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# Can the Critically Endangered Liben Lark be saved? Our latest update

Community nature reserves are not only improving habitats for rare grassland birds, but also proving a vital lifeline for cattle farmers, literally saving lives during drought. But how has the Liben Lark responded to this initiative?



There are thought to be fewer than 250 Liben Larks left © Nikk Borrow

By Mercy Kariuki & Kariuki Ndang'ang'a

The **Liben Plain** in southern Ethiopia is home to the Liben Lark *Heteromirafra archeri* (Critically Endangered), and is one of the few fragments of open grassland surviving in East Africa. However, the Liben Plain's grasslands face threats from overgrazing, soil erosion, scrub encroachment and conversion to cropland. Now, less than 7,500 hectares of degraded grassland remains. These threats are driven by poverty, population growth and drought, which pushes pastoralist communities into using the plain unsustainably.

"This brings about problems not only for the pastoralist community's livelihoods, but also for the unique biodiversity found in this Important Bird and Biodiversity Area. Human lives and biodiversity are at stake and thus

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we need sustain action that helps the lark as well as the people”, says Mengistu Wondafrash of the Ethiopia Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS, BirdLife Partner).

Fortunately, action has been taken to address these issues. Since 2016, Participatory Rangeland Management (PRM) techniques have been put into action to support local people on the Liben Plain. These work by creating communally-managed grassland reserves locally known as “*kallo*”. They have a double benefit, helping farmers by reserving livestock forage for use during the dry season, and creating habitat for breeding birds.

This is thanks to the project “*Sustainable management of an Ethiopian rangeland for biodiversity and pastoralists*”, which has united both local and international organisations in the protection of the plain\*. Through the project, which ends in October 2018, locally established ‘*Kallo* Management Committees’ govern these grasslands under a set of agreed customary pastoralist by-laws. By August 2018, approximately 350 hectares of *kallos* had been established and approximately 1,000 hectares of invading scrub cleared, increasing the size of the open grasslands by approximately 14%.



Liben Lark and grassland surveys have been going on since 2007, even before the current project started. The most recent survey in June 2018 showed encouraging results for the grassland structure within the *kallos*: very tall grass sprung up following heavy rains from February to June. Unfortunately, the fate of the Liben Lark is less certain, and it is likely that numbers have continued to decline: the quantity of singing males recorded was almost seven times fewer than in 2007. These preliminary results may look worrying, but it is possible that the prolonged two-year (2016-2017) drought might have had a natural impact on the Liben Lark population from which the bird may recover – or, there may simply have been fewer birds singing at the time of the survey:

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“The Liben Lark is known to be shy and only easily seen or heard singing when breeding. It is possible that the birds were not breeding at the time

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due to the early rains that started in February 2018”, observed Simon Wotton, a scientist from RSPB who was part of the team that conducted the June survey.



Outside the *kallos*, the plain continued to show high levels of overgrazing, with more and more grassland converted to cropland as well as increasing scrub encroachment. However, within the *kallos* there was an abundance of other grassland birds such as Somali Short-toed Lark *Alaudala somalica*, African Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus* and Kori Bustard *Ardeotis kori* (Near Threatened), as well as invertebrates.

*"Kallos came in very handy during the severe drought, where they saved livestock and human lives"*

So there is still hope. And even though the Liben Lark’s recovery is slow, the project has already begun to enhance the livelihoods and food security of thousands of Borana pastoralists across the Liben Plain.

“The existence of *kallos* in Liben Plain came very handy during the severe drought, where they saved livestock and human lives by providing fodder to the livestock” says Abduba Yacob of SOS Sahel, who has been instrumental in setting up some of the grazing reserves. The community, through their Community Based Organizations (CBOs), were trained in cattle fattening initiatives to improve resilience during drought, which also provided additional income.

It’s clear that this kind of project has a great deal of potential, and it is therefore important that the current efforts are maintained and expanded on. Therefore, a national stakeholders’ workshop was held in September 2018 to share lessons learnt, while devising the best way to sustain the PRM approach in the Liben Plain and beyond. The workshop recommended that local and national governments, as well as community institutions, should play a key role in ensuring holistic way of life in the Plain for both the people and biodiversity.



“Pastoralism is not a single way of life. It has three basic units: natural resources, livestock and society” - Mr. Woyessa Merga, Deputy Commissioner of Oromia Pastoralist Area Development Commission (OPADC). This is the credo that we will continue to work by as we strive to protect the unique Liben Plain.

\* “Sustainable management of an Ethiopian rangeland for biodiversity and pastoralists” was funded by the UK Government’s Darwin Initiative through the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB, BirdLife in the UK), and was implemented by a partnership of RSPB, EWNHS, SOS Sahel, BirdLife International, Coventry University and Manchester Metropolitan University.

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