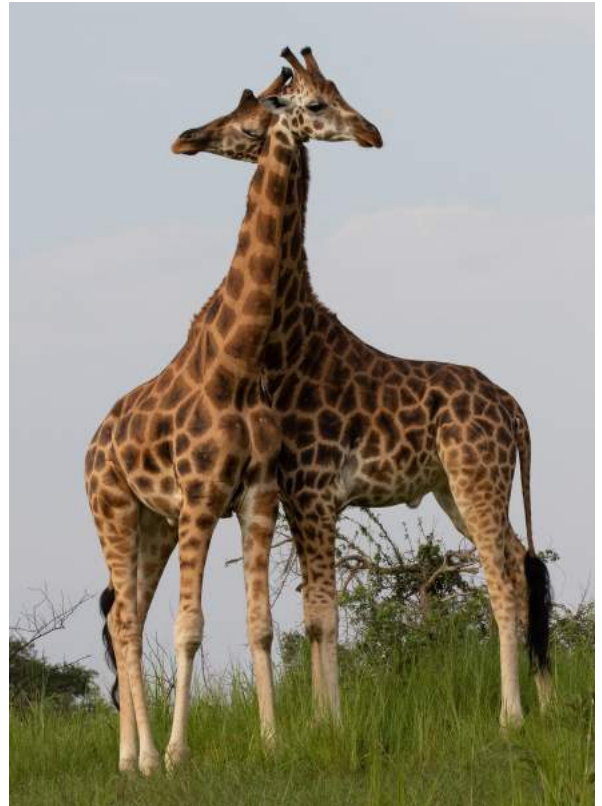


Uganda Birding & Nature | Trip Report

August 1 – 15, 2019 | Written by Peg Abbott



Thursday, Aug. 1 | Early Arrivals to Entebbe, Uganda

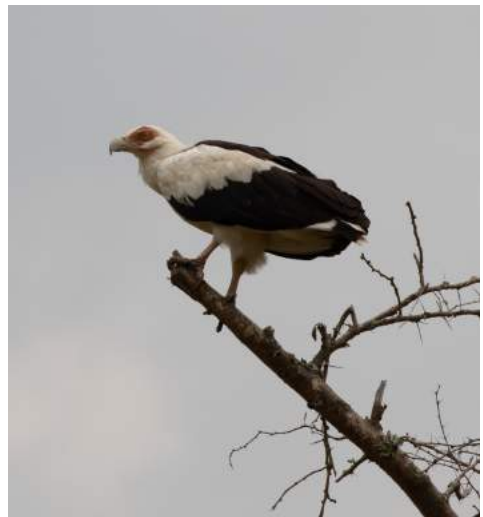
Several of the group came in early to rest up from travels. We were happy to find the gardens here very birdy. After settling into our rooms, cheerful Judith Mirembe, one of our two wonderful guides from Bird Uganda Safaris, offered to help us start birding. First off – for some, their first bird in Africa – was an outstanding species by any measure, an African Wood Owl, roosting in a palm over the garden gazebo! We then found Black-headed Gonolek with its scarlet red breast, a furtive Gray-capped Warbler, White-browed Robin Chat, and scores of Northern Brown-headed Weaver that seemed to enjoy bird parties on the lawn.

Continuing out the hotel gate and onto the road, we had fun watching locals come and go, including school children in uniform, shy but staying “hello”, then giggling when we replied back. Right away we saw both Meyer’s and African Gray Parrots, being late in the afternoon they were flying over and calling as they headed to roosts. A small predator, African Hobby, stirred things up, while a Tawny-crowned Prinia called loudly, aware of the threat. By the time we returned we had noted 56 species, not bad for an hour and a half or so, right from our hotel.

Friday, Aug. 2 | Safari Begins! Entebbe Botanical Gardens

As so many of us had elected to come in and rest up, Peg had asked for us to start with a trip to the Entebbe Botanical Gardens, a fine and lush green space only about five minutes from the hotel. We ended up going over twice with a mid-day break as rain (unusual for July and August which are in the dry season) chased us out by Noon. It was easy to return late afternoon, when we could add a few of our later arrivals.

There was so much activity and the gardens right on the shore of Lake Victoria are large, so no one minded a return. The trees were a mix of native and exotic species, many huge in height and size. These were attractive to turacos, of which we saw two species. Great Blue Turaco were surprisingly common and easy to see, we had over a dozen of this beautiful species. They fed in fruiting trees, and in one we spied two shy Ross’s Turaco with them, alongside colorful African Green Pigeon. There were two stately Saddle-billed Storks feeding near tethered cattle by the lakeshore, and a Black-headed Heron. We heard a commotion and were alerted to a big group of Pied Kingfisher, ten or more in the group. Both Long-tailed and Great cormorants roosted in trees over the water while a Swamp Flycatcher worked around them to feed a large fledgling.





We walked along, identifying a steady stream of species. Crowned Hornbill, Broad-billed Roller, and Palm-nut Vulture perched prominently, while Grey-backed Camaroptera and Snowy-crowned Robin-chat that were more furtive. We found a female Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher and stopped to watch a Lizard Buzzard feed on a snake.

Four of our group were scheduled to arrive today, so we returned to the hotel at Noon for some down time until Judith and the driver picked them up. We had a nice lunch, punctuated by sightings of Red-chested and Green-headed Sunbirds as well as Prong-billed Barbet, a group of five, three adults and two recently fledged chicks.

Herbert Byaruhanga, owner and creator of Bird Uganda Safaris, his son Davis, and Judith all joined us for dinner. We enjoyed introductions and hearing the tales of how Judith and Herbert got started in birding. Menu choices were good, beef stroganoff, vegetarian pastas, various curry dishes, and fresh Tilapia. We did our checklist, with so many new species seen already the first day – wow! After a briefing for our day tomorrow, it was off to bed to rest.

Saturday, Aug. 3 | Mbambe Swamp - Success Seeing Shoebill - Equator Crossing

Early birding on the hotel grounds was productive, we added Gray-capped Warbler to our growing list for Bouma Lodge. The African Wood Owl was in his roost spot and seemed to enjoy soaking up the sun as it rose. A bird party was happening on the lawn with about twenty Northern Brown-throated Weaver, interrupted by White-browed Robin Chat and Black-headed Gonoleks, a species boldly patterned with a shocking crimson breast.

We had breakfast in the open-air dining room in view of the pool, and tall trees that teased us with birds, especially a bottlebrush tree in bloom attracting several species of sunbirds. But we did not linger, we wanted to get on the road to meet our drivers and local boatman guides from the community project at Mabamba Swamp. Our guide, Judith, had worked for two years with this community, helping to train guides as she did research on the Shoebill. We all had high hopes of seeing this odd bird, an archaic-looking four-foot giant once called the Whale-billed Stork. Its realm is the papyrus swamps where it feeds mainly on Lungfish. Uganda is perhaps the most reliable place to find them and we were keen to do so.

The boats we boarded held 3 persons each with a local guide or one of our guides. The front of each boat had a Viking-like keel. The boat loading area was a busy place to observe community life, as it also served the local





ferry which takes supplies, even big trucks or fuel, over to an island community in Lake Victoria. We passed locals coming in by water taxi, even a fuel delivery, but despite the coming and going, the bird life was extraordinary.

African Jacana were plentiful, we saw adults, at least 30 or more. At times we were just a few feet away from them, also from jewel-toned Malachite Kingfisher. There were both Squacco and Purple herons, and everywhere we saw Winding Cisticola's up on reeds calling. Some other tourist boats were already coming back in, big smiles on their faces so we felt that our chances were good.

We only went a couple of kilometers, when we saw one other boat pulled up to papyrus along a line of fig and other shrubs. And there it was, the Shoebill! It appeared massive, passively standing and facing us, with bright eyes staring. We were thrilled to find it and settled in to wait and watch. With luck it was feeding time, so we got to see this Shoebill walking, and even hunting – at one moment it thrust out its wings and fell down on its chunky breast with a loud splash. When it came up empty it went on the move, walking in slow motion with almost snake-like motions, stopping periodically to assess a pool or more open area in the reeds. It seemed to use its huge feet a lot to stir up the bottom substrate.

We stayed with it close to an hour, feeling no rush, and enjoying a steady stream of other species. Most notable was the brightly colored Papyrus Gonolek that worked its way down the line of papyrus, singing from exposed perches mostly mid-height. We got great views and photos ops of this beauty, which we were told is not the usual event. Also present were Blue-headed Coucal, Levallant's Cuckoo, large flocks of Weyn's Weaver, and Bronze Manakin.

Back at the boat launch area we found a number of good birds and distant Vervet Monkeys. Species included Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Splendid Starling, Brown-throated Wattle-eye, Spectacled Weaver, and more.

We decided to have our picnic lunch in the sheltered pavilion, then moved on to stop at the Equator where we got our first chance to bargain and do some shopping. We watched a demonstration of water flowing different directions down a bowl, with two stations set up within 15 feet of each other, touristy but fascinating! Several took their photo under the Equator sign and we moved on. We drove the rest of the afternoon, taking a coffee and ice-cream break at Gator's Rest Stop, a modern coffee shop from which we imbibed. Sooty Chat and Pin-tailed Whydah, Yellow-fronted Canaries made their way on to our list. From the wires and fenceposts observed



while traveling on, we picked up Lilac-breasted Roller, Spectacled Pigeon and Fork-tailed Drongo. We saw the native Ankole cattle with their massive upturned horns, and Judith told us more about the special relationship they have with their handlers. Commerce in the cities and towns was bustling, we saw many small shops, and signs of construction.

We entered Lake Mburo National Park at about 5 P.M but saw so many great birds and mammals that we kept stopping, using up all our daylight. We saw four Brown-chested Lapwing, a species that occurs only

seasonally here, coming in from West Africa. Then it was a mammal parade, Impala, Zebra with young, Buffalo and Waterbuck. We found Crested Francolin and a great view of Blue Malkoha, also known as Yellowbill. A highlight was seeing massive Eland with their young.

We reached our lodge at dusk, but they were very efficient at making us welcome and getting us by flashlight to our safari tents, spacious and with private bathrooms and porches – nice! We had a bit of time to unpack and freshen up, then came down to dinner. The staff was very kind, telling us about the menu for the evening (pumpkin soup, chopped salad, grilled chicken, banana cake) and serving up drinks. Tonight, drinks were on Peg and Naturalist Journeys, our welcome and a cheerful celebration for finding the Shoebill! Walking back to our tents, we marveled at the million stars, such a dark sky, and there was the Southern Cross.

Sunday, Aug. 4 | Mburo National Park Boat Ride and Game Drive

We put in wake-up calls, upon which a knock on our tent porch came with coffee or tea – a lovely custom of safari lodges in Africa. Sitting out on their porch to enjoy this, listening to the variety of dawn bird songs, Linda and Bev got to see a Pennant Nightjar fly by them with its full plumes fly, wow!

We birded on the grounds after breakfast, walking up the hill to a view of the valley and its centerpiece, Lake Mburo. While not the Rift Valley proper, it showed the processes of rifting, and the lake was framed to the west by a fine set of hills. Below us we could see a herd of Buffalo and some Waterbuck. Atop the hill, we surprised two Topi which were resting in open dirt, also enjoying the view, but probably more for security reasons. We got views of two Golden-breasted Bunting and heard their songs, and then got scolded by a pair of Wattled Lapwing.

We then drove slowly through the park, en route to the boat dock area. We scoped a Pearl-spotted Owl that turned into a lichen-colored branch, teasing poor Judith for stopping the bus. But actually, it worked out well as a “bird party” came through, giving us looks at White-winged Tit, Chinspot Batis, Spot-flanked Barbet, Brown-backed Scrub Robin, and other species. Score!

The boat dock was home to a very tame Malachite Kingfisher which seemed to pose for us. A vocal pair of African Fish Eagles tossed their heads to the sky, courting on prominent perches above the lakeshore. One would break out to fly over the bay, coming right back at us, providing us awesome photo ops. We waited a bit for some other travelers to join us, then left the dock about 10 A.M. What a ride! For the next two hours we



went from one highlight to the next, passing a Pied Kingfisher every couple of hundred yards. There was a steady chorus of their chirping and lots of chances to see their dazzling pattern in flight.

We went first over to a papyrus area, hearing and for some getting a glimpse of White-winged Swamp Warbler along with a super view of Papyrus Gonolek, a colorful and stunning creature. The naturalist on the boat took us in close to a snake coiled in the plant life, telling us the black shiny scales were those of a Spitting Cobra, but no amount of patience would make it raise its head for us to see full on. Still pretty great to see.

Crossing back past the dock we encountered the courting African Fish Eagles again, then started to look in earnest for African Finfoot. During this time, we also found Black Crake, Common and Wood sandpipers, and in time a secretive female. The African Finfoot female was furtive, but with patience and killing the engine of the boat, she came out to feed and we got decent views. Continuing on, the male was more obliging, coming out on a log to preen, giving us a full-on view of its bright orange feet. Several pair occur in the bay we searched, but we still felt fortunate to find them. We also saw Hadada Ibis, Nile Crocodile, and bright Holub Golden Weavers at and active nest site.

Time passed quickly! We headed back to lunch, stopping to view Woodland Kingfisher and a small group of Little Bee-eaters. After lunch it was time for showers, catching up on our list and for some taking a well-earned nap.

At 3:30 P.M we went out for a game drive, making little progress for the first half-hour as we kept seeing species that we wanted to stop for, such as Striped Kingfisher. We were very lucky to see a Greater Honeyguide, getting out to enjoy scope views. While watching a Nubian Woodpecker feed, we looked up to see a soaring, immature Bateleur. We had good looks at Gray Hornbill, an African Cuckoo and everyone enjoyed seeing the meadowlark look-alike, Yellow-throated Longclaw.



We had some enjoyable time with Zebras, sunlit for good light on photos, active enough for all to enjoy their behavior and antics of two very young foals, nursing and dropping like puppies for a nap. Atop a termite mound, we found a female Bushbuck which was not going to give up this fine perch just because of our bus and curiosity. We found a large group of Giraffe, 20 or more, mainly females with at least five young ones. These varied in age, probably the youngest about seven months old. Watching them was like being at the ballet, they moved with such grace and fluidity. In the end they regrouped, and we were pleased to leave the aggregation of giraffes feeding intently on acacias. This is a restored population of Rothchild Giraffe, brought over from Murchison Falls, so it was rewarding to see that the effort is going well, and the animals were successful reproducing.

The whole afternoon was a good one, but the grand finale was totally top-rate, when a pair of Pennant-winged Nightjar flew back and forth in view. In dusky light, we had super looks at the white patches of the male and his odd, waving streamers. We got repeated views – what a way to end our time in Lake Mburo National Park!

Back to dinner, tonight a local tilapia fish caught in Lake Victoria, very mild and cooked with a nice sauce. The chocolate mousse for dessert helped several who expressed missing their chocolate fix.

Monday, Aug. 5 | Travel Day to Bwindi

We packed up and left by 7 A.M, enjoying a couple of hours birding at several stops as we made our way some 22 KM to the main paved road. We looked for a rare species, Red-faced Barbet, to no avail, but we were pretty content with the constant flow of species we had to look at.



At this roadside stop, we watched Yellow-billed Stork fly over a line of native Ankole Cattle moving uphill, picturesque for sure. We had two tiny African Pygmy Kingfisher fly aerial paths between perches in a field of bananas, several Little Bee-eaters teed up for inspection, and we got good views of Green-winged Pytilla and Red-cheeked Cordon-blue. We all caught up on seeing Blue-naped Mousebird, sprinkled in with the more common Speckled Mousebird families. Two Lesser Blue-eared Starling were new for us and their iridescent plumage gleamed in the sun.

Further down the road we were able to get good views at two Eland decorated with Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, a Wahlberg's Honeyguide and a Common Scimitarbill. We found an amazing aggregation of Grey-crowned Crane, forty or more, under the shade of a big acacia outside a small roadside town.



The lodge at Bwindi was incredibly welcoming. We thought it would be simple, described as a "community project", but it was indeed luxurious in its atmosphere and spacious common area, rooms with lovely furnishings and good beds, most welcome after our long day driving! Best of all we had three nights here, yeah!

Tuesday, Aug. 6 | The Great Gorilla Trek

We woke at dawn, as our gorilla trek permits were for the Ruhiga side, we had to face a couple of hours on a bumpy dirt road away. The route was through village land, and we envisioned time for birding on our way back through some of the lush forest areas, as Herbert had done with groups in the past. We all knew Gorilla trekking could be hard, but not a single one of us was prepared for what we'd accomplish by days end or the energy it would take. Most groups finish by 2 P.M. We came out at nearly 6 P.M!



But, we did it! With our expert tracker, one of the original to habituate the gorillas, we were able to find and follow a group, see the huge Silverback with his group that included another younger male, several females and at least one young baby. We think this group had recently split from another, so they were warier than some, and for us they stayed on the move. We also moved slower than we hoped to as the going such a challenge, so we missed their morning rest period which made our viewing more difficult. Each time we would catch up, they would start to move. Most of us were able to see them feeding, wrapping their human-like hands around fruits and leaves to pull them in.

We watched two sleeping, doing their best to ignore us, waking to stare at us with such soft eyes. There was a fig ripe high in the tree canopy, and we watched several up on high limbs feeding. One big male made his way down quickly, swinging like Tarzan on a vine for the final leap. Our porters from the local community were there to support us and spending a day with them was one of the most memorable parts of the trip. They were terrific, at times simply pulling us upslope, or blocking our slippage with a turned secure foot placement!

We saw only a few birds as we had to focus on walking this terrain that held such a scramble of rock, vegetation and mud. The trek was more like climbing a wall or steep, vegetated stairs for hundreds of yards at a time than hiking. Still, Royal Sunbird was spied by Bev, Peg found a White-collared Oliveback face to face at close range, and several had a chance at seeing Purple-breasted Sunbird or Masked Apalis. At the start of our trek, two noisy Chestnut-winged Starlings flew over and deep in the forest, two Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo also made loud calls as they fed on giant moss-covered tree branches.

It was a beautiful and terrible realm all at the same time, everything carpeted by epiphytes and mosses, lush and green, massive tree canopy shading us. But there was no friendly footing and without our porters, pre-arranged by Peg and Herbert who knew we'd need them, we just could not have made it. Peg's fitness monitor measured 252 flights of stairs by days end, and close to six miles.

Patrick and Linda, our most fit, had a good ten-minutes viewing the group resting and quiet, getting videos of the mom and baby, watching the Silverback stand and call them all to move on. We all had closer encounters than we expected, as we came upon them resting unexpectedly.

Herbert said in all his year's he'd not had a group of clients come out this late. It was a grueling but amazing day! We penetrated the Impenetrable Forest; our muscles would remind us of this for days to come!

Wednesday Aug. 7 | Birding Bwindi Impenetrable Forest

We warned Herbert and Judith that we wanted to see birds this day. Herbert smiled, and choose the best possible place for us, a level road winding past the park entry gate, past two lodges and the administrative center. A local guide, Matthew, joined us along with a trainee of the Women's Birding Association, Patricia.



There were birds everywhere! We could barely walk ten feet and another group were there to behold. Just out of the bus, even before the gate, in view of all the line of small shops and cafes, we had African Yellow White-eye, Gray-headed Negrita, and Brown-throated Wattle-eye. We got good views at two elusive robin-chats, the Red-capped and later Grey-winged. Several greenbulbs gave us enough views to sort them out, Slender-billed, Cameroon Sobre, and Little. There were several plants that were attractive to sunbirds, and they fed long enough for us to try for photos, Variable, Green-throated and Double-collared to name a few. We watched Green Crombec, a Buff-spotted Woodpecker, and found a Speckled Tinkerbird. All of these specialty forest species are one of the great treats of a trip to Uganda, in addition to the wonderful array of savanna species, many forest species extend here from West Africa – and there are some regional endemics. We also found a courting pair of Gunther's Green Snake, with their bright orange eyes prominent, we could track them winding through a tall hedgerow.

The morning passed so quickly, despite our aching muscles from yesterday's adventures. A troop of L'Hoest's Monkeys came through and it was wonderful to have time to watch them feed, several young ones among the group. Great Blue Turaco put on a good show feeding on fruits near one of the car park areas, while a pair of noisy Chub's Cisticola sang duets and picked bugs off the car and truck windows. At our turn-around spot, an open clearing, we spied a pair of Cassin's Hawk Eagle soaring, and a Great Sparrowhawk flying in the same vicinity.

We went back to the lodge for lunch, though many of us were so entranced with the birds of the veranda that we did not really get a break. How do you leave good views of Luhder's Bush-shrike, Red-headed Bluebill, and African Blue Flycatcher? Lunch was vegetable pizza for all, yum!

We had an appointment at 3 P.M at the Ride for a Women's Centre, an outstanding and multi-faceted project to help local women in the community. Their project started with bicycle rentals, and women were trained to be bike mechanics to keep bikes in working order in addition to handling the rentals. In time, visitors passing through helped train the women in sewing and quilting, so making and selling crafts entered the mix, also welcoming back local basketry skills. Women work for a daily salary, sharing proceeds of the craft sales. About 50 women are doing so, and they hope to build capacity for more. Some bring their youngest children; all can leave with jugs of fresh, clean water and throughout the day they find support as they share stories of their lives with a meal. Some have experienced domestic abuse and are here to help repair their lives and family relations. All have gained confidence and skills and the atmosphere of the place was a very happy one. Herbert says he's witnessed great change in three years in this community, and they in turn thank the gorillas.



We looked at their garden and were able to talk with some of the individual women, and we had great fun shopping. We bought baskets and fabric goods, and after check-out, the manager Evelyn beamed, saying our combined purchases would be enough to keep the women working for two weeks.

They then set up chairs for us in the garden (where Gray-headed Barbet and Pied Crow were active) and came out in colorful wraps to dance and sing. We loved the traditional drums, and as Herbert promised us, the dance from his part of Uganda would make the ground shake! It was a beautiful afternoon, with sun shining and a view of the mountains. Sitting and watching the colors, the movements and feeling the rhythm of song was enchanting. A program at the Center brings in regional experts to teach them dances from the different tribes and locales in Uganda. We watched three, then on the final dance they asked us to join in. Festive and fun, we got a little window into the lives of local people. Herbert described for us later the changes he has seen in the village since the park has been revived after the years of war and strife. All very encouraging!

As some of our crew had not gone on the morning walk, opting to relax at the lodge post gorilla-trekking, we returned to the same productive area, spending the last hours of daylight retracing our steps, with Matthew and Patricia guiding us. The area is so rich in birding we were able to find for them some of the highlight species of the morning, and some new ones for the rest of us. Tambourine Doves posed on mossy branches, and a Blue-throated Brown Sunbird appeared high in the trees.

It was time to quit and return to our cozy lodge for dinner! Buhoma Lodge was more than comfortable, it felt luxurious and was built with such care. The staff seemed genuinely concerned for our happiness and welfare. The proceeds from the lodge help the local community, a fine architect helped them build it.

Tonight, we had cause to celebrate, as it was Bev's birthday. We enjoyed rosemary chicken with gravy, vegetables and what else for dinner, but a lovely cake! We shared it with staff and had good fun.

Thursday, Aug. 8 | Travel day to Queen Elisabeth National Park

Today was a travel day and one on pretty rough dirt roads, yet to be paved as we made our way north along the Albertine rift to Queen Elisabeth National Park. Our very first stop was exciting as a fig tree had several Ross's Turaco feeding in it and we got super views. Two Woodland Kingfisher rounded out the show of color at this site.

Half of our drive was in the park, where we had high hopes of seeing tree-climbing Lions. We stopped to scan often, this section of the park having a lot of massive fig trees interspersed with the acacias. We did not find them, but did find some good bird species, several much at home in the grasslands. There were both Fawn-breasted and Crimson-rumped Waxbills, Southern Red Bishop, Violet-backed Starling, both Winding and Croaking Cisticolas, Red-billed Firefinch, Yellow-throated Longclaw and we had super views of an African Moustached Warbler in reedy grasses.

We bumped along, got out at rest stops, birding as we made progress through a dense shrub region, then back to savanna at the main part of the park. We got to our lovely lodge late in the day, in time to settle in and enjoy sunset looking over a vast protected stretch of the rift valley. The dining area was atop a hill, and cabins spaced widely below for privacy. Elephants grazed below us, a huge group of nearly forty, with several young babies.

This evening we enjoyed wine and cocktails as we gathered for dinner. We tried traditional Ugandan food that Judith requested for us. They served family style, and we all enjoyed sweet potatoes, Matooka (mashed plantains), beef stew, green peas marsala, a g'nut (peanut) sauce and baked chicken, then yet more starch as they love it, added rice and Irish potatoes. Fun!

Friday, Aug. 9 | Queen Elisabeth National Park – a 100+ Species Day!

Today turned out to be a 100-species day for our birding, plus some marvelous moments watching mammals. We started with breakfast as dawn came (6:30 A.M) and were out by 7:30 A.M. In tall grass we found a Marsh Tchagra, and got good looks at Palm Nut Vulture, which flew our way and landed on the road behind the bus. A troop of Vervet Monkeys gave us good views, and there were Buffalo and Elephant groups feeding. As we left town, Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon) and House Sparrow were noted, feeding by a Rolex stand, a local food made with eggs and freshly rolled Chapada bread.

At the park entry gate, we birded as Herbert did the paperwork, finding Diederik Cuckoo and having fun watching the huge colonies of Lesser Masked Weavers on their nests, joined by Black-headed Weavers as well. Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Black-headed Gonolek added some color.

The bush telegraph sent us news that Lions were being seen up on Janet's Track in the Kasenyi Section, about twenty minutes to the north. We went straight away and were lucky to get there in time to see four, two females up and walking between clumps of bushes (where one had cubs stashed), and two others cradling the branches of a large Candelabra Euphorbia they had climbed. Several vehicles were parked and watching; we were at quite some distance, so the ranger let us get out to use the scope. Laughing Doves shone pink and blue in the sun on closer trees as we watched.



We continued our game drive, watching Warthogs with young, Uganda Kob, Waterbuck, Wahlberg's Eagle, Bateleur, and on small shrubs aside the road, a beautiful Copper Sunbird male. We stopped to look at a Village Weaver nest and its builder, though being far from a village, Judith suggested we rename it the "Park" Weaver.

We got to the boat launch early, so had some time to relax and have our lunch in a thatch-roof ramada on the shore of the Kasinga Channel. Keeping us company were Pied Kingfisher, African Jacana, Little Egret, a very tame African Pied Wagtail, and a Swamp Flycatcher. Across the river we watched a group of Elephants and Buffalo and got distant views of wading birds we'd soon see up close.

Starting at 1 P.M we had two wonderful hours to cruise the wildlife-rich Kasinga Channel aboard the Kingfisher, Captain Brian at the helm. We had our own boat, and he was patient with our many sightings, quite good with the birds himself. But first some Elephant time, we were up-close and personal to a herd of mostly males. They enjoyed dust baths, drinking water, and some of the young one's games of push and shove. When they wanted river shore access, Buffalo got out of the way! In the foreground of all this action we found many birds, Yellow-billed Storks pinkish colored in breeding hue, Egyptian Goose, a couple of Comb Duck, Common Greenshank, and Common Sandpiper. Cruising farther up the channel, we steered towards a muddy bank on which 100 or more African Skimmer perched, so beautiful to see! Pied Kingfisher were everywhere, nesting in holes in the embankments on both sides, loudly calling to each other. We would see groups of 10-50 at a time and estimated some 500+ were using this stretch of the river. In a small cove we found Gray-headed Kingfisher, which dazzled us with its electric blue plumage in flight. Two Madagascar Bee-eaters posed in lush greenery and a bit further down we found Red-chested Bee-eaters and Woodland Kingfisher. About twenty Water Thick-knee clustered on one area of shoreline, and on a wide mud bank we found scores of Great Cormorant, both Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans, Gray-headed Gull, and small numbers of shorebirds: Ruddy Turnstone, Kittlitz Plover, Little Stint and one Three-banded Plover on the rim of a Hippo wallow.

Hippos were everywhere, including a few out of the water grazing. They lay in big piles, cavorting and grunting, a couple of young ones staying out of the way of the big males. Crocodiles were also present, not in large number but we saw some giant heads in the water and younger ones out sunning to the side. Wire-tailed and Barn Swallows were flying about, and the heron lineup including Squacco and Striated.

We hated to go! We could have easily taken the next ride but were happy to see a big group of Ugandan children, in colorful uniforms, were ready to board to learn about wildlife.

As we left, we stopped to watch a group of Elephants with one very small baby, easily fit under its mom and still nursing. A big matriarch sensed our interest in it, and put herself between the bus and the baby, keeping a keen eye on our every move as she fed on small acacia leaves. We stayed with this group some time, enjoying time of photo and video and watch their interactions.

Ann suggested a swim would be lovely, and we'd seen so much, we decided to head on home. We were back by five and several joined her. A cool refreshing dip in view of the vast expanse of open savanna of the Rift Valley before us was pretty fine!

Dinner was a choice of local lamb or fresh grilled fish, a stuffed eggplant and side dishes, with a lemon pie for dessert. We did two days of checklist to catch up, then off to bed. In the night we heard both African Scops and African Wood Owl.



Saturday Aug. 10 | Queen Elisabeth National Park to Kibale National Park – Chimpanzee Forest Guest House

We woke to a misty morning, with rain having come in the night. Fresh breezes greeted us as we stepped out on porches to greet the day, an incredible view across the Rift Valley, dotted by acacia trees, tall grass lining the spaces between. The Elephant herd, so widely dispersed at dusk, was now gathered, 40 strong, mainly females with young, five of them this year's calves (measured by still being able to fit under their mothers). What a life they have here with so much grass!



We gathered in the open-air dining room with its grand view for breakfast, drinking strong Ugandan coffee and tea. Fresh fruit, eggs and bacon or sausage, for some a cup of chocolate-colored local millet porridge.

We left at 8 A.M, and our drive today taking us through Queen Elisabeth National Park. We stopped by the Elephant group now much closer, and while watching them we found Yellow-mantled Widowbird, zitting Cisticola, and Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike. Raptors were perched up and we found Palm Nut Vulture, Long-crested Eagle, African Fish Eagle, African Harrier-Hawk, and with them two Crowned Hornbill. Crossing Kasinga Channel the White-rumped and Little Swifts were active.



Down the road we found a closer group of Uganda Kob, with some big males and one mother with a tiny baby just nursing, legs still wobbly as it had to run to keep up. It was probably born in the night, she was licking it, encouraging it to nurse, sweet! Red-necked Spurfowl intermingled with the herd, also feeding.

A Hippo nearly filled his small mudhole close to the road. We watched as he defecated, whirling the tail to

spread his poop far and wide. A Hamerkop and a Wood Sandpiper shared the pool, while behind it we found Senegal Lapwing.



We continued on, making good time on paved road, taking a break to eat our lunch at the Gardens Café in Fort Portal. Roger tried a chocolate milkshake (yum!) and others had cappuccinos and mocha coffees. The store was a hit, loaded with baskets, fabric, postcards (and stamps, yeah!) and more. Town was busy, we watched a wedding party assemble with men and women in traditional dress, and a marching band passed by for another occasion. A lion statue marks the round-about of town, for this is the gateway to both Queen Elisabeth, Kibale, and Ruwenzori National Parks.

We got to the hotel by 3:30 P.M, a record for us on this trip. It was nice to settle in and either relax, tour the gardens (5 types of eggplant, wow!) or watch birds quite active on the grounds. There was a good study of sunbirds to be had with eight species putting on a good show: Collared, Blue-throated Brown, Scarlet-chested, Olive-bellied, Red-chested, Purple-banded, Variable and Copper. We watched a pair of Yellow-bellied Waxbills making a nest, had a visit from a curious Brown-throated Wattle-eye, and marveled as a Great Blue Turaco came into a fruiting fig. Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird (Bev nicknamed “Tink”) kept up the background music to sightings of Tropical Boubou, White-breasted Nigrita, Black-crowned Waxbill, and more.

This hotel was a former tea estate of a British commissioner and it exudes colonial hospitality. The original owner’s art hangs on the wall of the main house, his books are in glass cases, and the lawns and hedges are still closely clipped in early British style. The innovations of the place are great though, lots of fresh organic foods, and self-sufficiency with extensive gardens. Beyond tourism it is still a working farm and a pleasure to stay at.

Dinner was presented well, lovely pumpkin or leek soup for starters, lightly curried chicken or vegetables for the main dish, and cakes or fresh fruit for dessert. Off to bed – tomorrow another adventure – seeing Chimpanzees of Kibale Forest.

Sunday, Aug. 11 | Kibale Forest National Park

Today turned out to be a “seven-primate” day, wow! We were at Kibale National Park, which calls itself the primate capital of the world, and it seemed rightfully so. We left in time to get to the briefing and learn about Chimpanzee trekking, how we would go about it, and what chimps we might find. It turns out they have two groups, and we would separate into small groups to go and find them. Our tracking guides were Richard and Justice, and both seemed quite knowledgeable.

Three of our party declined the walk, taking the option of birding with Herbert instead, while in the beautiful forest. They found a lot of activity, twenty-five species or so, many of them new. One highlight was seeing seven Black-billed Turaco in one tree, all vying for fruit and showing off their vibrant colors. They also had time to



admire butterflies, numerous and varied here, especially the Forester group. Kibale Forest is known for its butterfly diversity and we found real fascination in their beauty.

Sounds were those of tantalizing species, Yellow-spotted Barbet, Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo, Blue-breasted Kingfisher, and more. Rounding a bend in the trail, we encountered our first Chimp, a lone individual with a group of more active Red-tailed Monkeys behind them. We had seen Uganda Mangabey (formerly Gray-cheeked Mangabey) as we entered the forest, a distant female with a young one cradled close to her, so already we had three primates! We continued hiking to a huge fig tree, where we encountered a jam-up of almost all the groups, it was just too irresistible for us all to watch the half dozen or so members of the larger of the two Chimpanzee groups feed. They enjoyed the figs immensely and were pretty focused on the task of harvesting them. Occasionally they'd let go with a "warm shower" so we had to be mindful not to stand directly underneath. Our guides interpreted their activities and we stayed for some time. As it was warming up, the guides suspected they might come down for better views, but our birders were restless, so we split up at this point, some waiting for hope of the descent, and others going on to an open road area where they might encounter other monkeys and birds.

The road group quickly found Red-tailed Monkeys again, mixed in with agile and active Blue Monkeys. We could see each species here very well, faces and tails and we studied the way they made their way just fantastically through the dense foliage. Brenda spotted a female Chestnut Wattle-eye, a really stunning bird, along with the male, a nice find! We walked a bit farther and got ourselves into the midst of a bird party, a BIG mixed flock over the road. Several of the flock were forest specialists, we admired Velvet-mantled Drongo, Yellow-crested Woodpecker, Purple-headed Starling, Red-headed Malimbe, Buff-throated Apalis, and Tambourine Dove. A Yellowbill duo flew in squabbling, and we had good looks at Klaas's Cuckoo with its startling emerald color.

We were picked up by our driver here, united with the others, to go back to the lodge for lunch and a bit of a break. At 4 P.M we met again to return to the forest. On a log over a stream, we found Cassin's Flycatcher while above us we spied a Scaly-breasted (formerly Hairy-breasted) Barbet. The loud sharp call of Western Nicator gave us a start, but we got good views, alongside Olive-bellied Sunbird and Toro Olive Greenbul. We found a troop of Ugandan Mangabey, marveling at their huge leaps through the canopy. We then found a group of L'Hoerst Monkeys as we returned to the lodge, plus Olive Baboon and Vervet Monkeys. What a day!

We had fun this evening, as it was the end of our main safari and two, Brenda and Elaine, would be leaving the group. Peg asked for each person to list their top three trip favorites, either moments or species. When she tallied the results, 21 different events or species listed. Those with multiple votes included Shoebill, the lead contender, followed by Mountain Gorilla and then Pennant-winged Nightjar. Giraffe and Elephant were on several lists, the boat trip on Kazinga Channel got rave reviews, and Judith was listed bringing all a smile as she was always so enthusiastically there for us. Peg reviewed some of trip highlights, reminding us that place names ten days ago were then just a difficult word to pronounce, but now they had a real name, and a presence indelible in our memories. We listed so many positive feelings for Uganda – and heartily thanked Herbert of Bird Uganda Safaris for putting it together for us – what a great trip!

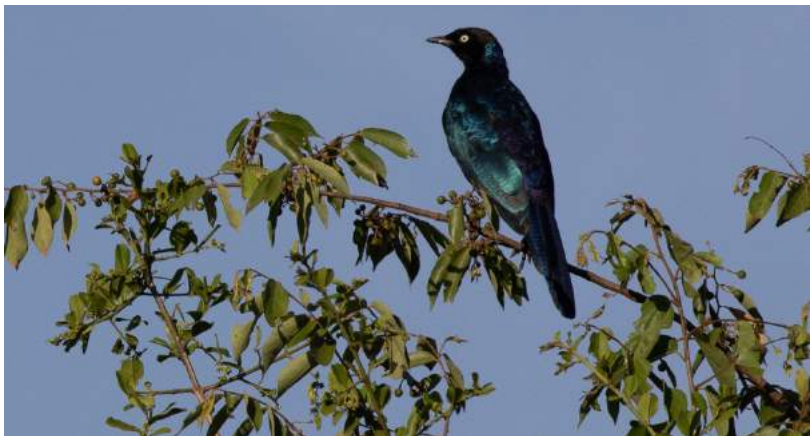
Monday, Aug. 12 | On to Murchison Falls National Park (by air)

There is always some angst on flight days, so we all got up early. Kasese Airport is a grass strip, with stunning views of the Ruwenzori Mountains in the distance. We found two White-rumped Swift nests glued to the building under an eave, amazing constructions of feathers with plump big-eyed chicks inside. There were Black-headed Weavers crafting nests, Crowned Lapwing commanding the runway, two species of cisticola (Croaking and zitting) calling, and Gray-backed Fiscals hunting butterflies.

About ten minutes from landing the whole delta of Lake Albert, giving rise to two major branches of the mighty Nile River came into view – the Albertine Nile and the White Nile, fanned out below us. This was a geographer's dream! And then Roger spied a big group of Buffalo around a water hole, then we all spied giraffe that looked up at the plane, then broke into a soft stable lope to run away. There were hundreds of Uganda Kob, some Jackson's Hartebeest, and views of Hooded Vulture and Bateleur below us.

Drivers from the lodge were there to meet us. Donna exclaimed at a bright lizard, a Red-headed Agama that ran almost between her legs. Anabelle spied a soaring Bateleur. The short drive to the lodge gave us a peek at what we'd see over the next few days. This was open savanna with wide spreading (perfect for Leopard) acacia trees. We found a group of Rothchild's Giraffe posing picturesquely against a ridgeline, males and females, large and small, moving fluidly at no speed of rush. We had good views at Grey Kestrel, an African Harrier Hawk hanging and flapping from the weaver nests it was raiding, and views of a Dark Chanting Goshawk with its long legs pinning down a lizard lunch. There were Orabi, many Uganda Kob, more Rothchild Giraffe and Lelwel (Jackson's) Hartebeest, and our first view of a scarlet Carmine Bee-eater. We also met the Piapiac, a bird that says its name. This corvid occurs in big flocks, high numbers, and follows the herds of ungulates to clean them from ticks and other parasites, sometimes alongside the Yellow-billed Oxpecker.

We got to the lodge, had a briefing on the facility and retired to our rooms, happy for an afternoon to relax – we'd been keeping up a stiff wildlife-viewing pace! At 5 P.M we did a brief walk with Herbert around the grounds, finding Spotted Morning Thrush, Speckle-fronted Weavers, African Gray Hornbill and Pin-tailed Wydahs.





Tuesday & Wednesday, Aug. 13 & 14 | Murchison Falls National Park

Murchison is Uganda's Yellowstone, a place replete with wildlife, rich habitats that attract herds of ungulates and their predators. The northern half is the place to be for mammals, our lodgings at Pakuba Safari Lodge gave us a prime position from which to see them. We also found a host of exciting birds.

We had two boat trips on the Nile River here, five for our safari in total, and a drive 21 kilometers between the lodge and the boat ramp between us. So, we had breakfast early, made our way across the park stopping for wildlife (Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, herds of Elephant and Rothchild Giraffe, various birds) to meet the boat. The first day we made our way upstream to the park's iconic Murchison Falls. Our driver again knew birds well, and we had our own boat so we could stop at sunlit African Darter. Red-throated Bee-eaters by their nest cliffs, Senegal Lapwings first spotted by Kim, African Jacana, and various herons and shoreline associated species. The Falls were rushing with water, we viewed them behind a big rock, on which were perched two Rock Pratincole. By standing on the seat we could peer over and get cracking views of this lovely species. African Fish Eagles made circles overhead while Pied Kingfisher were again so numerous that they could have been butterflies. Gray-crowned Cranes were picturesque against the green marsh grasses along the Nile River shoreline, and we had many Vinaceous Doves and Black-billed Wood-Doves. The first day we came back for lunch and a break, the second we stayed out and had wood-fired Pizza on the porch of the once-elegant Paara Hotel where the Queen of England stayed when she came to Uganda (close to the river dock)!

Crossing back and forth by different routes, we found lovely Cardinal Quelea, Levillant's Cuckoo, Swallow-tailed and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters, Saddle-billed Storks at close range, Long-crested Eagle, and both Ruppell's Griffon and White-backed Vultures. It was shortly after seeing vultures that Bev uttered an emphatic STOP – She had found us a Leopard! It was draped over one of the big acacia trees, not close but still very distinguishable. We backed up after all had a precious first view, and at this time it was alert to our presence. In total cat fashion, it lingered in its prone pose, then decided to get up, stretch a bit, and we watched as it walked the huge limb, jump to another, and then make its way down the tree.

Our second morning boat trip was downstream from the ferry to the Delta of the Nile River into Lake Albert. This was a longer trip, so some occurred at high speed, but we saw many species. Pink-backed Pelican, White-bellied Whistling Duck, Glossy Ibis, Purple Heron, and five Goliath Herons. One we glided quite close to and thus could really appreciate the beauty and height of the world's largest heron. Big fruiting trees lined the channel and at one stop many got views of White-crested Turaco, it made several flying passes back and forth, showing off the



brilliant red underwing of this very tropical group. We added Long-toed Lapwing to our species list and had super views of African Openbill.

The second day, after our boat ride and lunch at the hotel, we learnt of some lions being seen as they rested, and we were fairly close, so we managed to get there in time for a good viewing. After a quick stop to find Bar-breasted Firefinch, we found 12 of the supposed group of 16 Lions here in total. Most of the big females were simply flat out, well-fed and napping. Two younger ones were active, grooming, rolling over with big stretches, then chasing each other across to join the more mature matriarchs of the clan. Two Buffalo were resting and seemed not too concerned, they must have sensed this was a well-fed group. We located them later afternoon and still had some ways back to the lodge. Two fabulous sightings then occurred, indeed Anabelle commented that it seemed almost scripted, one highlight to the next! Driving along it was Judith that uttered the emphatic STOP this time! She had found a Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, sitting on the outside of a very densely-leaved tree, giving us great views at its pink eyelids and more – Wow! To top this off, as we went back, Roger spied a Spotted

Hyena on the right side of the bus. We pulled to a stop and it crossed the road, ambling away on the left side. With almost 100 bird sightings and all this mammal action, it was a grand final day!

Thursday, Aug. 15 | The Road Home...

All good things must come to an end, and it was our plan to drive back to Entebbe. In hindsight we should have flown it, but we did not know the entire section through the park to the town of Masindi was torn up for construction, slow-going through this very forested section of Murchison Falls National Park. We would have loved time to bird here, or the other side at the Royal Mile, but our tour was coming to a close. We did find two new birds, Red-necked Falcon, a pair perched out in the open, and Beautiful Sunbird, a real beauty. We had our lunch at a hotel in Masindi, got to the post office for stamps (finally!) and made it to the airport by 5:30 P.M. Paul, our wonderful and skilled driver, timed it well. It was hugs and good-byes for our compatible group, with promises to share photos and keep in touch.

Until the next adventure!

Photo Credits:

Elephant with friends, Peg Abbott (PA); Madagascar Bee-eater, PA; Rothchild Giraffe, PA; Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill, PA; Speckled Mousebird pair, PA; African Darter, PA; African Wood Owl, PA; Palm-nut Vulture, PA; Great Blue Turaco, PA; Bwindi birding group, PA; Bwindi Park Sign, PA; Bwindi Park Sign, PA; Bwindi Gorilla Trek, PA; Bwindi Haven Lodge morning birding, PA; Bwindi womens group dancing, PA; Group birding Shoebill sighting x3, PA; Mabamba Swamp Trip - boats, PA; Buffalo w Yellow-billed Oxpecker, PA; Malachite Kingfisher, PA; Pied Kingfisher, PA; Lake Mburo morning walk, PA; Rothchild Giraffe trio, PA; Nile Crocodile, PA; Rothchild Giraffe group, PA; Bwindi group birding park, PA; Bwindi Gorilla trek, PA; Bwindi Gorilla trek group, PA; Ugandan street life, PA; Tambourine Dove, PA; Gray-headed Negrita, PA; Group birding, PA; African Skimmers, PA; Elephants on the Kasinga Channel shoreline, PA; Queen Elisabeth National Park views, PA; Hippo grazing, PA; Hippo yawning, PA; Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, PA; Olive-bellied Sunbird, PA; Copper Sunbird, PA; Butterfly, PA; Northern Double-collared Sunbird, PA; Gray-crowned Crane, PA; Lions, PA; Red-throated Bee-eater, PA; White-browed Coucal, PA; Pin-tailed Whydah, PA; Ruppells Starling, PA; Rock Pratincole, PA; Elephants feeding, PA; Group Photo, Roger Mattson (RM); Leopard in the trees, PA; African Fish Eagle, PA;