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OBSERVATIONS OF VISIBLE NORTHBOUND PASSAGE IN UGANDA AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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Unlike in many other parts of the world, Africa has no bird migration counting stations. While the oldest such stations are in North America and Europe, others have recently been established in Asia (Nepal, Thailand, Malaysia and Georgia) and in Central America (Panama and Costa Rica). Most are focused on counting birds of prey, but other diurnal migrants are also counted. Such stations exist as close to Africa as Israel and the Strait of Gibraltar, and occasional counts have been undertaken in South Africa (e.g. Newman 1977, Newman 1978) and Djibouti (Welch & Welch 1988, Welch and Welch 1991, Rayaleh 2013). The reasons for the dearth of migration counts in Africa could be lack of knowledge of the important migratory corridors in Africa in which such a station could be placed or the diffuse nature of diurnal migration once the birds reach Africa.

Here I report on three observations of northbound passage of migrating birds in east-central Africa. These migrations are certainly not unprecedented; for example Carswell *et al.* (2005) report counts of up to 6 000 Common (Steppe) Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* along the northern shore of Lake Victoria in October. However, specific data on the timing, location, diversity, and numbers of such



Fig 1 - Kettle of Steppe Buzzards over Mainaro,
Kibale Forest National Park. © Josh Engel

reports are often lacking. A combination of additional observational data as well as data provided by satellite telemetry (e.g. Meyburg *et al.* 2003, López-López *et al.* 2009; see Bildstein 2013) could help establish the optimal locations to establish a migration counting station in sub-Saharan African, if such locations exist.

Itombwe Plateau, Democratic Republic of Congo
S02.9788 E28.87476; 2 770 m
14 April 2012

While conducting fieldwork on the eastern escarpment of the Itombwe Plateau, I witnessed a migration of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* and European Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster*. Conditions were such that counting the birds was very difficult; I estimated 500 bee-



eaters and 120 swallows during a one-hour period (12:00-13:00). I have no doubt that the birds were migrating long before I got to a point where I could see them, so I consider the actual number of birds to be much higher. The vast majority of bee-eaters were European, but I noticed several Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters *Merops persicus* mixed in.

The bee-eaters were migrating in flocks of 30-50 birds; the swallows in flocks of 5-20. At times they were migrating through heavy fog. During these times I could still hear flocks migrating over, even though I could not see them. The birds appeared to be following the escarpment north, but once the fog settled in the birds seemed to go elsewhere.

Ngogo, Kibale Forest National Park
N0.5055 E30.42605; 1 445 m
8 March 2013

Late in the afternoon, at about 17:00, Sadic Waswa alerted me that there were hawks flying overhead. I emerged from under the tarp where I had been working to see a long stream of hawks flying in a north-northwesterly direction, running essentially horizon to horizon across a narrow width of sky. I immediately asked Holly Lutz, who was nearby, to start counting while I worked on identifying the raptors and timed one minute. Holly counted 55 raptors pass overhead – all Steppe Buzzards – in the timed sixty seconds. The movement of raptors ceased almost immediately thereafter. In total, over 100 Steppe Buzzards were seen flying over, but the true number that went over that afternoon is unknown. Given the late hour, they may have been looking for a place to roost. Also flying over in the same direction were groups of swallows, including about 60 Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* and 10 Barn Swallows.



Fig 2 - Lesser Spotted Eagle migrating over Mainaro, Kibale Forest National Park. © Josh Engel

Mainaro, Kibale Forest National Park
N0.35746 E30.387; 1215 m
16 March 2013

In the late morning I started noticing a stream of raptors flying northeast, reminiscent of what I had seen previously at Ngogo. Many of the birds formed small kettles, gained height, and continued northeast. Again the predominant species was Common (Steppe) Buzzard (Fig 1). The migration lasted just 30 minutes, from 09h30-10h00; during this time I estimated that 100 Common (Steppe) Buzzards, 150 Sand Martins and 90 Barn Swallows passed overhead. Individuals of Common Swift *Apus apus* and Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* (Fig 2) also migrated over during this



time. The eagle represents one of the few records of the species for southwestern Uganda, but the timing fits with other Ugandan records on northward passage (Carswell *et al.* 2005).

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