

A photograph of a Fox's Weaver bird perched on a branch. The bird has a bright yellow body, a black head and neck, and a black beak. It is looking to the left. The background is a clear blue sky with some green foliage and small white flowers in the foreground.

A total of 168 nests were recorded from 8 locations in the Districts of Amuria and Katakwi.

**THE REDISCOVERY OF THE FOX'S WEAVER**

# Fox's Weaver

**UGANDA'S ONLY ENDEMIC BIRD**

Last documented in 1996 (Byaruhanga et al 2001) with more than 40 individuals breeding on the fringes of Lake Bisina, the Fox's Weaver (*Ploceus spekeoides*) was not recorded again until in the recent two years when the bird was rediscovered breeding in a different site but still in North-Eastern Uganda.

The range of this bird species, restricted to the north-eastern parts of Uganda, is getting clearer than before with the discovery of new breeding sites in Magoro, Palam and Ngarium in Katakwi, PianUpe Wildlife Reserve, Ongongoja in Kapelebiong and non-breeding population observed in Iri Napak area. The expeditions for the species is supported by the GEF Small grants programme and Africa Bird Club (ABC).

Uganda is the birder's paradise, boasting of over 1,060 bird species and is arguably one of the top birding destinations in the World. Among the special birds for Uganda is the Fox's Weaver which is only found in Uganda and nowhere else in the World. The species is

poorly studied and has only been recorded in the seasonally flooded wetlands in Teso Sub-region in the North-Eastern part of Uganda. Previous records were from L.Opeta, L.Kyoga and L.Bisina, where the species preferred Papyrus swamps with nearby trees, but nesting on trees in wetland areas or trees hanging over water. The species mainly breeds during the rainy season in April and August and is suspected to move further field from wetlands during the dry season. The population of the species is largely unknown. The first documented breeding records were on fringes of Lake Bisina in 1996. New records were documented in July 2018 when the NatureUganda team made a reconnaissance visit to the new sites in Katakwi after a tipoff

from bird guides in the region. This was followed by a more extensive survey in the area in August 2019 and February 2020, covering four districts. The extensive search in August 2019 found most of the records of the species on nests, indicating the peak of the breeding season. Apart from the breeding season that is known to occur between May and August, the ecology and behavior of the species has not been well studied and documented. The species is Globally and regionally Near Threatened but locally considered to be Endangered (WCS, 2016).

## Most individuals (50) were recorded in Katakwi, 7 in Napak, 6 in Amuria and 3 in Soroti.

NatureUganda is leading the way in bridging the information and knowledge gap with regard to the ecology and behavior of the species. Working with partners such as the Uganda Bird Guides Club (UBGC) and Local guides in the area, NU has carried out a total of four surveys (only three found records), to estimate the population of the species, map its distribution and document the habitat ecology of the bird especially its breeding ecology, with only one survey done outside the breeding season in February 2020.

In 2016, NatureUganda, with funding from the Africa Bird Club, conducted a survey to assess the presence of the Fox's Weaver in its historically known sites around L.Opeta, L.Bisina and L. Kyoga. For more than 10 years, this Bird had not been recorded by the NatureUganda bird monitoring team nor by the Uganda Bird Guides Club members during their tourist visits to these sites. All the three visits conducted in the sites yielded no record of the Fox's Weaver, making a conclusion of a possible extinction of the species in the known sites. The Survey in August 2019 was conducted by four teams comprising of technical team from NatureUganda and volunteers from UBGC. The survey was timed to coincide with the known peak breeding season of the species. Sites surveyed covered districts of Kumi, Teso, Katakwi and Napak. There were two teams; the

“Magoro team” and the “Katakwi team”, a separate “Kumi team” which surveyed Kumi and Soroti districts, and the “Iriru team” which surveyed sites in Iriru, Napak district. From this survey, the Fox's Weaver was recorded in three of the four districts surveyed.

Only the team in Kumi did not record the species in the sites surveyed in Kumi and Soroti districts. Findings from the survey showed that, the Fox's Weaver inhabits wooded grasslands dominated by *Vachelia drepanolobium* commonly known as the Whistling-thorn Acacia. This acacia species was the favored nesting and feeding tree by the species. Magoro and Ngariu had the highest number of individuals and it is not uncommon to see bird nests or even individuals flying across the roads or perched just a few meters off the road in this area. A total of 66 individuals of Fox's Weaver were recorded from the August survey. Most individuals (50) were recorded in Katakwi, 7 in Napak, 6 in Amuria and 3 in Soroti. A total of 168 nests were recorded from 8 locations in the Districts of Amuria and Katakwi.

The survey in February 2020 was timed to coincide with the non-breeding season of the Weaver. Three districts of Katakwi, Amuria and Napak were surveyed by the three survey teams being the sites where the Weaver was recorded breeding in August 2019. A total of 10 individuals of the Weaver were recorded mainly in Magoro and Iriru sites. The lack of records from some of the sites in February may be a link to the theory that this species migrates away from its breeding sites during the non-breeding season.

These two surveys in North-eastern Uganda seem to suggest that Magoro, and Ngariu in Katakwi Pian-Upe Wildlife Reserve and Ongongoja are important habitats for the Fox's Weaver especially during the breeding season. More surveys are planned to clearly understand the ecology of the Fox's Weaver during the breeding and non-breeding to unravel the mystery of Uganda's only endemic bird species.

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