

# A new observation of Grauer's Long-eared Owl, *Asio graueri*, in Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda.

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**Summary:** On 6 November 2022, during a birding training session organised by Singita Lodge, a single Grauer's Long-eared Owl (*Asio graueri*) was observed for at least 13 minutes along the edge of the small Lake Ngezi, situated on the north-eastern flank of Mount Bisoke, within Volcanoes National Park. The sighting was made by the author, Gaël R. Vande weghe, together with Charles Nsabimana and Robert Mugabe. This constitutes the ninth record for the species in total, only the second confirmed record of the species in the past four decades, and the fourth record ever documented within Volcanoes National Park, all four earlier observations, in DRC, dating to before 1981. The sole other recent record in Rwanda was made in 2019 in Nyungwe National Park, at Uwasenkoko.

**Key words:** Rwanda, Afromontane forest, *Hagenia*, *Hypericum*, *Asio graueri*, Volcanoes National Park, Mt. Bisoke, Lake Ngezi, Albertine Rift.

**Résumé :** Le 6 novembre 2022, lors d'une session de formation ornithologique organisée par Singita Lodge, un Hibou de Grauer (*Asio graueri*) a été observé pendant au moins 13 minutes en bordure du petit lac Ngezi, sur le flanc oriental du mont Bisoke, dans le Parc National des Volcans. L'observation a été réalisée par l'auteur, Gaël R. Vande weghe, accompagné de Charles Nsabimana et Robert Mugabe. Il s'agit de la neuvième observation confirmée de l'espèce au total, et la deuxième au cours des quatre dernières décennies, la quatrième jamais documentée dans le Parc National des Volcans, les quatre observations précédentes, de RDC, datant toutes d'avant 1981. Le seul autre signalement récent au Rwanda remonte à 2019, dans le Parc National de Nyungwe, au site d'Uwasenkoko.

**Mots clefs :** Rwanda, forêt afromontagnarde, *Hagenia*, *Hypericum*, *Asio graueri*, Parc National des Volcans, mont. Bisoke, lac Ngezi, rift Albertin.

## Introduction

On November 6, 2022, a training session was held within the delimitation of Volcanoes National Park, with specific objectives to explore and learn about high mountain forest bird specialists and Albertine Rift endemics. The selected trail was the Ngezi trail, leading to Lake Ngezi, a small crater lake. The weather was rather dark and heavy, with low clouds and mists. The vegetation along the trail consists of open afromontane forest, dominated by *Hagenia abyssinica*, *Hypericum revolutum*, *Neoboutonia macrocalyx* and the bamboo *Yushania alpina*; the formations in openings are dominated by the fern *Pteridium aquilinum*, various vines and numerous Asteraceae.

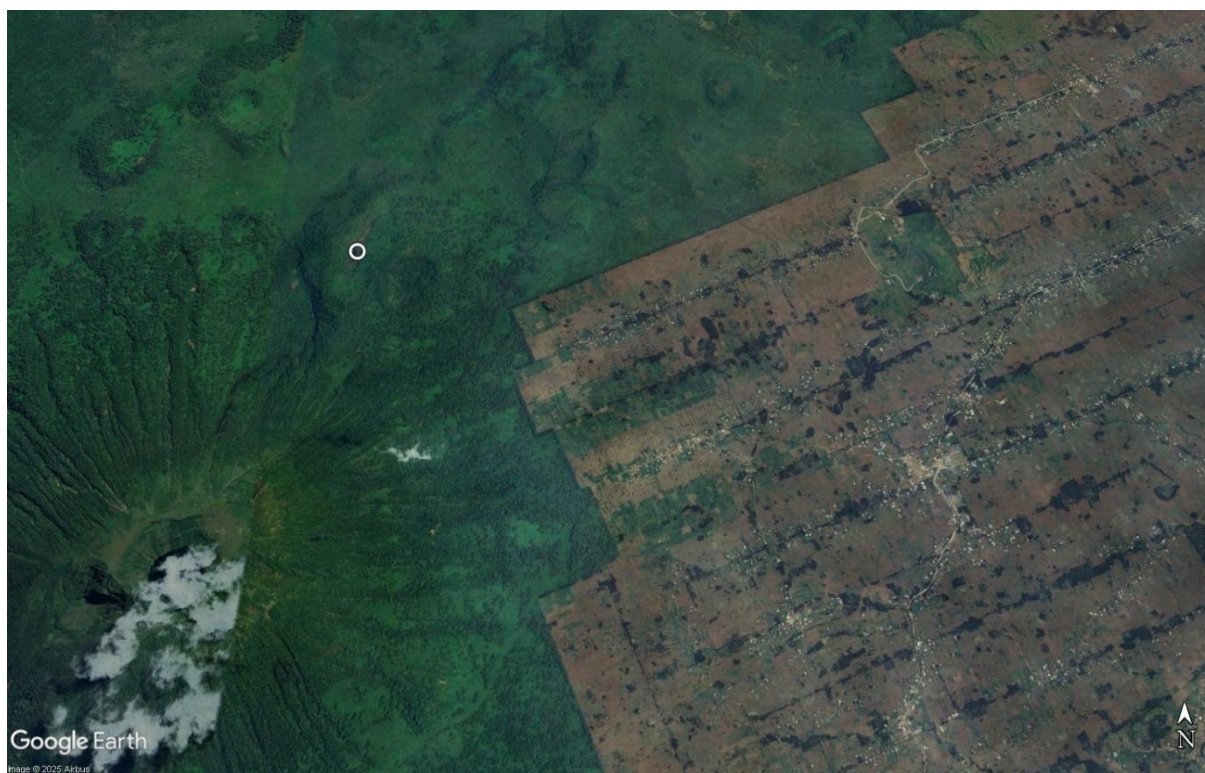


Fig. 1. Localisation of the record.

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## Material and methods

The team crossed the boundary wall marking the edge of the national park at approximately 8:30 AM. They proceeded along the trail at a slow pace, pausing every ~20 meters to facilitate the detection of any bird activities. A few particular species were called using playback on some occasions. All observers were equipped with binoculars, and one member additionally carried photographic equipment to document habitats and confirm visual records. No specific attention was given to owls because of their known rarity in the park, but the lead observer remained mindful of the historical significance of the site, where *Asio graueri* was previously recorded in 1979 and 1980.

## Observation details

The observation was made on the south-eastern edge of Lake Ngezi (1°26'34S-29°29'38"E) at an elevation of 2,895m, at 12:30. The site lies approximately two kilometres from the trailhead. The owl was first detected perched in the open at the tip of a *Hypericum revolutum* branch, overlooking the waters of the small volcanic lake. Initially unnoticed, the bird's presence was betrayed only by its silhouette. It was roosting calmly and appeared undisturbed by the observers' presence. Upon approach, the bird took flight for a short distance, landing nearby and allowing prolonged views and documentation for approximately ten minutes. The owl was notably tame and was photographed extensively.



Fig 2. The owl as it was first noticed.





Fig 3. The same individual after settling a few meters away.





Fig. 4. The same individual seen from the ventral side.

In terms of plumage, the owl initially appeared very dark overall, but the contrasting bicoloured ear tufts were immediately evident. The dark, blotched mantle was also a prominent and diagnostic feature. Great views of the bird's frontal aspect were obtained—an angle that had been missed during a previous sighting in 2019 in Nyungwe National Park (Vande weghe et al., 2021).

Very few other birds were observed in the vicinity of Lake Ngezi, with the exception of one Rwenzori Turaco (*Gallirex johnstoni*), and one Red-knobbed Coot (*Fulica cristata*) on the lake. Prior to these two, various other species were seen in decent numbers on the trail, including Kikuyu Mountain Greenbul (*Arizelocichla kikuyensis*), Mountain Yellow Warbler *Iduna similis*, Striped-breasted Tit *Melaniparus fasciiventer*, Cinnamon Bracken Warbler (*Bradypterus cinnamomeus*), a few Stuhlmann's and Regal Sunbirds (*Cinnyris stuhlmanni* and *Cinnyris regius*), Strange Weaver (*Ploceus alienus*), Dusky Crimsonwings (*Cryptospiza jacksoni*) and the Streaky Seedeater *Crithagra striolata*.

## Discussion

This record represents the fourth documented observation of *Asio graueri* in Rwanda, and the third in Volcanoes National Park, the three previous observations are detailed in Vande weghe et al. (2021). Remarkably, one of these—made by Jean Pierre Vande weghe on 9 June 1979—occurred only a few hundred meters from Lake Ngezi, along the descent from the summit of Mount Bisoke at approximately 3,400 meters elevation. The present sighting, 43 years later, and in nearly the same locality, confirms the continued presence of the species at this site.

Despite intensive human activity in Volcanoes National Park—including daily patrols and monitoring by gorilla trackers, visits by tourists and guides, and regular scientific research (primarily primatological)—*Asio graueri* remains undetected in all routine bird censuses, underscoring the exceptional nature of this record. The individual's behaviour—remaining motionless and apparently habituated to human presence—may partly explain why it is so rarely encountered. Interestingly, the 1979 observation also involved a bird that did not flee upon approach, despite being probably less habituated then, due to the significantly lower human presence in the park at that time.

This observation further underscores the significant conservation importance of Volcanoes National Park for *Asio graueri*. Together with Nyungwe National Park, Volcanoes constitutes one of only two known refugia for the species within Rwanda. These two protected areas likely offer a level of ecological stability and protection superior to that of other known localities across the Albertine Rift.

In Vande weghe et al. (2021), the authors called for a reassessment of the IUCN conservation status of the Abyssinian Owl complex, with particular emphasis on *Asio graueri*, elevated to full species rank. Field records of this taxon remain exceptionally scarce. When considered alongside the documented decline in avian diversity and abundance in Volcanoes National Park (Derhé et al., 2019), these findings highlight an urgent need for targeted field surveys and comprehensive population assessments of *Asio graueri* in Rwanda.

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## References

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## Appendix. Habitat



Fig. 5. The small Lake Ngezi.



Fig. 6. The edge of the lake.





Fig. 7. *Hagenia abyssinica* and *Hypericum revolutum* open forest around Lake Ngezi.