

YOUTH FOR SHARPE'S LONGCLAW: *ENGAGING YOUTH IN GRASSLAND AND BIRDS CONSERVATION IN KINANGOP PLATEAU*

Report by: Martin Mwangi, Samuel Bakari, Cynthia Wanjiru & John Gitogo



African Bird Club
Working for birds and conservation in Africa



NatureKenya
The East Africa Natural History Society



MAY 2025

SUMMARY

This project addressed the critical decline of the Kinangop Plateau grasslands, an Important Bird Area (IBA), where less than 1% of the initial 7,000-hectare suitable habitat remains for the endangered Sharpe's Longclaw (SLC). Historically, conservation efforts were hindered by an aging volunteer base and rapid land conversion driven by socio-economic pressures such as agricultural expansion. This intervention strategically bridged this gap by mobilizing the youth who comprise 70% of the population to secure the plateau's ecological future.

The project successfully trained 91 youth in ornithological identification and sustainable grassland management. By integrating digital tools such as eBird and the African Bird Club App, the project institutionalized citizen science among local landholders. Furthermore, the initiative reached 1,440 primary and secondary school going students and 2,700 residents through targeted awareness campaigns and community *barazas*, fostering a landscape-wide conservation culture.

Key outcomes include the establishment of a robust youth birds monitoring network across Kinangop grasslands and the promotion of biodiversity-friendly livestock techniques including managed rotational grazing. These results demonstrate that intergenerational leadership and tech-forward monitoring are essential to reversing habitat fragmentation and ensuring the long-term survival of the SLC and associated highland biodiversity.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The project took place in the Kinangop Plateau grasslands, an Important Bird Area in Kenya. The plateau is the middle catchment of Lake Naivasha Ramsar site connecting the two biodiversity hotspots; the lake and Aberdare Mountain which is a major water tower and in UNESCO world heritage sites. This site is in Nyandarua County with a human population density of 300 persons/km-sq, 32% living in abject poverty, and practicing small scale farming (KNBS, 2019). These grasslands are stronghold habitat for the endangered Sharpe's Longclaw (SLC) and Grey Crowned Crane, home to other globally threatened and vulnerable birds including, Pallid Harrier (NT), Aberdare Cisticola (VU), 30 Palearctic migrants winter here and close to 200 birds, non-avian biodiversity including the Bitis worthingtoni (VU) and Phrynobatrachus kinangopensis (VU), Birdlife International (2024).

The grasslands have rapidly declined with only less than 10% remaining from the original 77,000 and only less than 1% of remaining being suitable habitat for SLC (Mwangi, *et. al.* 2022) due to change of land use from traditional livestock grazing to crop production, mono-species exotic plantations and land sub-division. These unique grasslands are privately owned and not included in protected areas. The remaining grasslands are under more pressure as a result of smaller average land holdings, less grasslands and higher stocking rates. A growing human population has put more pressure on the land, leading to smaller average land holdings (which tend to include proportionately less grassland) and higher stocking rates (Rayment and Pisano 1999). The grasslands, being outside protected area, receives little conservation financing and effort which are usually uncoordinated while the threats are enormous and diverse and require a matrix of approaches. Parallel to declines of grassland habitats and fragmentation, are declines of biodiversity and birds' populations including Sharpe's Longclaw that are disproportionately large subjecting the local community to increased vulnerability to climate change.

The global population of endemic and endangered Sharpe's Longclaw also gone down from over 10,000 individuals to 2009 population estimate being ~2000 individual (Kimani, 2009). This is largely contributed by grassland conversion leading to very small and isolated grassland portions (Ngari 2004, Birdlife International, 2024). Fragmentation is leading to disproportionate reduction of SLC population (Muchai 1998). Owing to effects of COVID-19, Sharpe's Longclaw monitoring Report, 2021 by FoKP documented community members, farmers and grassland owners resulted to increasing grassland conversion as an adaptability mechanism rapidly reducing the grasslands extent which is expected to have a serious adverse impact to the population of the species in a short time if no interventions are put in place now.

To reduce, stop and eventually reverse these adverse effects to the grasslands and the Sharpe's Longclaw, it's critically important to educate, train and sustain the conservation knowledge and skills to the locals (Muchai *et al.* 2002) who make decisions that directly affect quality and extent of grasslands and in turn Sharpe's Longclaw.

Conservation Gap and Intervention

There is a volunteer based local organization, Friends of Kinangop Plateau FoKP (main partner for this project) which has been promoting conservation and carrying out monitoring in Kinangop. Its main audience has been the local elderly which has left a huge gap of awareness and training to the youth who are critical for implementing current interventions and will eventually make "better land use decision" when they will control the grasslands. Targeting the older have been strategic owing to the fact that it's a volunteer program and the youth had not been intentionally encouraged to join. Due to this imbalance, conservation in Kinangop has been spearheaded by a minority of elderly residents, resulting in slow conservation impact evidenced by the continuous decline of grasslands despite past efforts. Youth make up 70% of population in Kenya (KNBS 2019), which is unexploited opportunity for impactful conservation in Kinangop. The project sought to bridge this conservation gap training and educating local youth across the plateau through sessions on bird identification, ecological importance, threats and possible interventions, and workshops on grassland management while engaging youth in practical conservation activities, imparting to them skills and knowledge that will scale up and sustain conservation of the grasslands and SLC. This is in addition to internationally encouraging the youth to join FoKP for a more robust, short- and long-term conservation impact- organization based. After training them on grassland and species conservation including opportunities related to conservation, the project facilitated them to participate in FoKP's activities including birds and grassland monitoring, awareness creation to more residents including school going youth. Implementation of this project was a big boost to the conservation effort and capacity for increasing the number of Sharpe's Longclaw and extent and quality of grasslands.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Project goal

The aim of this project was to engage youth across Sharpe's Longclaw range in conservation of grasslands to maintain a viable population of species and other grassland biodiversity.

Objectives

It was implemented to achieve the following specific objective:

1. Train 80 youth on basic bird identification and practical grassland conservation skills in Kinangop Plateau
2. Create bird-biased conservation awareness to 500 school going youth in Kinangop Plateau
3. Reach out to 2700 residents through bird and grassland conservation biased print media and community meeting/baraza in Kinangop Plateau.

METHODS

Objective 1: Train 80 youth on basic bird identification and practical grassland conservation skills in Kinangop Plateau.

In 3 separate trainings, 91 youth were trained in groups across various venues in Kinangop Plateau through indoor-outdoor sessions on birds, habitats, and threats facilitated by experienced ornithologists from FoKP, Nature Kenya and County Government of Nyandarua.



Kinangop youth indoor training

The indoor training was followed by monthly birding days led by seasoned birdwatchers from May 2025-Feb 2026 to build hands-on identification skills. Participants were introduced to birding applications like eBird during these events to enhance their experience and contribute to citizen science data collection. The African Bird Club App was a major tool introduced during birds identification trainings. This was complemented by four one-day grassland management workshops facilitated by project team, FoKP, livestock and conservation specialists which imparted biodiversity-friendly techniques for livestock grazing and habitat restoration.



Nature Kenya and Nyandarua County experts indoor training sessions



Trainees during an outdoor session during a monthly bird watching session

Finally, the project facilitated the trained youth's participation in the annual Sharpe's Longclaw and grasslands monitoring in April 2026, ensuring practical application of skills through structured data collection and reporting protocols coordinated by FoKP.

Objective 2: Create bird-biased conservation awareness to 500 school-going youth in Kinangop Plateau.

Awareness was raised for 730 primary and secondary school students through tailored PowerPoint presentations on environmental concepts, birds, threats, and individual actions,

delivered via school visits and invitations to the FoKP Resource Centre. These sessions were interactive, incorporating Q&A and hands-on elements to engage students effectively. To foster deeper appreciation, nature and birding walks biased toward birds and grasslands were organized in and around schools during the same periods, guided by project team members and local experts to highlight local biodiversity.



Student engagement on landscape and birds conservation

In months 4-7 of this project, students were facilitated to visit the FOKP Resource Centre, the grassland nature reserve in North Kinangop, serving as an experiential learning hub where visiting students observed and identified birds, promoting positive interactions and long-term conservation attitudes through repeated exposure and educational signage.

Objective 3: Reach out to 2700 residents through bird and grassland conservation biased print media and community meeting/baraza in Kinangop Plateau.



In ABC branded t-shirts, part of trained youth join Sharpe's Longclaw monitoring team, 2026

Outreach to 2300 residents was achieved by designing youth-targeted print materials such as leaflets, t-shirts, and calendars developed collaboratively by the project team and advisor for cultural relevance, then printed and distributed to strategic locations across the plateau, trainings, and school programs.



Local community members with branded calendars at FoKP grassland reserve

Leveraging FoKP's networks, the project team attended regular community barazas organized by local leaders, delivering concise presentations on grassland and bird conservation with visuals and Q&A to amplify messages. Throughout all activities, a targeted FoKP membership drive informed youth and residents about joining the organization, offering sign-ups on-site to build a sustainable conservation network.



Community Awareness engagements on species and grassland conservation

PROJECT IMPACT/SUCCESES

Two major impacts have been achieved through the implementation of this one-year project as described below:

1. Local youth have trained, networked and equipped building employable skills and increasing their capacity to effectively contribute to the conservation of Sharpe's Longclaw and the Kinangop highland grasslands. This has led to an increased FoKP youthful membership strengthening the effort and sustainability aspects of the community based organization.
2. From the success of this project, a new replication project has been designed for a new similar highland grassland KBA, Mau-Narok Molo grasslands. Led by youthful members from Mau Narok Molo and supported by this project's team members, the designed project is initially funded by African Bird Club with a similar foundation to conserve a separate population of the Sharpe's Longclaw. Initiating a conservation effort for this separate population significantly contribute to overall global species conservation.

Lessons Leant

The implementation of this project within the Kinangop Plateau has yielded critical insights into the dynamics of community-led conservation in non-protected areas. The following key lessons reflect the strategic shift toward youth engagement and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

1. The strategic necessity of intergenerational succession: Historically, conservation efforts in Kinangop were spearheaded by a minority of elderly volunteers. This project demonstrated that youth are not merely a demographic target but a necessary catalyst for scale. By training 91 youth, exceeding the initial target, the project tapped into a demographic that represents 70% of the population. The lesson is clear: for conservation to be sustainable, it must transition from a legacy activity of the elderly to a viable pursuit for the youth who will eventually inherit land-use decision-making power.
2. Integration of citizen science and technology: The introduction of digital tools, specifically the eBird and African Bird Club applications, proved transformative. These platforms bridged the gap between traditional birdwatching and modern engagement, allowing youth to see themselves as contributors to global citizen science. This suggests that future interventions should prioritize "tech-forward" conservation to maintain engagement and ensure data-driven monitoring of the Sharpe's Longclaw (SLC).
4. Collaborative ecosystem: The success of the training sessions facilitated by a mix of local NGOs (FoKP), national bodies (Nature Kenya), and government entities underscores that conservation requires a united approach. Robust conservation in privately owned landscapes requires a continuous, coordinated presence rather than isolated interventions to effectively counter the rapid decline of suitable SLC habitats.

Recommendations for Future Strategic Interventions

Building upon the insights gained during project implementation, the following recommendations serve as a roadmap for scaling the protection of the Kinangop Plateau and the endangered Sharpe's Longclaw (SLC).

1. Recognizing that habitat conversion is often a survival-based adaptability mechanism, future phases must move beyond awareness to economic empowerment. It is recommended that the implementing team facilitates the development of a "Grassland-Friendly Enterprise" model which may include: providing financial and technical support for high-value, low-impact grazing practices that improve milk, wool and meat yields without increasing stocking rates.
2. Establishing a permanent FoKP Youth Conservation Wing will ensure that bird identification and monitoring skills are passed down through peer-to-peer learning, reducing reliance on external experts and ensuring long-term institutional stability.
3. The success of using eBird and the African Bird Club App should be leveraged to influence local policy. The team recommends using citizen science data to advocate for the inclusion of these private grasslands into Nyandarua County's spatial planning. Providing the County Government with precise maps of SLC strongholds can help inform land-subdivision regulations and potentially lead to the designation of "Community Conservation Areas."

Challenges

1. The project's primary challenge was the historical exclusion of youth from the local conservation body, Friends of Kinangop Plateau (FoKP). Because previous efforts targeted the elderly, there was a risk of low youth recruitment and skepticism toward a volunteer-based model in an area with high poverty levels. To mitigate this, the team designed incentivized training sessions that utilized modern tools like the African Bird Club App and eBird, making the program technologically relevant and appealing to the 70% of the population that had previously been unengaged.
2. Unlike projects in national parks, this intervention took place on privately owned, fragmented grasslands. This presented a risk where youth might be trained in identification, but lack access to suitable habitats for practical application due to land sub-division. The team mitigated this by conducting training in three separate groups across the plateau, ensuring that youth were trained within their own sub-counties. This localized approach allowed them to monitor the specific "grassland portions" they or their families actually own and manage.
3. A technical challenge was ensuring that the 91 trained youth continued to contribute data after the initial workshops. There was a risk of "one-off participation" where skills would atrophy without regular use. The team mitigated this by establishing monthly birding days led by seasoned ornithologists. These recurring events provided the necessary mentorship and social structure to transform the trainees from temporary participants into a robust, long-term monitoring network for the Kinangop Plateau.

Project Expenditure

| Item Description | Cost in Ksh | Cost in £UK |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| Indoor training for youth including meals, facilitators, venues and stationaries | 90,675 | 585 |
| Local transport and snacks monthly birding sessions and grassland management workshop days and community meetings | 91915 | 593 |
| Print materials T-shirts Calendars and leaflets | 53,320 | 344 |
| Local transport and lunches during FOKP birds monitoring and school outreach | 33,480 | 216 |
| Equipment: Pair of binoculars, 5 bird guide books, 1Projector &laptop | 136,400 | 880 |
| Administration: Communication, meetings and reports | 52,700 | 340 |
| Bank Charges | 4,185 | 27 |
| Total | 462,465 | 2,985 |

Kinangop youth step up to save an Endangered bird

■ By David Magoma

Youth are key to protecting the future of Kinangop's tussock grasslands, and the endangered Sharpe's Longclaw that depends on them.

To build this connection, Friends of Kinangop Plateau teamed up with Nature Kenya and the Nyandarua County Government. Their goal? To pass on vital birding skills, spark local conservation careers, and inspire a new generation of citizen scientists.

On 17 April 2025, 34 young people from Kinangop took part in a practical birding and conservation

training. The session introduced them to bird identification, habitat protection, and field skills. They also learned how to use birding equipment, understand species diversity, and appreciate the role birds

play in healthy ecosystems.

The training was more than just theory. It opened minds to the idea of conservation as a career and a way of life. The participants explored

the challenges facing local wildlife, including the threats to the Sharpe's Longclaw, and discussed how they could take part in protecting it.

As part of the follow-up, the young birders, under the guidance of the Friends of Kinangop Plateau Site Support Group, will now lead monthly bird walks. The first walk is set for Saturday 10 May 2025.

This is just the beginning. The energy, curiosity, and passion these young people bring could make all the difference for the survival of both the grasslands and the Sharpe's Longclaw. 🐦



ANNEX 2: Indoor training report



TRAINING REPORT (17-18th May 2025)

INTRODUCTION OF YOUTH TO BIRD WATCHING AND CONSERVATION

On May 17&18, 2025, the Friends of Kinangop Plateau (FoKP), in collaboration with Nature Kenya and the Nyandarua County Government, conducted a comprehensive training seminar focused on bird watching and environmental stewardship. Supported by the African Bird Club, the initiative engaged local youths to foster a sustainable interest in conservation within the Kinangop region. The curriculum provided a rigorous overview of ornithological principles, climate change mitigation, and the technical aspects of bird identification. Key objectives included strengthening FoKP membership and highlighting professional career pathways in conservation. Participants were introduced to citizen science methodologies, emphasizing the role of data collection in habitat protection. The program successfully cultivated a sense of community responsibility and technical proficiency. To maintain momentum, the organizers established three regional teams; South, Central, and North to conduct synchronized monthly bird-watching activities, ensuring the longterm integration of youth into the regional conservation framework.

