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A review of the status, distribution and ecology of Friedmann's Lark *Mirafrapa pulpa*, including its habitat associations

by James Bradley

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SUMMARY.—Friedmann's Lark *Mirafrapa pulpa* is a poorly known species endemic to East African savannas, and classified as Data Deficient by BirdLife International. In light of our limited knowledge, I reviewed the species' ecology, status and distribution, finding no more than 51 dated records (or discrete periods of occurrence) in a search of the literature and internet databases. However, the restriction of these records to two distinctive regions of the Chyulu and Nyambeni foothills suggests that Friedmann's Lark may be closely tied to pockets of ash-based soil associated with geologically recent volcanic formations. These gritty, white-coloured soils are characterised by slower drainage in contrast to the region's otherwise widely occurring red soils, and retain year-round the dense grass cover apparently preferred by *M. pulpa*. It is therefore likely to be the distribution of these ash-based soils and associated dense grassland that determines the distribution of Friedmann's Lark. Based on this hypothesis, and the species' well-known erratic occurrence, its year-round area of occupancy may amount to no more than 20% of its overall extent of occurrence, amounting to c.5,000 km², potentially qualifying Friedmann's Lark as Near Threatened under IUCN criteria.

Following the discovery of Friedmann's Lark in 1912 (Friedmann 1930a), and a gap of five decades before the species was encountered again, basic knowledge of the species began to improve between the 1970s and 1990s, when it was found on several occasions in the Tsavo area of southern Kenya (Lack 1977, Pearson *et al.* 1992, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). Subsequently, it has been reconfirmed to occur in the Shaba area of central Kenya, close to where specimens were collected in 1912 (Friedmann 1930b, Records Sub-committee 2002), yet numbers appear to be small, and several key questions concerning the species' precise habitat requirements and breeding ecology remain unanswered. Because of these fundamental shortfalls, no threat category has been assigned to the species to date, and it remains in the 'holding category' Data Deficient (Butchart 2007, BirdLife International 2020).

Complicating an assessment of the species' ecology and conservation needs, Friedmann's Lark is a notoriously cryptic species. It tends to sing during only a few wet months of the year, while its occurrence at even better-known sites is frequently erratic. Although its song is very distinctive, the species' morphological similarity to Singing Bushlark *M. cantillans* has commonly posed identification problems in the past (Lack 1977, 1992).

However, following the publication of accurate field guides in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and with now easily accessible audio material, knowledge of the species among field observers has improved significantly in the last two decades. This has resulted in a slowly growing number of records, and permits a closer review of the species' ecology and status than was previously possible. A question of particular importance, on which I seek to shed

some light here, concerns the factors behind the patchy distribution and specific habitat requirements of Friedmann's Lark, and the seasonality of its occurrence.

Status and distribution

Friedmann's Lark is known only from southern Ethiopia, and central Kenya south to northern Tanzania (Lack 1992). Knowledge of the species' ecology was well summarised by Lewis & Pomeroy (1989), who considered it to be an obscure inhabitant of bushed grasslands, seen during sporadic influxes associated with rains, and also, at least locally, a nocturnal migrant (Pearson *et al.* 1992). Areas of repeated occurrence, supported by both historic and / or recent records, include the following.

(1) Archer's Post and the adjacent Buffalo Springs and Shaba National Reserves in north-central Kenya (Friedmann 1930b, Records Sub-committee 2002, Borrow 2010), covering an area of c.1,500 km². Reports are almost exclusively in April–May, but also in August and November. Juvenile specimens taken in May 1912 (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989; Appendix 1), are thought by some to perhaps involve same-age Singing Bushlarks *M. cantillans* (P. A. Donald *in litt.* 2019), but otherwise represent the only breeding data for the species.

(2) The Tsavo region of southern Kenya, extending south into northern Tanzania (Lack 1977, Pearson *et al.* 1992, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996; N. Baker *in litt.* 2019, B. Finch *in litt.* 2019), and covering approximately 23,500 km². Within this broader range, the few regularly frequented areas (>3 records) include the plains north-east of Kilaguni Lodge in Tsavo West National Park, the western part of Tsavo East National Park, the Taita Hills lowlands including the Maktau area and Rukinga Ranch, and Mkomazi Game Reserve in northern Tanzania. A small number of records immediately south-west of the Pare Mountains, in northern Tanzania, mark the southern limit of the range. Most reports from these areas are in April–May and November–January, supplemented by scattered dry-season records in February–March and August–September.

Aside from these two regions, wanderers (presumably from the Tsavo population) have been found at several places. The type specimen (Friedmann 1930a), collected at the Sagan River in southern Ethiopia in May 1912, and the sole record from that country (Ash & Atkins 2009), is generally believed to have involved a wanderer. North-east of Tsavo West National Park, wandering birds were found at Kiboko in the 1960s and 1970s (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989; audio recording by M. North), while Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) mentioned a record at nearby Kibwezi, although the date is unknown. Reports of the species from the northern Kenya Rift Valley, at Kapedo and in the Ilemi Triangle in the 1980s, are now thought to be erroneous based on a reappraisal by the original observer (Lack 1992; P. Lack *in litt.* 2019). Consequently, the two areas detailed above encompass the sole regularly known distribution of Friedmann's Lark. Where known, coordinates of records are provided in the Gazetteer.

The two areas inhabited by this lark are characterised by an arid-semiarid, bimodal rainfall regime, with annual rainfall amounting to 250–1,000 mm, falling primarily in March–May and October–December (Brown & Britton 1980, Lewis & Pomeroy 1989). Although records during the dry months are very few (Fig. 1b), and the species is also sometimes unrecorded for several consecutive years (Fig. 1a), Friedmann's Lark may undergo mass breeding and irruptive dispersal events during and following good rains, such as those preceding December–January occurrence in well-grassed areas of Tsavo East National Park (Lack *et al.* 1980). It has been found in good numbers on rare occasions during particularly suitable rainfall conditions (e.g., Pearson *et al.* 1992). However, this

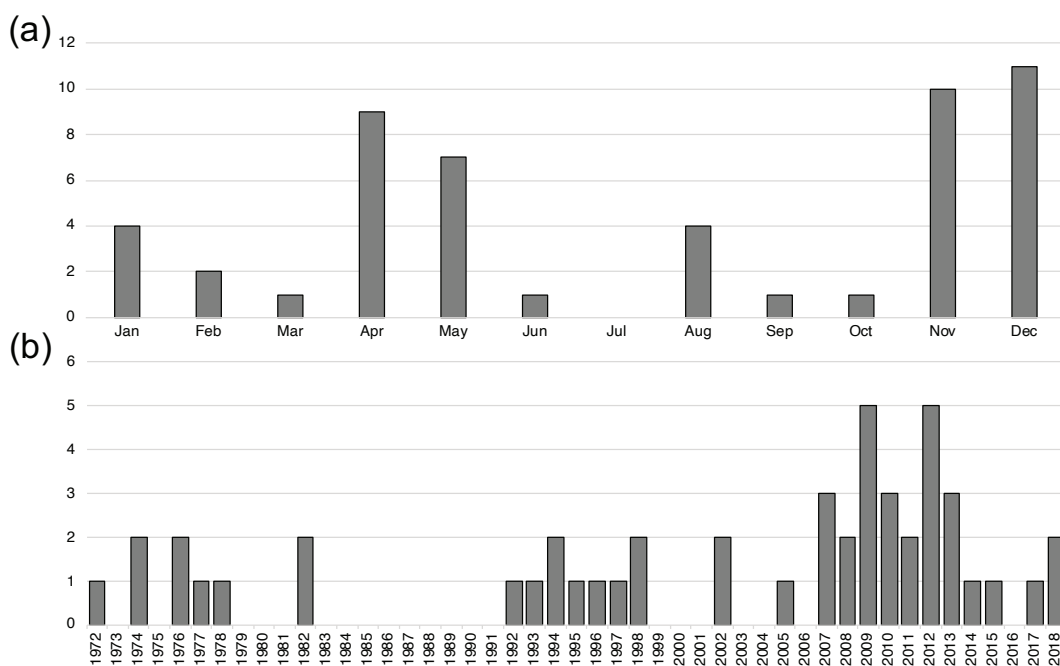


Figure 1(a) Monthly (1912–2018) and (b) annual (since 1972) summaries of Friedmann's Lark *Mirafra pulpa* records.

sporadic abundance has yet to be studied in detail, and its breeding ecology is wholly unknown (Ryan & Sharpe 2019). With no repeat occurrences of the 100+ birds observed in Tsavo East in December 1992 (Pearson *et al.* 1992), and the whereabouts of most individuals when not singing during the rains being largely unknown (Lack 1977, Borrow 2010), it appears that Friedmann's Lark is genuinely rare. The absence of records from the well-watched Buffalo Springs / Shaba areas, between the specimens collected there in 1912 and its rediscovery in May 2002 (Records Sub-committee 2002), which itself could have involved local extirpation followed by re-colonisation, suggests a precarious existence for the species in that area.

While this lark has been described as 'seasonally uncommon' (Lack *et al.* 1980, Lack 1985), it is otherwise known from some 51 dated records or discrete periods of occurrence, as determined by my personal communications with field observers, a search for literature records, and a review of reports in online databases and digital media platforms (e.g., eBird, iNaturalist, The British Library of Sounds, xeno-canto.org, the Macaulay Library, Surfbirds.com, bird tour company trip reports, and YouTube). All but eight records are from Kenya, and there are just seven specimens, and 20 records documented by in-hand examination, video, photographs or audio recordings. Another 26 records regarded here as reliable are based on sight records by experienced observers familiar with the species (Appendix 1). Numbers reported since Pearson *et al.* (1992), primarily during suitably wet conditions, have never exceeded ten singing males and in most cases, involved only 2–4 or 'several' singing birds. Numbers are likely to be considerably lower during years of (presumably) suboptimal conditions when the species is not reported at all (e.g., 1999–2001 and 2003–04; Fig. 1a).

Habitat associations

Vegetation communities typically frequented by Friedmann’s Lark include particularly dense grassland up to 1 m tall with some bare ground, and a range of woody shrubs covering 2–8% (Lack 1977, Pearson *et al.* 1992). Areas that have recently burned may also be favoured (Pearson *et al.* 1992) but sites where dense grass cover dies back and thins out during the dry months, such as in parts of Tsavo East National Park, are not thought to be occupied year-round (Lack *et al.* 1980, Lack 1997). A few records in the dry months of February and August–September at Lake Jipe, Mkomazi Game Reserve and Shaba National Reserve, however, suggest probable year-round presence in at least some areas. At these sites, immediately adjacent to major highland areas with relatively high annual rainfall, locally moist conditions may permit suitably dense grass cover to persist throughout the year. The importance of dense grassland is echoed by Lack (1977) who noted a preference for the western side of Tsavo East National Park, which is wetter and more densely grassed than the east. Behaviours noted in the field include a tendency to sing from bushed

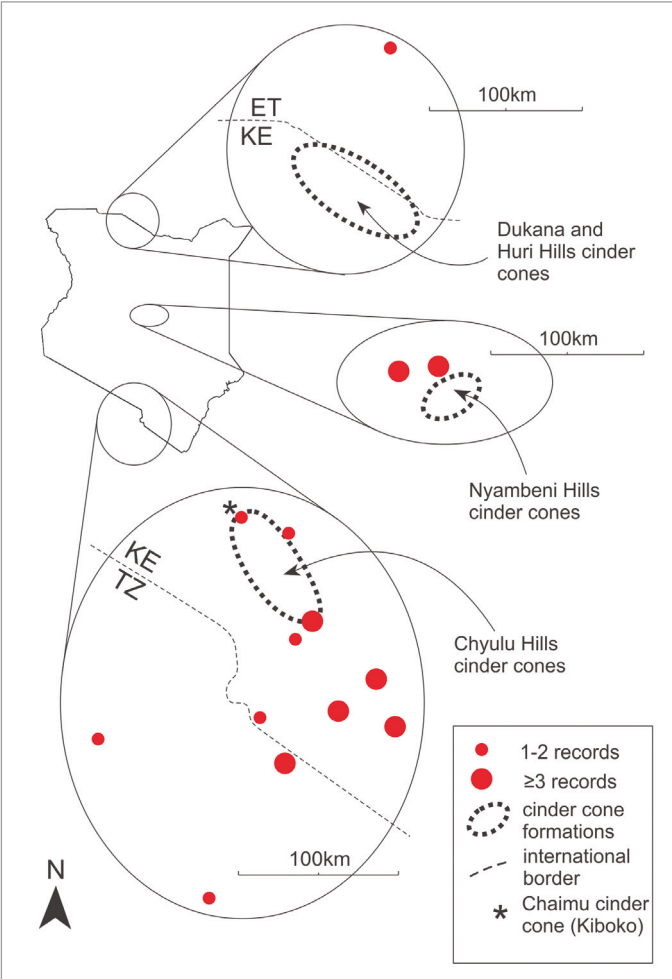


Figure 2. Spatial distribution of records of Friedmann’s Lark *Mirafrapa pulpa* records in relation to the cinder-cone formations of the Dukana / Huri Hills in Kenya (KE) and Ethiopia (ET), and the Nyambeni and Chyulu Hills in Kenya. Records extend to Tanzania (TZ).

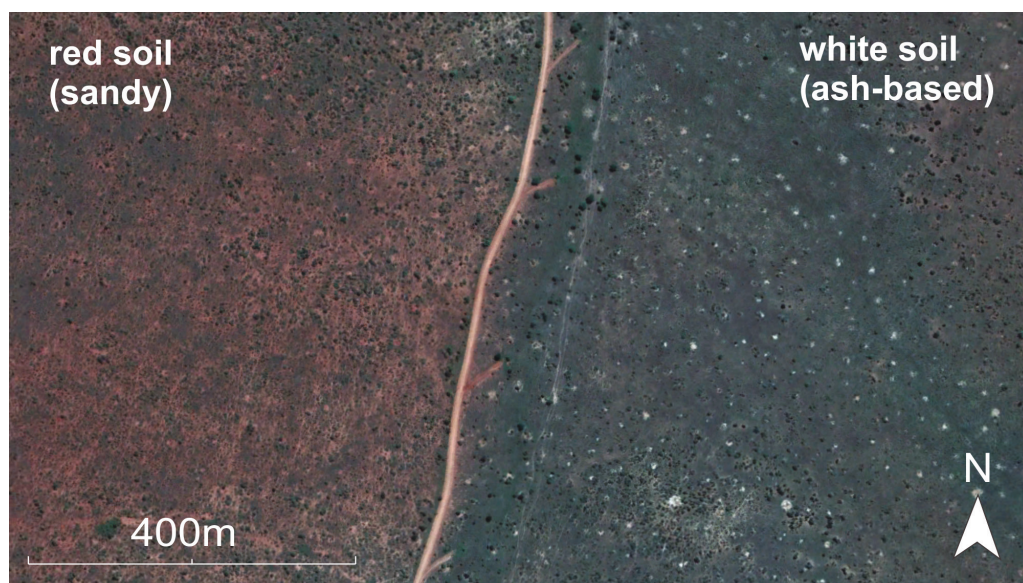


Figure 3. Satellite imagery (© Google Earth) showing the denser grassland and poorer drainage (evidenced by abundant water pans) that characterise white ash-based soils (right side) in comparison to red soils (left side) in the Kilaguni Lodge area of Tsavo West National Park (Kenya).

grassland on low ridges (B. Finch *in litt.* 2019), while all sites of regular occurrence are at elevations between 500 and 1,100 m (up to a max. of 1,400 m).

A possibly important observation not yet made with respect to the distribution of some favoured areas, relates to the soils at these sites and their proximity to recent volcanic activity. A review of the wider geography of the two regions regularly frequented by Friedmann's Lark shows these areas to be immediately adjacent to volcanic cinder-cone formations. At both the southern end of the Chyulu Hills and the Nyambeni Hills, basaltic cinder cones date from the late Pleistocene to Holocene, with some eruptions recorded in the Chyulu Hills as recently as the 19th century (Hackman *et al.* 1989, Haug & Strecker 1995). Cinder cones are indicative of light pyroclastic lava that commonly forms ash deposits, which give rise to distinctive soils. The Tsavo region, and areas south to Mkomazi Game Reserve, are within reach of ash falls from the cinder cones of the southern Chyulu Hills, and the Buffalo Springs-Shaba region is only a short distance north of the cinder cone formations of the Nyambeni Hills (Fig. 2).

In both these areas, soils on which the densest grassland habitat forms are commonly gritty and whitish in colour, sometimes found on low ridges, and probably formed from ash ejected by the nearby cinder cones. Such volcanic ash-based soils appear to have unique drainage characteristics, retaining sufficient moisture during dry periods to permit the formation of dense grassland year-round. Satellite imagery showing dense grassy cover on white soils vs. red soils, with the former also characterised by abundant water pans (Fig. 3), supports this theory. In Kenya, such white volcanic ash-based soils and their associated grassland type are apparently restricted to the environs of these two ranges of hills.

Discussion and Conclusions

While Williams's Lark *M. williamsi* is well known to favour weathered lava-based soils in Kenya (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996), an association with volcanic soils has not previously been suggested for Friedmann's Lark. Such a habitat specialisation, related to the distribution

of a particular type of ash deposit (vs. lava), may help to explain this species' puzzling distribution. While there are records of Friedmann's Lark from soil types other than ash-based soils, this appears to be the case only after heavy rains result in a fresh cover of dense grassland on other soils (e.g., December–February in Tsavo East National Park; Lack 1985). As grassland on soils other than those formed from ash thins out during the dry season, these areas apparently become unsuitable for the species, with for example only *M. cantillans* recorded with certainty on the red soils of Tsavo East National Park in May–November (Lack 1985). It seems possible that during these dry periods, birds retreat to areas closer to the cinder-cone formations, where ash-based soils and associated dense grassland are more abundant. In this context, the distribution of this soil-grassland association would comprise the core of the species' range, and while *M. pulpa* may disperse nocturnally into nearby dense grasslands on other soil types following adequate seasonal rains, it is unable to colonise them permanently because they do not offer sufficiently dense habitat year-round. Further supporting the view that grassland on ash-based soils is indeed the preferred habitat, and the source of seasonal dispersal, is the observation of more than 100 singing birds in a small area of white soils in the immediate vicinity of the southern Chyulu Hills, near Kilaguni, in the early 1990s (Pearson *et al.* 1992), as well as the 1965 record from Kiboko (Appendix 1), involving one or more birds singing on the flanks of the Chaimu cinder cone.

In light of my review, the global conservation status of Friedmann's Lark may warrant updating to reflect its small global distribution, intermittent occurrence, highly specialised habitat requirements within broader savanna ecosystems, and its apparently genuine rarity. While there are still no robust data from which to estimate population size, several observations outlined herein permit an assessment of extinction risk for Friedmann's Lark against other threat criteria which are geography-based (IUCN 2012). While the global extent of occurrence of Friedmann's Lark, based on two widely separated subpopulations, is large, the year-round area of occupancy within this range is undoubtedly considerably smaller. Within the regional extent of occurrence of both subpopulations, records are very patchily distributed and large areas appear to be either entirely unoccupied or used on only a seasonal or sporadic basis. Based on this, unoccupied areas may amount to <20% of the 25,000 km² identified as the regional extent of occurrence (see Status and Distribution), resulting in an area of occupancy that is unlikely to exceed 5,000 km². This figure approaches the 2,000 km² threshold for qualification as Vulnerable under criterion B2. As such, and given that regularly occupied sites (three or more records) number scarcely ten in total, Friedmann's Lark may merit the status Near Threatened. That changes in rainfall patterns related to climate change might adversely affect Friedmann's Lark within this small global range is also cause for concern. Coupled with predicted climatic stochasticity, such cyclical population dynamics as shown by the species could render it increasingly vulnerable to risk of extinction.

Targeted surveys and basic ecological knowledge are much needed for Friedmann's Lark, and should focus on: (1) estimates of population size in either or both of the known regions of occurrence, with a focus on documenting its breeding ecology and variation in population size related to rainfall, and (2) searches for Friedmann's Lark in other areas of potentially suitable habitat, especially in proximity to cinder-cone formations and ash-based soils associated with the Gregory Rift System, particularly during dry periods.

The latter include formations on the western slopes of the Huri Hills (03°36'35"N, 37°49'31"E), and the nearby Dukana Hills and Mega Basalt Field (04°00'00"N, 37°20'23"E). Both of these geological features are within 150 km of the type locality in southern Ethiopia, and should be surveyed following seasonal rains, both for the lark and to assess the

grassland habitat. Given that southern Ethiopia is some 500 km from the population in the Buffalo Springs / Shaba area, it is possible that an undiscovered population closer to southern Ethiopia might account for the type specimen, perhaps in the vicinity of the above-mentioned regions of remote northern Kenya.

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Appendix: List of dated records of Friedmann’s Lark *Mirafra pulpa* (NMK = National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi, reg. no., USNM = US National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, reg. no., BLS = British Library of Sound recording no., IBC = Internet Bird Collection media no., ML = Macaulay Library media no., XC = Xeno-canto recording no., iNat = iNaturalist media no.). NP = National Park; NR = Nature Reserve.

| Date | Observer | Country | Location | Documentation | Source |
|---------------|-----------|----------|-----------------------------------|---------------|--|
| 1 19 May 1912 | E. Mearns | Ethiopia | Sagan River, Shoa | Type specimen | Friedmann (1930a); USNM 246241 |
| 2 2 Aug 1912 | E. Mearns | Kenya | Archer’s Post, Buffalo Springs NR | Specimens | Friedmann (1930b); USNM 246219, 246221, 246222 |

| Date | Observer | Country | Location | Documentation | Source |
|----------------|----------------|----------|--|-----------------|---|
| 3 2 Apr 1965 | M. North | Kenya | Chaimu Hill, Kiboko | Audio recording | ML 8044 |
| 4 2 Dec 1972 | G. Backhurst | Kenya | Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP | Specimen | Lack (1977); NMK 16142 |
| 5 8 Jun 1974 | A. R. Gregory | Kenya | Kiboko | Audio recording | BLS 022M-WA03044X0031-0018V0 |
| 6 12 Nov 1974 | D. Pearson | Kenya | Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP | Specimen | Lack (1977); NMK 16143 |
| 7 30 Mar 1976 | P. Lack | Kenya | Tsavo East NP | Sight record | Lack (1977) |
| 8 16 Apr 1976 | P. Lack | Kenya | Tsavo East NP | Sight record | Lack (1977) |
| 9 4 Jan 1977 | P. Lack | Kenya | near Voi Safari Lodge, Tsavo East NP | Specimen | Lack (1977); NMK 16144 |
| 10 29 Nov 1978 | D. Pearson | Kenya | Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP | Ringed | Turner <i>et al.</i> (1978) |
| 11 15 Aug 1982 | D. Turner | Kenya | Lake Jipe, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | Turner & Pearson (1983) |
| 12 2 Dec 1992 | D. Pearson | Kenya | 12 km NE of Kilaguni Lodge, Tsavo West NP | Audio recording | Pearson & Turner (1998) |
| 13 4 Dec 1993 | Ngulia Ringers | Kenya | Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP | Ringed | Pearson & Turner (1998) |
| 14 19 Sep 1994 | N. Baker | Tanzania | Mkomazi Game Reserve | Photograph | Turner (1998) |
| 15 1994 (Nov) | N. Baker | Tanzania | Mkomazi Game Reserve | Sight record | Tanzania Bird Atlas unpubl. data |
| 16 1995 (Dec) | P. Lack | Tanzania | Mkomazi Game Reserve | Sight record | Turner (1998) |
| 17 1996 (Jan) | P. Lack | Tanzania | Mkomazi Game Reserve | Sight record | Tanzania Bird Atlas unpubl. data |
| 18 1997 (Dec) | G. Backhurst | Kenya | 35 km west of Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | Backhurst (1997) |
| 19 4 Feb 1998 | D. Fisher | Kenya | Lake Jipe Lodge area, Tsavo West NP | Audio recording | BLS W1CDR0000788 (available offline only) |
| 20 1998 (Aug) | N. Baker | Tanzania | Terat | Sight record | Tanzania Bird Atlas unpubl. data |
| 21 29 May 2002 | C. Jackson | Kenya | Shaba NR | Sight record | Records Sub-committee (2002) |
| 22 2002 (Oct) | B. Finch | Kenya | Rukinga Ranch, 40 km SSW of Voi | Sight record | Records Sub-committee (2002) |
| 23 18 Dec 2005 | R. Bishop | Kenya | 3.5k m SW of Kilaguni Lodge, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 24 22 Apr 2007 | B. Finch | Kenya | Shaba NR | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 25 15 Aug 2007 | B. Finch | Kenya | Shaba NR | Photograph | pers. comm. |
| 26 7 Nov 2007 | B. Finch | Kenya | Buffalo Springs NR | Video | pers. comm. |
| 27 3 Nov 2008 | N. Borrow | Kenya | Shaba NR | Photograph | Borrow (2010) |
| 28 1 Dec 2008 | B. Finch | Kenya | Salt Lick Lodge, Maktau, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 29 6 Apr 2009 | C. Kariuki | Kenya | Maktau Gate area, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 30 15 Apr 2009 | B. Finch | Kenya | Shaba NR | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 31 11 May 2009 | B. Finch | Kenya | Shaba NR | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 32 28 Nov 2009 | A. Smets | Kenya | Tsavo East NP | Photograph | Borrow (2010) |
| 33 15 Dec 2009 | A. Jacot | Kenya | Kilaguni Lodge area, Tsavo West NP | Video | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_rKiWE8ESk |
| 34 2 May 2010 | C. Davies | Kenya | Shaba NR | Audio recording | XC 57940 |

| Date | Observer | Country | Location | Documentation | Source |
|----------------|------------------|----------|------------------------------------|---------------|---|
| 35 20 May 2010 | C. Kariuki | Kenya | Shaba NR | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 36 19 Nov 2010 | B. Finch | Kenya | Kilaguni Lodge area, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 37 2011 (Apr) | B. Finch | Kenya | Maktau Gate area, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 38 2011 (Nov) | N. Borrow | Kenya | Buffalo Springs NR | Photograph | Surfbirds Gallery |
| 39 2012 (Jan) | H. Matheve | Kenya | Rukinga Ranch, 40 km SSW of Voi | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 40 7 Apr 2012 | B. Finch | Kenya | Kilaguni Lodge area, Tsavo West NP | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 41 28 Apr 2012 | M. Lilje | Kenya | Shaba NR | Photograph | iNat 7131884 |
| 42 2012 (Nov) | P. Morris | Kenya | Buffalo Springs NR | Sight record | Birdquest trip report |
| 43 23 Dec 2012 | N. Baker | Tanzania | Kitwai Plains | Sight record | Tanzania Bird Atlas unpubl. data |
| 44 1 Jan 2013 | C. Kariuki | Kenya | Rukinga Ranch, 40 km SSW of Voi | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 45 7 Feb 2013 | N. Baker | Tanzania | Kitwai Plains | Sight record | Tanzania Bird Atlas unpubl. data |
| 46 2013 (May) | A. Scott Kennedy | Kenya | Kilaguni Lodge area, Tsavo West NP | Photograph | Surfbirds Gallery |
| 47 15 Dec 2014 | L. Petersson | Kenya | Tsavo East NP | Photograph | IBC 1311265 |
| 48 3 Dec 2015 | C. Kariuki | Kenya | Rukinga Ranch, 40 km SSW of Voi | Sight record | pers. comm. |
| 49 24 Nov 2017 | M. Cade | Kenya | Kilaguni Lodge area, Tsavo West NP | Video | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoqH_4xBFII |
| 50 17 Apr 2018 | M. Grant | Kenya | Buffalo Springs NR | Photograph | ML 108545821 |
| 51 18 May 2018 | D. Bormann | Kenya | Buffalo Springs NR | Photograph | ML 102482451 |

Gazetteer

| Site | Locality | Coordinates |
|----------|--|--------------------------|
| Ethiopia | Sagan River, Shoa | 05°02.827'N, 37°42.042'E |
| Kenya | 12 km NE of Kilaguni Lodge, Tsavo West NP | 02°49.778'S, 38°08.000'E |
| Kenya | 3.5 km SW of Kilaguni Lodge, Tsavo West NP | 02°56.153'S, 38°02.912'E |
| Kenya | 35 km W of Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP | 03°05.520'S, 37°54.477'E |
| Kenya | Archer's Post, Buffalo Springs NR | 00°37.395'N, 37°40.306'E |
| Kenya | Buffalo Springs NR | 00°33.107'N, 37°37.001'E |
| Kenya | Chaimu Hill, Kiboko | 02°15.431'S, 37°43.273'E |
| Kenya | Kilaguni area, Tsavo West NP | 02°55.609'S, 38°03.609'E |
| Kenya | Lake Jipe Lodge area, Tsavo West NP | 03°36.041'S, 37°46.960'E |
| Kenya | Maktau Gate area, Tsavo West NP | 03°24.420'S, 38°07.112'E |
| Kenya | near Voi Safari Lodge, Tsavo East NP | 03°20.619'S, 38°33.520'E |
| Kenya | Ngulia Lodge, Tsavo West NP | 03°00.823'S, 38°12.642'E |
| Kenya | Rukinga Ranch, 40 km SSW of Voi | 03°45.312'S, 38°29.645'E |
| Kenya | Salt Lick Lodge, Maktau, Tsavo West NP | 03°32.804'S, 38°12.936'E |
| Kenya | Shaba NR | 00°38.433'N, 37°55.937'E |
| Kenya | Tsavo East NP | 03°13.356'S, 38°38.254'E |
| Tanzania | Kitwai Plains | 04°54.038'S, 37°34.545'E |
| Tanzania | Mkomazi Game Reserve | 03°58.132'S, 38°00.490'E |
| Tanzania | Terat | 03°55.879'S, 36°34.051'E |