MALAWI:

GENERAL INFORMATION



*The **Yellow-throated Apalis** is Malawi's only true endemic, although there are many other near endemics in this part of the world.*

INTRODUCTION

Malawi is a long, narrow country with a surprisingly wide range of habitats packed between the low-lying Shire River Valley and Lake Malawi, extensive miombo woodland, and the cool montane plateaus of the south and north. Our birding tours generally travel through much of the country, combining highland forest birding around Zomba and Nyika with miombo woodland, lakeshore habitats and safari birding in Liwonde National Park. The current standard Birding Ecotours itinerary does not involve camping, and we use hotels, lodges and safari accommodation throughout.

The style of birding is varied. In the forests and miombo woodlands we spend a fair amount of time on foot, often searching quietly for localized or skulking birds. Miombo birding can involve stretches of relatively little activity followed by a fast-moving mixed-species flock, while montane forest birds can require patience and repeated attempts. In Liwonde and other open areas, much of the birding is from vehicles or boats, with some walking as conditions allow. Photographic opportunities can be excellent in the open habitats, but are naturally more difficult for forest birds.

Participants should be prepared for early starts, several full days in the field and a number of long transfers. Our Malawi tours generally don't involve any strenuous hiking, but a reasonable level of fitness is required because some key sites are birded on foot over uneven forest or woodland trails. Road conditions and travel times can also vary considerably, particularly away from the main centers and during the rainy season. The highlands can be cool, wet or misty even when the lowlands are warm and humid.

PASSPORT AND VISA

Your passport should be valid for at least six months after the date of your arrival in Malawi. Please make sure there is at least one full blank page available for immigration stamps, and bring a photocopy of the information page of your passport to be kept separately in case of loss.

Malawi's visa requirements depend on nationality and can change. The country revised its visa-on-arrival arrangements in 2026, and some nationalities are visa-exempt, some are eligible for a visa on arrival, while others require a visa or prior authorization before departure. Please check your own status well in advance using the official Malawi e-Visa portal. Even where a visa on arrival is available, the Malawi Department of Immigration encourages travelers to apply online before departure to reduce delays at the border.

Birding Ecotours can assist in providing documentation to confirm your participation on the tour, in support of your visa application, should this be required. However, the onus is on you, as the client, to secure your visa and ensure that you meet all entry requirements.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

We require (see Birding Tours Terms and Conditions - Birding Ecotours) that you purchase trip cancellation insurance in case you have to cancel due to illness just prior to the tour departure date, and suitable cover for accidents, medical emergencies, loss of valuables or luggage, and travel interruptions or delays of all kinds. Allianz Travel and Generali Global Assistance are two options to consider. Because several of the birding sites we visit are remote, your policy should include appropriate emergency medical evacuation cover.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Please carefully read the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) information for travelers to Malawi (or your government's equivalent travel-health advice for Malawi). The information below highlights some issues particularly relevant to our tours, but current advice from your doctor or travel clinic should take precedence. Please ensure that routine vaccinations are up to date.

Yellow Fever

Yellow Fever vaccination is not officially required for travel to Malawi. However, proof of vaccination can be required if you arrive from, or have a long airport transit in, a country with a risk of Yellow Fever transmission. This can affect flight routings through other African countries, so please check your itinerary and the current entry rules before travel.

*Note however, that it is common practice for most African countries to ask for proof of Yellow Fever vaccination to enter, and thus, we suggest you bring your Yellow Fever vaccination card with you, to show on entry, should it be asked for.

Malaria

Malaria occurs throughout Malawi, including in areas visited on our birding tours. We strongly recommend that you discuss appropriate malaria prevention with your doctor or travel clinic before departure. In addition to any medication recommended for you, use insect repellent and wear long trousers and long-sleeved shirts in the evenings and at night.

Schistosomiasis (Bilharzia)

Freshwater schistosomiasis occurs in Malawi, and Lake Malawi is included in the areas of potential exposure. The CDC advises travelers to avoid swimming, wading or bathing in untreated freshwater such as lakes and rivers. Some lakeside lodges may offer optional swimming or snorkeling activities; participants considering these activities should discuss the risk with a doctor or travel clinic before the tour and make their own informed decision.

Dangerous Animals

Liwonde National Park and some other wildlife areas support **African Savanna Elephant**, **Hippopotamus**, **African Buffalo**, **Nile Crocodile**, big cats and other large predators. Wildlife may also move through or close to our safari accommodation. Always follow the instructions of your tour leader and lodge staff, and do not walk around after dark without one of the armed camp guards accompanying you. The same applies during bush walks and boat activities, where the local guide's safety instructions must be followed at all times.

Crime

Normal precautions with valuables are sensible in Blantyre, Lilongwe and other towns. Avoid walking alone in quiet urban areas after dark, and follow the advice of the tour leader and accommodation staff regarding local conditions.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Please make sure that you are covered by medical insurance in case of an emergency while on this trip. Medical facilities are more limited outside the larger cities, and serious cases may require evacuation.

Please notify us at the time of registering for the tour of any medical conditions you think we should know about, including allergies, heart conditions, diabetes, epilepsy or mobility issues. Bring enough prescription medication for the full tour, together with the generic names of your medicines, and carry a reasonable extra supply in your hand luggage in case of travel delays.

WATER / FOOD

Birding Ecotours provides unlimited bottled drinking water during the tour. Tap water should not be used for drinking. Keep a bottle with you during walks and game drives, especially in the warmer lowland areas.

Meals are generally taken at our hotels, lodges and safari camps, although early starts and full days in the field sometimes require packed or picnic breakfasts and lunches. There may be large gaps between meals, and it is recommended to bring additional personal snacks or energy bars for long days out in the field, especially if you require specialized snacks. Remember this is a remote, rural and poor African country and access to “mainstream” shops and supermarkets are extremely limited and not available widely in the country. Dinner is usually the main meal of the day, and is taken at your accommodation in the evening. Meals are generally international style, though in more remote areas, options will be more limited with a focus on staple dishes. As is common in many parts of Africa, food should be approached with an open mind, particularly in remote lodges where supply chains are limited, and can often be underwhelming to international visitors.

Please tell us well in advance about food allergies or dietary requirements so that these can be communicated to the relevant establishments. Very specialized diets are not easily catered for in this country.

CURRENCY AND MONEY

The Malawian kwacha (MWK) is the official currency. Credit and debit cards are accepted at many larger hotels, lodges and businesses, but card facilities should not be relied upon in rural areas or at small establishments. It is therefore useful to carry enough local cash for drinks, tips, small purchases and other personal expenses.

ATMs are available in the larger cities and towns, including Blantyre and Lilongwe, but they can occasionally be out of service or short of cash. Major foreign currency is best exchanged at the airport when you arrive (it is difficult/impossible to exchange money elsewhere whilst on the

tour). Notify your bank of your travel plans before departure and carry more than one payment method if possible.

LANGUAGE

English is an official language and is widely used in tourism, government and business. Chichewa is the most widely spoken local language. English-speaking participants should have little difficulty communicating with our guides and the staff at the hotels and lodges used on our tours.

VEHICLES / TRANSPORT

Our Malawi tours are primarily road-based. Ground transport is used between the major birding areas, with safari game drives in protected areas and boat travel where appropriate, including birding on the Shire River (in Liwonde National Park) and transfers or excursions on Lake Malawi. The exact vehicle used can vary with group size, route and local arrangements.

Expect to spend significant periods seated on transfer days. The state of roads in Malawi varies and changes dramatically, but it is unwise to expect good roads and fast transfer. Driving is slow with lots of villages, speed bumps, and various other obstacles that necessitate slow driving. Roads and reserve tracks can be dusty in the dry season and muddy or wet in the rainy season, and open safari or boat activities can leave participants exposed to sun, wind and showers. Keep a light rain jacket, sun protection and a warm layer accessible rather than packed deep in your luggage.

WEATHER

Malawi has a warm rainy season, broadly from November to April, and a drier season through much of the rest of the year. In the lowlands around the Shire River and Lake Malawi, daytime temperatures are commonly in the high 20s to low 30s °C (low to high 80s °F), with warm nights and relatively high humidity. Conditions become considerably cooler with altitude. Zomba and the Viphya Plateau generally have milder days and cool nights, while Nyika can have daytime temperatures in the mid-teens to low 20s °C (around 60–70 °F), with early mornings occasionally dropping even lower. In the rainy season, expect showers or thunderstorms and the possibility of muddy roads and trails. Even on a warm-season tour, bring a fleece or light insulated layer and a waterproof jacket, together with sun protection for exposed areas.

ELECTRICITY

The electricity supply in Malawi is approximately 230 V, 50 Hz, and the standard sockets use the British-style Type G three-pin plug (See here). If your equipment uses a different plug type, bring a suitable international adapter.

It is always good practice to travel with multi-plugs, and cable extensions (as there is sometimes only 1 plug outlet per room, which can be located far away from the bed, if needed for CPAP machines or similar).

Electricity is generally available at the accommodation used on our tours, but power cuts and generator schedules can occur. Charge camera batteries, phones and other equipment whenever

power is available, and consider bringing a power bank. A good flashlight or headlamp is also strongly recommended for night birding, walking around lodges after dark and occasional power interruptions.

INTERNET / WIFI / MOBILE COVERAGE

Wi-Fi is available at many hotels and lodges, but it may be slow or intermittent and should not be expected to work reliably in remote reserves, forest areas or on the Nyika Plateau.

Mobile coverage is generally better around towns and along main routes, but can be patchy at our more isolated birding sites. A local SIM card (purchased at the airport on your arrival) is advised should you want to stay in regular contact. You may consider an eSIM rather than a physical SIM card, but we advise against it as eSims are still problematic in most rural African countries.

LENGTH OF DRIVES AND ROAD CONDITIONS

Malawi is a narrow country, but our birding routes cover a considerable distance from the southern highlands to the far north. Several transfers take much of the morning or afternoon, and some are longer than five hours before birding stops are added. Travel days are therefore an important part of the tour, and participants should be comfortable spending extended periods in the vehicle.

Road quality varies considerably. Main routes are generally paved, but potholes and slow sections are common, while access roads into reserves, forests and highland birding sites may be gravel or dirt. During the rainy season, mud, standing water, local flooding and road damage can make journeys slower and occasionally require changes to the plan. Fuel availability can also sometimes affect travel logistics. Please approach driving times with some flexibility, as conditions can change at short notice.

WALKING / STYLE OF BIRDING

The amount of walking varies considerably between habitats. In Liwonde National Park, much of the birding is done from safari vehicles and boats, although short-distance bush walks may also be included. At Zomba, Dzalanyama, the Viphya Plateau, Nyika, Vwaza and several lakeshore forest sites, important birds are searched for on foot. Dzalanyama in particular involves spending substantial time walking through miombo woodland, while forest targets elsewhere can require quiet, patient walking along narrow trails and through dense vegetation.

Most walks are not exceptionally long or steep, but footing can be uneven, with roots, rocks, leaf litter, wet ground and occasional slopes. Some miombo targets occur on rocky hillsides, and highland birding takes place at appreciable altitude. Participants should be comfortable being on their feet for a few hours at a time and maintaining a reasonable birding pace. Lightweight walking boots or sturdy walking shoes with good grip are recommended, particularly during the wetter months.

Forest birding can be physically less strenuous than a long hike but still demanding in another way: views may be brief, birds can remain hidden in dense vegetation and we may need to stand quietly for extended periods. Miombo birding can likewise require persistence while we search for mobile

feeding flocks. This is normal for birding in Malawi and is an important part of finding the country's localized species.

Please note that Liwonde and Nyika National Parks are stocked with Africa's megafauna, and you are not allowed to walk around yourself, without guides, or leave the vehicle yourself. Additionally, the lodges are not fenced here, and game can occasionally pass through the lodges, and caution is advised when walking around the lodges yourself. Please adhere to the instructions of the guides and parks and lodge staff.

PACE OF TOUR

This is an intense tour, with full days expected/needed almost every day, and little down time possible. Early starts are common, as many of the key birds are most active in the first hours of daylight. On dedicated birding days we may remain in the field for much of the day, with lunch taken at the lodge or as a picnic depending on the location. Some safari-based days allow a break around the middle of the day, but this should not be assumed throughout the tour.

There are also long transfer days between birding regions, and occasional after-dark outings may be made for owls, nightjars or mammals. The tour is therefore best suited to participants who are comfortable with a fairly full birding schedule. It may sometimes be possible to skip an optional activity when we are based at the same lodge for several nights, but this is usually not practical on transfer days or when the group is moving between accommodations.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation on our Malawi tours is generally comfortable and ranges from town hotels to lakeside and safari lodges. Some remote properties, particularly those close to important miombo or highland birding sites, are more rustic and have simpler facilities than the larger safari lodges (such as that available at Dzalanyama). The current standard tour does not require camping. The highland lodges can also be surprisingly cool in the evenings, so do not rely on tropical temperatures simply because Malawi is in southeastern Africa.

Malawi's safari infrastructure is well developed, but as with most African destinations, occasional issues such as power outages, Wi-Fi interruptions, or maintenance problems may arise. Flexibility and understanding are appreciated in such situations, and every effort will be made to ensure comfort and resolve any issues promptly.

FLIGHTS

Malawi's two principal international gateways are Lilongwe and Blantyre. Depending on the itinerary, our tours may begin in one city and finish in the other, so please check your tour-specific documentation carefully before purchasing flights. International routings commonly involve a regional African hub. The standard Malawi itinerary is otherwise road-based, with no internal flight required as part of the core tour.

Please kindly check with the Birding Ecotours office before booking any flights. Arrival and departure requirements can vary between itineraries, and the office can confirm the appropriate airports and recommended flight times for your particular tour.

WHAT TO BRING

Clothing – Lightweight, breathable clothing is strongly recommended. Linen, bamboo, and modern moisture-wicking fabrics tend to perform well. Quick-dry shirts and trousers are often preferable to cotton, particularly in humid coastal and forest environments.

Layering is the key to comfort. Early-morning game drives and birding excursions can be surprisingly chilly, while midday temperatures may become very warm. A combination of lightweight clothing and a warm outer layer works best.

Neutral-colored clothing (khaki, olive, beige, brown, or grey) is recommended for both birding and wildlife viewing. Bright colors are best avoided.

We strongly recommend bringing at least two pairs of comfortable walking shoes or lightweight hiking shoes. Having a spare pair is invaluable should one become wet.

Long trousers are advisable throughout the tour. They provide protection from sun, insects, thorny vegetation, and occasional off-trail birding in forests and scrub habitats.

Wellies (gumboots) are not necessary and can become uncomfortable during long walks in warm and humid conditions.

A wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and high-SPF sunscreen are highly recommended, particularly for the more open and exposed habitats.

Laundry can be arranged at some of the establishments used on our tours, at your own expense. A lead time is usually required, so do not rely on laundry being possible during single-night stays or at the more remote properties.

Do not forget - BINOCULARS, prescription drugs (also bring the generic names for these drugs), toiletries, prescription glasses and a spare pair, insect repellent, camera, flashlight/headlamp, batteries and chargers for electronic equipment, plug adaptors, sunscreen, alarm clock, money pouch, field guide(s), soft-sided luggage, daypack/backpack, and your favorite road snacks!

Key documents and cash - Bring your passport, a photocopy of the passport information page, your visa or printed e-Visa approval if required, travel and medical insurance details, credit/debit cards and some local cash for **tips**. If your flight routing makes a Yellow Fever certificate necessary for entry into Malawi, keep the original certificate with your passport while traveling.

Luggage - Due to limited space in tour vehicles and the need to handle bags during boat transfers and frequent accommodation changes, please pack as lightly as practical. A medium-sized soft-sided duffel bag is preferable to a large hard-sided suitcase. Bring a small daypack for binoculars, camera equipment, rain gear, water and other items needed during the day. Protect sensitive electronics from rain and dust, particularly during the wet season.

BOOKS

Please read our blog about recommended bird field guides for Africa here.