

PREVENTING EXTINCTIONS

Taita Thrush
Turdus helleri

Taita Apalis
Apalis fuscigularis



Dr Mwangi Githiru



Top: Taita Apalis (© Ken
Norris/www.rarebirdsyearbook.com); bottom: Taita Thrush
(© Tom Callens/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.400ha). The largest surviving forest patches occur at Mbololo (c.200ha), Ngangao (c.92ha) and Chawia (c.50ha). These, and other smaller fragments, remain under considerable threat from both forest clearance and degradation.

Taita Thrush: this medium-sized thrush favours well-shaded areas with 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.

Taita Apalis: restricted to an even smaller area of forest, this bird is a territorial insectivore, favouring gaps and edges with thick undergrowth. Surveys in 2001 failed to find any sign of the species at one 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. The project has initiated a **strong interest in birdwatching** among local schoolchildren, with binoculars being provided to environmental groups in five different schools.

2. Four local organisations are together forming a **Site Support Group**, known as the Dawilda Biodiversity Conservation Group. Through posters, talks and other means, they are beginning to raise support and awareness in the community of the importance of conserving the Taita Hills.
3. Once the SSG is officially recognised, it will act as a **champion** for the Taita Hills site and the two critical species.
4. Nineteen local participants have been **trained in bird ecology and study methods**. Once these staff have gained more experience, there will be a strong basis for future monitoring of the two species.
5. Monitoring protocol has been established, with a link set up with the National Museums of Kenya, who will be sent the results for **data analysis** and feedback. This format has proved successful for other Kenyan IBAs.



The Taita Hills (© Mwangi Githiru).

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