

**NORTHERN MALAWI; WHITE WINGED BABBLING STARLING (*Neocichla gutturalis*) FOR INDEPENDENT TRAVELLERS. 6-9 JANUARY 2011.**

Among the **Miombo** birds there is a special thrill connected with the White Winged Babbling Starling. It's oddity and "awkward" distribution gives you something to dream about. Since I was to spend a holiday-time in the Serengeti/Arusha area my initial plan was to find a locality for the Babbling Starling in Tanzania, but I found it absolutely impossible to get any reliable and "workable" information. Though distribution maps, fact sheets etc. gave promising indications from south-western Tanzania, it turned out to be in areas where access was very limited and also, there were no descriptions of localities or logistics. My first impulse then was to improvise but the rains and the roads and not to mention the costs for such things made me think of **Malawi** instead.

Fortunately I soon found out that the Babbling Starling had one locality in **northern Malawi**, at the **Vwasa Marsh Game Reserve. Possible the only locality for this bird with relatively easy access** (correct me if possible). The very few observations published doesn't give you very much details so after having been luckily helped by local competent people I want to share my info with you.

Within the **Vwasa marsh game reserve** the **Babblingstarling** does occur at the **northern ranger-station; Kawiya camp** sometimes referred to as **Kawiya gate** (name from the adjacent Kawiya hill) next to Chitungulu village. (But not in the Kazuni lake area as is sometimes stated). This northern area is about. **45 km. west of Rumphi** which is a small town that is served by minibuses from the "main road". If you are coming from Tanzania and Dar Es Salaam allow one full day to go by bus to the small town of Uyole 15 km east of Mbeya. (you can stay at hotel Stockholm! in Uyole). From here it will take you at least half a day to reach **Rumphi in Malawi** (bus down to the border-taxi/motorbike over the border-bus southwards). In Rumphi there are good lodging at 2-3 hotels. In Rumphi I asked at my hotel for assistance with transport. I had but vague information about where to find the starling and decided to reach the Kazuni lake camp where I thought I might have some chance. The friendly hotel staff (I was surprised that English was so easy to get by with in Malawi) arranged for me to go with a truck (regular public transport is scarce) to Kazuni. At Kazuni I learned that the starling doesn't occur there but at the northern ranger station. I spend the night in one of the lakeside cabins and the next day set out with the game reserve jeep (driver, guard and guide) towards Kawiya (along rd. 9 towards northwest passing Mporo). You could certainly get a car with driver from Rumphi or even with patience find public transport all the way to Kawiya, but going with the game-reserve staff would ofcourse benefit their institution. I don't know how to contact the staff at either site but they might know at the post office in Rumphi or at the hotels. **To reach Kawiya from Rumphi go along the Rumphi-Bolero-Nyika rd. (rd. 24 changing to rd. 9 northwest of Mporo on my map) up to the fork where there is a sign for Thasina camp/gate 9 km. (Nyika) straight/right, here you take left instead. After 10 km. past villages as Kaduko, Kawiya is reached (some 45 km. from Rumphi).** We were received with great friendliness at Kawiya where you probably also could stay over night. (It should be possible to arrange directly with the staff here with transport etc. from Rumphi). For the whole day going about 100 km with the game reserve jeep incl. 3 staffmembers I was supposed to pay 100 euro. but with tips (also for the staff at Kawiya) it landed at 200.

The Miombo habitat starts right behind the staff houses. You must walk with guards from here (Elephants, Buffalos, and it is also extremely easy to get lost as there are almost no ground vegetation hampering, as you swiftly move around chasing birds, without any tracks or clues). At the time for my visit the leader of this camp was **Edwin Zgambo**. He has a great

knowledge and almost directly found the Starling. **The best area is just behind the camp. Walk through the miombo forest (Brachystegia sp.) towards the Kawiya hill (a few hundred meters to the left as you enter the forest from the centre of the camp) and after reaching its foot turn right until you reach (after 200m) the small stream named “Vumo”. Along the stream the veget. is a little denser and according to Edwin this is a good roosting place for White winged Babblingstarling, “easy to see in the morning and a good area in the afternoon”**, however, this was in the middle of the day and we walked for about 200 m along the now (8 Jan.- 2011) dry stream before crossing. We soon encountered our first flock of Neocichla which was typically first heard at a distance. **The calls reminded me of the dry “scurrings” heard from juvenile gangs of Sturnus vulgaris.** The forest is open and these birds are rather shy so it took me some time to see them near and well (no photos on internet before Jason Anderson from Itulu Hill forest reserve in Tanz. which seems to be a very remote place and taken under expedition-like circumstances; netting, ringing-birds etc.). At first they were hiding rather high up in the miombo-trees flying off at a distance, but soon I saw them well, perching on rather low branches. I guess that their behaviour was affected by post-breeding conditions. I also assume that they were feeding on the ground before we disturbed them. According to Edward there should be about five groups in the vicinity of Kawiya camp.

As we walked I also encountered **several Chestnut-mantled Sparrow-weavers. Plocepasser rufoscapulatus)**

All **twitchers of plantfamilies** should look out for the parasitic **BALANOPHORACEAE** in these forests. At Kazuni lake close to the guest cabins, at tree bases big dark-red clumps of **Sarcophyte sanguinea (Balanophoraceae)**

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