

# Grand Uganda: Fabulous Birds & Mammals | Trip Report | July 15 – 31, 2022 | by Gerard Gorman



**Participants:** Naturalist Journeys group leader Gerard Gorman, with local guides Patricia and Davis, and participants Anne, Gill, Greg, Heather, Jenny, Shannon, Suzanne and Will.



## Trip Summary

Uganda is a remarkable country for wildlife: Indeed, on this trip we had countless memorable encounters with birds, butterflies, reptiles, and large mammals. Where to begin? Well, highlights included close encounters with iconic mammals such as Elephants, Hippos, Giraffes, Baboons, Chimpanzees and Gorillas, as well as various monkeys, a range of antelopes and parties of comical Common Warthogs. We recorded an impressive 354 species of birds – a diverse mix of wildfowl, waders, storks, herons, raptors, turacos, hornbills, kingfishers, bee-eaters, woodpeckers, cisticolas, flycatchers, sunbirds, weavers, etc. But it was not all about numbers, it was about quality. For example, we had outrageously good views of an adult Shoebill with its chick. Reptiles included tiny geckos, chameleons, colorful agamas, two species of monitor lizards and some huge crocodiles. We also found over 70 species of butterflies. In addition, the people we met - local guides, park rangers, lodge staff – were always friendly, charming, and helpful. Of course, we had lots of fun, too, as we always do on Naturalist Journeys tours!

## Fri., Jul. 15

### Our adventure in ‘The Pearl of Africa’ begins!

Those who had flown in days earlier visited the nearby botanical gardens in the morning with Patricia one of our local guides. A graduate of the Ugandan Women’s Birding Association, she was sharp-eyed and knowledgeable, a key team-player throughout our trip. Located on the shore of the vast and famous Lake Victoria, the native vegetation provides a haven in an urban area for many species. Those of us who arrived today, landed at various



times, but everyone was punctually met at the airport by a driver and car from the hotel. After settling in, several of us birded the hotel grounds seeing African Thrush, Northern Brown and Baglaffeht Weavers, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Double-toothed Barbet, Red-eyed Dove, Northern Black Flycatcher, Black-headed Gonolek, African Gray Woodpecker, noisy Eastern Gray Plantain-eaters and colorful, gorgeous, outrageous-looking, Ross's Turacos. Common Bulbuls were almost everywhere. A very birdy and wonderful beginning to our time in Uganda, the 'Pearl of Africa'! Our a-la-carte dinner was at 7pm, during which we met Herbert Byaruhanga, our local organizer, a jolly and experienced chap, who outlined our plans for the next day. As we ate, House Geckos watched us from the walls above with their big eyes. We would see these almost translucent little reptiles at most of the places we stayed at during the tour. We all retired early in order to get a full night's sleep before our African adventure would continue.

## **Sat., Jul. 16                      Entebbe – Mabamba Swamp | Shoebill Boat Trip | Entebbe Botanical Gardens**

Red-eyed Dove, African Thrush and Northern Brown-throated Weavers were all active in the garden. We departed at 7am for the Mabamba Swamp, an extensive, channel-riddled wetland of reeds and papyrus which lies by Lake Victoria. A Wetland of International Importance, it is famed as one of the best places in Africa to watch Shoebill. We had a medium-size bus, and everyone had a window seat. Our driver, Samuel, was excellent. He became a key member of our team, unassuming and very patient, even when we shouted 'Stop', 'Go back', etc., when an animal was spotted someone wanted to photograph. We headed in a westward direction, driving for around two hours, first on a paved road, and then on a rather bumpy back road. We passed through busy and colorful settlements, most with dozens of small stores and businesses, selling just about anything you can imagine. It was fascinating to see how people went about their lives in rural Uganda. As we went along, we often saw Pied Crows, Marabou Storks, African Openbills and perched Long-crested Eagles. Black Kites were almost always in the air. Broad-billed Rollers, Blue-breasted and Madagascar Bee-eaters, Woodland Kingfishers and Lizard Buzzards were on roadside wires. Rüppell's Starlings, long tailed and glossy, soon became favorites. We arrived at the boat landing area where various hirundines were in the air and weavers and sunbirds in the trees. The weather was ideal: warm, clear, no sign of rain at all. We then hopped into three canoe-like wooden boats, watched by a Hamerkop that perched on a moored boat, and set off along a main channel and then into narrow backwaters. Almost the first bird seen in the tall reeds was a Fan-tailed Widowbird. There were several species of herons and egrets, and Long-tailed Cormorants, African Jacanas, Black Crakes, Long-toed Lapwings, White-faced Whistling-Ducks, Yellow-billed Ducks, Gray-hooded Gulls, and African Marsh Harriers, were soon seen. There were dozens of Pied Kingfishers and the odd Malachite Kingfisher, a colorful little stunner. It was





clear, however, that our crew were on a mission to find us a Shoebill. It did not take them too long to do so, either. First, a single five-foot tall individual standing almost motionless in a backwater. It was a remarkable sight, like a 'prehistoric monster', with an outrageously big bill. The bird was slightly obscured by vegetation and after eyeing us for a while flew off.

We motored on to another part of the swamp, the boat guys certainly knew where they were going and what they were doing. After much maneuvering to get us into the best areas, with these young men at times heroically wading waist deep in water, we then had close views of another adult standing guard over a chick! It was simply magnificent. The cameras clicked away. We stayed for almost an hour, finally leaving to make room for another boat of birders that arrived. Success of the highest order! Back on land, we ate our packed lunch in the shade of a pavilion and then returned to Entebbe. We took a slightly different route, but still a bumpy one, finding Striped Kingfishers, White-throated Bee-eaters and Great Blue Turacos. We stopped at the hotel for a brief 'comfort stop' before visiting the nearby Entebbe Botanical Gardens. The mix of native and exotic trees here meant birds were numerous. But the first animals we saw were Vervet Monkeys. They were curious about us, perhaps looking for something to eat. Others were squabbling among themselves, and one chased another: these monkeys have a strict social ranking system and fight to try to rise up it. We saw a pair of Black-and-White-Casqued Hornbills flying to their nest in a hollow in a big tree and also a Crowned Hornbill. A tree by the lake was covered in roosting herons and egrets. Reluctantly, we returned to the hotel for dinner after which we ran through our checklist of the day's sightings and made plans for the next day. It was already clear that our trip to Uganda was going to be full of wildlife.

## **Sun., Jul. 17**

### **Entebbe | Drive to the Mbuoro National Park**

We had a fine breakfast at 6.30am and then left for our next base in the Mbuoro National Park. We mostly drove in a south-western direction and were stopped at a police checkpoint, nothing sinister, just a routine control with our driver's paperwork examined. The journey, once again, allowed us to take in the colorful sights and sounds of roadside Uganda. Every few miles or so we'd see a Long-crested Eagle sat on a pole, and Angola Swallows, Gray-backed Fiscals and Lilac-breasted and Broad-billed Rollers were often on wires. At a stop for restrooms and drinks, we saw a Common Kestrel, Little Swifts and the usual Hadada Ibises, Red-eyed Doves, Pied Crows and Common Bulbuls. Soon after the town of Mpigi we pulled in at the Equator, where we posed for photographs. We continued onwards, into the southern hemisphere which, not surprisingly, was very much like the northern! We ate a packed lunch at a small resort, and as we did so a raucous group of Black-lored Babbler



showed well. As we left a Laughing Dove, and a beautiful Greater Blue-eared Starling were spotted at the roadside. Further on, a small reservoir hosted a selection of storks, egrets and Gray Crowned-Cranes, so we pulled over. This crane is Uganda's national bird and appears on the country's coat of arms and flag. Soon after as the landscape began to change to wooded savanna, we saw the first Zebras of the trip. The taxonomy and nomenclature of this iconic wild horse is rather complex and sometimes confusing. Different books call these animals different names, depending upon subspecies and where they occur, for example, Plains, Burchill's or simply Common Zebra. Our local guides insisted the ones we were seeing were a subspecies known as 'Maneless Zebra'. In the late afternoon we reached the gate of the park. We stopped to get our entrance permits, and at once came upon a family of Warthogs. With their somewhat 'comical' appearance and the postures they take up, particularly when they kneel down to feed, these tusked members of the pig family are always popular. Birds here included Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Northern Gray-headed Sparrow, Little Weaver, and Crested and Double-toothed Barbets.

Once in the park, we started to see Olive Baboons and big mammals in good numbers. Waterbuck, stout, heavy-looking and with a large white rump-patch, were common. The subspecies here is often referred to as the Defassa Waterbuck. Impalas were numerous: groups of 'bachelor' males and nursery herds of females with young. Males of this graceful, medium-sized antelope have sharply pointed, grooved, lyrate horns, while females lack them. There was more excitement when we saw our first Giraffes, the tallest mammal on the planet. Like the Zebra, the taxonomy of Giraffes has been heavily debated. Some authorities recognize just one species with nine subspecies, others split it into several distinct species. Our local guides referred to the ones in Uganda as Nubian Giraffes. Whatever, they are elegant animals with a lattice patterned coat of brown and tan patches bordered by white and cream lines. We also saw a significantly shorter mammal, a single Nile Bushbuck. This species is one of the smallest horned antelopes - only the males have the short, pointed, spiral horns. Both Vervet and Tantalus Monkeys were here. We often struggled to tell these two remarkably similar relatives apart, indeed they have been regarded as the same species. After a few miles more we checked into our tented camp, a classic African safari camp. Its location on a hilltop offered a panoramic view over the wooded savanna from the lounge and restaurant.

## **Mon., Jul. 18                      Mburo National Park | Game-drive | Birding Lake Mburo**

Today we began with an early morning game-drive. Our wake-up calls were gentle 'knocks' on our tents by staff





who offered us cookies with coffee or tea. Such clever and kind hospitality. Everyone had a window seat in the bus, and we were soon seeing, and getting photographs of, Olive Baboons, Zebras, Giraffes, African Buffalos, Impalas, Waterbucks and Warthogs. A single Topi, a handsome, chestnut-brown colored antelope, walked across the road in front of us. It was not clear which sex it was, as both males and females have thick, lyre-shaped, ringed, horns. We also spotted a couple of Common Eland, but these seemed shy and did not come close. These are the largest antelopes in Africa, males reaching over five foot at the shoulder, and both sexes have horns. Some of the buffalos, the only wild species of cattle in Africa, were 'loners' (or 'losers' as Davis called them), single bulls that had been forced out of the herd by more dominant ones. At 10am we set off on a boat trip on Lake Mburo. Vervet and Tantalus Monkeys were in the parking area, and we saw our first Hippopotamus before we had even boarded the boat. These giants were unmistakable, weighing up to two tons, hard to miss! They were wallowing in the shallow water near the shore, and occasionally made their grunts and snorts, tail-flicking and water splashes. Over the next two hours we would see herds of up to twenty individuals, which though living together, appeared to hardly tolerate each other.

We boarded a medium-sized, comfortable craft, which had a sunroof and 360 degree views. Perfect. Our main avian target was the African Finfoot, an aquatic bird that looks like a cross between a duck and cormorant, with a thin bright red-orange bill and thick orange lobed feet. Finfoots are quite widespread by rivers and lakes across Africa but can be secretive and hard to find. That was not the case today as our boat guides knew where these birds were hanging out and steered us expertly to two different individuals foraging under shoreline branches. Another special bird here is the White-backed Night-heron, once again, our boat crew knew where a pair were breeding. Though it took a little time, we all eventually spied one sitting still on its nest deep in the lakeside bushes. Other birds seen, often on the shoreline, included Egyptian Goose, Hamerkop, Striated Heron, Black Crake, Water Thick-knee, Spur-winged Lapwing and African Jacana. This was kingfisher heaven, too, with Malachite, Woodland, Striped and scores of Pied Kingfishers, all seen well. Rufous-chested Swallows and White-headed Sawwings swirled over the lake, and we counted over twenty African Fish-eagles, some in flight, many perched in trees. A flock of Glossy Ibis (a rarity here) circled high overhead, too. We spotted various large mammals which had come to the lake shore to drink, and a few Nile Crocodiles, resting on the land and lurking in the shallows.

After around two fantastic hours we disembarked and went back to the lodge for lunch. In the afternoon, we drove the park's tracks again. A gang of vultures perched atop a tree quite close to the road drew our attention. Sure enough, we spotted a dead Zebra foal which, for the moment, the scavengers had not feasted on. After a 6.30pm dinner, some of us followed one of the camp's staff who knew spots where nightjars tended to sit. Flashlights in hand we set off on an easy trail through the camp. It did not take long to find a Square-tailed



Nightjar sitting on a gravel track, and then, just beyond it a male Pennant-winged Nightjar doing likewise. When it took off, we followed it with a flashlight as it displayed above the trees, seeing its impressive 'pennants', long plumes that grow out from its wings. What a bird! During the night Spotted Hyenas laughed not far away.

## **Tues., Jul. 19                      Mburo | Drive to the Bwindi National Park | Buhoma**

We had breakfast this morning at 6.30am, checked-out and set off at 7.30am for our next base in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. During breakfast everyone wondered why the monkeys were making such a constant racket nearby. Was a predator around? The mystery was solved when one of the staff explained that the monkeys were upset by the large image of a leopard that adorned the back of our bus! Before leaving Mburo, we stopped for final views of the Zebras, Eland and Impalas, as we were told that they only occurred in this region and would not be seen in the other places we were to visit. As we did so, we also saw more Olive Baboons, Warthogs, African Buffalos and Waterbuck. Our route was generally westwards, and passed through numerous small settlements, and stretches of banana and pineapple plantation and people herding Ankole Longhorns, a breed of cattle that have extraordinarily large, heavy-looking horns. A Shikra and Banded Snake-eagles were perched on roadside utility poles, and Northern Fiscals perched on wires started to become numerous. As well as Speckled Mousebirds, we also spotted our first Blue-naped Mousebirds. A small wetland hosted many herons, egrets, storks and a few Pink-backed Pelicans.

We ate our lunch by a bridge over a small river at the bottom of a gorge. Various swifts, swallows, and martins were swooping over and under the bridge. As we went on, plantations of coffee and tea started to dominate the landscape. We made several unscheduled stops when birds were spotted, including one when around fifty Gray Crowned-Cranes were stood in a field. We arrived in Buhoma, our base in the Bwindi NP, in the late afternoon. This legendary forested upland nestles in the very south-west of Uganda in the Albertine Rift valley and borders the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Albertine Rift (also known as Africa's Western Rift Valley) is one of the richest regions on the African continent in regard to biodiversity. We would stay for three nights, our comfortable chalet rooms located in very pleasant and birdy grounds. Uganda Blue-headed Tree Agamas, colorful reptiles we would see on several of the days to come, were basking on the lawn. The view from the restaurant and bar over the forested mountains was stupendous.

## **Wed., Jul. 20                      Bwindi National Park | Mountain Gorilla Trek**

Today we would embark on a trek to find Mountain Gorillas. This primate, without question, is one of the most





iconic mammals in the world. The Bwindi National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and home to around half of the world's population of these endangered apes. We were up early, leaving at 5am. We had coffee and tea before departure and took a packed breakfast with us. We arrived at the meeting point, registered for the trek and then listened to a briefing by a ranger on the history of gorillas here in Uganda's forests and how we should be conduct ourselves on the trek and when we meet these primates. A group of local women sang and played music and some of our group, notably Suzanne and Shannon, joined in. Then came the serious stuff. We would be looking for the largest of all primates, mature males of which, called Silverbacks owing to a saddle of grey on the lower backs, can weigh almost 400 pounds. Gorillas are not predators, they are vegetarian and generally placid, but they are big, powerful and intelligent, and so not to be trifled with. We were escorted by a team of rangers, trackers and porters who would help us carry our gear. The head tracker explained that the gorilla family we would track was composed of eleven individuals, that they were wild, not tame, but habituated to humans, and hence tolerated close approach.

We were each assigned a porter who would carry our backpacks and help us when needed during the trek. The forest was quiet for most of our trek. It was hot and dry, and very few birds were active, but one of the trackers pointed out a gorgeous reptile, the Rwenzori Three-horned Chameleon (aka Johnston's Chameleon). This particularly pleased Will, who had said that he was very keen on these reptiles. After around three hours of walking through the jungle, at first on a good trail, but often up-and-down, which was not easy for everyone, we reached a spot where the trackers asked us to stop. We prepared ourselves and our cameras. And there they were, Mountain Gorillas! At first females with infants and then the dominant male. He was relatively young, perhaps 13-14 years, and with only a developing mantle of greyish hair. He was a young 'silverback' who had done well for himself. We were privileged to spend over an hour with these stunning animals. They were sometimes just a few yards away and at times they were all around us, but they were never concerned by our presence. It was majestic, as Jenny said, 'That was a truly once in a lifetime experience, one that most people will never do'. After quietly spending time with the great apes, carefully getting photographs and video footage, we trekked back. We paused to take it all in, and eat our packed lunches, sharing what we had with our porters and trackers. Finally, upon reaching the main road, we were presented with a certificate to commemorate our visit. It was explained that the fees we had paid would contribute to the funds needed to protect the area and its wildlife. It had all been organized very well. In the afternoon, we rested back at our lodge, had refreshments, and birded from the veranda. What a momentous day it had been!



**Thurs., Jul. 21**

## **Bwindi National Park | Buhoma Trail | Visit to the Women's Community Centre in Buhoma**

This morning we were joined by Matthew, an expert local birding guide. We walked on a flat, easy road trail from the national park center - much easier than it had been the trek the previous day. It was a birdy route and Matthew quickly pointed out two woodpecker species, Buff-spotted and Elliot's. A great find was a Dwarf Honeyguide, an Albertine Rift endemic. The birds kept coming: Klaas's Cuckoo, Black Bee-eater, Gray-throated Barbet, Speckled Tinkerbird, Brown-throated Wattle-eye, Northern Puffback, Luehder's Bushshrike, African Paradise-Flycatcher, White-tailed Blue-Flycatcher, Shelley's Greenbul, Green Crombec, Green Hylia, Gray Apalis, White-chinned Prinia, Dusky-Blue Flycatcher, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Rufous Flycatcher-Thrush and a host of sunbirds. Some were seen well, others only glimpsed as the forest undergrowth was dense in places. Tambourine Doves were cooing constantly. Suddenly, we heard a troop of Chimpanzees in the canopy. Even our local guide was excited as these apes apparently seldom visit this stretch of forest. We only glimpsed the Chimpanzees but later saw Mantled Guerezas (also known as Black-and-White Colobus) and Red-tailed Monkeys as they moved through the tall trees. We also had tremendous views of several Great Blue Turacos, calling loudly and displaying. Two African Harrier-Hawks soared high over a clearing. On the walk back we glimpsed another primate species, L'Hoest's Monkey, a couple hiding low down in leafy bushes. This is a true forest primate that often forages on the ground, but on this occasion these individuals did not come out into the open. After an incredibly good morning, we returned to our lodge for lunch. As it was getting sunnier and warmer, the trail was now alive with butterflies, in flight and 'puddling' on damp spots. The beautiful swallowtail species attracted particular attention. In the afternoon we visited a community project run by local women, called 'Ride 4 a Woman'. This charitable organisation was set up to support women struggling with various issues. It started with the idea of bicycle rentals, and women were trained to keep bikes in working order. Later, they began to take-up sewing, quilt-work and make craft items like baskets which they started to sell, the proceeds being shared. Today over fifty women are involved, and the community has grown. The women in our group – Anne, Jenny, Gill, Suzanne, Heather, Shannon - got involved, chatting and buying baskets and textiles.

Some of us bought the locally produced Kanyonyi 'Gorilla Conservation Coffee'. Kanyonyi was a famous silverback in Bwindi and \$1.50 of every kilo of the coffee named after him goes towards funding the protection of his ancestors. Another very worthy cause. This visit was not without its wildlife, either. Knowing we were interested in animals, one of the women showed us two Mountain Side-striped Chameleons (also known as





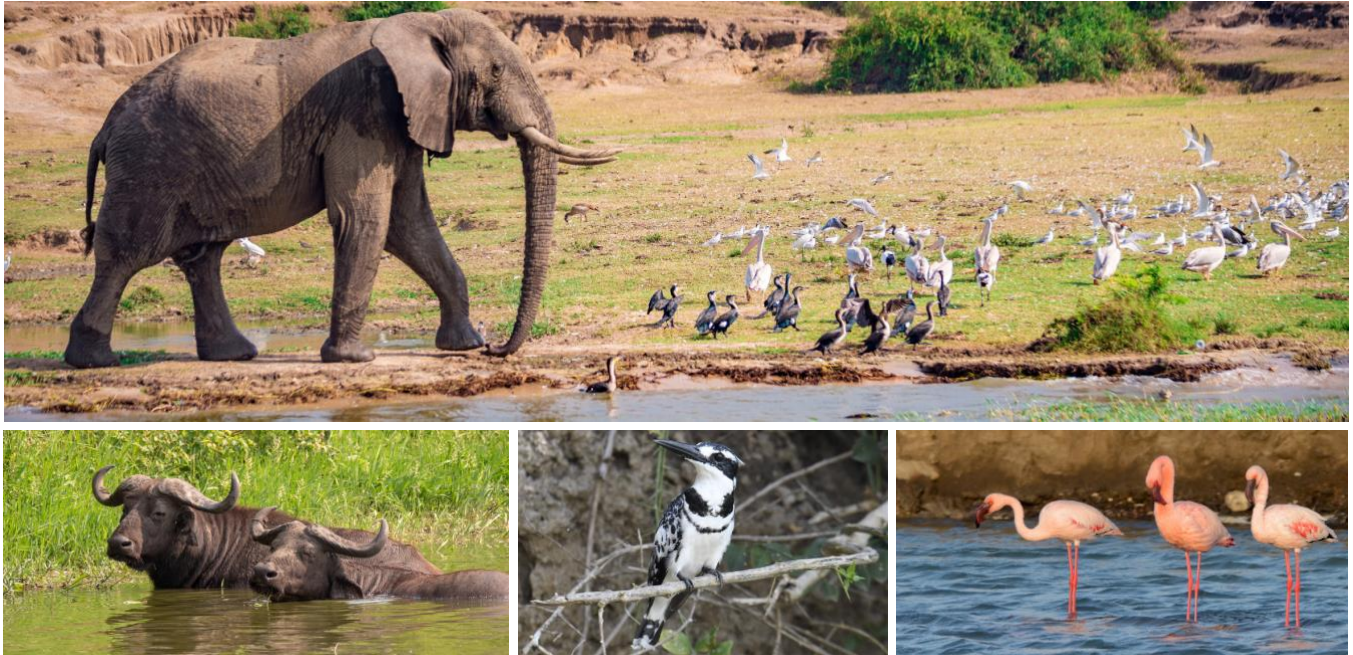
Two-lined Chameleon and Elliot's Groove-throated Chameleon), an adult and a younger individual. This particularly pleased Greg (who specializes in 'herps'). Unfortunately, Will had not come along to the centre and so this time missed getting chameleon photographs. That evening, as we were served another delicious dinner, we could hear Chimpanzees calling and squabbling noisily in the dense green forest across the valley. It had been a brilliant day and we were now listening to one of the quintessential sounds of Africa.

## Fri., Jul. 22

## Drive from Buhoma | Queen Elizabeth National Park

We left after breakfast at 8am and drove to northwards following the Albertine Rift towards the Queen Elizabeth National Park. Today was mostly a travel day and in stretches we were on gravel and dirt roads, but we stopped often, for birds, mammals and for gas, restrooms and coffee. Families of ever-popular Olive Baboons were often at roadsides and in forested areas Red-tailed Monkeys and Mantled Guerezas were occasionally spotted. Just outside a village like many others we had passed through, we stopped in farmland with scattered trees. Davis told us that he'd seen a Rufous-necked Wryneck here recently. That got us scrambling out of the bus. Also called Red-throated Wryneck, this species is one of only two wryneck species, both in the Old World (the other being Eurasian Wryneck). These birds belong to the woodpecker family but do not resemble 'true' woodpeckers as they have delicately pointed bills, soft tails and are unable to make their own nesting cavities. We played a call and almost at once a bird flew in. A Rufous-necked Wryneck, a lifer for most! As we got closer to our destination, the habitat opened up from forest to savanna and we started to see big game: a couple of Topi, and our first herds of Kobs, stocky but elegant antelopes with stout lyre-shaped horns that are bigger than those of Impalas. The subspecies here is known as the Ugandan Kob and features on the country's coat of arms alongside Gray Crowned-Cranes.

But excitement levels rose when we came upon our first elephants. There are two species of these huge, unmistakable, creatures in Africa - the Savanna Elephant and Forest Elephant. The ones we saw were the former, which are the bigger of the two. We had splendid views of cows, calves and big bulls, 'tuskers' which can stand over nine feet tall and weigh over six tons! At the end of today we had counted ten (by the end of our trip we had seen hundreds). We also saw a Savanna Monitor, a stocky, powerful-looking lizard, of about three feet in length. Today had also been a momentous day for butterflies, too, with some delightfully named and gorgeous species on the wing, like Black and Yellow Swallowtail (aka Hesperus Swallowtail), Common Citrus Swallowtail, Noble Swallowtail, African Queen, Spotted Hairtail, Common Dotted Border, Mountain Pied Pierrot, Blue Mother of Pearl, African Leaf, African Map, Blue Policeman and Common Fairy Hairstreak. Heather, as full as



energy and enthusiasm as ever, managed to photograph several of them.

**Sat., Jul. 23**

## **Queen Elizabeth National Park | Dame Drive | Birding the Kazinga Channel**

This morning we began with a game-drive through the savanna with Common Warthogs, Elephants, African Buffalo, Waterbuck and Kob all seen in high numbers and well. Yellow-billed Oxpeckers rode on the backs of some of these mammals. Other birds included Helmeted Guineafowl, Red-necked Francolin, Black-shouldered Kite, Palm-nut Vulture, Bateleur, Wahlberg's Eagle, Black-bellied Bustard, Senegal Lapwing, Common Scimitarbill, Gray Kestrel, Black Bishop, White-tailed Lark and African Pipit, a great mix of species. We stopped to watch a group of Kob at their display ground, an open grassland where males battled, competing with each other for females and mating with them. We were informed through the local 'grapevine' that Lions had been found not too far away, so Samuel quickly drove us in that direction. Unfortunately, we were not able to get close to the big cats, only getting glimpses of two of them. Before heading off for lunch, we stopped at the Katwe salt-works where Lesser Flamingos were added to our list. It was hot here, and we wondered how the poor folks working there, collecting and hauling sacks of salt, could stand the heat. Lunch was a terrific buffet in a lodge where Queen Elizabeth had stayed in 1954. Needless to say, the quality and service here was regal. As we prepared to leave, a troop of Banded Mongoose entertained us in the grounds. One of the adults had a radio-collar on its neck, so it seems these animals were being studied.

Next up was one of the major highlights of our time in Uganda (and there were many), a boat trip on the Kazinga Channel, a long body of water that links Lakes Edward and George. It was simply amazing. We had fantastic views of families of elephants on the shore and drinking and dipping in the lake. There were some small 'cute' calves, their trunks swaying back-and-forth 'out-of-control'. At another spot, two bulls sparred in mock-battle. There were also Giant Forest Hogs, the biggest wild pigs in the world. Both sexes, but especially mature boars, have notable tusks. Hippopotamus, African Buffalos, Waterbucks (males with long, heavy, ridged horns, females without them) were all seen up-close and photographed. Indeed, when safe to do so (there were seriously big animals out there) the boatman steered us as close to the shore as he could. When he did so at a sandy bank with many Pied Kingfisher nesting burrows, we spotted a Nile Monitor. The birds were clearly not happy having this egg-eating lizard close to their nests. This specimen was about four feet long, but they can grow to double





that. We all got photographs of the wildlife, but later Gill would show us some of the really excellent ones she had taken with her smartphone, making us wonder why we were carrying around cameras with big lenses! After a simply phenomenal day we drove back to our lodge. Before dinner, some group members went in the lodge's pool, which looked out over the park. Going through our checklist of sightings we reckoned we had seen over one hundred elephants today.

### **Sun., Jul. 24                      Drive from Queen Elizabeth National Park to Fort Portal**

On we went, today in a northern direction towards Kibale. But it did not take long before we stopped, to watch and get photographs of a sow Giant Forest Hog and her piglet foraging right at the roadside. It is unusual to get such close views of this behemoth. A little further on we pulled in just before the Katunguru Bridge which goes over the Kazinga Channel before it connects with Lake George. Our target here was Papyrus Gonolek, a bird that is only found around wetlands with thick papyrus stands. It is rarer, harder to find and trickier to observe than its close relative Black-headed Gonolek, which is more general in its habitat needs – indeed we'd already seen several on the trip. Other birders were already here, also looking for the Papyrus Gonolek, but they had had no success. We were patient, looking and listening, and meanwhile seeing other great species like Gray-headed Kingfisher, Lesser Striped Swallows, Black-headed Weaver, and the only Carruther's Cisticola of our trip. Then, just as we were about to leave, our target bird called and showed itself. Another success, thanks to the knowledge and tenacity of our local guides. Continuing northwards, we crossed the Equator near Kikorongo, going back into the Northern Hemisphere. After a fairly uneventful drive, passing through settlements of all sizes, we arrived at our comfortable accommodation in Fort Portal in the Kingdom of Tooro in the late afternoon. We were told an interesting fact about this place: the reigning monarch there, King Oyo, was the youngest ever to be crowned when in 1995 he ascended to the throne at the age of just three. Although now older, King Oyo is still the youngest monarch in the world. But back to the birds. We checked into our hotel in a suburb which had a Bronze Sunbird, African Thrushes, Speckled Mousebirds and, of course, Common Bulbuls in its garden. We had an early night as tomorrow would be another day of trekking, this time in search of another great ape, the Chimpanzee.

### **Mon., Jul. 25                      Kibale National Park | Pitta Search | Chimpanzee Tracking | Bigodi Trail Birding**

We left early with a packed breakfast. After an hour of driving, we reached the Kibale Chimpanzee Tracking headquarters. The tropical evergreen forest habitats of Kibale are home to over a dozen species of primates and today we hoped to see one of the most iconic of them all. We met our park guide Justus, who gave us



background information, safety instructions and then took us on the short drive to where we'd begin our jungle trek. But first, as the sun began to rise, we would search for a special bird, the Green-breasted Pitta. Justus soon showed us what an expert he was. He told us how he expected the pitta to behave, that it would call from high in a tree before first light, then move lower and finally drop to the ground. And that is exactly what happened. We saw a bird in the mid canopy and then were amazed when it suddenly appeared before us, hopping on an open track. Remarkable! It later went into the forest undergrowth, but then came back and perched on a log as the light improved. Good views of an often difficult bird to see. We moved on and as we went, we noticed areas that seemed to have been 'trashed', with broken trees and flattened vegetation. There were also huge, dinner-plate-sized footprints, some quite fresh, and piles of dung; Forest Elephants had passed this way. Our tracking guide encouraged us to move on. Although Forest Elephants are smaller than their relatives on the plains, they are still huge beasts and said to be generally more 'aggressive', hence it is best not to encounter them within the confines of a forest. We saw movement in the canopy - a troop of Red-tailed Monkeys. Then we finally found the Chimpanzees, a female with sub-adults and an infant sitting high up in a tree. In another tree behind the apes, a Narina Trogon was spotted, too.

Later, two big male Chimps crossed the road, one was rather old and carrying injuries. We had splendid views of these, especially as they paused to look back at us. As we were about to board our vehicle, I pointed out a pile of fresh elephant dung by roadside - some folks found this most very amusing. We stopped at the park centre where we were presented with a certificate and grabbed refreshments and a few souvenirs from a small store. As we drove along, a large troop of Olive Baboons, of all ages, sat confidently on the road, only moving to the side when we were right upon them. We walked the road with tall trees on both sides seeing three species of starling, Violet-backed, Chestnut-winged and Purple-headed, which were all new for the trip. Then it was time for lunch, and everyone was ready. This was in another lodge with a very birdy garden. Dessert was an artistically arranged choice of fruit – pineapple, melon and mango. A nice touch and refreshing and delicious. In the afternoon, one or two decided to rest and relax in the shade of the lounge whilst the rest of us continued birding. Two young local birders, Perezi and Innocent, took us around a trail at Bigodi. We were first shown their small library and they explained how they involve the local community in conservation. Both of these young men were excellent. Patricia felt at home here, too, as this is where she had served her birding 'apprenticeship'. The first species they found for us was a Lesser Honeyguide, which was inspecting a tree cavity quite low down. Further along the trail we saw, amongst others, African Green Pigeon, Hairy-breasted Barbet, an exquisite African Pygmy-Kingfisher, African Blue-Flycatcher, Cardinal Woodpecker and, almost last but certainly not least, a Speckle-breasted Woodpecker. As we headed back, Mantled Guerezas started to call noisily. We had also seen a rich range of butterflies today and once again Heather was at the fore naming them. They included Green-



Banded (aka Apple-Green) Swallowtail, Narrow Blue-banded Swallowtail, Cambridge Vagrant, Weymer's Glider and False Diadem.

## **Tues., Jul. 26**                      **Nguse River Camp | Masindi**

Today was mostly a day of travelling. We left at 8am for our next base in the town of Masindi, to the north-east. Fort Portal was already busy, with folks out and about and kids in smart uniforms walking to school. We checked-out a small reedy swamp at the edge of town. This proved to be an outstanding urban birding spot. Our main targets were Northern-masked Weaver, the delightful little White-collared Oliveback and a true 'LBJ' (Little Brown Job) the Highland Rush-Warbler. We soon found all of these and other birds, so pushed on, heading northwards on mostly paved roads, passing through colorful villages and small towns. On the journey we saw scores of the 'roadside' and 'wire' birds we had now become familiar with, such as Marabou Storks, Hadada Ibis, Long-crested Eagles, Red-eyed Doves, Woodland Kingfishers, Northern Fiscals, Pied Crows, Angola Swallows, African Pied Wagtails and Rüppell's Starlings. We stopped for an hour at the Nguse River Camp, just after the town of Pachwa, having our packed lunch, and ordering 'Ugandan tea' (hot, sweet and with milk) in the shade. Village and Vieillot's Weavers were building their hanging nests in trees right by the café. We had learned that gardens with flowering and fruiting trees at such places were often good for sunbirds and here was no exception – Scarlet-chested, Bronze, Olive-bellied, Red-chested and Copper Sunbirds were all seen. Davis also found our only Whistling Cisticola of the trip here.

We arrived in Masindi just after 4pm. In the parking area of our hotel a handsome male Red-headed Rock Agama greeted us with his head-bobbing and 'push-ups' territorial display. In the coming days we'd see many of these colorful lizards which, here in Uganda at least, do not have red but rather orange heads, their bodies being blue or turquoise. Owing to this, these herps are sometimes called Rainbow Agamas. Birds around the hotel included, of course, the omnipresent Common Bulbul. A family of Tantalus Monkeys were sat on the roof of a service building in the back yard, the adults grooming and the mischievous young ones chasing each other around. Dinner was a fine buffet, after which we did our checklist of sightings and discussed our plans for the next day.

## **Wed., Jul. 27**                      **Budongo Forest | The Royal Mile**

After an early buffet breakfast, we left at 6.45 for Budongo Forest and the Royal Mile. After around an hour of driving passing through settlements, markets and agricultural land, we were joined by a young local birder called Raymond. We'd find out that he was very sharp-eyed and a virtuoso at imitating birds calls. He first took us to a patch of farmland dotted with bushes which seemed like many others we had passed by, apparently nothing special, but the place was alive with birds - Senegal Cuckoo, Yellow-spotted Barbet, Black-crowned Tchagra, Moustached Grass-Warbler, Red-faced Cisticola, Compact Weaver, Black Bishop, Yellow-mantled and Red-collared Widowbirds, Green-backed and Brown Twinspots, Gray-headed Oliveback, Village Indigobird and more. A superb start. We passed through the village of Nyabyeya which has an old church that was built by Polish refugees during the second World War. Raymond told us that around 7,000 exiles, mainly women and children, settled here, at the edge of Budongo forest for six years before tropical diseases took their toll. Indeed, Uganda has a long tradition of hosting refugees. A little further on, we stopped at the reserve gate to get our entry permits. A Red-headed Rock Agama that was stood on the top of a building nodded his head up and down and did his 'morning exercises': this endearing behaviour always amused us. The Royal Mile is a renowned birding trail, a flat dirt road that runs through the Budongo tropical rainforest. Unlike several other places in Uganda, the 'Royal' here does not refer to the British monarchy but to a local king, a certain Omukama Kabalega. As soon as we entered the forest, we started to find birds amongst the tall, mature trees.

A Brown-eared Woodpecker and a pair of Golden-crowned (aka Yellow-crested) Woodpeckers showed, and



White-thighed Hornbills flew over. Blue-throated Roller, Chestnut Wattle-eye, Ituri Batis, Western-black Headed Oriole, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Gray and Little Greenbuls, Uganda Woodland-Warbler, Buff-throated Apali, African Forest-Flycatcher, Forest Robin and Brown-chested Alethe were all spotted, too. As ever, kingfishers were firm favourites, and here we saw Blue-breasted, African Pygmy and African Dwarf. Then Raymond heard another one, a Chocolate-backed Kingfisher. It was calling from cover and hard to locate at first, but finally there it was, higher up in a tree than we'd expected. We managed to get it in my telescope, and everyone had views. Patricia was especially excited, and later we were to discover why. It was a life bird for her! The forest was exceptionally good for monkeys, too. Mantled Guerezas and Red-tailed Monkeys are highly arboreal and were indeed up in the treetops. A Blue Monkey, a less-common species which is only found in mature forests like this, walked out onto the road ahead of us a few times and took a drink from a small channel. The Royal Mile was also awesome for butterflies. What a grand day we were having! But then it started to rain, not heavy, but enough to force us to eat our packed lunch on the bus. In the mid-afternoon, we bade farewell to Raymond and headed back to Masindi where we had a little free time. Some rested, others caught up with their notes and edited the many photographs they were amassing, and some of us birded the hotel garden. Before dinner Heather (Canada) and Will (USA) played an international table-tennis match in the spacious open-air bar whilst the audience sipped wine and Tusker beer. Canada came out on top in the game.

## Thurs., Jul. 28

## Murchison Falls National Park

We left Masindi at 8am, for our final base in the Murchison Falls National Park just to the north, where we would stay for three nights. At around 1500 square miles this is Uganda's biggest park. A quick stop at an ATM to get local currency was not without its birds. A Red-cheeked Cordonblue was building a nest in a bush and flitted back and forth with material, a pair of Gray Kestrels were sat in a tall tree, and Gray-headed Sparrows and Red-eyed Doves were on wires. Moving on, we passed through plantations and farmland but then the roadside vegetation began to change, becoming more wooded. Just north of Budongo Forest Shannon yelled 'Owl!'. Our ever-alert driver Samuel braked and reversed. And there was a magnificent Verreaux's Eagle-owl! It was perched across a bough, in full view, clutching what seemed to be a chicken leg in one of its talons (there were no KFCs in the area, so it was more likely that of a Helmeted Guineafowl). We opened the windows and stayed in the bus so that we would not flush it and got super views. A few miles on, as we turned a corner, a snake slithered across the road and into a drainage ditch. After a little research, it was later identified as a Spotted Bush Snake. Our next stop was at the famous Murchison waterfalls (aka Kabalega Falls) on the Victoria Nile (a section of the White Nile). These are not the biggest nor highest falls in the world but are considered the most powerful as here the river narrows to a width of about twenty feet, drops about four hundred feet over the course of three cascades, and delivers 11,000 cubic feet per second (300 m<sup>3</sup>/s) in the process. It is spectacular. A group of Rock Pratincoles resting on the boulders in the rapids were new for our trip, and White-headed Sawwings flitted over the white-water. It was time to head on. For a while we followed a road that was under construction, weaving





around the trucks and machinery, and noted that there were guards with rifles – obviously, building a road through a place with elephants, buffalos and big cats can be dangerous for the workers. Indeed, the wooded and open savanna and wetland habitats of the park were full of wildlife, and we soon saw African Buffalos, Waterbucks, Warthogs and three new antelopes for our trip - the small, dainty Oribi, a Bohor Reedbuck and several Hartebeest. The subspecies of the latter that occurs here is known as Lelwel Hartebeest. These upright, high-shouldered antelopes have a distinctive, long face and both sexes have horns. The Giraffes at Murchison seemed on average taller and darker than those we'd seen in Mburo earlier on the trip, but we were assured that height and darker markings were an age-related thing. We also came upon a new primate for our trip, Patas Monkeys. This species lives in the savanna and is more terrestrial than its relatives. Indeed, we did often see them on the ground or standing on stumps and termite mounds, looking out for predators and curiously watching us. We stopped again when a pair of Abyssinian Ground-hornbills were spotted walking through the grass. Will was particularly pleased, as he really wanted to photograph this species. Males of these ground-dwelling members of the family have blue and red bare facial skin, while females have only blue. After only brief views near Entebbe, we were now also coming across flocks of Piapiacs, small, long-tailed, social crows, which were often riding on the backs of large mammals as oxpeckers do. African Palm-swifts, too, were now much more common, presumably as they found the numerous Borassus (Palmyra) Palm trees here ideal for nesting. Before arriving at our lodge, two Black-billed Barbets showed well in a bush. After a buffet lunch, we went out again, driving the park's tracks and seeing a wealth of wildlife, big and small, avian and mammalian. After dinner, some of us we walked the perimeter of the lodge grounds and shone a flashlight into the bush to see if any wildlife was out there. There were lots of Waterbucks and a surprise, an African Civet. This stocky nocturnal predator had very distinctive black, grey and white markings, Suzanne observing that its facial mask 'looked like a racoon's'. Bats were flying around but we were unable to identify them for sure.

## **Fri., Jul. 29**

## **Murchison Falls National Park | Victoria Nile Boat Trip**

Early starts were often necessary to get the best out of each day, so today we had breakfast at 5.30am. Considering the time, the hotel staff served up a good range of things - tea, coffee, juice, eggs, sausages, cereals, fruit. We were away soon after 6am and on a game-drive. A solitary Spotted Hyena walking by the roadside



forced us to stop. It casually sauntered away, paused to drink from a ditch, and then loped off again. We saw Patas Monkeys and lots of antelope, including a Bush (Common) Duiker, a small species that is usually solitary, that proved to be the only one we would see during our trip. A White-tailed Mongoose, a quite large member of the family, which is usually only active at night, was out, too. We also added three typical grassland-dwelling birds to our list: Denham's Bustard, Heuglin's Francolin and Senegal Thick-knee. At 10am we boarded a boat for a cruise on the river. Throughout the trip our boat-trips had been excellent: in terms of the wildlife seen, the riparian habitats visited, and in the way in which we were expertly and safely navigated. We were often placed close to the animals on water and on the shore. There were the 'usual suspects' – Baboons, Hippos, Elephants, African Buffalos, Kobs, Waterbucks, Hartebeest, Giraffes and a lone Nile Bushbuck, indeed the latter were never in herds nor in family groups. Now and then we saw a Nile Monitor and Nile Crocodiles, in big, medium and small sizes, were often lying motionless on the shore, although one would occasionally open its jaws and show its formidable rows of teeth. African Darters were common here, and we saw our first Giant Kingfisher, which really dwarfed the more numerous Pied Kingfishers.

Earlier we had seen the waterfalls from the land, now we visited them from the water. It was another spectacular perspective. Lunch was back at our lodge, then we had the afternoon free: some rested, some birded the grounds, others visited the craft shop and others did a combination. We had planned a night game-drive, after dinner, but a major downpour meant that had to be postponed. The deluge was inconvenient for our plans, but much needed by the parched ground. After our evening buffet, we ran through our checklist of sightings and retired, ready for more adventures to come. As we went to our rooms lots of Waterbucks were resting in the grounds – it seems they were seeking refuge from predators out in the adjacent bush. Interestingly, Davis told us that a pungent fluid which Waterbuck secrete deters most predators, including Lions. A Bunyoro Rabbit, a species which tends to be active after sunset, was hopping around on the grass by our chalets. It had been yet another tremendous day of wildlife watching.

**Sat., Jul. 30**

## **Murchison Falls National Park | Victoria Nile Boat Trip to Lake Albert**

There was another bout of heavy rain in the early morning, but as soon as it stopped, we set off for another boat-trip on the Nile. This time we went downstream towards Lake Albert. It was to be, as previously, a wonderful, wildlife-filled, experience. Our boatman, Isaac, was superb, being professional and expert in where to find the key mammal, bird and reptiles, and he knew the behavior of each species. As we set off, Mantled Guerezas watched us from tall riverside trees. A Giant Kingfisher showed well, perched and in flight. Once again

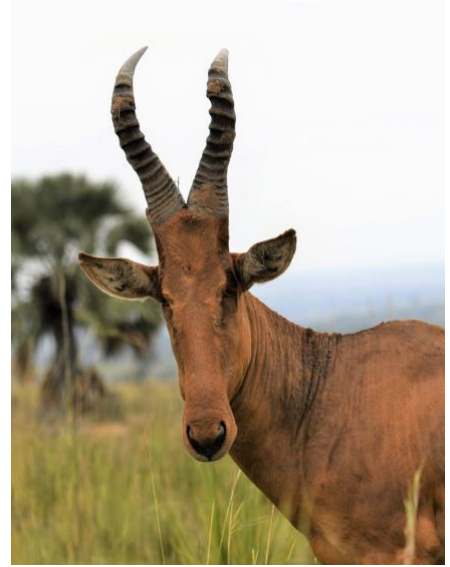




elephants, of all ages and sizes, were seen drinking, bathing and browsing in the bush. A Hippo loafing on the shore was heavily scarred on its back and flanks and had an open wound on one of its legs. Such injuries are usually not inflicted by predators, like crocodiles, but from other hippos. Though social beasts, they are very territorial and feisty. Later, one Hippo reared up out of the lake and faced the boat, in an intimidating display, but we were never in danger as our navigator knew the behavior of these aquatic titans and calmly and expertly steered us away. We also came up a mother and her little calf resting in lakeside vegetation, we glided in but she was not happy to see us, so again we moved away.

On the bird front, herons and egrets were plentiful, and raptors perched in trees, a new one being a huge Martial Eagle, the largest eagle in Africa that can have a wingspan of over six feet. We also got a good view of a Papyrus Gonolek, a bird that we'd seen early in the week but one that almost always hides in thick stands of papyrus. Overall, we were not only getting amazing views of various animals, and taking photographs of them, but also observing their fascinating behavior. On the way back to the dock, we saw the biggest Nile Crocodile of the whole trip. It was easily over ten feet in length (at that size presumably a male), lying on a sandbank with two smaller relatives basking nearby. In the afternoon we drove around on *terra firma* looking for predators. At first, our search for lions proved unsuccessful. We drove around an area where a family of these cats had been reported by the park's rangers, but they had moved out-of-sight into long grass. But then, as we passed a large tree, Shannon called out that there was something high up in its canopy – it was a Leopard! This powerful feline needs no introduction, it is one of the so-called 'Big Five' species that most visitors to African want to see. From the safety of our bus, we admired this beautiful cat dozing and occasionally moving around as it sat a bough. On the way back to our lodge we kept our eyes open and finally found two Lions resting under a tree, they were not close, so I put them in my telescope for everyone to see. One was wearing a radio-collar attached by researchers.

After dinner, some of our group went out on a night game-drive. This was successful with a range of mammals, White-tailed Mongoose, Egyptian Mongoose, Common Genet, Side-striped Jackal and Spotted Hyena, and finally Lions, all found. Birds included Spotted Thick-knees, a Grayish Eagle-owl and a second Verreaux's Eagle-owl for the trip.



**Sun., Jul. 31**

## **Murchison Falls National Park | Pakuba Airstrip Entebbe**

Today our trip was to end. Shannon and Greg left early by road for Entebbe airport as their flight home was in the mid-afternoon, whilst Gill and Will were staying on in Murchison for a few extra days. The rest of us spent the morning around the lodge, Jenny and Suzanne visiting the gift-shop one more time. We bade farewell to the Red-headed Rock Agamas that had been such a delight to watch and went to the 'airport' (a simple landing strip with a few small buildings) after lunch to catch a 3pm flight to Entebbe. On the way, we got our final sightings of the mammals we had become familiar with – Olive Baboons, Patas Monkeys, Warthogs, African Buffalos, Oribi, Lelwel Hartebeest etc. We were not at all tired of seeing them. Bizarrely, the commentary of a wrestling bout on an American sports' channel was blaring out from a TV in a small waiting room. But our wait was also to prove a bonus as there were many butterflies around and a pair of Abyssinian Ground-hornbills foraging by the grass runway gradually walked closer and closer. Also, as we waited for our slightly delayed plane to arrive, a kettle of raptors suddenly appeared overhead - vultures, hawks, buzzards and a pale morph Booted Eagle (this species has two color morphs, pale and dark, the latter being much trickier to identify). This was the only Booted Eagle seen on the trip - it is never too late to get a new bird. We had already visited the Murchison waterfalls from the land and the water, and now we saw them from the air, thanks to the pilot who kindly offered to adjust our route a little and fly us over them. The views of the falls, river and surrounding forest and savanna were truly memorable. After a flight of about one hour, we arrived in Entebbe. Everything went smoothly at the airport, with no immigration nor customs to deal with as we'd been on a domestic flight. We were met by a driver from our hotel right on time and we were soon back where we had begun our adventure, in the hotel Boma. Those of us who did not need to return to the airport this evening for our flights home had a final dinner together. We reflected upon our trip and the conclusion was unanimous – it had been a fabulous wildlife watching adventure!

*Photo Credits: Elephants (Gerard Gorman - GG), Yellow White-eye (GG), Mask 1 (GG), Mask 2 (GG), Eastern Plantain-eater (GG), Shoebill (GG), Boat trip (GG), Group Photo (GG), Gray-crowned Crane (NJ Stock), Scarlet-chested Sunbird (NJ Stock), Olive Baboon (NJ Stock), Hippos (NJ Stock), Vervet Monkey (GG), Bwindi National Park Scenic (NJ Stock), Hike (GG), Gorilla (GG), Bwindi National Park Canopy (NJ Stock), Gorilla (NJ Stock), African Paradise Flycatcher (NJ Stock), Klaas's Cuckoo (NJ Stock), Black Bee-eater (NJ Stock), Mantled Guereza (NJ Stock), Jungle Hike (GG), Rufous-necked Wryneck (NJ Stock), Elephants (GG), Red-tailed Monkey (NJ Stock), Kobs (NJ Stock), Elephant and waterfowl in Queen Elizabeth National Park (NJ Stock), Water Buffalo (NJ Stock), Pied Kingfisher (GG), Lesser Flamingoes (NJ Stock), Papyrus Gonolek (NJ Stock), Chimpanzee in Kibale National Park (NJ Stock), Verreaux's Eagle-owl (GG), Red-cheeked Cordonblue (NJ Stock), Blue Monkey (NJ Stock), Spotted Hyena (NJ Stock), Patas Monkey (NJ Stock), Black-billed Barbet (NJ Stock), African Civet (NJ Stock), Senegal Thick-knee (GG), Murchison Falls National Park (NJ Stock), Murchison Falls National Park waterway (NJ Stock), Giant Kingfisher (NJ Stock), Nile Crocodile (GG), Hippos in River (NJ Stock), Red-headed Rock Agama (GG), The falls (NJ Stock), Warthog (GG), Lelwel Hartebeest (GG)*