

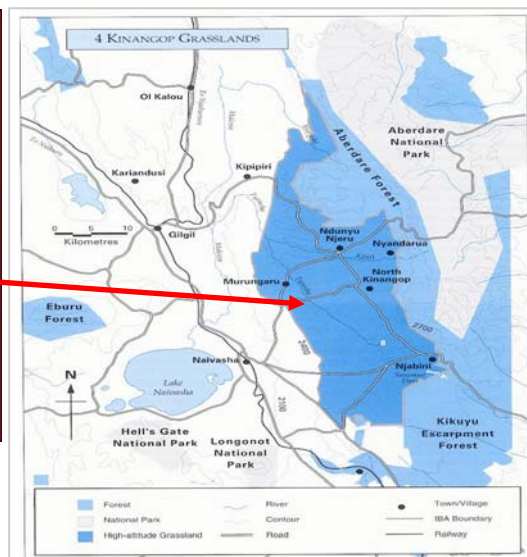
To address the critical loss of grasslands in Kenya, the World Land Trust is working with local project partners Nature Kenya to create a reserve in the Kinangop grasslands in central Kenya. Already 95 acres are under effective control Nature Kenya aims to eventually purchase and protect 500 acres of this threatened habitat with specific emphasis on the protection of a rare bird of the region: the endemic Sharpe's Longclaw. Compared to rainforest, grassland has received little conservation attention and unless immediate action is taken, the cost of reversing the damage might be too great.

Kinangop Highland Grasslands

The Kinangop Highland Grasslands situated in central Kenya encompass 172,970 acres of privately owned unprotected habitat situated at an altitude of 2,400-2,700 meters. Bounded by the forests of the Aberdare Mountains and Kikuyu Escarpment to the east and south and by the Rift Valley to the west, the grasslands are of global importance and are one of Kenya's 60 Important Bird Areas. Originally, the entire plateau was almost treeless covered with tussock grasslands and included many bogs, but a combination of demographic, environmental and economic factors have led to fragmentation and loss of these natural grasslands. It is estimated that the grasslands now cover between one-third and half of the historical extent.

Right: *Sharpe's Longclaw is threatened by loss of its grassland habitat.*

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Far left: *Map of Kenya showing project location in Central Kenya.*

Left: *Map of Kinangop Grasslands (outlined in dark blue) in relation to Aberdare National Park.*

Current threats to the Kinangop Grasslands

Since the 1960's the number of people settling in the Kinangop Plateau has significantly increased and many of those people rely on small scale farming. The result is that large areas of original grassland has been ploughed for cultivation of crops: mainly maize, wheat and potatoes. But more recently huge areas have been converted to wheat farms by private developers and this is causing real devastation of natural habitats. Plantations of non-native tree species such as *Eucalyptus*, *Acacia* and *Pine* are also adversely affecting the wetlands in the area.



Above left: *Nature Kenya's existing reserve at Kinangop with the Aberdare Mountains in the background.*

Above right: *Clearance of land for agriculture and plantations has eliminated natural grasslands throughout the region.*

A Great Biodiversity of Species

Whilst birds have been studied and are being monitored in the area, overall little research into other wildlife has been carried out and this is an urgent priority for the future. Some of this unstudied wildlife (especially butterflies, reptiles and amphibians) are likely to be highly specialised and restricted in range. To date twelve species of frog have been recorded in the grasslands, including two endemic species *Hyperolius montanus* and *Phrynobatrachus kinangopensis* and just this year a new species to science (yet to be named) was discovered in the region. These are all under threat from loss of habitat and further endangered by draining of wetland habitat. A number of snakes have been also recorded including the Kenya Horned Viper, which is threatened by illegal hunting.

The grasslands are especially important for birds and are recognised as an Important Bird Area (IBA). As mentioned earlier, it is the global stronghold of Sharpe's Longclaw, an endangered bird found only in restricted ranges where their tussock grassland habitat survives. Other bird species found in these grasslands include the Near Threatened Jackson's Widowbird and Pallid Harrier and the Endangered Aberdare Cisticola.



Right: Jackson's Widowbird. During the breeding season the male develops glossy black breeding plumage and a bright blue-grey bill. They also grow a beautiful down-curved tail, about 20 centimetres long, and a glossy black collar. The male, which is about 40 percent heavier than the female, uses his new, showy plumage in a bizarre and elaborate jumping display to attract females.

Project Focus

With the support of WLT, Nature Kenya aim to purchase and protect 50 acres of these largely neglected grasslands. They eventually aim to purchase 500 acres made up of several separate land parcels, an amount they believe will be sufficient to maintain a viable population of the Sharpe's Longclaw in the locality, in addition to giving sufficient area to demonstrate good management practices of grasslands, whilst supporting education and ecotourism. Furthermore, it is believed that through these purchases there is great potential to extend grassland conservation over a much wider area, potentially leading to the development of economic incentives to encourage the retention of the grasslands, ideally influencing the government and decision makers especially in relation to land use changes and agricultural practices.

The project being supported by WLT will be implemented by Nature Kenya in collaboration with Friends of Kinangop Plateau (FoKP), an independent group of volunteers who promote conservation and sustainable development of the Kinangop Grasslands. FoKP are a vital part to the success of the project and have already had great success working along side Nature Kenya. They have been influential in raising awareness amongst farmers and the local community about the importance of the grasslands for species such as Sharpe's Longclaw. They also play an important role in data collection and monitoring of the grasslands. Nature Kenya aim to halt the subdivision of land that causes fragmentation and look at alternative methods of farming other than the extensive cultivation of the grasslands that causes degradation. FoKP are trying to encourage the community to create small kitchen gardens without having to convert large areas of grasslands for their produce. There are four divisions of FoKP and Nature Kenya aim to have four central reserves, ideally with resource centres, to use for demonstration purposes.

Far Right: Friends of Kinangop Plateau at Nature Kenya's existing reserve area, with John Burton (WLT CEO) with the board and Ruth Canning (WLT Conservation Projects Officer for Africa & Americas Region), second from right.

Right: 'Friends of Kinangop' carrying out species surveys at Kinangop.



Local Partner Organisation

Nature Kenya is a registered name of to the East African Natural History Society (EANHS) which is Africa's oldest scientific society, founded in 1909. The aim of the organisation is to promote the study of natural history and conservation of the natural environment. They are involved in prioritising key biodiversity sites in Kenya, studying and documenting these areas and their biodiversity (particularly in relation of Important Bird Areas). They also take direct action to protect key species and their habitats through land purchase and currently own and manage 95 acres in Kinangop grasslands. Nature Kenya is also involved in ongoing forests sector reforms, notably drawing up of national guidelines for Participatory Forest Management and sensitization of Community Forest Associations. They raise public awareness of global, national and local issues relating to biodiversity and are extremely influential in policy making.