

### PREVENTING EXTINCTIONS

**Taita Thrush**  
*Turdus helleri*

**Taita Apalis**  
*Apalis fuscigularis*



**Mwangi Githiru**



Top: Taita Apalis © Ken  
Norris/www.rarebirdsyearbook.com; bottom: Taita Thrush  
© Tom Calens/www.rarebirdsyearbook.com).

### **Background**

Taita Thrush and Taita Apalis are both confined to tiny remnants of montane cloud-forest in the Taita Hills Important Bird Area, south-east Kenya. Forest clearance for cultivation and for non-native timber plantations has reduced indigenous forest habitat in the region to small, isolated fragments on hilltops and ridges (total area c.400 ha). The largest surviving forest patches occur at Mbololo (c.200 ha), Ngangao (c.92 ha) and Chawia (c.50 ha). These, and other smaller fragments, remain under considerable threat from both forest clearance and degradation.

The Taita Thrush favours well-shaded area with a dense understory and high litter cover, and feeds mainly on fruit. Research carried out in 1997 estimated a total Taita Thrush population of just c.1,350 birds, with c.1,060 in Mbololo, 250 in Ngangao and 38 in Chawia. However, the effective population size at the latter site is likely to be much lower owing to a considerable male-biased sex ratio (only 10% of birds were found to be female), which may have significant negative consequences for the long-term survival of the sub-population.

The Taita Apalis is restricted to an even smaller area of forest. It is a territorial insectivore, favouring gaps and edges with thick undergrowth. Surveys in 2001 failed to find any sign of the species at a location where it was previously recorded, and found it at lower densities than previously estimated at three other locations. The global population was estimated at between c.600-930 individuals, which appears to be decreasing.

### **Actions being implemented**

1. Work is underway by local community-led Environmental Committees **to establish tree nurseries**. Indigenous trees will be used to **restore degraded habitat** and enhance the connectivity of scattered forest fragments, whilst on adjacent agricultural land fast-growing non-native species will be planted to provide a buffer zone. These activities have now been initiated with engagement of seven group nurseries. A large number of trees have already been raised and planted in the forest and nearby farmland. These activities are set to be continued and expanded in the future.

2. A total of 21 Community Based Organisations have been identified and assessed with regards to their activities and aims. Although the majority were involved in conservation, most were not aware of the importance of the Taita Hills for bird conservation. Most groups identified understaffing and over-expectation as main problems. The groups that place conservation as their main focus have been identified and these will be tracked for their development and organization into a **Site Support Group (SSG)**. Further to this, visits to relevant government officials, public meetings and local leaders have occurred to gain support for conservation work and to brief them on the conservation of the Taita Hills. At least 1541 people have been reached through these methods, and pamphlets bearing conservation messages have also been distributed. The District librarian at Wundanyi, has agreed to reserve some space where materials on conservation could be put.
3. **Income-generating activities**, including bee-keeping and butterfly-rearing have been initiated and farmers have been educated in environmentally responsible agriculture practices.
4. In order to secure the long-term survival of the Taita Thrush population at Chawia, a **translocation project** is being developed.
5. Data from the first **in-depth study** on the Taita Apalis is being analysed and should provide valuable insights into the ecology of the species aiding effective conservation. Furthermore, surveys for both species have been conducted and have updated their known range. The next sampling session was set to coincide with the breeding season of the two species. The data being collected and its subsequent analyses will inform on demography, breeding and movement patterns.



The Taita Hills (© Mwangi Githiru)

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