

Fox's Weaver Expedition Report



JULY 2018



Fox's Weaver survey Report

Front cover photo: Male Fox's weaver perching on a whistling-thorn acacia

(*Vachellia drepanolobium*) in Omugetum village near Angisa Landing site of Lake Opeta during the expedition. Photo by Mr. Achilles Byaruhanga.

INTRODUCTION

The Fox's Weaver (*Ploceus spekeoides*) is a species of birds in the Ploceidae family. It is found in Eastern Uganda and it is the only endemic bird species for the country. *Ploceus spekeoides* is a poorly recorded species known from a restricted area of seasonally flooded wetlands in northern Uganda (Collar and Stuart 1985, Byaruhanga *et al.* 2001). The species has been recorded at two Important Bird Areas, Lake Bisina and Lake Opeta. There are also records from Rhino Camp in Arua and from the environs of Lake Kyoga near Nakasongola. Its preferred habitat is papyrus-fringed lakes with nearby wooded grassland, a habitat common throughout Eastern Uganda. (Nalwanga *et al.*, 2015).

PREVIOUS SURVEYS

In August 1996, 47 nests of this species were counted around Lake Bisina, since when it has not been recorded breeding (Byaruhanga *et al.*, 2001). The last reliable sighting was made in January 2010. They recorded seven birds including two males. (Nalwanga *et al.*, 2015). There are also records from Rhino Camp in Arua and from the environs of Lake Kyoga near Nakasongola.

AIM

Nature Uganda conducted this expedition with the major aim of confirming the presence and identity of *Ploceus spekeoides* based on recent allegations by local birders who claimed to have seen the species in this area.

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AREA OF STUDY

The study was undertaken in Omugetum village in Magoro Sub-county Katakwi District in North-Eastern Uganda. The area lies on the fringes of Lake Opeta and the vegetation of the area is described as seasonally flooded wooded grassland dominated by acacia species, especially *Vachellia drepanolobium*. The area experiences a single rainy season, mean annual figures range between 500 and 700mm, mean annual temperatures range between 25 - 29 degrees Celsius (Byaruhanga et al., 2001).

SURVEY OF THE FOX'S WEAVER, 2018

NatureUganda conducted a survey on 11th July, 2018. The survey team was led by Mr. Achilles Byaruhanga (Executive Director NatureUganda) and Dr. Dianah Nalwanga (Director Research and Monitoring, NatureUganda) and 5 other members of staff. The survey was timed to coincide with the breeding season of the species according to Fry and Keith (2004).

Unlike the previous Fox's weaver survey carried out by NatureUganda in 2015, that surveyed many sites in Eastern Uganda, this survey was specific, and targeted only the area along Magoro-Angisa road. The transect measured approximately 2 km along the Magoro-Angisa road. GPS readings for all colonies of the Fox's weavers found were taken and the number of birds seen along the transect were recorded, other important habitat information such as dominant vegetation and nest records were also recorded during the survey.



Team Members celebrating after seeing the Fox's Weaver.

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*Nature*Uganda team surveying the area along Magoro-Angisa Road. L – R Mr. Achilles Byaruhanga, Dr. Dianah Nalwanga, Lillian Twanza, Gordon Mwesigwa, Onongo Jonathan,. Photo credits; Robert (the guide)

RESULTS

A total of 7 Fox's weaver birds were sighted along the transect, these comprised of 5 males and 2 females. 32 Fox's weaver nests were counted along the transect, 28 of these were active while 6 were deemed inactive. Majority of these nests were built on whistling-thorn acacia trees. It was also noted that the nests were situated near water pools.

During the course of the expedition, the team was able to identify 30 bird species including the Fox's weaver and the Karamoja Apalis that is classified as Vulnerable under the IUCN red-list.

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DISCUSSION

Majority of the Fox's weaver birds and nests recorded in the survey were built on whistling-thorn Acacia trees using grass as building material. This species is the dominant woody species in the area. Although little is known of the ecology and behavior of the Fox's weaver, the team observed the weavers feeding on ants that depend on the whistling-thorn Acacia for shelter. The close affinity of the Fox's weaver to the Acacia is attributed to a mutualistic relationship between the Acacia and some species of ants.

The nesting preference of the Fox's weaver as noted in the survey could play a key role not only in understanding the ecology and behavior of the Fox's weaver but also provide insight in developing conservation strategies to protect Uganda's only endemic bird species.

One of the major habitat threats observed was cattle grazing in the grassland, given that the surrounding community are predominantly cattle keepers. During the drier months, parts of the grassland are subjected to burning in order to encourage growth of new fodder and this poses a risk to the already threatened species. Other activities such as fishing which is widely practiced in the area pose a threat to the habitat of *P. spekeoides*.

CONCLUSION

The survey **was a success and this** is attributed to the timing of the survey which coincided with the suspected breeding season of the Fox's weaver between June to August. However, the role of local guides and other birders **who gave reports of sightings that prompted NatureUganda to undertake the expedition** cannot be undermined.

Little is still known about the Fox's weaver in terms of its range, breeding, threats and population. The lack of information makes it difficult to identify and protect the species. The major habitat threat was burning of the grassland, however the magnitude of the threat is not clearly understood. It is thought that the population of this species has reduced because of the threats to its habitat caused by wetland drainage and cattle grazing.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A more extensive survey of the grasslands around the Lake Opeta and Bisina area is required in order to properly assess the population and range of the species.
2. All year round studies should be carried out to better understand the behavior and ecology of the Fox' weaver so as to design successful conservation actions and approaches for the protection of the fox's weaver.

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REFERENCES

BirdLife International. 2016. Ploceus spekeoides. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2016:e.T22718933A94602536.<http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2016-3.RLTS.T22718933A94602536.en>.

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Skeen, R., Nalwanga, D., Opige, M. & Byaruhanga, A. 2015. Survey on the Fox's Weaver, the only Ugandan Endemic bird species; Final Survey Report.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Showing the bird species that were identified during the survey.

Order	Species Name	Family	Conservation Status
1.	Pin-Tailed Whydah	Viduidae	LC
2.	Karamoja Apalis	Cisticolidae	VU
3.	Common Bulbul	Pycnonotidae	LC
4.	Fox's Weaver	Ploceidae	NT
5.	Northern Red Bishop	Ploceidae	LC
6.	Trilling Cisticola	Cisticolidae	LC
7.	Purple Heron	Ardeidae	LC
8.	Little Egret	Ardeidae	LC
9.	Long-Tailed Cormorant	Phalacrocoracidae	LC
10.	Rufous Sparrow	Passeridae	LC

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11.	Dwarf Bittern	Ardeidae	LC
Order	Species Name	Family	Conservation Status
12.	Bronze Munia	Estrildidae	LC
13.	Green-backed Heron	Ardeidae	LC
14.	Dark-Chanting Goshawk	Accipitridae	LC
15.	Black-Shouldered Kite	Accipitridae	LC
16.	Silverbird	Muscicapidae	LC
17.	Yellow-Mantled Widowbird	Ploceidae	LC
18.	Marsh Tchagra	Malaconotidae	LC
19.	Malachite Kingfisher	Alcedinidae	LC
20.	Cardinal Quelea	Ploceidae	LC
21.	Grey-Backed Fiscal	Laniidae	LC
22.	Ring-Necked Dove	Columbidae	LC
23.	Winding Cisticola	Cisticolidae	LC
24.	Striped Kingfisher	Alcedinidae	LC
25.	Speckled Mousebird	Coliidae	LC
26.	Black Crake	Rallidae	LC
27.	Fan-Tailed Widowbird	Ploceidae	LC
28.	Flappet lark	Alaudidae	LC
29.	Fork-tailed Drongo	Dicruridae	LC
30.	Woodland Kingfisher	Alcedinidae	LC

KEY:

- LC – Least Concern. ([IUCN 3.1](#))

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- NT – Not Threatened. ([IUCN 3.1](#))
- VU – Vulnerable. ([IUCN 3.1](#))