

# Tana River Delta

## Important Bird Area



**NatureKenya**  
The East Africa Natural History Society



The Tana Delta - J. Reiter

# The Tana River Delta: A special place

The Tana Delta is a vast seasonal wetland complex. Its habitats, people and wildlife have adapted their lives to the extremes of drought and flood. The seasons themselves vary dramatically from year to year. A series of drought years, in which ponds dry up and the grasslands are eaten bare, may be followed by a great flood such as the 1997-98 El Niño floods that washed away the tarmac road, destroyed the irrigation dykes, and filled the Delta south of the river with three metres of water.

Intangible environmental services provided by this vast wetland system include: regulating the hydrological cycle, including catchment, storage and release of rainwater; moderating the climate, including reducing the severity of droughts and floods; protecting the soil from erosion, stabilizing

the shoreline and reducing the impact of storm surges; slowing global warming by the absorption of carbon dioxide and release of oxygen; and providing a range of habitats for terrestrial, aquatic and marine biodiversity.

Some of the traditional economic importance of the delta include: Dry season and drought refuge grazing for enormous herds of cattle from Tana River, Lamu, Ijaara, Malindi and other districts; major fisheries for the local and export market; and growing of subsistence crops, cash crops and fruit trees. New economic uses include tourism, with lodges, boat rides and a wildlife conservancy all currently under development.

## What are IBAs?

Important Bird Areas are places of international importance for bird conservation.

## How are IBAs selected?

Using an internationally agreed criteria based on threatened birds, birds only found in a small area, birds found in a particular habitat type and sites with large gatherings of certain birds.

## Why are IBAs useful?

By conserving areas that are important for birds we protect many other forms of life.

## How many IBAs in Kenya ?

60 IBAs have been listed in Kenya. The Tana River Delta is listed because of vast congregations of waterbirds.

## A key biodiversity area

The special importance of the Tana Delta for biodiversity conservation includes: Habitats such as Borassus Palm savannah on flooded grassland, which is not included in any protected area; coastal *Hyphaene coriacea* palm woodland, protected only in a few Forest Reserves such as Witu Forest; fragments of coastal and riverine forests with many rare and endemic plants; seasonally flooded acacia woodland providing nesting sites for waterbirds from all over Kenya; sand dunes along the coastline with their specialized vegetation; mudflats and sandbanks where migratory birds feed and rest; and mangrove forests with eight mangrove species and especially fine stands of *Heriteria littoralis*, *Xylocarpus granatum* and *Bruguiera gymnorrhiza*.

Large assemblages of water birds qualify the Tana Delta as an Important Bird Area. A 1992-3 study recorded 22 different species of water birds that occurred in the Tana Delta in significant numbers – 1% or more of the biogeographic population. A brief survey in 2008 indicates that similar numbers are

still found in the Tana Delta despite an increasing human population. The vast numbers of migratory and resident waterbirds are particularly dependent on the seasonally flooded grasslands and Borassus Palm savannah that cover some 70,000 ha in the heart of the Tana River Delta.

A thousand hippos and a thousand crocodiles are estimated in the river and associated lakes, there are herds of elephant, buffalo, topi, zebra, warthog and other wildlife in the palm woodland on the edge of the Delta, and at least four globally endangered birds are found in the Tana Delta. The Tana River Red Colobus, one of the world's most endangered primates, is found in some riverine forest fragments. Marine turtles nest along the beaches, and three threatened fish species and three different species of eels have been recorded from the Tana River. The mangrove forests play an important economic role, sheltering fish and shellfish nurseries that nourish the rich fisheries of Ungwana (Formosa) Bay.

Water birds found in globally important numbers in the Tana Delta (more than 1% of biogeographic populations):

- Great White Pelican
- Pink-backed Pelican
- Cattle Egret
- Yellow-billed Egret
- Great Egret
- African Open-billed Stork
- Yellow-billed Stork
- African Spoonbill
- Greater Flamingo
- Spur-winged Goose
- White-fronted Plover
- Lesser Sandplover
- Little Stint
- Curlew Sandpiper
- Marsh Sandpiper
- Sooty Gull
- Slender-billed Gull
- Gull-billed Tern
- Caspian Tern
- Lesser Crested Tern
- Saunders' Tern
- Whiskered Tern

Waterbirds known to nest in Tana Delta heronry:

- African Darter
- Black-crowned Night Heron
- Black Heron
- Common Squacco Heron
- Little Egret
- Yellow-billed Egret
- Great Egret
- Grey Heron
- Purple Heron
- African Open-billed Stork
- Sacred Ibis
- Glossy Ibis
- African Spoonbill



*Pelicans, Tana Delta -D. Mugambi*



*African Jacana, a characteristic bird of the Tana Delta - P. Usher*

### Globally-threatened bird species:

- Lappet-faced Vulture
- Southern Banded Snake Eagle
- Malindi Pipit
- Basra Reed Warbler



*Basra Reed Warbler - S. Patel*



*Glossy Ibis - P. Usher*

### Regionally-threatened bird species:

- African Darter
- Great Egret
- Saddle-billed Stork
- Scaly Babbler



*Goliath Heron -D. Mugambi*



*African Darter, one of the birds that nest in the Tana Delta heronry - P. Usher*

## Conservation challenges at the Tana Delta

- Communities living in the Delta depend primarily on the natural resource base, as farmers, pastoralists or fisherfolk
- Most of the land is owned by the government or is Trust Land managed by Tana River County Council.
- Most local communities are not involved in conservation activities.
- Tana Delta IBA covers a vast area. Many parts of it are inaccessible during the rainy seasons.
- Current farming methods do not retain soil fertility, thus encouraging slash and burn agriculture.
- Human-wildlife conflict including destruction of crops by wild animals.
- A number of commercial agricultural projects are proposed to take place in the Tana River Delta including irrigated sugarcane plantations, large-scale irrigated rice production, and growing of horticultural crops and biofuel crops such as *Jatropha*. If implemented, the projects

will definitely have multiple negative impacts on the biodiversity status and ecology of the Delta

- Proposed commercial agricultural projects will also alienate land from local communities, possibly fueling communal conflict between farmers and pastoralists.



A watering point at the Tana Delta -D. Mugambi



## Nature Kenya activities in the Tana Delta

- Bringing together stakeholders in conservation for action for Tana Delta
- Spearheading an advocacy campaign for conservation of the delta
- Working with local communities towards the creation of a Community Conserved Area
- Championing the formulation of a Conservation and Development Master Plan for the Delta
- Developing the capacity of organised Community Based Organizations to champion for protection of their livelihood support systems



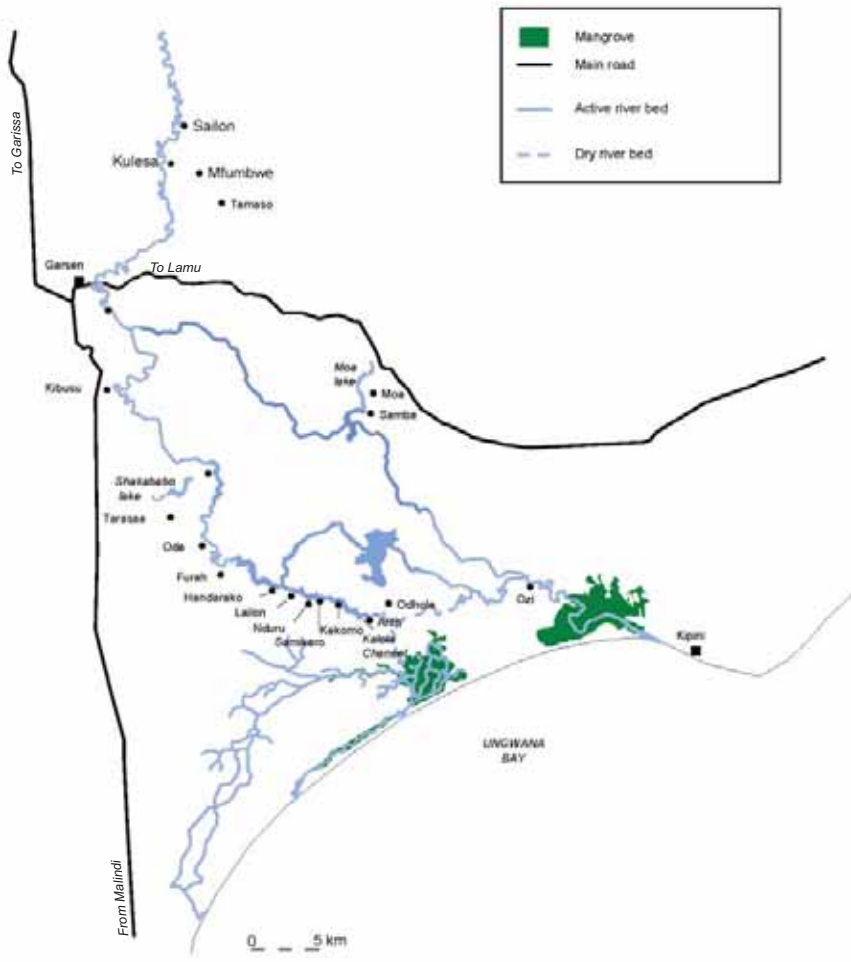
Meeting with Ozi community conservation group -D. Mugambi

## What to do at the Tana Delta



Hippos at the Tana Delta -D. Mugambi

- Birdwatching
- Viewing hippos and crocodiles along the river or in the many small lakes
- Photographic canoe trips and boat rides
- Trekking and beach expeditions
- Beach walks and games



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