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BIRD OBSERVATION &
CONSERVATION AUSTRALIA

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Africa!

A dream destination

MANDY WRIGHT, PHOTOS TERRY EVANS

Grey-headed Kingfisher.

In December 2010, Richard Jordan, founder of Bellingham Birders, led a group of 11 bird watchers to Uganda on a breath-taking bird watching tour. Richard lived for some years in Africa so he was fully conversant with conditions and places and found an ideal tour leader, Herbert Byaruhanga of Birds Uganda Safaris.

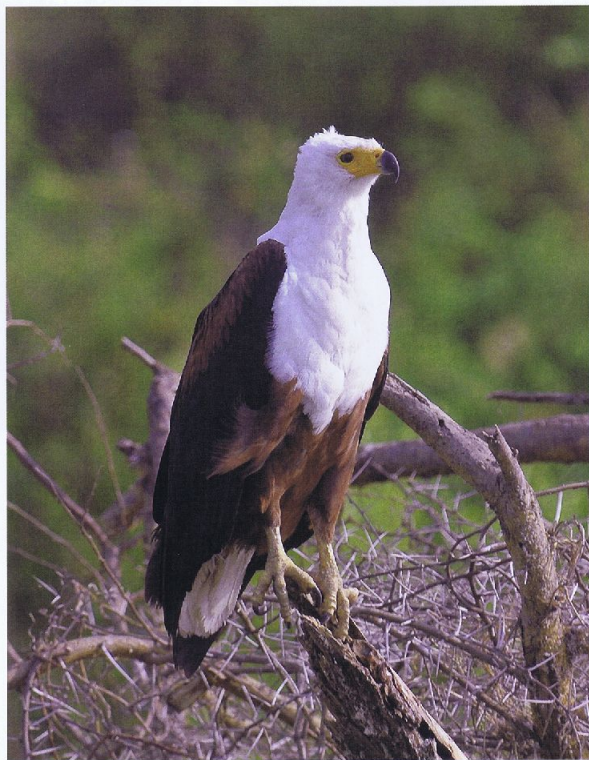
Uganda is a sensational place to visit, boasting over 1000 species of birds, the vast majority totally unfamiliar to visiting Australians. A relatively small country (slightly larger than Victoria), and situated on the equator, much of the country is over 1000 m above sea-level, which moderates the heat and humidity. Habitats include arid semi-desert, savannah, rainforest, papyrus-fringed lakes and swamps. One-sixth of its area is covered by water, with some glorious lakes. Ugandans are warm, friendly people who genuinely welcome you to their country. Accommodation is very affordable, especially if you stay in the lodges and tented camps as we did, in the heart of the habitats you have come to experience.

On the afternoon of our arrival we strolled down to the Entebbe Botanical Gardens where we saw an overwhelming variety of birds never before seen by most of us, including hornbills, weavers and gorgeous paradise fly-catchers and an impressive Lizard Buzzard. Pied Kingfishers were everywhere, sitting on branches overhanging the tranquil Lake Victoria, while fishermen dotted the horizon towards the banks of The Congo in the distance. Seeing Ross' Turaco and the Great Blue Turaco, spectacularly colourful birds, made our day.

The next day found us on the shores of Mabamba Wetlands on the northern shore of Lake Victoria. Here we clambered into large dugout canoes expertly paddled by native Ugandans. The trip was fascinating with an abundance of birdlife. The

lagoon is a highway of narrow channels through thick papyrus, carrying traffic in both directions with the locals travelling to markets on the water highway. Canoes were laden with a wide variety of merchandise, including a cow, feet firmly trussed, lying peacefully across the bows. The narrowness of channels provided fabulous close-up views of the many jewel-like kingfishers that sat quietly, enabling our photographers to capture excellent shots of the Malachite, Striped and Pied Kingfishers. There were also stunning Blue-breasted and White-throated Bee-eaters, just two of the many brilliant little bee-eaters we saw throughout our trip.

However, the object of that day's trip was far more exotic. As the channels opened into enchanting lagoons, our guides located not one, but two Shoebills at different stages, standing in the reeds close to the shores of the lake, looking, for all the world, like creatures from prehistoric times. These are birds that every birder who visits Africa hopes to see and we were all highly elated at seeing them so early in our trip. We also saw Black-headed and Purple Herons and several Hamerkop, another very distinctive bird of the region. Back on land, we explored the nearby Mpanga Forest area where birdlife was so abundant it was difficult to know which bird to focus on. There were cisticolas everywhere – on this day we saw the Red-faced and Winding Cisticola, but later in the trip we identified Rattling, Singing, Trilling, Whistling, Croaking, Foxy, Wing-snapping, Zitting and Chubb's Cisticolas. Swallows and martins swooped everywhere – particularly eye-catching was the Mosque Swallow, resembling a very small bird of prey in flight. Another favourite was the Black-headed Gonolek, with its striking red breast and black head and back, although the Papyrus Gonolek, seen later in the papyrus swamps of Kibale National Park, was even more stunning.



Left: African Fish-Eagle. Right: Pied Kingfisher.

Our next day was spent travelling to Murchison Falls National Park over the rough African dirt roads, stopping constantly to find the local birds. As we travelled through the lush Borassus grasslands, we saw our first elephants, giraffe, buffalo and antelope, while countless hippos wallowed in the shallows at the edges of the lake. The boat-trip on the broad waters of Lake Albert allowed wonderful views of a large variety of waterbirds including the striking African Fish-Eagle and vultures, as crocodiles lay sunning themselves and elephant and buffalo ranged along the banks. The next day we travelled to the top of the truly impressive falls and marveled at the ferocity of the Victoria Nile as it thundered through a cutting in the rock some 6 m wide, to crash 122 m into Lake Albert below.

Our next destination was the Budongo Forest and here the highlight was an idyllic walk down the Royal Mile – a leisure spot for the traditional King. The forest had been slashed back on each side of the trail and afforded excellent views of the forest-dwelling birds – hornbills, barbets, woodpeckers, sunbirds, bulbuls, prinias, apalis, the tiny, and rare Lemon-bellied Crombec, Dusky Tit, Tit-hylia, and many others. Several species of monkeys and squirrels enlivened the walk as they swung through the trees, crashing through the foliage and calling to their companions. We were also struck by the huge numbers of butterflies that seem to be attracted to some of the group.

The next day we spent the afternoon in the Kibale National Park, where over 335 species of birds have been recorded. We saw numbers of doves perched on the prickly African cacti and shrubs, also many varieties of bee-eaters and woodpeckers. Vibrantly-coloured starlings and bishops abounded as well as weavers, negrofinches and waxbills.

After Kibale we moved to Queen Elizabeth National Park, an area boasting some 610 bird species. We spent a pleasant morning driving around the park which has eco-systems ranging from savannah to rainforest with dense papyrus swamps and brooding crater lakes. Besides a huge variety of birds, we saw African buffalo, elephant, Uganda kob, topi, bushbuck and waterbuck. However, the highlight was a splendid leopard, lying indolently right beside the track and lay stretched out while we took countless shots of this magnificent beast. Then a boat trip through the Kazinga Channel linking Lakes Edward and George, which is home to a profusion of waterbirds. We saw the Collared Pratincole and several varieties of handsome plovers. Kingfishers perched on branches over the water and it was relatively easy to photograph them before they sped away.

After two rewarding days here, we took the rough but rewarding Ishasha Road to Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. This is a renowned area where tree-climbing lions can be found. Our destination was the Buhoma Community Camp,



Top left: Grey Crowned-Crane. Top right: Red-throated Bee-eater. Bottom left: Lizard Buzzard. Bottom right: Hamerkop.

located high in the Rwenzori Mountains on the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. It proved to be much cooler here as it was up to 1800 m above sea level. Again, we stayed in safari tents with decks that overlooked the lush jungle vegetation. The highlight of this area, even for the most die-hard birder, was the trek to find the mountain gorillas that inhabit the aptly-named Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. The gorilla family we followed had moved a long distance from the previous day and our group had to trek for over three hours before locating them. It was an unforgettable experience coming face to face with these animals.

The rest of our time in this spectacular location was spent birding locally. We were especially interested in localised Albertine Rift endemics and were delighted to find, among others, the Pink-footed Puffback, Chinspot Batis, Mountain Illadopsis, Blue-throated Brown Sunbird, Sooty Boubou, the gorgeous Black Bee-eater and the Red-faced Woodland-Warbler – each bird was a thrill as we spotted it.

Our final destination was the Lake Mburo National Park where we spent the next four days (including Christmas Day). Driving through the park we enjoyed spotting the plentiful species of grassland animals such as zebra, impala, buffalo, monkeys, warthogs and even a large family of mongoose racing through the bushes.

On Christmas Eve we had our last wonderful boat-trip on Lake Mburo where the highlight was several African Finfoot, a bird one of our group had particularly wanted to see on this trip. Raptors were out in force and we saw some of the most colourful birds – a couple of Grey Crowned-Cranes, Uganda's national bird, with a fluffy golden chick keeping close to its beautiful parents as they wandered through the grassland. The Bare-faced Go-away-bird made its appearance and besides the Speckled Mousebirds, we saw the beautiful Blue-naped Mousebird. Shining-blue Kingfisher entranced us as it swooped from bush to bush and a Lilac-breasted Roller obligingly flew over our group a couple of times allowing us to see its gorgeous colouring. Green Woodhoopoes were hard to miss as they landed, calling loudly, in bushes near us.

As we packed our bags for the final journey to Entebbe, the group was sad to leave this wonderful country where we had seen so much and packed so many experiences into our short visit. We had seen over 420 birds and had unforgettable views of African animals. Herbert, our Ugandan guide, had been outstanding and one of the keenest spotters we'd ever met. He has personally trained over 40 Ugandans to become bird-guides which will doubtless contribute to the country's increasing appeal as a birdwatching destination.