

Major population crash of Critically Endangered Taita Apalis

The Taita Apalis *Apalis fuscigularis* is endemic to the Taita Hills, in south-eastern Kenya. It is one of the rarest birds in the world, surviving in only five small forest fragments at altitudes of between 1,500 and 2,200 m. Its known global range is less than 600 ha. In 2001, the population of this species was estimated to only be 300-650 individuals, thereby qualifying it for the highest threat category, Critically Endangered. Field work carried out in 2009 and 2010 with support from BirdLife International, RSPB, CEPA and Chester Zoo strongly suggests that a major population crash is underway. Compared with 2001, sighting rates in April-May 2009 had dropped by about 38%; repeated counts done in September-December 2009 and May-July 2010 showed even larger decreases, approaching 80%. This means that the global population of the apalis might now be reduced to only 60-130 individuals, almost all of which are located in a single forest, Ngangao, which is only about 120 ha.



The causes of this extremely worrying drop are

unclear. Little or no illegal logging is now occurring in the Taita, and human disturbance has been significantly reduced thanks to the effort of the Kenya Forest Service and local conservation groups. The impacts of other possible factors, such as nest predation and climate change remain unknown. Nonetheless, it is clear that all the possible candidates driving this apparent crash need to be urgently studied in order to stop this species from sliding further towards the brink of extinction. Similarly, research is also urgently needed on the second critically endangered bird of the Taita Hills forests, Taita Thrush *Turdus helleri*, whose population has not been assessed in recent times, but might be threatened by the same factors that are already affecting the apalis. Taita Apalis and Taita Thrush are both receiving funding from the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme. The programme is

spearheading greater conservation action, awareness and funding support for all of the world's most threatened birds, starting with the 190 species classified as Critically Endangered, the highest level of threat. Read about the latest research on these two species [here](#) This news is brought to you by the BirdLife Species Champions and the British Birdwatching Fair ? official sponsor of the [BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme](#) by Luca Borghesio, Lawrence Wagura and Mwangi Githiru Image credit: Lawrence Wagura