

British birdwatchers rally to help Ethiopia

Title

Tens of thousands of British birdwatchers attending the 22nd British Birdwatching Fair this weekend are coming together to raise funds for Ethiopia's unique bird life. This landlocked African country now has 22 species of bird facing extinction. Man-made and natural phenomena all conspired, historically, to ravage Ethiopia's wildlife riches, but conservationists hope that the proceeds from this year's British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water - will help throw a lifeline to some of the most threatened species. Martin Davies of the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) - one of the fair's co-founders and key organisers - said: "Ethiopia has a remarkable natural heritage and is hugely rich in species found nowhere else in the world. Over 840 species of bird have been recorded in Ethiopia, 17 of which are unique to this country and 29 others nearly so. Unfortunately, this wonderful wildlife is coming under increasing threat and we hope that the proceeds from this year's event will help the BirdLife Partner organisation in Ethiopia (the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society) and BirdLife International to take the urgent steps needed to secure the future of this country's unique birds. We also hope that the event will help raise the profile of this wonderful country of contrasts: formerly so associated with poverty and yet so rich in wildlife." One of the Ethiopian endemic species is Liben lark, which is classified as Critically Endangered, the highest level of threat. With a population possibly fewer than 100 birds, it is widely tipped to become mainland Africa's first recorded bird extinction. Overgrazing and the conversion of grasslands to crop production means that the Liben lark is now on the brink of oblivion, confined to a single grassy plain in the south of the country. Proceeds from the fair will be used by the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society to work with local communities to reduce the pressure from over-grazing livestock and to help the grasslands recover. Ethiopia's UK Ambassador, His Excellency Berhanu Kebede, will officially open this year's Birdfair. He said: "Ethiopia's biodiversity resources are under critical threat. Growing human and livestock populations pose the single most serious problem, resulting in deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion, and desertification. To reverse the situation, the government of Ethiopia has promulgated laws and put in place the appropriate institutions. Significant achievements have been made in restoring the fauna and flora of the country; hence the percentage of land covered by forests has grown from three to nine per cent within five years. "On behalf of my country, I'm delighted that Ethiopia's unique birds have been chosen as a beneficiary for this year's British Birdwatching Fair. It is fantastic that British birdwatchers have a passion for conserving Ethiopia's birds. With four out of ten of Africa's birds having been seen in Ethiopia, my country has a great deal to offer visiting birdwatchers and we believe that eco-tourism will be vital in helping to protect our unique wildlife and landscapes." Another Ethiopian endemic species in trouble is the grandly-named Prince Ruspoli's Turaco.

This macaw-sized bird with scarlet and navy-blue wings, long tail and green-and-white head was first found among the personal effects of the Prince after he was crushed to death by an elephant in 1893. As the unfortunate nobleman had not had time to label the specimen, its origins remained a mystery for half a century before the species was seen in the wild by a Cambridge naturalist in southern Ethiopia. The other species set to benefit from the proceeds of this year's Birdfair include: the Ethiopian Bush-crow; and the White-tailed Swallow. The Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust's Tim Appleton is the fair's other co-founder and co-organiser. He said: "Since 1989, the British Birdwatching Fair has raised almost £2.5million for global conservation. Beneficiaries have included threatened species, spanning the globe from albatrosses in the Southern Ocean to rainforest birds in the Philippines. This is a terrific achievement for an event which has its home in a few fields in Leicestershire over one weekend each year." Image credit: Paul Donald; RSPB