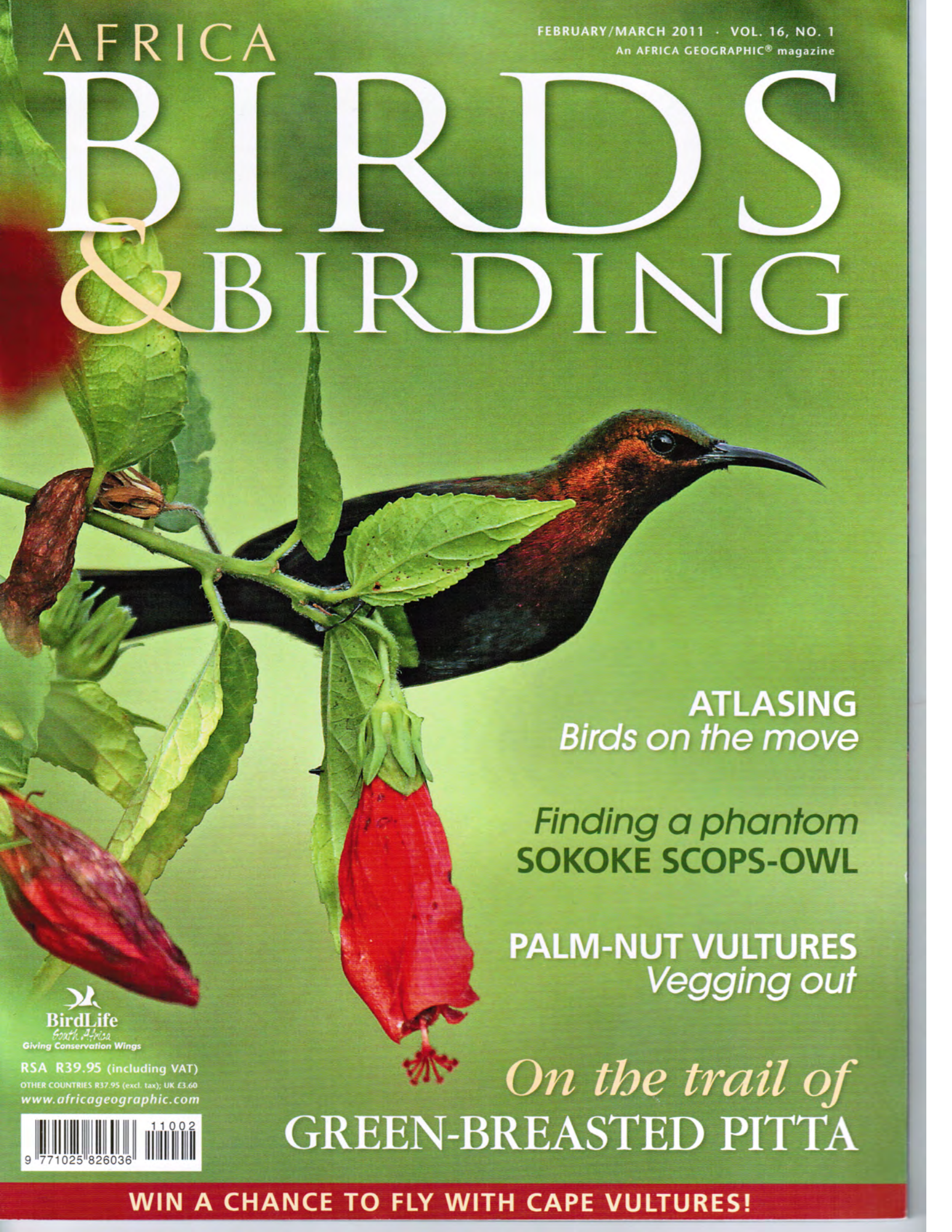


AFRICA

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2011 · VOL. 16, NO. 1
An AFRICA GEOGRAPHIC® magazine

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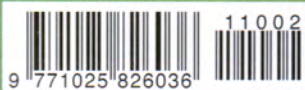


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FINDING A phantom

SOKOKE SCOPS-OWL



MUNIR VIRANI/THE PEREGRINE FUND



PEOPLE USUALLY VISIT the coast of Kenya in order to snorkel the coral reefs of the Indian Ocean, lounge on white sandy beaches or gorge on fresh prawns as large as dinner plates. But in Watamu, a hundred kilometres north of Mombasa, the largest intact indigenous forest remaining on Africa's eastern coast lies undiscovered on the inland side of the narrow two-lane coastal highway. Within its 420 square kilometres, the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest contains at least 24 rare or endemic species of birds, mammals and butterflies. Six bird species depend on this Important Bird Area, including the Sokoke Scops-Owl *Otus ireneae*, the smallest owl in Africa.

TEXT BY MEERA SUBRAMANIAN

On a cool night in July, our small group of scientists and travellers sits around a campfire at a place marked on the map as Munir's Site, listening to four of these enigmatic owls. They are probably two pairs, filling the air with their single-note calls, a repetitive, hypnotic *too-too-too*. What little is known of the Sokoke Scops-Owl, which was discovered only in 1965, is due in part to the work of Dr Munir Virani, the director of the Africa and South Asia programmes for The Peregrine Fund and the namesake of our campsite. He sits with us now, explaining his year of study in this spot in 1993. Independent guide David Ngala, who has been exploring these woodlands for 30 years, accompanies us. In 2004, Ngala was awarded the Conservation Achievement Award by BirdLife International for his work in the region. His quiet, attuned nature picks up what other visitors miss – the lingering imprint of a green mamba in soft, red sand or the quick movement of the rare Ader's duiker.

Virani, with the help of Ngala and others, repeated the early 1990s' surveys and in 2010 published their findings in the ornithological journal *Ostrich*. The results are alarming. The population of the Sokoke Scops-Owl, which is located only in the Arabuko-Sokoke and one other tiny isolated patch of forest in Tanzania to the south, has decreased by nearly a quarter in the past 16 years. The highest count estimated that there were about 2 000 pairs in the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest; today, there could be as few as 800 pairs. Even with Virani's work and other scientific inquiries, little is known about this owl that the International Union for Conservation of Nature lists as Endangered on its Red Data List. For example, no one has yet identified a nest, the most basic starting point for understanding the life-cycle of an animal.

The opportunities to learn more about this bird are diminishing. Within the biological islands that it inhabits, the Sokoke Scops-Owl faces the same conservation pressures as many of Africa's creatures, large and small: habitat fragmentation as a result of human encroachment and wood harvesting,

and lax government enforcement of existing conservation laws. But because its range is already so restricted, this owl is particularly vulnerable to large land-use projects that could alter great expanses of forest within its limited habitat.

One such project is being proposed at Dakatcha, just north of the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. An Italian company hopes to create a 50 000-hectare plantation of jatropha for biofuel, a plan that would destroy critical woodlands. This is currently community-owned land and is home to numerous human settlements, the endemic Clarke's Weaver and quite possibly the Sokoke Scops-Owl as well, although adequate surveys have not yet been undertaken. Numerous studies question the amount of fuel that the potentially invasive jatropha plant can realistically produce in this dry region where freshwater sources are limited. The project, fiercely contested, has temporarily been placed on hold.

It is no more than 17 centimetres in length, its short tail barely clearing the branch it's perched on. Ever alert, when it blinks at all, only one eye closes at a time

Back at camp, Ngala has built the fire large to keep at bay the elephants that roam these woodlands, but now he leads us from the safety, warmth and light to see if we can get a closer look at one of our hooting neighbours. In single file, with headlamps on their dimmest setting, five of us follow Ngala into the *Cynometra* woodland of the forest, a thicket of tangled shrubs interspersed with silver oaks. We lurch between branches and pause every few minutes as Ngala clicks off his



MEERA SUBRAMANIAN

Guide David Ngala has been exploring the Sokoke Forest for the past 30 years and has an in-depth knowledge of its inhabitants.

flashlight, instructing us to do the same, and cocks his head towards the sound of the call. The sound stops, then starts again from a different direction. We shift our sinuous course, getting ever closer, but our winged quarry still seems to be hidden at least 15 metres away from us in the darkness.

In daylight, searching for birds is about finding movement and patterns of colour that break the rhythm of the landscape. It is different in the dark. All senses but sound are switched off. Tonight it is an auditory hunt, and we recognise we are in the hands of a master when Ngala switches on his light again and directs the incandescent beam to a branch just four metres from where we've halted in silence. The owl, too, is quiet, and stares at us with oversized eyes ringed in gold, pupils dilated in the darkness.

The two slight bumps of the owl's ears are attuned to every sound we make. The bird's small, sharp beak, which secures its diet of beetles and other insects, is set in a face covered in rufous-coloured feathers. Specks of cream and black leap out in the spotlight from the soft brown feathers of its chest and belly. It is no more than 17 centimetres in length, its short tail barely clearing the branch it's perched on. Ever alert, when it blinks at all, only one eye closes at a time.

It puts up with our invasion longer than we expect, and then without a sound, it lifts off and disappears into the night. □