

just keep watching

NGAMO PANS, ZIMBABWE

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **BRENDAN RYAN**

Situated in a remote corner of Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, the Ngamo Pans is, in my opinion, southern Africa's best raptor-watching destination, hosting a diversity of those species and in numbers that you would need to travel to one of the world's migration hotspots, such as Israel, to beat.



NOT ONLY will you find nearly all of southern Africa's resident 'bushveld' eagles, hawks, falcons and vultures here but, if you time your visit for early December when the first heavy rains arrive, you will also encounter sizeable flocks of migrant raptors.

Large numbers of Lesser Spotted Eagles and Yellow-billed Kites stream into the region, accompanied by Steppe Eagles, Eurasian Hobbies, Amur Falcons and Lesser Kestrels, all arriving to feast on the waves of alates (flying termites) that emerge following the rain storms.

Ngamo has, so far, produced two serious rarities for me. In December 2014 I recorded the subregion's first Grasshopper Buzzard here (the sighting has now been accepted by BirdLife Zimbabwe's Rarities Committee)

and, in December 2013, I had a 'near-miss' on a Greater Spotted Eagle (see box, page 28).

It's not just migrant raptors that are attracted to the flying ants. There's an extensive supporting cast. Expect to see impressive flocks of White and Abdim's storks getting in on the action, together with significant numbers of Southern Carmine and European bee-eaters. Then there are other migrants, for example Red-backed and Lesser Grey shrikes, and some uncommon 'locals', such as Dickinson's Kestrel and Bradfield's Hornbill.

My raptor species tally after three visits to Ngamo over a 12-month period stands at 10 eagle species, six falcon/kestrel species, five hawk/kite species and four species of vulture. Surprisingly, I have never seen a



harrier there, although the terrain looks perfect for Pallid and Montagu's, which occur in fair numbers on the Makgadikgadi Pans, which are not that far away as the harrier flies. >

above A juvenile Yellow-billed Kite takes evasive action in a 'dog fight' with a Lanner Falcon above the Ngamo Pans. >

A December thunderstorm drenches the parched Ngamo Pans.



When the rains are good, Dwarf Bitterns visit Ngamo to breed.

There's another side to Ngamo, one that does not involve raptors. If the rains are good (and those during the summer of 2013/2014 were some of the best on record), the pans flood extensively and draw a different set of birds that come to breed: herons, waders and a variety of waterfowl.

The change in scenery is remarkable. In early December 2013 – before the first rains – the pans were barren and dusty, the

grass having been grazed flat by the herds of buffalo, zebra and wildebeest. The plains were dotted with piles of elephant dung, while the woodland fringes generally had a 'beaten-up' look because of the trees that had been damaged by sizeable herds of the pachyderms.

Three months later, when I returned in March, Ngamo had been transformed into a green wetland, with many of the roads impassable because they were

either under deep water or too treacherous to use.

The pans now supported many Yellow-billed and Woolly-necked storks, a few pairs of Saddle-billed Storks and a plethora of herons. Of the latter, my attention was most focused on Dwarf Bittern, a 'bogey' bird of mine from way back because I had never photographed one successfully. That deficiency was swiftly remedied as I located five breeding pairs near the lodge where I was staying.



AN UNEXPECTED SURPRISE WAS TO ENCOUNTER A GREY CROWNED CRANE WITH CHICKS THAT COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE THAN A FEW DAYS OLD

Another rarity present in numbers on the deeper ponds along the railway line that runs from Bulawayo to Victoria Falls and forms the eastern boundary of Hwange was Lesser Moorhen. The flooded grasslands were pumping with Greater Painted-snipes which called continuously through the night, and there were waterfowl everywhere, the most prominent species being Comb Duck. An unexpected surprise was to encounter a Grey Crowned Crane with chicks that could not have been more than a few days old.

However, at this time of the year raptor numbers are way down as

the migrants have dispersed. You may see the occasional Lesser Spotted or Steppe Eagle but there's none of the excitement of the big flocks on passage that occurs during December.

Winter months at Ngamo are for lovers of the 'big and hairy' mammals. Large herds of elephant and buffalo move in to feed on the new vegetation and take advantage of the water provided at the pans and watering points maintained by the safari operators in the region.

By early December that vegetation has gone and the elephants have usually moved to other parts of Hwange or into neighbouring Botswana in search of food. Lions are present year-round, as is a full range of plains game, the particular attraction being regular sightings of sable, which are common in Hwange.

The bad news is that the Ngamo Pans are not an easy destination to reach, which is probably why so few birders seem to know about it. Ngamo



is situated in the far south-eastern corner of Hwange. You cannot reach it from the tourist road network that covers the northern half of the national park and, in fact, it is not open to the general public.

The only way you can get in is by staying at one of two tented safari camps: Wilderness Safaris' Little Makololo Lodge (www.wilderness-safaris.com) or Imvelo Safari Lodges' Bomani Lodge (www.imvelosafarilodges.com). >

above A migratory Steppe Eagle on the lookout for prey on the pans.

top A Grey Crowned Crane forages together with its newly-hatched chick during March.

CLOSE, BUT NO CIGAR

Greater Spotted Eagle is a species that has yet to be accepted onto the bird list for the southern African subregion, but I reckon I have come the closest so far to finding one by photographing what I like to think of as the region's first 'medium-spotted eagle'.

Yes, I know there is no such beastie, but bear with me and you will see why I came up with that description following Finnish raptor expert Dick Forsman's official assessment of my sighting.

In December 2013, I found myself in the middle of an influx of Lesser Spotted Eagles into the Ngamo Pans region of Hwange National Park. They had arrived with the season's first heavy rains to gorge on the emergence of alates.

At one point there were more than 50 Lesser Spotted Eagles either on the ground or perched in trees around the pans. One of them struck me as looking somewhat different to the others. It seemed a darker, more chocolate brown than the rest but the bird was drenched and drying out after a rain shower.

But once I was back in Johannesburg, those photographs got my full attention when I was reviewing them in detail. To my eye this eagle was certainly different to the others and the tantalising prospect surfaced – could it be a Greater Spotted?

I hit the books and promptly opened up a Pandora's box of identification issues on telling Greater from Lesser, which left me more confused than when I had started. But this bird did tick three boxes for Greater: it had a darker plumage overall, it had a dark iris (Lesser has pale yellow) and it had a heavier beak.

So I submitted the photos to Trevor Hardaker. He, in turn, sent them to Dick Forsman, whose lengthy reply went into detail on aspects of the plumage; head shape; bill; type of spotting and other issues. Forsman's conclusion was that 'it is either a less typical Lesser or a hybrid'.

He explained that hybridisation between Lesser and Greater spotted eagles is 'a massive problem in Eastern Europe and many researchers working with these two species fear that the Greater will disappear as a breeding species from its former European range because of being soaked up into the population of Lessers.'

So, 'close, but no cigar' as they say, but I was still encouraged by Forsman's comments. I had been correct in picking out that particular bird as different and there's a clear lesson: should you ever find yourself in the fortunate position of being

surrounded by Lesser Spotted Eagles, start looking for the odd one out.

You may get lucky and record southern Africa's first Greater Spotted Eagle but, hopefully, not before I nail it myself!

Trevor Hardaker comments: Large brown eagles are notoriously difficult to identify even at the best of times, so when faced with a conundrum like Brendan Ryan was, it really does just throw everything we think we know about raptor identification right out of the window. There are no confirmed records of Greater Spotted Eagle in the southern African subregion as yet, but there have been several unsubstantiated claims over the years.

Given the added difficulty of having to eliminate the possibilities of atypical Lesser Spotted Eagles or perhaps even hybrids between Greater and Lesser spotted eagles, it would appear that any future claims of Greater Spotted Eagle in the subregion will need to be investigated in great detail and will hopefully be supported by a number of photographs of the bird that could assist in clinching the identification.

So get out there, find those large brown eagles, look at them very carefully and take lots of photos – let's see if we can eventually get this species officially onto our subregion list.



'Hybrid' Greater/Lesser Spotted Eagle (above) and Lesser Spotted Eagle (right).



I stayed at Bomani for a couple of reasons, the main ones being that it's both cheaper and situated closer to Ngamo. Bomani sits in a 2,023-hectare private concession in the Ngamo State Forest, immediately adjacent to the entry gate to the Ngamo Pans section of Hwange. It takes about 25 minutes to drive onto the pans from the lodge.

If you are on a driving trip to Zimbabwe, the pick-up point for Bomani is at the Halfway House Hotel (so called because it is halfway between Bulawayo and Victoria Falls), where there is secure parking for your vehicle. It's then a two-hour transfer in a four-wheel-drive vehicle to the lodge.

Be aware that driving around Zimbabwe is no longer the 'happy, carefree' experience that it used to be because of the plethora of police roadblocks that have been set up on all the main roads. Their sole purpose appears to be to fleece travellers through the levying of 'fines' payable on the spot in US dollars for alleged defects with their vehicles. On my recent visits there have been as

many as eight of these roadblocks between Victoria Falls and the town of Hwange, a distance of about 100 kilometres.

If you opt to fly in, Imvelo will arrange pick-ups from either Bulawayo or Victoria Falls airports. It takes about two hours from either airport to reach Halfway House, making this a four-hour transfer overall – unless it's been raining heavily. Then there's frequently a problem with the low-level bridge over the Gwayi River and you have to take a longer, alternate route from Halfway House. On either route you travel through extensive belts of magnificent teak woodland, providing the best chance of seeing Dark Chanting Goshawk on the trip because this species does not seem to be present around Ngamo itself.

Until recently, the best flight option from Johannesburg was via Victoria Falls because the airfares on that route were a lot cheaper than going through Bulawayo. The reason for this is that until the beginning of 2015, while South

African Airways had a monopoly on the Bulawayo route, it faced competition from British Airways on the leg into Victoria Falls. That has now changed with the introduction of a competing service by new budget airline Fly Africa, which has resulted in a sharp drop in the Bulawayo airfares.

One final piece of advice for a December trip. Pack earplugs. The noise from the frogs at Bomani after the onset of the first rains is deafening – nature's equivalent of a rock concert. It's hell in Africa – if the lions and the Greater Painted-snipes don't keep you awake at night, then the frogs will.

above Good rains mean easy pickings for herons and spoonbills at Ngamo.

below A flock of migratory Abdim's Storks on the barren, elephantdung strewn pans, just ahead of the first rains.

