impossible, and boats give us the best chance to get anywhere near to these impenetrable mats of greenery.

For our counts of Nyumba ya Mungu and the upper Ruvu Valley below the dam we were lucky enough to have the use of a sturdy Canadian Canoe thanks to Tanzania Game Tracker Safaris based in Arusha. Our plan was to use the canoe to survey the northern end of the reservoir which is essentially a thickly vegetated vlei of aquatic vegetation maintained by three inflowing rivers – the Kikuletwa emanating from Mount Meru, the Lukaranga from Moshi on Kilimanjaro and the Ruvu itself being a confluence of rivers coming from Kilimanjaro and the North Pare Mountains.

When we arrived to choose our campsite the evening before counting was to start, we found the swamp was no more, the great extent of reeds had been left high and dry by a massively reduced reservoir whose waterline was lower than any of us could remember. Instead of negotiating an impassable marsh, we drove out across grassy flats between dying reeds and exposed mudflats thronging with waders thankful for the muddy shallows. Driving almost to the North East corner of the reservoir we settled down for the night as Kilimanjaro poked its smooth crown out above the clouds to the north.

The hard work started the next day and due to the dry conditions we were able to move steadily along the northern shore counting the varied but not overly numerous (thankfully for

us) waders. Good numbers of Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper, a large flock (450) of Caspian Plovers and smatterings of Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo and Glossy Ibis characterised the area. Black-tailed Godwits turned up in small groups, while the alarm calls of Spur-Wing Plovers accompanied every walk from the vehicle down to the lake edge. With Red-Billed Teal and both Whistling ducks accounting for most Anatidae, and Gull-Billed, Whiskered and White-winged Terns flitting up and down the shoreline, we enjoyed seeing healthy numbers of different species, and finished the morning at the northern end of the Western shore which is more rocky and less wader friendly.

On a more sober note, and to add to the looming sense of tragedy in the world of cranes, we can report only seeing one lone (and very lonely) Grey Crowned Crane along the entire sweep of the lake, a place of broad grasslands and open bush that would in the past have seen regular pairs and sometimes feeding flocks.



Fishing causes conflicts!

Without rehearsing our unfortunate and eminently avoidable “getting stuck” episode, we knocked off the herons, egrets and other odds and ends along the shore with ease, and our generally successful day was spoiled only by the discovery of a Grey Heron stuck in fishing line. We extracted it only to find that both legs were broken and unusable, and we had to leave it to its fate.

The combination of low altitude and dry surrounding savannah makes the Ruvu basin a generally unwelcoming place. Its saving grace of course is the river itself, a stunning ribbon of evergreen vegetation fringing slow but, crucially at least for African Finfoot, constantly flowing water. Here our canoe would at last be useful, and we spared not time in launching in the heat of the day into the sanctuary of the cool water.

A few hours of counting confirmed that the generally homogenous habitat is perfectly surveyed from the water and we counted ourselves lucky to be gently floating down a fresh water stream, under shady fringing trees rather than standing out on mudflats hunched over a scope for hours on end! The usual suspects were observed, Long-tailed Cormorants in flat,

arrow like flight, Green-backed Herons squawking loudly as we disturbed their afternoon roosts, Great white Egrets fishing over rapids, Purple Herons hiding in reedbeds and Goliath Herons proudly perched above the river like statues watching for passing fish.

Other denizens of permanent rivers were spotted – African Darter, Ospreys and many (uncounted!) Kingfishers, Giant, Pied, Malachite, Pygmy and Chestnut-Bellied. And the prize tick showed itself only twice on that afternoon, a female finfoot fleeing to cover and a male carefully paddling along among some broken down dead tree branches.



Simply a paradise in the Semi-desert

The next day was equally rewarding as we covered many more kilometres of river counting as we went, and finished off in time to make our way across the Masai Steppe towards Shambarai Swamp, a large but very seasonal wetland that lies directly south of USA River near to the Tanzanite mines. Again the experts showed the way, striking off boldly from the road on a “short” cut that took us into some of the most impenetrable Commiphora woodland this side of Ndedo and ate up many hours of paint stripping, tyre puncturing bush-bashing. And was there any water in Shambarai? Simple answer – no. Easy to count wetbirds in such cases, no waders, no waterbirds at all, no tricky mudflats, no deceptive soft sandy mud to get stuck in.....



Messing about on the River!

Nyumba ya Mungu and Upper Ruvu River Counting team, Jan 2005:

Jo Anderson
Marc Baker
Njano Mbilinyi.