

East Africa's Dazzling Dozen

By Adrian Binns

I am often asked, "What is the most colorful bird in East Africa?" This is nearly impossible to decide, with such an amazing array of beautiful birds from which to choose. I have decided to limit my answer to a list of twelve species, offering just one representative of a given family. This is difficult enough, when you consider, for example, the starling family and multitude of sunbirds.

While beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I think most will agree that these dozen are among the most dazzling. In no particular order.....

Golden-breasted Starling

Restricted to the semi arid areas of Tsavo and Samburu in Kenya, this is undoubtedly the most breathtaking of the 31 starling species represented in East Africa. Many of the brilliantly iridescent 'glossy starlings' such as the ubiquitous and aptly named Superb Starling are savannah dwellers and have light, yellow or red eyes. They are found in all habitats including a number in the forests that have rufous in the primaries.



Red-and-yellow Barbet

This strikingly colored bird of the dry savanna is found close to the ground, often near termite mounds, to which it has a strong association. It's relatively slim bill allows it to probe the soil for insects, contrasting with forest-dwelling barbets which have thicker bills more adapted to woodland habitat. All barbets and tinkerbirds, of which East Africa has 33 species, are cavity nesters and the Red-and-yellow Barbet is the only species that uses termite mounds for nesting, food source, courtship and display behavior.



Green-winged Pytilla *(by default)*

There is a wonderful family of small seed eating finches known as waxbills, which are usually found low in the savanna grasses or brush. Two species that are found in highland forest undergrowth are Shelley's Crimsonwing and Red-headed Bluebill, both of whom would surely go straight to the top of anyone's list. Unfortunately I do not have even a reasonable photograph to show you, so you will have to make do with looking at them in the field guide, and settling for a Green-winged Pytilla as its representative. With its brightly colored

plumage and waxy bill, red face and throat, and orange breast band with crimson tail and barred underbelly this is not bad for a runner-up!

Malachite Kingfisher

Whether flashing a streak of cobalt blue as it flies low over still water or sitting patiently on a bulrush stem its brilliant colors makes it stand out even at a distance. In spite of its diminutive size, the Malachite is easily the most recognizable of Africa's 15 kingfisher species. Not all of the continent's kingfishers are associated with water and survive on a diet of fish; some are exclusively insect eaters such as the African Dwarf, an interior forest species, and the widespread and striking Grey-headed Kingfisher that is found in woodland thickets.

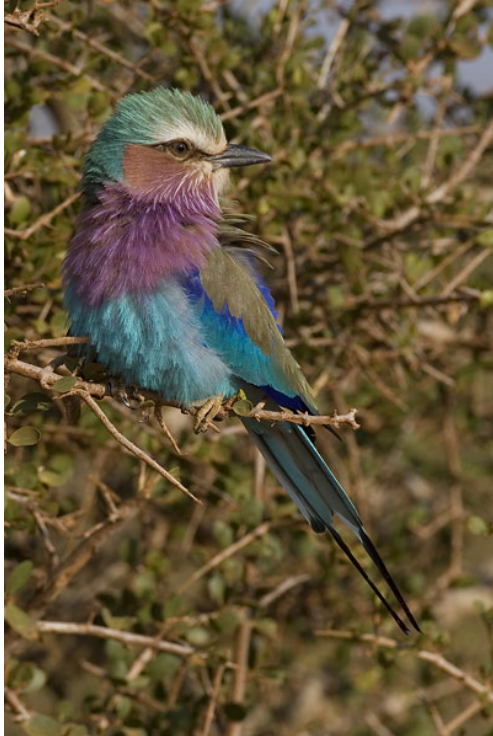


Papyrus Gonolek

Gonoleks get their name from their call and are part of the huge African endemic bush-shrike family, that include the aptly named Gorgeous (or Four-coloured) Bush Shrike. While it is amongst the most beautiful of birds this shy black and crimson plumaged bird with golden crown and prominent white eye is also amongst the toughest to see as it moves slowly with a horizontal posture through the western papyrus swamps around Lake Victoria.

Northern Red Bishop

This small species brings a bright splash of color to the African landscape. With distinctive red and black breeding plumage, Northern Red Bishop males are particularly eye-catching during breeding displays, when they fluff up their back feathers and flutter like bumble-bees over the reed beds. They breed communally where the polygamous males defend a territory and build a nest for each of their females. Once the breeding season is over they molt into drab streaky female-like plumage and wander widely in mixed flocks.



Lilac-breasted Roller

Perched on prominent vantage points in the open savanna no bird represents an African safari more than the Lilac-breasted Roller. It gets its name from its agile rolling aerial displays. It is easily and instantly recognizable with its long forked tail and multitude of colors, olive-chestnut back, sky-blue underparts, dark blue wing coverts, lilac chest and throat, turquoise-green nape and cream forehead....simply stunning.

Beautiful Sunbird

East Africa boasts over 50 species of these iridescent jewels. Filling a similar niche that hummingbirds do (in the western hemisphere) the nectar-sipping sunbirds are found in all habitats. They lack the specialized flight of hummers and consequently regularly feed from a perch. An inhabitant of the dry thorn bush and wooded gardens, the Beautiful Sunbird has central tail feathers that extend 2 inches beyond the others. It has a glittering green head, red breast band bordered with yellow patches and a black belly – truly a beautiful bird.





Vulturine Guineafowl

This elegant and distinctively spotted terrestrial gamebird, whose family is endemic to Africa, is an inhabitant of the dry bush of Samburu and Tsavo. Highly gregarious and vocal, they are often encountered along the sides of dirt tracks. The contrasting combination of striking plumage makes this bird unforgettable - long black-and-white striped lanceolate feathers covering a cobalt blue breast, white spots on grey back and wings, and red eye within a bare grey-blue head.

Grey-crowned Crane

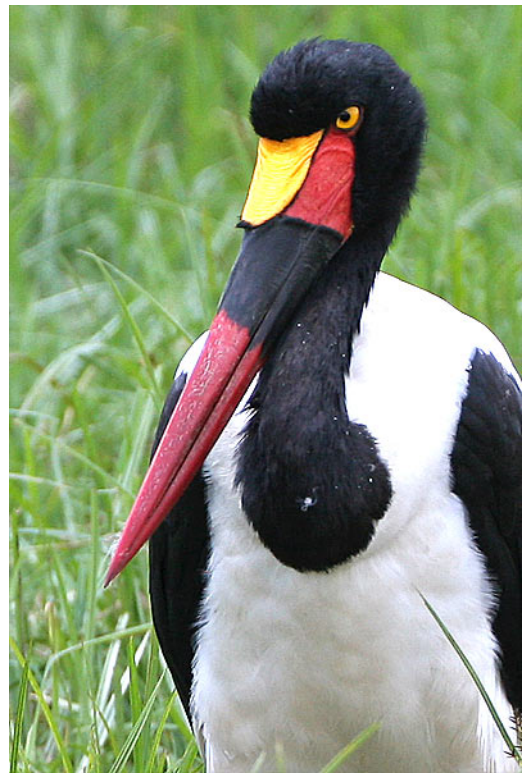
Uganda's national bird is easily recognized with its red and white facial patch, red wattle and prominent ornamental golden crest. Favoring moist wetlands these beautiful, stately birds are often encountered in pairs. Of all the world's cranes, the Grey-crowned is the only one that roosts in trees. Though they resemble storks, they are actually more closely related to bustards and rails.





Little Bee-eater

An exotic family with dazzling colors, sleek bodies and long tails, Bee-eaters exhibit amazing aerial skills, flying short sorties from perches to pick off insects. Living up to their name, bees comprise the majority of their diet, and they must beat the insect against a branch to remove the stinger before devouring. The ubiquitous Little Bee-eater is often encountered in pairs and relatively low to the ground. As with all bee-eaters they create a tunnel nest in a sand bank to hatch and raise their young.



Saddle-billed Stork

Of the 8 stork species found in East Africa, the tall, long-legged Saddle-billed is unmistakable with its pink-red knees, outrageously colored bill and yellow saddle-shaped frontal shield. Alone or in pairs, they are often found near marshy areas or still pools, dieting on snakes, lizards, frogs and fish. Females can be distinguished from the males by their yellow eye.

My list ends at twelve, but I could easily add a dozen more beautifully-colored birds, like Jackson's Golden-backed Weaver; Eastern Long-tailed Paradise Whydah; Sulphur-bellied Bush-Shrike or Gorgeous (Four-coloured) Bush-shrike for that matter; African Paradise Flycatcher; White-fronted Bee-eater; Black-headed Oriole; White-browed Robin-Chat; African Hoopoe with its wonderfully rich rufous-cinnamon crest; Green Wood-hoopoe; Pangani Longclaw; Golden Pipit which looks like a large yellow butterfly in flight; or even Lesser Flamingos, that create an endless ribbon of pink wash ebbing and flowing its way around one of the rift valleys soda lakes.

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