

EAST AFRICAN ADVENTURE

'Urban Birder' David Lindo travelled to Ethiopia to survey rare endemic birds, but it was an encounter with the country's endangered canids that made him cry wolf.





Lake Garba Guracha in the Bale Mountains: less arid East Africa, more *The Land that Time Forgot*.



David Russell Spencer with The Africa Image Library/Alamy

David – here on the Liben Plain – carried out survey work with the help of guides from the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society.

“Wolf!” The sight of a canine trotting down a hillside towards us had me yelling with excitement. But it wasn’t a wolf; as it came closer, I realised – to my chagrin – that it was just a rusty-coloured mongrel.

I was scanning the landscape from a Land Cruiser bumping and skidding over a muddy, potholed road in the foothills of the Bale Mountains National Park, some 400km south of Addis Ababa. I’d already cried wolf once before, some five minutes earlier, precipitating a mad scramble for binoculars and cameras from my fellow passengers, so this time they were prepared for the anticlimax. But you couldn’t blame me for being excited about travelling through the Bale Mountains, a rugged upland covering 2,200km² and home to about 300 Ethiopian wolves – the largest single surviving population of this endangered canid.

THE EXPERT

DAVID LINDO has been birding, mostly in Britain’s urban areas, for the past 30 years. This was his first trip to Ethiopia.

David cried “Wolf!” so many times, no one believed him when a real one materialised.

THE BALE MOUNTAINS: WORTS AND ALL

As we began our ascent onto the Sanetti Plateau, lowland farms gave way to lush forest and then, as we approached a breathless 4,000m above sea level, to alpine habitat. Just a few hours ago we’d been overheating in open-necked shirts; now we pulled on fleeces and watched our breath condense in a misty vapour. Giant St John’s worts, the size of small trees, dotted the boulder-strewn landscape: this was not the Ethiopia I had imagined – it was more like *The Land that Time Forgot*.

Many of the flora and fauna on the plateau were stranded here as glaciers retreated at the end of the last ice age. While some developed into new species, others are relict populations of European species such as golden eagles and choughs. As if to demonstrate the point, a hoary-looking creature appeared, pummelling through the low vegetation: an Ethiopian highland hare, endemic to the Bale Mountains but related to our brown hare. ▶



In his element: the Urban Birder surveys some waste ground from the roof of his hotel in inner-city Addis Ababa.



The Tacazze sunbird – found across East Africa, from Sudan to Tanzania – is a colourful find in Addis Ababa, particularly the male with his shimmering plumage.



And then it appeared, as if from nowhere: a tan-coloured dog with its head up and its ears pricked. “Wolf! Wolf!” I blurted – and this time I was right, even though no one else was listening. The beast was quite unlike anything I had expected, resembling a long-legged, labrador-sized, lean fox, with a mid-length, bushy tail; the only feature that was remotely lupine was its face.

By the time my companions realised that I wasn’t joking, one of the world’s rarest canids was standing within 20 paces of us. That day – our only day in the Bale Mountains – we saw eight individuals, including a family party of two adults and a pair of well-grown pups. Not bad for an urban birder.

Rewind 10 days and you’d have found me boarding the flight to Addis Ababa – alongside far more experienced ornithologists from BirdLife International and the RSPB – wondering what on Earth I was doing. I’d been invited to join an expedition to conduct surveys of four of Ethiopia’s rarest endemic birds: the Ethiopian bush crow, the white-tailed swallow, Prince Ruspoli’s turaco and the enigmatic Liben lark. Conservationists have been estimating the populations of these species since 2008, with the aim of establishing whether numbers are going up or down, and if anything can be done to help them survive.

Ethiopia, embedded in the Horn of Africa, is entirely landlocked; even so, it is ecologically diverse, with deserts in the east, mountains looming over much of the interior and tropical forests in the south. As large as Spain and France combined, its population is the second-highest in

the continent, at more than 82 million people. Everyone I encountered was invariably warm, friendly and universally predisposed to sharing.

URBAN BIRDING IN ADDIS

I began my visit in the capital, Addis Ababa, where I spent four days exploring its urban birding spots. The city is home to nearly 300 species of birds; scouring hotel gardens and botanical parks, I was rewarded with great views of exotic species such as moorland chats, black-winged lovebirds and Tacazze sunbirds, the males resplendent in their iridescent plumage.

Overhead, vultures and yellow-billed kites were stacking up like planes at Heathrow, waiting for their next free meal. But my ultimate birding site was a piece of waste ground behind my city-centre hotel: it was rough and it was smelly, but I spotted an incredible number of birds here, including whitethroats and willow warblers bound for Europe.

Our first study species were the bush crow and the swallow. Both live in very restricted ranges 12 hours’ drive south of Addis in Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary, a sparsely wooded, savannah-type habitat where cattle herding is the

THAT DAY WE SAW EIGHT WOLVES, INCLUDING A FAMILY PARTY WITH A PAIR OF WELL-GROWN PUPS. NOT BAD FOR AN URBAN BIRDER.



On the lookout: a huddle of blue-breasted bee-eaters wait to snatch insects out of the air.



Giant St John's worts stud the Sanetti Plateau in the Bale Mountains.

number-one occupation. The road trip there offered plenty of birding opportunities, though mammals of any size were decidedly scarce. Indeed, my first furry sighting was of an unlucky small rat being swallowed alive by a gutsy black-headed heron.

The reason for this absence, according to our guides from the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society, is that most of the large game has been hunted for food to the point of being completely wiped out, a consequence of numerous droughts and the burgeoning population.

In Yabelo (a small town near the wildlife sanctuary of the same name) we saw much evidence of prolonged drought conditions: cattle carcasses littered the landscape atop the largely bare soil, which was an odd shade of Martian red. It's a landscape that has been shaped by its people, and it is believed that both the Ethiopian bush crow and the white-tailed swallow have evolved in tandem with the human population and rely heavily on the semi-natural woodland – not unlike some of our corvids and swallows.

THE THORN BIRDS

The bush crow lives in clumps of acacia trees in the villages surrounding the town of Yabelo; here they build their domed, magpie-like nests in large colonies. They are adorable small, grey birds, with black wings, a black tail and a curious bare eye patch – they are believed to be one of very few species that flash the bare skin behind their eyes to indicate their mood. We spent several days counting nests and the birds themselves; overall, they seemed in fine fettle.

WILDLIFE SPOTTER ETHIOPIAN WOLF

▶ **NAME** *Canis simensis*. Also known as the Abyssinian wolf, Simien fox or Simien jackal.

▶ **IDENTIFICATION** A medium-sized wolf with long legs and muzzle. Fur is usually tawny-red, with white underparts and a blacky, bushy tail.

▶ **BEHAVIOUR** Lives in close-knit, territorial packs up to 13 strong.

▶ **DIET** Specialises in taking giant molerats and three species of grass

rat; hence farmers do not fear for their livestock.

▶ **HABITAT** Confined to isolated pockets of afroalpine grasslands and heathlands above 3,000m.

▶ **DISTRIBUTION** Mainly Bale Mountains National Park and Simien Mountains National Park.

▶ **POPULATION** About 500.

▶ **STATUS** Classified as 'Endangered' by the IUCN Red List.



The Ethiopian wolf's range is restricted to seven isolated mountain regions.



Degradation of the Liben Plain, caused by cattle grazing, is the key reason why the population of the Liben lark has declined so precipitously in recent years.



David had occasional glimpses of mountain nyalas on his way north from Yabelo to the Liben Plain.



The Ethiopian bush crow fares best in areas of low human habitation.

Though its woodland habitat is declining, recent surveys suggest the endemic Prince Ruspoli's turaco is more widespread than previously believed.

But it is a delicate balance: if humans become too numerous and what's left of the acacia woodland is lost, it would spell the end of this remarkable bird.

The white-tailed swallow, by comparison, is a complete mystery. Only five nests are ever known to have been found, including one in a clay oven in one of the villages. It looks like a shorter-tailed version of our barn swallow and appears to be fiercely solitary, often turning up out of nowhere, flying low to the ground and showing no fear of humans before disappearing. Nobody knows how many of these birds exist or, indeed, how they live. Sadly, we could add little from this year's study.

GAME ON

From Yabelo we drove 200km north-east to the town of Negele, which would be the base for our search for Prince Ruspoli's turaco and the Liben lark. For the first time, as we journeyed north, we spotted some proper African 'game'. Warthogs were common; less frequently we saw antelopes such as the diminutive dik-dik and the graceful and endangered mountain nyala, with occasional glimpses of mountain reedbucks, Thomson's gazelles and Burchell's zebras. Our guides assured us that there were still low numbers of lions and leopards in the area, too.

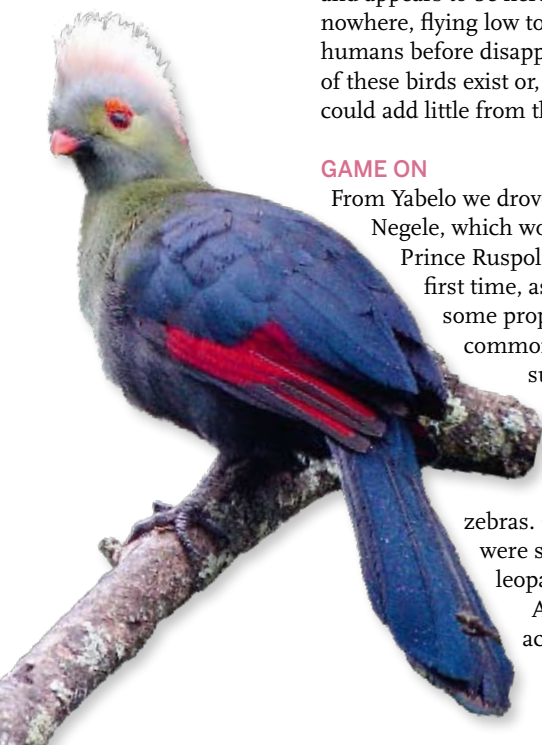
An inhabitant of dry juniper and acacia-conifer woodlands, Prince

PRINCE RUSPOLI'S TURACO IS EXTRAORDINARY: A DAZZLING PLUMAGE OF BLUES, REDS AND GREENS, PLUS TEDDY-BOY QUIFF.

Ruspoli's turaco is an extraordinary bird to look at: a dazzling plumage of blues, reds and greens is complemented by a teddy-boy quiff. But it is an even more extraordinary bird to hear, emitting a guttural call, not unlike that of a red grouse, that does not suit its regal name or nature. For three days it eluded us until we found one perched high in the canopy, barking out its cacophonous song.

But the main purpose of our visit was to survey the Liben Plain, a high-altitude plateau that is a shadow of its former self. As recently as 20 years ago it was a sweeping savannah that harboured big game. Since then, cattle herding and agriculture have pushed out most of the wildlife; today, the night-time howls of the spotted hyenas are all that remain to remind visitors of its former glory.

So, how is the critically endangered Liben lark faring? The species possesses a long hind claw, indicative of a preference for long grass, yet I couldn't find a single blade more than 5cm in height. It wasn't looking promising. For the past few years, BirdLife International and the RSPB have conducted surveys here to establish its numbers. Last year, they recorded nearly 60 birds but could not decipher how many were female – crucial





THE INFORMATION

ETHIOPIA A landlocked country in North Africa, Ethiopia has a huge range of habitats and some fantastic wildlife.

NOW YOU DO IT

GETTING THERE

► **Ethiopian Airlines** flies Heathrow to Addis Ababa direct. 0800 635 0644; www.flyethiopian.com

► **Lufthansa** flies to Addis via Frankfurt. 0871 945 9747; www.lufthansa.com

TOURS & GUIDES

► Operators offering Ethiopian wildlife tours include Naturetrek (www.naturetrek.co.uk) and Exodus (www.exodus.co.uk).

► David's guide was **Abiy Dagne** (abiymill@yahoo.com), who is affiliated with the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society. http://ewnhs.org.et

SAFETY

► The UK **Foreign and Commonwealth Office** currently advises against travel to some border zones including the Somali region and other specified areas, though not those described in this article. For the latest advice visit www.fco.gov.uk

WHEN TO GO

► The driest period is October to March, though many areas are dry till July. October and November are ideal times to visit the Bale Mountains, when the wildflowers are in bloom.



Look out for hartebeest in Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary.

FURTHER READING

► **Birds of the Horn of Africa** (Helm Field Guides, 9780713665413, RRP £29.99, readers £27.99, subscribers £26.99, WAUT11/13).

► **Ethiopia** (Bradt Travel Guides, 9781841622842, RRP £16.99, readers £15.50, subscribers £14.50, WAUT11/14).

► Buy these books on p81.

THE NAVIGATOR



Bale Mountains NP

The Bale Mountains are home to many endemic species, including Ethiopian wolves. Trekking through the park's juniper woodlands and over its high moorlands is a popular tourist activity.

Simien Mountains NP

The Simien Mountains are home to species such as ibex, geladas and a small number of Ethiopian wolves. The highest peak in Ethiopia, Ras Dashan, is here. It's one of the few places in Africa where snow regularly falls.

Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary

Yabelo Wildlife Sanctuary comprises acacia savannah and juniper woodlands, and is one of the best game-viewing areas in Ethiopia, with zebras, hartebeest and even some big cats such as lions and leopards.

WILDLIFE SPOTTER LIBEN LARK

► **NAME** *Heteromirafra sidamoensis*.

Formerly known as the Sidamo lark.

► **IDENTIFICATION** Typical lark, with brown, cryptic plumage. Big head with short, stout bill on a relatively long, slender neck.

► **SONG** Like an underdeveloped skylark's song, delivered from a brief low flight.

► **BEHAVIOUR** Unobtrusive. Creeps through the grass like a mouse.

► **DIET** Invertebrates.

► **HABITAT** Poorly known. Currently found on heavily used pastureland.

► **DISTRIBUTION** Only discovered in 1968, it is believed to be restricted to the Liben Plain east of Negele, at or above 1,450m.

► **POPULATION** Probably fewer than 100 individuals.

► **STATUS** 'Critically Endangered' on the IUCN Red List.

Restricted to an area of less than 36km², the Liben lark is one of Africa's rarest birds.



information if they are to assess the species' breeding potential. What would we find this year, I wondered?

On my first morning I spotted plenty of larks, but most turned out to be the common Somali short-toed variety. The main diagnostic feature of its Liben cousin is behavioural: the song flight is very similar to our own skylark's, but it climbs less than 10m above the ground before plummeting earthwards, legs akimbo.

Sadly, it was all too easy to see why the existence of this rare species is threatened. The cattle weren't just cropping the grass, they were reducing many areas to bare earth. Tallying up the results of our survey, we'd counted only 30 birds – half of last year's total – with no idea how many of them were female.

LIVING WITH THE LARK

Can the Liben lark survive? Perhaps, but it will take engagement with local people, helping them to find ways of keeping livestock and growing crops that do not completely edge out this perilously endangered bird. From my encounters with some of the villagers who live on the Liben Plain, I got the impression that they didn't want to lose the lark either. On one day we brought some schoolchildren on the survey, and they all took to the task enthusiastically, so perhaps there is hope for the future. But whatever is done, it needs to be done quickly – time is running out.

And so, with our work completed, we prepared to head north to Addis Ababa via the Bale Mountains. Apparently, somebody said, there are wolves in them there hills... 🐾