

NORTHERN ZAMBIA

A TASTE OF THE *tropics*

Memorable moments in birding usually come when there are species involved that the birder hasn't seen before or when the number of species in a certain area makes for an extraordinary experience. Very occasionally these are combined and one encounters a host of new species in a relatively small area, as **Leon Marais** recounts.



White-tailed Blue Flycatcher



Bocage's Akalat

Such groupings of different bird species often occur around a particular attraction, such as food or water. On a trip in March 2006 we had a particularly productive hour at the Kumasinga Hide in Mkuze Game Reserve, when a pair of Dark-capped Bulbuls initiated a drinking session that just never seemed to stop, with a new bird arriving every 30 seconds or so, and hoarse whispers of 'Grey Waxbill... Purple-crested Turaco!... Red-backed Mannikin!...' eventually becoming more like shouts in the silence of the hide.

Other such moments can occur around termite emergences, and I've experienced a few in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve that had not only the birds enthusiastically hunting down the alates (winged reproductive termites), but also giant plated lizards and vervet monkeys 'making like birds' and becoming briefly airborne as they pursued the termites. But the most memorable of my recent birding experiences occurred around a tropical ant swarm.

We arrived at Kapishya hot springs in northern Zambia after a long trek from the dry lowlands of the northern Luangwa Valley. The Kapishya area is remarkably similar in vegetation and feel to the Kosi Bay area of Maputaland, complete with raffia palms and Palm-nut Vultures.

We pulled up in front of reception and, being birders, immediately walked over to a small patch of garden and forest to our left, binoculars in hand, leaving the

car abandoned in the parking lot with all the doors wide open...

A flash of pale, luminescent blue was the first thing that caught our attention – a White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, a beautiful tail-fanning species that only seems to alight for a micro-second before it's off again. On the ground an African Thrush ran to and fro between the trees, a Green-backed Honeybird flitted over to the right, and soon we began to feel almost overwhelmed by the number of new birds in this small patch of forest.

Moving around to the front of the area we encountered an African Dusky Flycatcher that had no hesitation in flying down from its perch to pick up insects from between our feet. In the outer edge of the forest, not a metre from where we were standing, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Bocage's Akalat, Red-capped Crombec, three different species of somewhat unfamiliar greenbuls (Little, Grey-olive and Cabanis's), Yellow-throated Leaf-love, Ashy Flycatcher, White-browed Robin-Chat, a colour morph of Grey-headed Bush-Shrike that had a pale, whitish breast, and other species flitted from branch to branch, most of them remarkably confident and unperturbed by our presence.

Looking closely at the vegetation we noticed that the plants on the outer edge of the forest were covered in ants and, on peering down at the forest



floor, we saw the ants were marching in columns up to 10 centimetres wide. Suddenly the penny dropped: the ants were on a massive feeding exercise and all manner of insects were fleeing ahead of the marauding army, thus revealing themselves and becoming food for the birds that were congregating in the area. This phenomenon is common in the Neotropics, and bird guides in Central and South America spend hours around army ant swarms, which can cover up to 240 square metres of forest floor. Studies there show that the attendant birds have a distinct spatial distribution (height above the forest floor and position relative to the central front of the ant swarm) according to species, which they maintain as the swarm moves along. They also take different-sized prey, thus further helping to reduce inter-specific competition. At least one species, the Bi-coloured Antbird, feeds only in association with ants.



Carving a path through the forest, the army ants continue on their way.



Black-throated Wattle-eye

In the situation we encountered in Zambia, the birds appeared quite unorganised in their positioning, with all species flitting about constantly in what seemed to be a random, opportunistic affair.

It was a new experience for us and, initially, we hadn't realised what was going on and had been more interested in the birds themselves, rather than why they were there. The following day we returned to the same patch of forest and, while the ants were still present in columns, they weren't feeding as a swarm fanned out over a large area and the birding was quiet by comparison. It had been a matter of being in the right place at the right time and it was definitely the highlight of our birding experience in the area.

The general vicinity provided very good birding, with the mixed habitat of 'mushito' forest (a wetter version of broadleaved miombo forest) and open dambos (grassy floodplains) resulting in a good species list. Some of our best birds in and around Kapishya, apart from those seen at the ant swarm, were Grey-headed Parrot, Schalow's and Ross's turacos, Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Black-backed and Miombo Pied barbets, Evergreen Forest Warbler, Laura's Woodland Warbler, Böhm's Flycatcher, Anchieta's and Western Violet-backed sunbirds, Marsh Widowbird, Fawn-breasted Waxbill, Stout Cisticola and Fülleborn's Longclaw.



Böhm's Flycatcher

COMPETITION WINNERS

The five winners of the copies of the DVD 'Amazing Birds of the Kruger National Park' competition featured in the October/November 2006 issue are:
Des Havinga, Pretoria; Gert J. Venter, Doornpoort; Orna Kemp, Springs; T.H. Tonkin, Anerley; Sue Hill, Pietermaritzburg.

The names of the sleeper hides at the Kruger National Park are Sable Dam and Shipandani.