

## The Water Birds Of East Africa - The Dream of Birding Enthusiasts

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In this report, we look at the water birds of East Africa. Birding is one of the fastest growing hobbies in the world. And Africa is the world's treasure house for birding. Though on safari you may be after the bigger grounded wildlife, you will get more value if you also look out for the birds



Flamingoes

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## **1. The Water Birds Of East Africa - The Dream of Birding Enthusiasts**

Birding is one of the fastest growing hobbies in the world. In America, bird watchers rose from 21 m in 1982, to an astonishing 68 million in 2000. In the US, birding is now the second most popular outdoor recreation after gardening. Technology advances have made this hobby more fun and appealing. It is now easier with powerful binoculars and other equipment to view birds from a distance. And Global Positioning Systems have improved navigation in unfamiliar places. Parents are also able to amuse their youngsters by luring birds from the bush with recordings of bird songs.

Africa is a treasure house for birding. The continent has over 2,050 bird species recorded, two thirds of which are found nowhere else. East Africa, in particular, has an amazing variety of birds, perhaps due to a mild climate devoid of extremes. The region has 4 of the Top Ten Birding Sites in Africa as rated by the [African Bird Club](http://www.africanbirdclub.org) ([www.africanbirdclub.org](http://www.africanbirdclub.org)) -an international organisation devoted to the study of Africa's birds. These sites are: Bwindi Impenetrable Forest (Uganda), Bale Mountains (Ethiopia), the Rift Valley Lakes (Kenya) and Murchison Falls Park (Uganda).

East Africa's birds are scattered in all sorts of habitats: mountain forest, lowland forest, seacoast, deserts, savannah, lakes, marsh, swamps and mudflats. In this article, we shall look at the region's water birds. This category refers to those birds that depend directly on water for food, habitat and breeding or indirectly for a certain component of their life cycle. Most water birds linger along the shallow shoreline of lakes, temporary waters in the inland ecosystems and rivers and very few venture far away from shore. Water birds delight birders, being easier to spot and photograph, as they tend to be larger and live more in the open.

Flamingo's, on account of their size and huge numbers rank as East Africa's foremost water birds. Out of a world population of about 4 million, an estimated 95 % reside in East Africa. Flamingos are found only in saline water, and East Africa's Rift Valley lakes are their favourite habitat, particularly Manyara and Natron in Tanzania and Nakuru and Baringo in Kenya. Small populations are also found in Lake Abiata in Ethiopia and at the Etosha Pans of Namibia.

The flamingo is very biologically unique among wildlife species. It is highly gregarious and lives in large groups. In Kenya's Rift Valley Lakes, up to one million birds have been known to gather- forming the largest bird flocks anywhere. The birds are characterised by pink plumage, which is especially thick

on the underside of the feathers and is gracefully exposed during flight. Young flamingos are however more grey than pink - they turn full pink at sexual maturity. You are then likely to see them in courtship displays that look like mock fights.

Flamingos' beaks are S shaped and pink in colour, while the legs are straight and webbed to facilitate wading in water. They feed on microscopic blue green algae plants that only thrive in saline waters. These plants are suspended in water and to extract a meal they swallow large volumes of water, which is filtered by the beak through specialised anatomical devices. For this reason, flamingos are said to be filter feeders, a status they share with a number of other aquatic animals.

Lake Natron on the Kenya-Tanzania border is the principal breeding ground of East Africa's flamingos. Scientists do not know for sure why they don't breed in the other alkaline lakes. But research indicates that Natron is favoured on account of its ecological stability and minimal human disturbance. By reason of its remoteness in location, it has recorded little change in soil chemistry – a critical factor in nest formation.

At Lake Natron, incubation of eggs takes about 3 weeks, after which the mothers fly back to their preferred habitat, mostly Nakuru, Baringo and Manyara. About a week later, the hatchlings usually follow their mothers northwards.

There are two types of flamingos, the greater and lesser flamingos. The casual observer may be unable to tell them apart. But the greater flamingo is considerably larger and has a whiter plumage. The majority of flamingos in East Africa are of the lesser species. The greater flamingos feed on invertebrates like molluscs and crustaceans. This is the ecological factor that may largely explain their smaller numbers in relation to lesser flamingos, which are primary consumers in the food chain.

The pelican is the other bird likely to be found in large aggregations in East Africa's wetlands. These are large, stout birds with large white beaks specially adapted for catching and swallowing fish. Most fresh water lakes in East Africa are generously stocked with pelicans. You will see them swimming most gently and graciously as they search for fish, their primary food. They habitually swim in a team of 3 and offer a spectacular show as they dive for fish rhythmically and simultaneously.

Though a saltwater lake, pelicans abound in Lake Nakuru, where over 44,000 have been recorded. They are a dazzling sight to behold as they spiral upwards in huge columns. In Kenya they only breed at Lake Elementaita. Pelicans are found in plenty round river mouths hosting high fish populations. Other popular

sites to see them in East Africa include Kazinga Channel in Uganda and Lake Victoria.

Cormorants are a bird species closely associated with pelicans. Of these, the most common type is the greater cormorant. Cormorants are mostly grey and black and are usually slightly smaller and less gregarious than pelicans. They favour lakeshores well sheltered by vegetation; they feed on fish and other aquatic invertebrates and breed in trees close by. For this reason, cormorants are less easy to sight than pelicans.

Cormorants have been observed swimming under water in pursuit of fish. After making a catch, they emerge from water and resume their lofty positions on the banks. You will see them at East Africa's inland waters, and especially Kenya's Rift Valley lakes.

Herons and storks constitute a large category of water birds. Herons are tall slim birds with long forward pointing necks and elongated stout beaks. There are about 10 species of herons in East Africa, the most commonly sighted being the Goliath heron, the Grey heron and Black-headed heron. The Goliath heron, as the name suggests, is a huge bird that can attain an overall length of 5 feet.

With few exceptions, herons are mostly sighted around marshes and shallow waters, but can also be seen around inland grassy habitats. Their favourite menu includes snakes and other small vertebrates that live in wet areas. One of the herons –the Green-backed heron is noted for its use of the advanced technique of baiting fish with live insect. Herons are quite common throughout East Africa.

The shape of the beak distinguishes storks, and from this feature they derive their name. With about 10 species around East Africa, only the Marabou stork and the white stork are not directly water dependent. Marabou storks are very large and unlike the other storks fly with head and neck retracted. This bird is quite common in the urban areas where it feeds on refuse and carriions, and hence its dirty reputation.

Marabou storks are also common around water shores where they target fish and other small and young animals especially the weak and injured. They are thus happiest in areas with high populations of other birds, such as flamingos. Another unique stork is the Saddle-billed stork, easily noticeable due to its red beak with a black patch at the middle and yellow base. This stork is quite common in shallow waters and swampy areas.

The Hamerkop is a popular medium size bird associated with storks. Its name is derived from the Afrikaans word for hammerhead, the shape formed by its head and beak. They are common all over East Africa's wetlands. It is uniquely

popular among bird watchers on account of its massive nests. Built with lots of dry vegetation, the nests average a depth of 1.5 m, and can take upto 6 weeks to complete.

Undaunted by the labour of putting up the ostentatious nest, hamerkops go on to build as many as 6 nests in a territory. The mystery is that they occupy only one! This apparently irrational behaviour is not lost to other birds; Egyptian geese and Verraux eagle owls frequently take over some of the nests. Thus the saying that you cannot tell a bird's size from its nest rings most true with hamerkops.

The Shoebills and Spoonbills are two other species of water birds that are uniquely identified by their beaks. The shoebill is a large and dark grey bird that looks almost prehistoric. The bill is shaped like – you guessed it- a shoe. It is often found in large swamps but is not easily sighted.

The spoonbill derives its name from the shape of its beak, whose posterior part enlarges into a "spoon". The most common type is the African spoonbill, which is well distributed in East Africa especially around the shallow ranges of large water bodies and swamps. As it wades in shallow water, it uses the sensitive inner bill surface to sense food- usually fish, frogs and snails.

In the East African wetlands, you are definitely bound to come across one or two species of ibises. They have narrow beaks of almost uniform thickness that curve forwards and slightly taper at the end. The sacred ibis is the most common and usually has a black and white neck and beak. They tend to be gregarious and are mostly found around marshlands and lagoons.

Another common ibis is the hadada ibis. It is usually grey and has a glossy patch on both sides of wing coverts. They stand out on the basis of the loud distinctive calls they make during flight. They are at their most vocal at dawn and dusk. They are quite common throughout East Africa around wooded streams, marshes, lagoons and moist grasslands.

The hadada ibis is surrounded by many legends among African communities. It is often associated with long life and witchcraft. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, a person of advanced age is said to be as old as *Kagogo*, the vernacular reference to the hadada ibis. Indeed Kenya's leading writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo has recently published a novel titled in Kikuyu *Murogi wa Kagogo*, literary "The Witch of the Hadada Ibis". Conceding that this ibis has a rather haunted look, my considered opinion is that this is not sufficient ground to sustain such a serious charge as witchcraft.

In the wetlands of East Africa, also lives the crane, which is often called crested crane. Several species exist, but the crested crane -sometimes referred to as the Uganda crane- is the most common. It is mostly found in tall grasses and cultivated areas, but breeds mainly in wet areas such as marshes. The crane is widespread in Uganda's numerous swamps and estuaries and is indeed the national symbol.

Despite sitting on Uganda's court of arms, the elegant crested crane is considered endangered. In most parts of East Africa, suitable breeding habitats are increasingly being converted to agricultural use and the crane is now confined to very few areas. In addition, the crane has a most peculiar social behaviour, which in some way further jeopardises its long-term survival. Cranes practice true and perhaps absolute monogamy. Often, they are found in pairs and share strong bonds that are never broken, even unto death. When one of a pair dies, the other never pairs up again for the rest of its life.

The African Jacana is another bird that has unique social and mating behaviour. It is one of very few in the animal kingdom that exhibit "reverse polygamy", - technically known as polyandry, where females date and mate with multiple males. Under this practice females are always busy. The female starts off mating with one male, which it leaves incubating the eggs, then shamelessly hops off for an encounter with another male and so on and on.

The way the African Jacana brings forth young ones is highly specialised and rather shocking from the perspective of humans. It is easily recognisable by its purple-brown plumage and yellow chest. You will find it in wetlands especially shallow lakes, ponds and swamps.

The plovers are also associated with lakeshores and big swamps. The most common types are the blacksmith plover, kittlitz's plover and spur-winged plover. The blacksmith is named after its sharp, distinctive extra high "metallic" *voice* that will remind you of the goings on in a blacksmith shop. This is usually an alarm call whose pitch is raised when a threat stalks her eggs or chicks. You will find plenty of blacksmith and spur-winged plovers at Amboseli.

Geese are also very common in lakes and ponds throughout East Africa. The most common type is the Egyptian goose. This bird is thoroughly adapted and can even be found in shallow waters in cities. Africa's largest waterfowl is the spur-winged goose, which can reach a length of 100 cm. You can sight it at the swamps of Amboseli and in the marsh areas of the Maasai Mara in Kenya.

Most people on safari are after the big five- lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino. But you will get more value if you can also look out for the birds. Unless you are a really specialised bird watcher, you will get to see the common water

birds on a [classic wildlife safari](#), especially in Kenya. As lots of birds are found outside national parks, real birding enthusiasts opt for a custom itinerary accompanied by expert bird guides.

East Africa is a year round safari destination. The rains come around April- May and November-December. This however does not much affect the travellers' ability to get around. Generally the best time to go on safari is over the drier months when the grass is short and sighting animals is so much easier. The peak season falls around January to February and July to August. April to June is the low season and prices for accommodation in the lodges can fall by as much as 40% compared to the busy season.

On safari, wear light cottons and linen. Warmer clothing is needed for the evenings and for your early morning game drive. Some rainwear is advisable between March and June and October and December. You should bring along a decent pair of sunglasses. The glare you experience in bright tropical light is a new and uncomfortable experience for most. You should also pack a good pair of binoculars to bring the birds and other animals closer.

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## **2. Destination Facts: Kenya**

**Full Country Name:** Republic of Kenya

**Area:** 583,000 sq km

**Population:** 30 million (2001)

**Capital City:** Nairobi

**Other Major Towns:** Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, Eldoret

**Peoples:** Kikuyu (21%), Luhya (14%), Luo (13%), Kamba (11%), Kalenjin (11%), Gusii (6%), Meru (5%) plus Asian, Arab and European minorities

**Language:** English, Swahili & indigenous languages

**Religion:** Christian (54%), Muslim (6%) and traditional religions

**Government:** Republic

**Time:** GMT + 3 hours

**Currency:** Kenya Shilling (Ksh)

**Electricity:** 220/240 V, 50 Hz

**Weights and Measures:** Metric

**Economy:** Textiles, tea, horticultural produce, agricultural processing, oil refining, cement, tourism

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### **3. Travel Basics: Kenya**

#### **Health**

Visitors over 1 year of age entering Kenya from yellow fever infected areas require yellow fever international certificate of vaccination. Exemptions are made for visitors arriving from non-endemic areas such as Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Cholera is a health risk in the country and precautions are essential. Malaria is a serious risk in most of the country. The risk level is however lower in the highlands above 2500m, of the Central, Rift Valley, Eastern and Western Provinces. Visitors are strongly advised to take anti-malaria medication commencing two weeks before travel.

It is recommended, especially for longer staying visitors, to take vaccinations against hepatitis A, polio and typhoid. HIV-AIDS is prevalent in the country and prudent measures are called for. Some fresh water lakes and rivers carry the risk of Bilharzia and you are advised not to swim or paddle in such areas. There are good hospitals in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. Chemists can be found in all the major towns.

#### **Visas**

Passports valid for 3 months from date of entry are required of all visitors. All visitors require a visa except for citizens of some commonwealth countries. There are also exceptions with varying conditions for citizens of Ethiopia, Turkey, Malaysia, and Uruguay and a few other countries. Airport visas are available although this may result in delays upon arrival. It is advisable to obtain visa's in advance from Kenyan Embassies and High Commissions as some airlines may require it before allowing you to board. Visa requirements vary from time to time and you are advised to check on prevailing status well ahead of travel.

#### **Peoples & Culture**

Kenya is made up of more than 70 or so tribal groups. There are also small but influential minorities of Asian, Arab and European origin. More than 90% of the African population falls within the broad categories of Bantu and Nilotics speakers. The main Bantu speakers are Kikuyu, Luhya, Kamba, Gusii, Mijikenda, Embu and Meru. Nilotics speakers are Maasai, Samburu, Pokot, Turkana, Luo and Kalenjin. At the coast, the interaction of Arabs, Persians and Bantu Africans has resulted in the Swahili people. The Swahili language is now widely spoken in Kenya and throughout Eastern and Central Africa. It is quite useful to have a working knowledge of Swahili if you intend to travel outside the main urban and tourist routes. English is widely understood in urban centers.

The de facto national dish is Nyama Choma, barbecued goat meat. But the guy in the street survives on that stodgy filler called Ugali, prepared using maize meal accompanied with some greens. At the coast however the traditional food

of the Swahili is a good experience. This is usually based on seafood and rice dishes. Beer lovers will have a good time in Kenya. There are several international standard lagers produced locally. The most popular is named after the elephant, thus Tusker. While on safari, remember to celebrate the African elephant by taking a little Tusker.

In the last few years there has been some kind of revival in local music. This revival is led by younger urban artists who sing in Swahili and Sheng, a kind of Creole mix of Swahili and English. The music is a local blend of hip-hop and rap.

### **Communications**

Telephone, fax, telegram, post and Internet services are available in urban centers and locations popular with tourists. International direct dialing to many countries is available in most urban centres. In rural areas international calling is through the operator. The country code for Kenya is 254.

Mobile phones are based on GSM 900 network. Coverage extends to the principal urban centres, major highways and parts of popular game reserves such as the Mara. You are however advised to check beforehand whether your GSM phone is usable if you are traveling outside the main urban centres. You can obtain a GSM card that will allow you to make international calls to any country. Currently the country is served by two network operators: KenCell ([www.kencell.co.ke](http://www.kencell.co.ke)) and Safaricom ([www.safaricom.co.ke](http://www.safaricom.co.ke)). There are Internet cafes in urban centres and hotels around the country.

### **Accommodation**

You will find good quality accommodation within the main routes popular with tourists and business travelers. This includes Nairobi, Mombasa, Lamu, Malindi, Lake Naivasha, Kisumu and the popular game reserves and national parks such as Maasai Mara, Amboseli, Lake Nakuru, Tsavo, Aberdares, Samburu and the Mount Kenya area. In the parks, accommodation varies from 5 star lodges and tented camps at the upper end, to basic camping at the lower end. Outside the main urban centres and tourist routes, it is difficult to get rated accommodation. See our [Kenya Hotels, Lodges & Resorts](#) page to view info and book accommodation for your stay in Kenya.

### **Money**

The local currency is the Kenya Shilling (Ksh). There are no restrictions on the import and export of local or foreign currency. But for amounts exceeding US dollars 5,000 or equivalent you will need to declare the source and purpose of the funds. Major currencies such as US dollars and now the Euro and travelers cheques can be converted at major hotels, banks and forex bureaus in the main towns and tourist areas. You will get best exchange rates for cash or travelers cheques if you are dealing in US dollars or Pound Sterling. For this your best deal

will be at forex bureaus. Avoid changing money in the streets however favourable the exchange rate may appear.

Visa and Mastercard have wide acceptance. But American Express, Diners and other cards have more limited acceptance. Your Visa card can access your bank or credit card account through any Standard Chartered Bank dispenser, 24 hours a day.

### **Climate**

Kenya has such diverse geography, that, temperatures, rainfall and humidity vary widely. The country can be divided into four main regions: the arid north, the savanna lands in the south, the central highlands and the lowlands along the coast and the Lake Victoria region. The coastal areas are hot and humid though tempered by some much welcome sea breezes. Average temperatures vary little year round and range from 22°C minimum to 33°C maximum.

The central highlands and rift valley enjoy a pleasant temperate climate. Average temperatures vary from a minimum of 10 to 14°C to a maximum of 22 to 26°C. The Lake Victoria lowlands are hot and dry and temperatures can reach 34°C. Rainfall is also heavy. The semi arid north experiences the most extreme variations in temperatures. This ranges from a maximum of 40°C in the day to 20°C at night. There are two rainy seasons: March to May ("long rains") and October to December ("short rains").

### **International Travel**

Kenya is a regional travel hub and has connections by a large number of airlines from all over the world particularly those from Europe, Asia and other parts of Africa. The country has three international airports at Nairobi, Mombasa and Eldoret. The national airline is Kenya Airways, a major player in African air travel. British Airways and Kenya Airways fly to Nairobi direct from London. A few European airlines also have direct flights from their hubs in Europe. Gulf Air and Emirates fly to Nairobi using mid eastern connections.

In addition to flying, you can travel by bus between Kenya and Tanzania. The main connections are from Nairobi and Mombasa to Dar es Salaam and from Nairobi to Moshi and Arusha. Occasional ferries leave Mombasa for Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam. Uganda can be reached from Kenya by air, rail and bus. There is a border crossing at Moyale on the Kenya-Ethiopia border and which trucks mainly use. Overland travel to Sudan and Somalia is exceedingly difficult at present.

### **Local Travel**

There are scheduled flights to a number of local destinations from Nairobi to Mombasa, Nanyuki, Kisumu, Malindi, Lamu, Lokichogio and the national parks and game reserves of Maasai Mara, Amboseli and Samburu. See our web page for info and booking of [local flights in Kenya](#). You can also travel to a few urban centers in the country by train though this has not been reliable in recent years. Regular bus service links the main urban centers.

Around urban areas and shorter links between towns, the popular way to get around is by means of matatu (shared taxi). Rental cars are reliably available from Mombasa, Kisumu and Nairobi. Review our [rental cars in Kenya](#) web page and do your booking here. Remember that driving is on the left. Generally, between urban centers the road links are good. The quality deteriorates when you get off the main routes and into more remote locations.

### **Travel Insurance**

Health and the usual travel insurance are recommended. Ensure your travel insurance includes emergency evacuation.

### **What to Wear**

Light clothing is generally recommended in Kenya. The highlands are however temperate and you need a sweater and jacket year round. This is necessary for the evenings and early mornings. If you plan to climb Mount Kenya be ready with special clothing not only for the climb, but to protect yourself from sub zero temperatures.

On safari, bright coloured clothing may get you in trouble with the wild animals. Colours of the earth are generally favoured, thus brown, beige and khaki clothing. Short sleeve shirts, shorts and trousers for men are sufficient. For ladies, short sleeve blouses and skirts are ideal in the national parks and touristy places. This is except at the predominantly Muslim coastal areas, where more conservative dressing is called for. But even at the coast, swimwear is perfectly acceptable at beaches and hotel premises. It is advisable to travel light and some safari and air charters have a baggage limit of 10-15 kilograms.

## **4. About Africa Point**

**Africapoint.com** is an Africa specialist travel agent, offering travel services through the company website -Africapoint.com and also offline. This pioneering Africa travel website has been assisting travelers make bookings online since early 1999.

The company was started in 1997 has its central reservations office strategically located in Nairobi, Kenya.

The company is supported by a network of partner offices in the leading destinations in Africa. This includes Cape Town (South Africa), Arusha, Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Cairo (Egypt), Kampala (Uganda), Victoria (Seychelles), Harare (Zimbabwe). We are members of the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA).

### **What services do we offer?**

We provide reservation services for hotels, airline tickets, rental cars, tours and safaris to the top destinations in Africa. Among the countries we are currently covering are Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, Tanzania, Seychelles, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Mauritius.

We have special discounts for most of the services we offer and some of our prices are upto 50% off standard rates. Please visit our website to view the links of all the services we offer.

### **How do we make your Africa travel planning easier?**

Ours is one of very few websites offering one-stop travel booking and information service to a number of different African countries. In addition:

- We know our destinations and our products **very well**. We are in a position to give you good advice on the best hotel, rental car, tour or safari to suit your particular requirements.
- We are committed to working to the highest industry standards. We have many our past clients who are happy to share their experiences with you. Please visit the [Client Profile & Testimonials](#) page and see what some of our clients have to say.

- Our patience is the stuff of legend! We will patiently seek to answer all your queries until you are ready to pick what is most suitable for your needs. For high value items such as safaris we have communicated with our clients for 6 months and even longer before they are ready to buy.

Others have come back to and said: "Do you remember that tour we discussed 2 years ago? I am now ready to travel." And of course we remember. We always remember!

- Together with our partners, we are based in the African destination whose travel services we are selling. For this reason we are usually able to get you very good prices. For some products our prices are **40-50%** below standard rates.
- As members of **ASTA (American Society of Travel Agents)** we are committed to upholding **ASTA's** motto of " Integrity in Travel" and operate to those same standards you would expect from an ASTA member anywhere in the world.

One of our North American clients for whose 36 person missionary group we provided an air charter, hotel booking, safari and road transport to 2 African countries had this to say.

*"My experience with Africapoint.com was good as any service that I've received any where in the USA. Not only were they helpful before and during, but they went out of their way to also be helpful afterwards.*

*I'm using them again for an upcoming trip in November and will look forward to using them for years to come."*

In addition our membership of ASTA assures you of a **neutral and trusted** arbitrator in the event that a disagreement occurs between us.

### **What is the experience of other travelers with us?**

We continue to serve the many needs of travelers who seek our services. From straight forward single night hotel bookings to short and long term **car rental, tours and safaris** for individuals and groups, international conferences.

## **5. Forward This Report**

If you've found this report to be informative and useful please forward it to your family and friends. We're sure they will like it as much as you did!