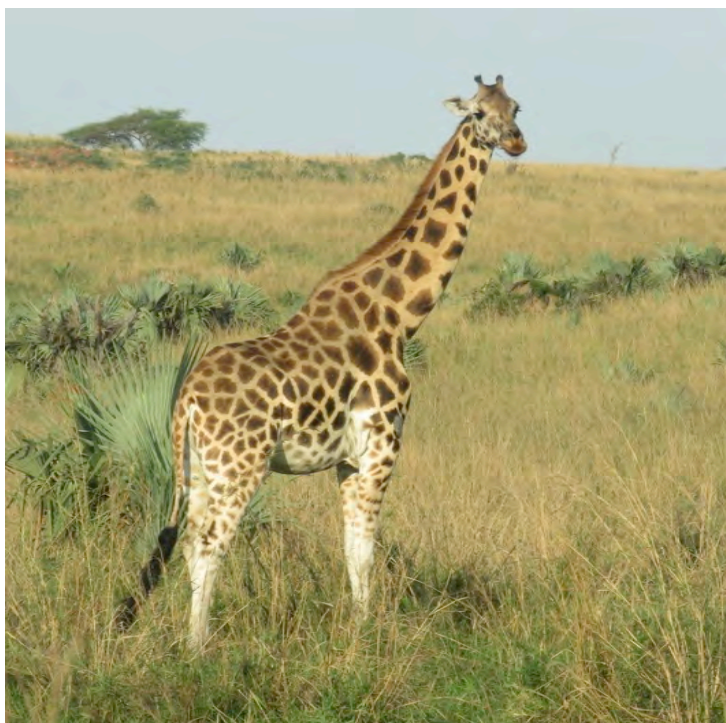


# Uganda Birding & Nature | Trip Report

February 5 - 20, 2020 | Written by Pat Lueders



**With Guide Pat Lueders, and participants John, Susan, Doug, Susan, Eva, Anne, Don, Bryan, Diane, Jennie, Ken.**





## **Wed., Feb. 5 Our adventure begins! | Entebbe Botanical Garden**

All eleven of us arrived in Entebbe yesterday; and, after a restful night, we were anxious to meet our Bird Uganda Safaris guides and begin birding. We gathered in the courtyard of the lovely Bona Guesthouse with Judith Mirembe and quickly found a beautiful pair of Ross's Turaco, Eastern Grey Plantain-eater, and Speckled Mousebirds. Male Northern Brown-throated and Village Weavers were busy building nests to attract a mate, and the brilliantly colored Scarlet-chested Sunbird fed amongst the beautiful plantings. What a wonderful introduction to the local birds of Entebbe!

We were joined by the friendly and outgoing Herbert Byaruhanga, owner and head guide of Bird Uganda Safaris, and took the short drive to the Entebbe Botanical Garden. Located on the shore of Lake Victoria, the native trees and plants attract a large number of species. We first spotted a pair of Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills silhouetted in the sky and then a striking Woodland Kingfisher posed for us at eye level. Near the lake we found our first Hamerkop of the trip, and an African Paradise-Flycatcher fed low in the trees. One of our target birds, the Orange Weaver, was seen nest-building in a low, lakeside tree. The impressive Great Blue Turaco and bright African Green-Pigeons were found along the trail. A family of Mantled guereza, impressive with their long white-tipped tails, were spotted feeding high in the trees, the first of many monkey species we saw.

We returned to the Boma for lunch; and, after a short siesta, we again joined Judith in the Boma Guesthouse garden finding the lovely Black-headed Gonolek, a busy White-browed Robin-Chat, a pair of Gray Parrots, Double-toothed Barbets, and a surprise African Pygmy-Kingfisher. We enjoyed a delicious dinner on the Boma terrace and did our first checklist, amazed at the huge number of species seen on just our first day in Uganda. We quickly realized what a fabulous adventure our trip to Uganda would be!

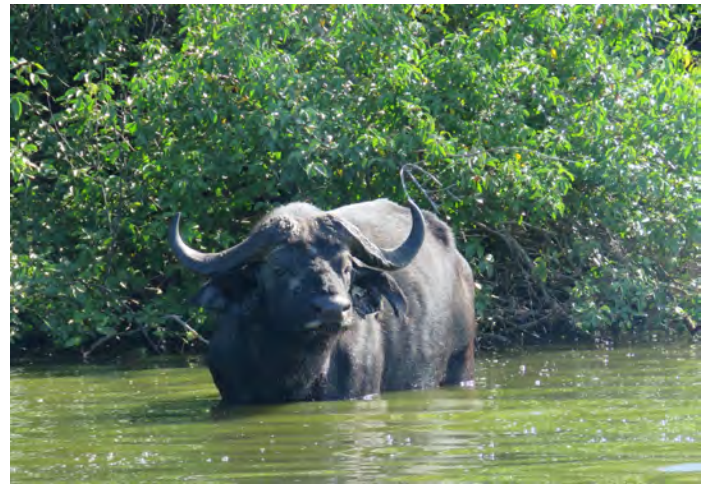
## **Thurs., Feb. 6 Mabamba Wetlands (Shoebill) | Lake Mburo National Park**

We got an early start for our drive to the Mabamba Swamp, a Wetland of International Importance, and home to Uganda's iconic Shoebill. The swamp is a labyrinth of channels and lagoons that winds through areas of papyrus, forest, and agricultural land. Unfortunately, when we arrived it was raining, but the weather did not dampen our spirits as we hoped to see this sought-after target bird of Uganda. We boarded the canoes and quietly weaved through the channels finding Malachite Kingfishers in abundance, Cisticola's vocalizing, an African Marsh-Harrier feeding low over the fields, and Purple Herons wading in the shallows. We came around a turn and there stood a Shoebill, only a few yards from the edge of the shore, quietly fishing for a Lungfish, its favorite food. Unbelievable!









Fortunately, the heavy rain stopped while we were quietly watching the Shoebill feed, some getting videos of this five-foot tall prehistoric looking species, slowly fishing like a heron. When we decided to move, what a treat to see the Shoebill fly, only for a short distance, but then to be hidden from view. We returned to the village to enjoy a picnic lunch and continue to bird, spotting Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Lesser Striped and Angola Swallows, Black-lored Babbler, and an African Pipit.

We crossed the Equator, took time for some group photos and watched the demonstration of water flowing down a bowl. We drove through the countryside and local villages to Lake Mburo National Park, arriving at the entrance early evening, and spotted Helmeted Guineafowl and Red-necked Francolin crossing the road, a Bateler and Brown Snake-Eagle perched in the trees, and Fan-tailed Widowbird, Red-cheeked Cordonbleu, and Red-billed Firefinch in bushes along the road. After checking in, we enjoyed dinner with a view of Lake Mburo, during the evening checklist we were amazed at the number of species we had seen today!

## **Fri., Feb. 7 Mburo National Park: Full Day Birding | Game Drive & Boat Cruise**

After a delicious breakfast, we left camp, slowly driving to Lake Mburo, birding along the way. As we drove, Emerald-Spotted and Blue-Spotted Wood-Doves were seen in the road. We bordered two boats and slowly cruised near the shore of the lake, carefully moving around our first views of hundreds of Hippos. It was hard to count the large numbers of Pied Kingfishers and African Fish-Eagles that were nesting in the area. Our target species was the elusive African Finfoot. We cruised for almost two hours without a sighting but marveled at the beauty of the Malachite Kingfishers. Finally, the lead boat sighted a male and female Finfoot, and we watched the pair as they searched for food under the hanging branches along the shore. A life bird for everyone on the trip!





After lunch, we did a game drive, occasionally departing the bus to walk along the road. We had great looks at Bare-faced Go-away-bird (what a name!), a perched African Harrier-Hawk, a Common Scimitarbill, and an active family of Red-chested Cuckoos.

After dinner, we heard a Black-shouldered Nightjar, and Herbert successfully called it in for quick looks. We were safely escorted to our comfortable tents under the canopy of thousands of stars.

## **Sat., Feb. 8 Drive to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park**

After breakfast, we were scheduled for a travel day, a long drive to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and home to almost half of the world's endangered population of Mountain Gorillas. We stopped in the lively town of Mbarara for restrooms and coffee. It was discovered that the bus had a flat tire, so we enjoyed birding and people watching while our driver quickly changed the tire. We saw a Pink-backed Pelican, Eurasian Kestrel, African Hobby, and both Little and White-rumped Swifts soaring over the city. Since it was Saturday, music loudly played from vehicles along the street to the delight of the shoppers.

The scenic winding road to Bwindi climbed high into the mountains with breathtaking views of the mountains, valleys, and agricultural areas below. As we entered the forest, Herbert kept us alert to Handsome Francolin possibly crossing the road, and we quickly saw four of them in plain sight. Continuing to drive to our lodge, we were promised we would return often to bird on this road. We needed to get settled in our lodge and prepare for our big event tomorrow, the Gorilla Trek!

## **Sun., Feb. 9 The Great Gorilla Trek**

After a restless night of sleep for many of us, from either the anticipation of the trek or the altitude, we anxiously ate our breakfast and made our last preparations for the trek. Because of the change in lodging to be close to our departure location, it was only a short drive to the gathering location. The Bwindi' womens group



entertained us before our orientation and assignments. We were assigned to our guide, Latitia, and the Bitukura Group of 12 Mountain Gorillas and two silverback males. The rain from the previous night was gone and the weather was perfect, cool and overcast. We each were assigned a porter who would carry our bag and assist us during the trek. We drove a short distance, entered the forest, and began descending steeply downhill through mud and over the top of ferns, foliage, roots, and tree branches. After only 45 minutes, the scouts communicated with our guide that the family had been sighted feeding high in the fig trees. We quietly gathered together and slowly moved into a clearing and were surrounded by Mountain Gorillas, some on the ground and others feeding in the trees. We were allowed to photograph and video the group for an hour as they rested, slept, fed on the fruit, and climbed in the trees. Our guide alerted us that the silverback was descending the tree with a young male by his side, and we were amazed by his great size and agility. What a memorable experience, an hour we will never forget! The gorillas seemed to ignore our presence and continued with their morning routines of feeding, resting, and preening. Sadly, the hour went too quickly, and it was time to depart. We carefully and slowly climbed back up the hill with help from the porters, marveling at our great luck that we had endured such a short trek!

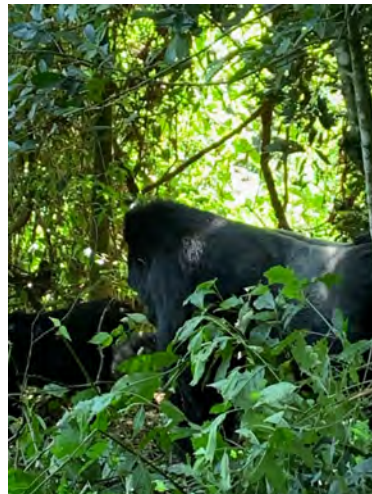
The few who did not attempt the trek and Herbert met to congratulate us on the road, we returned to the headquarters for pictures and to receive our certificates for completing the trek and the privilege of spending an hour with these magnificent animals. During our return drive, a Black-fronted Duiker quickly crossed the road.

Because of our good fortune to have a fairly easy trek, we were ready to go birding in the afternoon at this fabulous birding location, home to 23 Albertine Rift Endemics. While walking along the road, we spotted Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo, Narina Trogon, Gray-throated Barbet, Rwenzori and Chinspot Batis; Rwenzori, Black-faced, and Chestnut-throated Apalis; Slender-billed, Yellow-whiskered and Yellow-streaked Greenbul; and five species of sunbirds. What an unbelievable end to a truly magical day!

## **Mon., Feb. 10 Birding Bwindi**

After a restful night and delicious breakfast, we were excited to spend the day birding the school trail of this bird-rich Ruhija province. We continued our search for the 23 Albertine Rift endemics, quickly seeing a large number of Black Sawwings that are feeding young nesting in the mud cliffs along the road. We slowly walked along the trail, continuously finding new species including Black-billed Turaco, Northern Double-collared Sunbird, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, Dwarf Honeyguide, Mackinnon's Shrike, and a stunning pair of White-tailed Blue Flycatchers. A kettle of 35 Mountain Buzzards circled above us. Our heads were spinning with the









names of the many new species we had seen. After lunch, we shopped in the charming village where the gorilla trek porters live, purchasing many hand-made souvenirs related to the gorillas. Our last afternoon yielded many more new species adding three species of Apalis, three Greenbuls, Brown-capped Weaver, a striking Gray Cuckooshrike, and a pair of Yellow-eyed Black-Flycatchers. What a fabulous day!

## **Tues., Feb. 11 Drive to Queen Elizabeth National Park**

We left early this morning to drive to Queen Elizabeth National Park, named after the Queen of England, who visited in 1954. During our drive, just outside of Kabale, Herbert quickly stopped the bus after he spotted a Ruaha Chat perched on a utility wire. This Rwanda' species has recently been documented expanding its territory into Uganda, and Judith and Herbert were excited to get pictures of this bird, rare for the country of Uganda.

We stopped for a picnic lunch above the Kabale valley and then drove along rolling tea plantations, arriving at our lovely lodge which is situated high above Queen Elizabeth National Park. Fires and clouds of smoke stretched out below us across the Savanna. After we settled into our cabins, we enjoyed a delicious dinner, gathered to do the checklist, and anticipated an exciting day tomorrow!

## **Wed., Feb. 12 Game Drive in the Park | Kazinga Channel Cruise**

We left at sunrise for our safari drive and stopped along the road for some early birding. A Palm-nut Vulture was high in a palm, cisticolas were perched singing, a Black-chested Snake-Eagle was hunting. Shortly, someone yelled "Elephants"! Wow, our first Bush Elephants! The pair stood close to the road for our enjoyment and photos. The lead elephant had the right tusk much longer than the left, and the one following was throwing grass onto its own head. As we continued into the park towards the Kazinga Channel Cruise, we slowly passed numerous elephant groups that included adults, teenagers, and babies.





We boarded our boat, the “Hippo”, and began the exciting journey on this channel that is a narrow neck of water that connects Lakes George and Edward. We cruised along the shore and were provided great views of African buffalo, hippos, and elephants coming to drink and bathe in the water. Crocodiles and Nile Monitors sunned themselves on the banks alongside Little Egret, African Spoonbill, Hadada Ibis, African Skimmers, Pink-backed Pelicans, Hamerkop, and gulls and terns. Stunning Red-throated Bee-eaters were perched for photos as was a Black Bee-eater, four species of kingfishers including a Striped, and six species of sandpipers, including two Common Greenshank.

## **Thurs., Feb. 13 Game Drive in the Park | Afternoon Drive to Kibale National Park**

Early this morning we had time for a game drive before leaving the National Park. After stopping for some birding, we drove the Savanna searching for cats. While watching a pair of Spotted Hyenas along the road, Herbert got a tip that lions had been sighted. We followed a safari truck to find a pair of male African Lions resting in the grass. Unbelievable luck! We quietly photographed them resting, and then they both got up and moved around for even better looks. A view of a lifetime! We reluctantly moved on, and Herbert found a herd of Kob on alert, a sign that a predator was nearby. A tail was spotted by Judith moving in the grass, and then a leopard stood on top of a termite mound for great views! Later, at the park headquarters, Herbert was given a picture of the leopard resting in a tree taken by another guide after we left. What luck we had seeing three predators this morning!









After lunch, we drove to Kibale National Park, crossing the Equator again. Kibale is the best safari destination for Chimpanzee tracking in East Africa hosting 13 species of primates. There were also six Albertine Rift region endemic bird species that we hoped to see. Our drive crossed the huge tea and banana plantations, and we arrived at our guesthouse in time to do some birding, quickly spotting Gray Parrots, Speckle-breasted Woodpecker; Variable, Olive and Bronze Sunbirds; and Violet-backed Starling.

After dinner and checklist, we settled down to a restful night's sleep before our Chimpanzee tracking early tomorrow morning.

### **Fri., Feb. 14 Chimpanzee Tracking | Birding Bigodi Swamp**

We awoke to a beautiful morning and arrived at the Kibale Chimpanzee Tracking headquarters to receive our instructions and meet our guides. We then drove to our designated location to find a group of chimps. Our guide found the elder male leader sitting pensively on the ground. We heard, and then tracked, more members of this group, loudly vocalizing and screeching. We were told that a group of males were fighting over a female, and we quietly watched the males climbing through the jungle exhibiting aggressive behavior towards each other as a female quietly watched. The guides carried heavy rifles that are used to fire in the air in order to fend off any problems. We received certificates of achievement when we finished our session and left with wonderful memories of sharing this unique experience of nature!

After lunch at our lodge, we visited the Bigodi Swamp Sanctuary and were led by Patricia, a trainee of Herbert's. She explained the function of the sanctuary and led us on a walk to find some of the area's endemic species. We got good looks at a Great Blue Turaco, Klaas's Cuckoo, Hairy-breasted Barbet, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Brown-backed Scrub-Robin, and Chestnut-breasted Nigrita, to name only a few. What a fabulous birding location!

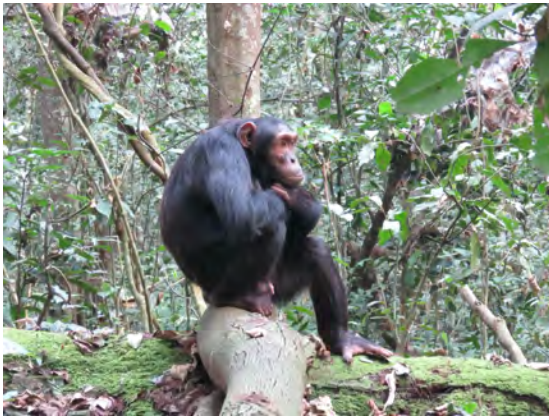
At dinner, we sadly said farewell to three members of the Uganda Tour that weren't continuing on the Murchison Falls Extension.

### **Sat., Feb. 15 Departures | Travel to Masindi**

We left the Kibale National Park and stopped near the town of Portal, a reliable location to see Northern Masked-Weavers. In addition to the weavers, a Cardinal Woodpecker and Little Rush-Warblers were seen.

We stopped along the road and bought some bananas from a boy. Many birds were seen as we traveled including a Banded Snake-Eagle, Long-crested Eagles, Marabou Storks, and soaring Black Kites. Near the busy city of Masindi, we found our first Piapiacs in a field with some cattle. Arriving before dinner, we checked into our city hotel and enjoyed dinner on the patio, finishing our checklist over a glass of wine or a bottle of beer.





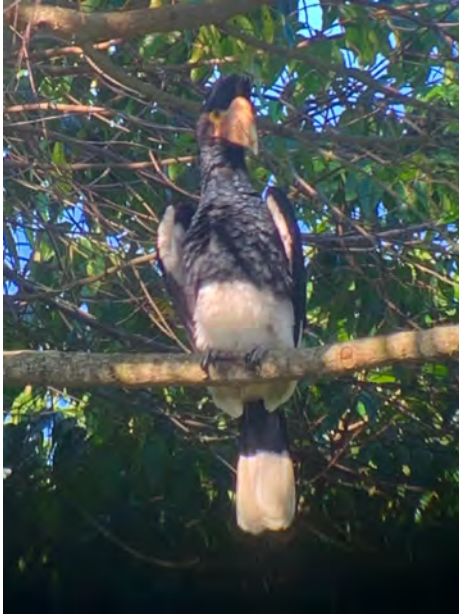
## Sun., Feb. 16 Birding the Royal Mile of Budongo Forest

The Royal Mile, a suburb birding spot with many sought-after key species, lies at the edge of the Albertine Rift and is attached to Murchison Falls National Park in the south. As we approached, we stopped for great looks at a target species, the White-thighed Hornbill. We picked up a local guide to assist us in birding on the trail. The mile trail is wide and open and birds can be easily spotted. We were amazed at the number and variety that we saw including: the endemic Chocolate-backed Kingfisher, Brown-eared Woodpecker, Golden-crowned Woodpecker, Green and Red-faced Crombec, four Greenbul species, Red-bellied Malimbe, Green Hylia, and Sabine's Spinetail. We brought a picnic lunch, enabling us to spend most of the day there, eventually seeing 74 rare East African species!

## Mon., Feb. 17 Drive to Murchison Falls National Park

Today we left Masindi and drove to Murchison Falls, stopping before lunch to walk down and view the falls. The falls on the White Nile River is considered among the World's most impressive, dropping over 150 feet creating a deafening roar. Six Rock Pratincole were standing on rocks in the middle of the rushing water seemingly comfortable in the rapids. Lunch was enjoyed at Red Chili's, and we crossed the Nile on the new bridge being constructed by Chinese contractors. We stopped to bird along the newly constructed highway and found Moustached Grass-Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Silverbird, and hundreds of migrating Abdim's Stork. We settled into our comfortable safari lodge, finding Marabou Stork wading in the shallow end of the swimming pool that overlooked the Victoria Nile.





## Tues., Feb. 18 Morning Safari Game Drive | Afternoon Cruise

We arose early this morning to begin our game drive. A Waterbuck was seen resting serenely on the hill and suddenly someone yelled “Giraffes”! Our first sighting of these magnificent mammals was breathtaking! Many Kob grazed in the area, and Patas monkey groups lounged in the trees. The colorful Abyssinian Roller posed at treetop near the bus. Male and female Abyssinian Ground-Hornbill, Black-rumped Waxbills, Spotted Morning Thrush, Black-crowned Tchagra, Blue-naped Mousebird, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, and three cuckoo species were only some of the 65 bird species that were seen.

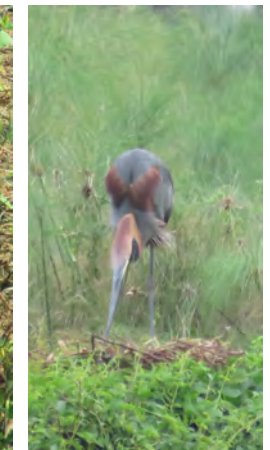
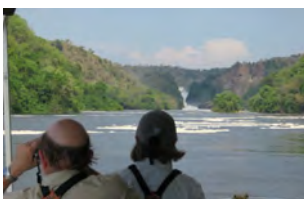
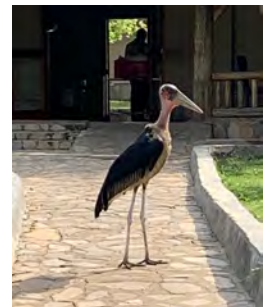
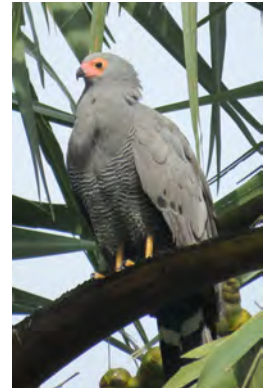
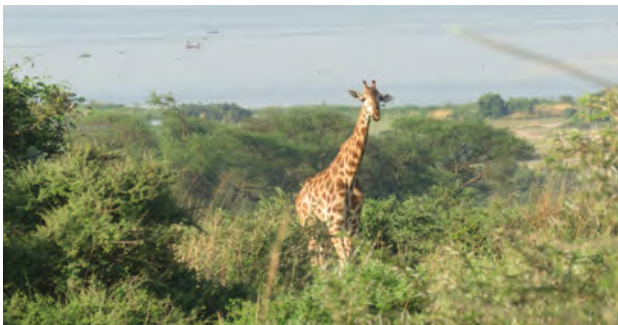
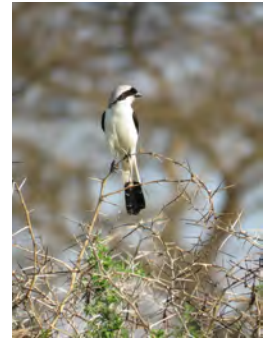
An afternoon cruise on the Victoria Nile complemented the game drive. African Swampphen, three Lapwing species, five sandpipers, African Skimmers, herons, egrets, and the distinctive Goliath Heron were seen closely and well from the boat. We traveled to where Murchison Falls empties into the Nile for another view of this renowned, World-famous spectacle. What a fabulous day we would never forget!

## Wed., Feb. 19 Game Drive | Cruise on the Victoria Nile Delta

Sadly, this was our last full day in Murchison Falls. We had an early morning game drive before joining the Nile delta cruise with sightings of the prehistoric looking Abyssinian Ground-Hornbill, Beaudouin’s Snake-Eagle, Martial Eagle, Grasshopper Buzzard, and African Harrier-Hawk. Unbelievable! We boarded our boat and waited for the drawbridge on the new Nile crossing to be lifted to enter the Victoria Nile delta. We spotted a Goliath Heron building a nest in the marsh among the Gray, Black-headed, Purple, Squacco, and Striated Herons. A pair of Giant Kingfisher were vocalizing and demonstrating mating activity along the shore. Sitting quietly in the marsh, we watched Carruther’s Cisticolas, Greater Swamp Warblers, Little Rush-Warblers, and White-winged Swamp Warblers. At the opening of the delta, an African Openbill sat on a log with Gulls, terns, and sandpipers feeding nearby.

Our final game drive was late in the afternoon and early evening. A stop at the shore of the Nile produced storks, Ibis, sandpipers, lapwings, Black-winged Stilts, Spotted Thick-knee, and our last Gray Crowned-Cranes. Kob, Waterbuck, Nile Bushbuck, Giraffe, Warthog, Hartebeest, Oribi and buffalo were grazing on the Savanna. A Side-striped Jackel was resting under a bush; and, at dusk, Herbert spotted Blotched genet, White-tailed mongoose, and a Bunyoro rabbit. We agreed during our farewell dinner and final checklist that this was a fabulous ending to our memorable journey through the pearl of Africa, Uganda! Our trip totals: Bird Species 402; Mammals, 39 (11 Monkeys); Carnivores, 8; Reptiles, 5









## Photo Credits:

Elephant with baby, Pat Lueders (PL); Crowned Hornbill, PL; Rothchild Giraffe, PL; African Fish-Eagle, PL; Woodland Kingfisher, PL; Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills, PL; Boma Guesthouse, PL; Shoebill, PL; Mabamba Swamp boat trip, PL; Bwindi boat cruise, PL; Bwindi Haven Lodge dining room, PL; Group at Equator, Herbert Byaruhanga (HB); Hippo, PL; Pied Kingfisher, PL; Nile Stout beer, PL; Buffalo group with Cattle Egret, PL; Buffalo, PL; Male Finfoot, PL; Female Finfoot, PL; Bare-faced Go-away-bird, PL; Judith Mirembe with jack fruit, PL; Malachite Kingfisher, PL; Gorilla statue, Gorilla Mist Lodge, PL; Bwindi Gorilla trek group, HB; View of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, PL; Guide with gorilla family photo, PL; Gorilla, PL; Bwindi gorilla trek group, PL; Bwindi Gorilla Trek porters, PL; Silverback, PL; Bwindi village shop, PL; Bwindi women's dancing group, PL; Gorilla trek group, HB; Kabale group picnic, PL; Tea plantation, PL; Palm-nut Vulture, PL; Elephants in Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP), PL; Red-throated Bee-eater, PL; Hippo, QENP, PL; "Hippo" boat, Kazenga Channel, PL; Elephant group, Kazenga Channel, PL; Spotted Hyena, PL; Lions, PL; Male Chimpanzee, PL; Chimp tracking group, HB; Banana harvest, PL; Chimp, PL; Herbert and guide, PL; Great Blue Turaco, PL; Group at Bigodi Swamp, PL; Farewell dinner, Server; White-thighed Hornbill, PL; Boy selling bananas, Ann Hughes; Silverbird, PL; Group birding at Royal Mile, PL; Local residents on Royal Mile, PL; Hobart's red glider butterfly, PL; Group at Murchinson Falls, PL; Red-headed Agama, PL; Gray-backed Fiscal, PL; Rothchild Giraffe above Nile, PL; Waterbuck, PL; African Harrier-Hawk, PL; Abyssinian Roller, PL; Hartebeest, PL; Maribou Stork at Pakuba Safari Lodge, PL; African Pygmy Kingfisher, PL; Murchinson Falls, PL; Rock Pratincole, PL; Palas Monkey, PL; Delta Cruise at new Nile Bridge, PL; Waterbuck, PL; Nesting Goliath Heron, PL; Group photo, HB;