

Uganda birding safari review - Andrew Bloomfield

Uganda was once one of those countries you only heard about in Europe because of the wrong reasons. Political turmoil, military takeovers and unimaginable horrors. Thankfully those days are long in the past and today it is a country striving to develop and progress in the modern world. Boasting half of the world's population of Mountain Gorillas, growing numbers of typical African big game such as Elephants, Buffalo, Hippo and Lion as well as a bird list of well over 1200 species, all within a country that is a similar size to the British Isles, makes it justifiably one of the finest destinations any lover of wildlife could wish to visit.

Despite the undeniable lure of seeing Gorillas, Chimps and one of the African continents most impressive and sought after birds; the Shoebill, my predicament was the high prices constantly quoted by the majority of western-based wildlife tour companies. It kept Uganda well out of my financial reach.

Things, however, unexpectedly changed upon a chance meeting with Herbert Byaruhanga of the Bird Uganda Safaris at the annual British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water in August 2003. His friendly demeanour and knowledge of his country left a lasting impression, and following a series of e mails that initial meeting brought to me the real possibility of visiting Uganda with a local ground contact, who also, most importantly knew his country's birds and all the sites I wished to visit. Two friends, Emma Russell and Galen Skeet, with similar interests were likewise impressed by the initial plans and with a price negotiated that fell within our budget; all was set for a three-week trip in March 2004.

Now that I am back home and trying to write a brief review of the trip, attempting to pinpoint the overall highlight is far from easy. The great beauty for a European naturalist visiting Africa with little experience of the continent is that with every corner turned there is something new to look at, usually in amazing bewilderment.

Uganda was no exception - its diverse habitats have produced a wonderful array of flora and fauna that makes even a three-week visit too short a time period for everything to sink in. From the very onset, at the wonderfully peaceful Entebbe Botanical Gardens, not that far from the hustle and bustle of the capital Kampala, common Uganda birds such as gaudy Great Blue Turacos and enormous Black and White-casqued Hornbills kept us enthralled as they vied for attention with our first Black and White Colobus Monkeys. We soon became accustomed to seeing them over the next three weeks at most well wooded areas, yet they always ensured more than a quick glance such is their beauty and great character. Weavers nested in abundance in the waterside vegetation, which in turn made the perfect perches for birds such as Blue-cheeked bee-eaters, Giant, Pied, Woodland and Pygmy Kingfishers and a pair of elusive yet strikingly marked Grey-capped Warblers.

Following a night in the homely Red Chilli Hideaway in the north of Kampala, complete with its showy

Black-headed Gonoleks, Ross's Turacos (our only ones of the trip) and a brief visiting Grey Parrot it was off to Mabamba Swamp in search of Shoebills. Exploring the quiet backwaters of this vast papyrus swamp by boat and local guidance was a wonderful way of spending our first full day in Uganda. Our only view, however, of a Shoebill was somewhat disappointing as we only saw its head and shoulders emerging from the depths of the papyrus at rather a long range. Not that we were complaining, the abundance of the swamp's other bird life was most impressive. A Fish Eagle squabbled with a Goliath Heron over a disputed meal, a Hamerkop grappled with an immense toad that was far too big to swallow, diminutive Pygmy Geese showed us why some think they are the most beautiful of the world's wildfowl and Jacanas and Long-toed Lapwings tip-toed across every patch of flowering water lilies. If all these sights were not enough, the amazing spectacle of tens of thousands of White-winged Black Terns wheeling around in one solid mass of wings everytime an African or Eurasian Marsh Harrier ventured too close, was certainly one of the most unbelievable concentrations of birds I had witnessed anywhere. Then there were the Papyrus Gonoleks; tremendous brightly coloured bush shrikes that usually lurk in the depths of the papyrus, yet treated us to wonderful views, thanks to Herbert's trusty cd player!

Day three saw us begin a long journey north west to Murchison Falls National Park, a home for more Shoebills, big game and hopefully a selection of birds more suited to semi-arid bush country which we would not encounter elsewhere. The journey despite being very hot and dusty had its moments. Stopping to look at a lovely male Red-headed Weaver, two immaculate White-crested Turacos whizzed across our path, seemingly melting away into the vegetation despite their dazzling colours. On a par with the previous days White-winged Black Terns was a sky seemingly full of Abdim's Storks. Several hundred swirled around, gaining lift in the thermals, while a relatively small roadside pool seemed jammed pack to the point of overcrowding with even more. Upon reaching the south of the national park, a brief excursion into the Kanio Pabidi section of Budongo Forest was our first taste of forest birding in Uganda. Arriving as we did mid-afternoon in the very hot conditions was obviously not the best of times for a visit, but circumstances and time schedules meant this was to be our only chance. Our search for Purvel's Illadopsis was consequently unsuccessful but with Black-billed Turaco, White-thighed Hornbill and Forest Flycatchers seen it was well worth the stop. More so than we expected, when Herbert picked up a displaying Rufous-sided Broadbill. With its rapid, wing fluttering 'dance', it proved to be an exquisite little bird and was easily one the trip's final high spots. As dusk approached we gained our first taste of Uganda's nocturnal wildlife and by the time we reached our accommodation for the next three nights, Red Chilli Camp, we had seen Spotted Eagle Owl, a selection of Nightjars including Swamp, Black-shouldered, Eurasian, Long-tailed and several displaying males of the unbelievably proportioned Standard-wingeds, along with Buffalos, Genet, Uganda Hare and our first Baboons.

Murchison Falls was as we had hoped a wonderful place. Our three nights there could easily have been doubled; such is the variety of life and habitats there to explore. It is also a place that has endless opportunities for the avid photographer. From the open plains north of the Nile, the scrubby bush south of the Nile, the dense papyrus beds of the Delta region, the vast expanse of Lake Albert, the tranquility of drifting down the Nile to the immense sheer power and grandeur of the falls themselves, all combine to make it one of Uganda's finest national parks. Picking a highlight is again difficult but seeing up to 4 Shoebills on the delta boat trip, including remarkable views of an immature catching a fish is an obvious choice. Other cherished memories

include the abundance of Hippos on the Nile along with the occasional herd of Elephant or the odd huge Crocodile basking in the sunshine, all of which were approached to within a few metres as we were on a boat. Red-throated Bee-eaters added a splash of colour to the banks of the Nile, while even more vivid were their larger Carmine cousins, which were observed chasing insects disturbed by a lumbering pair of Abyssinian Ground Hornbills. Palearctic migrants were abundant on the plains, particularly Whinchats and Montagu's Harriers, although the most memorable sight was seeing both Northern and Isabelline Wheatears feeding around the feet of a rather stately male Denham's Bustard. Flocks of Caspian Plovers and Collared and Black-winged Pratincoles were seen pausing on their northward migration, while Sand Martins were everywhere. While failing to see the mass exodus of bats (they failed to appear despite waiting until dark) and their attendant Bat Hawk was a major disappointment, seeing Murchison Falls from all angles (above, alongside and below from the boat) was an experience that no one who visits Uganda should miss.

Leaving Murchison Falls en route for our next destination, Budongo Forest, we picked up a delightful male Pygmy Sunbird, all the more pleasing, as it was a species Herbert had previously never seen. Budongo was another lovely spot; an afternoon walk along the road at Busingiro revealed our first Red-tailed and Blue Monkeys although an extremely vocal troupe of wild, unhabituated chimps eluded us, despite our best efforts in finding them. Birding was exciting with our only Chocolate-backed Kingfisher swiftly followed by a wonderfully confiding White-spotted Flufftail, lured into the open by Herbert's realistic imitation. What a bird; with its intricately marked plumage and with such clear views of a species renowned for its shy behaviour this was definitely another of the trips high spots. Our Budongo nights were spent in the wonderfully situated Nyabyeya Forestry College Guest House very close to the Royal Mile. From the garden we were able to observe Bronze Sunbirds, White-headed Saw-wings, and an abundance of Black and White Casqued Hornbills flying to roost, along with the only Great Sparrowhawks of our trip. The Royal Mile is a wide track that passes through a vast forest dominated by mature, buttress rooted iron wood trees and proved very productive for birds. Dwarf Kingfishers were abundant (with at least two nests found on the road side verges) as were Chestnut-capped Flycatchers, Emerald and Red-chested Cuckoos and Black and White Casqued and White-thighed Hornbills. Passerines were often very hard to see being either high up in the canopy or low down in thick undergrowth, but notable finds included Red-tailed Ant-thrush, Yellow-billed Barbets, Rufous crowned Eremomela, Yellow-browed Camaroptera, Little Green, Green and Blue Throated Brown Sunbirds. Mammals seen briefly included a Chequered Elephant Shrew (only by Emma) and African Giant Squirrel, while at night a Civet and an obliging African Wood Owl were much appreciated. The cultivated fields just outside the forest produced yet another highlight in the shape of Brown Twinspots and Grey-headed Olive-backs, two species of small elusive finches that should not be missed. Our next stop was at Kibale National Park, another site where Chimpanzees were likely. This time we were luckier than we had been at Budongo, with two seen distantly at Kihingani Wetland and more impressively, part of the large habituated troupe at Kanyanchu. The noise they generate in the forest is eerie, chilling and a sound that is totally unforgettable, while their antics both in the treetops and occasionally on the ground are always entertaining yet often unpredictable. Other species of primates seen in the park which had not previously been encountered on our trip included L'Hoest's Monkey, Red Colobus and Grey-cheeked Mangabey. Birding here was far from easy, with many of the species only giving fleeting views before disappearing into the depths of the

forest, but we did manage to see Narina's Trogon, White-headed Wood Hoopoes, Yellowbill, Green Hylia, Ludher's Bush-shrike, Red-headed Blue-bill, Crested Guinea-fowl, and Grey-winged and Red-capped Robin-chats. We were disappointed no pitas could be found, but once we began birding in their habitat we soon realised how lucky we would have been, had we seen one! Our list of Nightjars grew in a nearby village at dusk, with the rock-loving species Freckled being seen, while nocturnal inhabitants of the forest seen on our way back to Kanyanchu included Lesser Galago and the even smaller Demidoff's Galago.

From Kibale Forest we moved south to another different environment, the open grassland and euphorbia scrub of Queen Elizabeth National Park. Based in the unbelievably luxurious Mweya Lodge for three nights was something of a contrast to the small stone bandas at Kibale and was made all the more entertaining by the resident population of Warthogs and a large gang of Banded Mongoose which were always at large in the grounds. Birds too were confiding within the compound; Red-chested Sunbirds, Arrow-marked Babblers, Swamp Flycatchers (often flycatching from the elaborate chandeliers inside the plush reception) and extremely opportunistic Slender-billed Weavers always ready to dive into an unguarded dinner plate in the open-air eating area.

Despite avian attractions such as the plentiful White-throated Bee-eaters, a daytime sighting of a Verraux's Eagle Owl, Lappet-faced Vulture, Temminck's Courser, Bocage's Bush-shrike and plenty of migrant Montagu's Harriers, QE NP is more about watching mammals. Along with the concentrations of Buffalo, Water Buck, Uganda Kob and Warthogs there is the high probability of seeing predators such as Lions and Leopards. Our quest for the latter failed, although we did narrowly miss two crossing the road, but we were treated to some fine experiences with lions. Our first encounter was of a female with two inquisitive cubs. We found them one morning at first light and were able to watch them solidly for over an hour and with no one else for company! Such conditions are often the norm in Uganda and there is none of the overcrowding of parks or tourists attempting to get closer than yourselves, as in the national parks in neighbouring Kenya. Later in the same day another pride of lions, this time three females and five cubs were found. Again we had prolonged views, albeit more distantly, and were able to watch the group disappear into a scrubby thicket, while one of the females lured a particularly wild looking Buffalo away from her family. Other highlights included a couple of Spotted Hyenas and a group of very ugly, yet highly charismatic Giant Forest Hogs.