Full Detailed Itinerary - Malawi: Birding the Warm Heart of Africa

Day 1: Arrival Lilongwe

After our international flights land in the capital, we meet for a welcome dinner at a hotel in the city where one of our expert guides will discuss the days to come and answer any last-minute questions you may have.

Day 2: Lilongwe to Dzalanyama Forest Reserve

After an early breakfast, we depart by road for an approximate 2-hour trip to Dzalanyama Forest Reserve: our first stop on this epic Malawi itinerary.

Days 3-4: Dzalanyama Forest Reserve and Surrounds

The vast forest reserve of Dzalanyama lies to the west of Lilongwe towards the Zambian border. Within Dzalanyama is one of the largest expanses of miombo woodland remaining in Africa. The woodland covers the low-lying flat areas and ranges from rich evergreen forest along the rivers to climax Brachystegia forest on the slopes of the hills. The reserve is not rich in mammals but what might be lacking in terms of large herds of game is certainly made up for by a host of birds, many of them miombo endemics. The early morning dawn chorus emanating from the forest will include the likes of Ring-necked and Emerald-spotted Wood Doves and perhaps the deep, lion-like calls of Southern Ground Hornbills. We will concentrate our efforts on finding species such as the localized Pale-billed Hornbill and the rare Stierling's Woodpecker. If we can find some flowering proteas, we may find an array of sunbirds that could include Eastern Miombo, Forest Double-collared, Copper, Western Violet-backed, and hopefully the gorgeous Anchieta's (or Red-and-blue) or possibly even the uncommon Shelley's. Other miombo specialities here include Whyte's Barbet, Miombo and Cinnamon-breasted Tits, Miombo Rock Thrush, Red-capped Crombec, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, the strange Böhm's Flycatcher, Souza's Shrike and Reichard's and Black-eared Seedeaters, and we shall hope to find many of these during our explorations. Even the rare and localized Olive-headed Weaver occurs here, although we would need much luck to see it. By walking through the woodlands we might find Coqui Francolin or the magnificent Pennant-winged Nightjar, which can sometimes be flushed from the short grass. We will also climb one of the nearby forest hills where we stand a good chance of finding the restricted range Boulder Chat and the distinctive Striped Pipit. Other birds likely to be seen in this habitat include African Cuckoo-Hawk, Lizard Buzzard, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Shikra, African Harrier-Hawk, African Green Pigeon, Meyer's Parrot, African Pygmy Kingfisher, Broad-billed Roller, Black-collared Barbet, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Greater, Scaly-throated, and Lesser Honeyguide, Green-backed Honeybird, Green-backed and Bearded Woodpeckers, Black 'Eastern' Saw-wing, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, African Golden Oriole, African Spotted Creeper, Yellow-bellied and Southern Hyliotas, Red-faced Crombec, Green-capped Eremomela, Rock-loving and Siffling Cisticolas, Red-winged Prinia, Dusky and Ashy Flycatchers, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, White-crested and Retz's Helmetshrikes, Violet-backed Starling, Southern Yellow White-eye, Yellow-throated Bush Sparrow, and Cabanis's Bunting.

Day 5: Transit Day - Drive to Zomba Plateau

Departing after breakfast, we will have a relatively lengthy half-day (6 hours) spent on the roads as we make our way to one of Malawi's most iconic birding destinations, the Zomba Plateau - a large, syenite-based massif located in the Shire Highlands of southern Malawi. The plateau is one of the country's many breathtaking highlights, from both a birding and biodiversity perspective, reaching heights in excess of 2,000m above sea level. The nutrient-rich soil associated with the plateau provides for a mixture of species-rich forest, rolling grassland, and gentle flowing streams. Unfortunately, Malawi is plagued by rapid deforestation, and much like many other parts of the country, Zomba is at risk. This however will not affect our birding, and our efforts will be centered around exploring the magnificent, remnant, bird–rich forest patches that remain. With luck, we hope to be fortunate enough to have late afternoon views of Malawi's only avian endemic: the Yellow-throated Apalis.

Day 6: Zomba / Thyolo Tea Plantations

A full day dedicated to birding around Zomba where time will be allocated to locating some of the trickier forest inhabitants. One of which is the highly secretive Thyolo Alethe: a robust, robin-like skulker with a simply mesmerizing song. This range restricted species is one of Malawi's most sought-after, isolated to Afromontane massifs both locally and in adjacent northern Mozambique. Other notable species which will no doubt demand our attention include Malawi Batis, White-winged Apalis, Bertram's Weaver, Evergreen-forest Warbler, and Olive-headed Greenbul. Whilst exploring, our eyes will be trained on the canopies for potential glimpses of Green-headed Oriole as they go about their daily antics, adding their bubbly song to the forest orchestra and flittering from tree-to-tree. A fun and eventful day's birding will be celebrated in the evening with a magnificent supper and ice-cold beverages, all whilst watching the sun set on what will be nothing short of an incredible day spent in the field.

Day 7: Zomba to Liwonde National Park

Enjoying our final morning birding around Zomba, we will use the opportunity to take in the sights and sounds of the forest, and breathtaking scenery associated with the Shire Highlands. Any final attempts at locating any additional forest denizens that may have avoided our binoculars until this point will be conducted, before we depart for the lovely Liwonde National Park. All things considered, we hope to arrive at Liwonde NP in time for some lazy afternoon birding around the tranquil Mvuu Camp, a wonderful, tented lodge overlooking the Shire River. Undoubtedly a birding highlight of the trip, the park's wide range of habitats include open river, swamp, deciduous thicket, riverine forest, seasonal wetland, floodplain and Mopane woodland. Over 350 bird species have been recorded here. After a delicious lunch we will have time to relax in camp next to the ever-refreshing swimming pool; or, for those who would rather bird, we will take a walk around the camp, which is often teeming with birdlife. Species that are regularly encountered in the camp surrounds include the gorgeous Böhm's Bee-eater, Collared Palm Thrush, Southern Brown-throated Weaver, Scarlet-chested and White-bellied Sunbirds, White-browed Robin-Chat, Bearded Scrub-Robin and Yellow-bellied Greenbul. As dusk falls, we will search for Fiery-necked and Swamp Nightjars, as well as African Barred Owlets with their frog-like contact calls and characteristic song.

Day 8: Liwonde National Park

We have a full day to explore this incredible wildlife reserve. In our efforts to locate its great variety of bird and mammal species we will undertake a combination of guided walks, game drives and river cruises. The guided walks with an armed ranger are always a highlight as one gets to experience nature on foot. This morning, we might encounter the secretive Pel's Fishing Owl, often described as a giant, ginger teddy bear. Other birds that we hope to encounter include Brown-breasted Barbet, which in Malawi is almost exclusively found in the thickets that surround Mvuu Camp. Green Malkoha, Eastern Nicator, the striking and lively

Livingstone’s Flycatcher, Brown-headed Parrot, Broad-billed Roller, and African Broadbill are just a few of the other specialties we will be on the lookout for. In the Mopane belt that runs through the park we will search for several species that include the range-restricted Lilian’s Lovebird, Racket-tailed Roller, Arnot’s Chat, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Grey-headed Bushshrike, Meves’s Starling, Speckle-throated Woodpecker, Retz’s Helmetshrike and Dickinson’s Kestrel. A boat trip up the Shire River is always a highlight with a constant stream of activity to entertain us. This magnificent river is fairly wide and there are numerous bird species associated with its waters and its banks. On the boat trip we should encounter African Fish Eagle, Osprey, Red-necked Falcon, Spur-winged and Long-toed Lapwings and Luapula Cisticola, while numerous species of storks, ibis, herons and kingfishers are ubiquitous. Animals are plentiful in the National Park and especially in the thickets surrounding Mvuu Camp. Impala, Waterbuck, Bushbuck and Warthog are often seen feeding in the camp itself. The stately Sable Antelope is regularly encountered in the nearby dry Mopane woodlands, whilst the Shire River provides sanctuary for some of the largest Hippo and Crocodile populations in Africa. Black Rhino are occasionally observed from within the Rhino sanctuary where they are confined, and Elephant occur throughout the park. In the evening, we may get lucky and see the resident Bat Hawk hunting bats over the Shire River. Another night will be enjoyed at the lovely Mvuu Camp.

Day 9: Liwonde NP to Nkhotakota National Park

Today we depart for one of Malawi’s oldest and largest protected areas, Nkhotakota National Park. Covering approximately 1,800 square kilometers, Nkhotakota is home to an array of wildlife, and is the origin of one of the continent’s most successful African Elephant translocation projects. The park alone has a bird list exceeding 300 species; testimony to the variety of habitats that our group can expect to traverse over the duration of our stay. Whilst here, we will enjoy birding some of Malawi’s most pristine Mimbo woodland, enjoying the sights and sounds of the species which call this endemic African biome their home. Miombo Barbet, Miombo Wren-Warbler, Eastern Miombo Sunbird, and Miombo Rock Thrush are all resident, whilst Arnot’s Chat, Böhm’s Flycatcher, and Anchieta’s Sunbird are distinct possibilities. Larger game are also present, and we stand a chance at seeing African Savanna Elephant, Greater Kudu, Impala, Buffalo, Sable, Warthog, Eland, and Waterbuck.

Day 10: Nkhotakota National Park to Chintheche

After a final morning enjoying the park, we head towards Chintheche via a three-hour drive and the evergreen coastal forests that hug the fringes of Lake Malawi in this area. In the afternoon we chase down the amazing East Coast Akalat and, if we are extremely lucky Lesser Seedcracker and a few other lowland birds along the fringes of the fabulous Lake Malawi.

Day 11: Chintheche to Nyika National Park via Vwaza Marsh

Although there may be a few goodies to chase if we were unsuccessful the previous day we shall soon be on our way headed towards the gate at Vwaza Marsh to try out luck with a few specialties, before making our way to the top of the remarkable Nyika. The plateau itself is over 6000 feet (2,000 meters) in altitude and is one of the coldest places in Malawi (log fires are fairly commonplace at night!). We spend our first of three nights at the delightful Chelinda Lodge.

Days 12-13: Nyika National Park

With two full days to explore this wonderful area, our time will be spent searching the grassland, forests and marshes of the broad Nyika Plateau. Herds of majestic Roan Antelopes roam the plateau alongside groups

of Reedbuck whilst shy Bushbuck venture forth from the forest to graze alongside Bushpigs and Side-striped Jackals. Here the stately Denham's Bustard wanders over grasslands where we will also search for the rare Wattled Crane. We may be a little early for the brilliant but endangered Montane Blue Swallows, but we will keep our eyes peeled in the hope that we can find one flying low over the open hills and bracken- and briar-covered valleys where Black-lored and Churring Cisticolas are common and easy to identify with their distinctive songs and plumages. We will be on the lookout for the restricted-range Yellow-browed Seedeater (split from Streaky). At patches of flowering proteas we shall check the sunbirds carefully for Montane Double-collared, Bronze and Malachite, we will be hoping to see the equally impressive Scarlet-tufted Malachite. In the wetter areas we should find Buff-shouldered Widowbird in breeding plumage complete with some very impressive tails. We will want to spend most of the mornings inside some magnificent montane forest where we will be concentrating on finding more secretive forest birds such as Olive-flanked Robin-Chat, Orange Ground Thrush, the striking White-chested Alethe, Sharpe's Akalat, the localized Chapin's Apalis and Fülleborn's Boubou, whilst in the eveing, "Rwenzori" Montane Nightjars can be seen hawking insects around our chalets. Other noticeable species that we may find include Black Goshawk, Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk, Dusky Turtle-Dove, Scarce Swift, Moustached Tinkerbird, White-headed Sawwing, African Red-rumped and Angola Swallows, African Hill Babbler, Mountain Yellow-Warbler, Cinnamon Bracken-Warbler, Wing-snapping and Wailing Cisticolas, Brown Parisoma, Brown-headed Apalis, White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher, Waller's and Slender-billed Starlings, Baglafecht Weaver, Yellow-bellied Waxbill, and Yellow-crowned and Brimstone Canaries.

Day 14: Nyika to Luwawa Forest Reserve

We depart really early this morning so that we can spend as much time around the Vwaza Marsh area as possible. We will first visit the remote northern gate of Vwaza Marsh Game Reserve where two very special birds can be found; they are the stunning Babbling Starling and Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Weaver. Neither are easy to locate, however we will put in an intensive search. The Miombo that we will be passing through on the way provides a chance for some interesting birding and a time to catch up or obtain better views of specialties such as White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Hyliota, Miombo and Rufous-bellied Tits, Schalow's Turaco, Pale-billed Hornbill, African Spotted Creeper and Cabanis's Bunting. Other birds of interest that also occur in the Miombo woodland here include Böhm's Flycatcher, Green-backed and Bennett's Woodpeckers, and White-breasted Cuckooshrike. Towards the heat of the day, we will begin with our fairly long 3-4 hour drive to the Viphya Plateau and the remarkable Luwawa Forest Reserve.

Day 15: Luwawa Forest Reserve to Lilongwe

The Viphya Mountains of northern Malawi, specifically, Luwawa Forest Reserve, bring with it the prospect of further rich and rewarding birding on our final full day's birding. Another opportunity to enjoy some of Malawi's impeccable miombo birds with the likes of Red-capped Crombec, Miombo Scrub Robin, Miombo Barbet, Rufous-bellied Tit, African Spotted Creeper, Eastern Miombo Sunbird, Miombo Rock Thrush, and Whyte's Barbet all frequenting the Brachystegia dominated woodlands. In contrast to the above, we will have further opportunities to explore the local afro-montane forest patches (of which there are many around the reserve) frequented by Montane Blue Swallow, Southern Citril, White-stared Robin, Black-browed Mountain Greenbul, Forest Double-collared Sunbird, and Schalow's Turaco among others. After a great finale at Luwawa we make our way back to Lilongwe for our final dinner together as a group reminiscing on all the many great memories we accumulated in Malawi.

Day 16: Departure

Regrettably, all good things must come to an end. After breakfast, we will make our way to the airport where our tour will draw to a close.

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