

SOUTHERN UGANDA – TRAVEL SURVIVAL KIT FOR VISITING BIRDERS



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East Africa is internationally known for its high diversity of wildlife. The majority of African avifauna and mammals may be observed there, in a setting of highly variable ecosystems. Obviously, the region is a desirable travel destination for nature lovers. There are nations such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ruanda and Burundi to choose from. Recently, Uganda has gained a reputation of being the safest tourism destination in the sub-Saharan Africa, and therefore has a competitive edge over its neighbours. New air connections from Europe have also improved its appeal, with daily flights from Brussels. All the necessary services are available, and people are quite hospitable. Anybody with basic skills in English (or Swahili) is today able to travel in Uganda independently.

Nevertheless, East Africa is not necessarily anymore a good deal for an international traveler, who easily discovers more competitive rates in South America and Asia, not to mention the significantly less expensive Southern Africa. High prices and average services are often the order of the day in the region, with constantly increasing entrance fees and high cost transportation. Many package tourists do their visit once in a lifetime, and are therefore not that particular with money. At the same time, quite a few reserves have already over-reached their carrying capacity, and try to limit the number of visitors by high fees. At the end of the day, independent travelers may need to work hard to discover deals affordable for them, to be able to visit the region repeatedly.

The present report has been written in order to make things easier for a prospective visitor to Uganda. Fortunately, strong euro has recently made the nation somewhat more available for travelers originating from the euro-region. Furthermore, relatively good deals are still out there; companies with quality services for a reasonable price. One of them is **Avian Watch Uganda** (AWU), a birder company run and owned by Ugandan birdwatchers, but aiming for the international market. The following text is based on a 'test drive' of the AWU services, made as an eight day extension of the ATLAS Africa conference on Tourism and Wealth Creation, held at Makerere University, Kampala, in the end of October 2007 (29th Oct – 5th Nov). It will provide some practical information in regard to the essential bird tourism services in Uganda, and some notes on five important reserves in Southern Uganda: **Mabamba Swamp, Mpanga Forest Reserve, Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, Queen Elizabeth National Park** and **Semuliki National Park**.

In regard to birds, only some of the 391 bird species recorded will be mentioned, as there is plenty of information already available, in the form of trip reports and guidebooks. The latter also provide more detailed site information (maps etc.). Mammals will all be mentioned, just like the single record of an identified snake. I was already familiar with the majority of bird species, and could therefore identify many of them with ease. Most of the time was spent focusing on target species, e.g. the Albertine Rift endemics. The two unexpected bird species were seen in Kampala, where a **House Sparrow** and three **Redwinged Starlings** were spotted, beyond their Birds of East Africa (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2002) distribution, perhaps a sign of recent extension?

October-November is supposed to be rainy and wet in Southern Uganda. In practice, rain was experienced once, between the late afternoon of 3rd and early morning of 4th November, at Semuliki National Park. On the 4th, the light morning showers did not really interfere with birding, on the contrary (see below). Otherwise the weather was sunny, with occasional rumble of thunder in the horizon. Consequently, also the gravel roads were mostly in good condition. On the other hand, I wish I did spend so many hours wearing short-sleeved shirts, having experienced some sunburn despite my already well tanned skin. Bring your hat and suntan lotion also during the “rainy season”!

UGX refers to Ugandan shillings, EUR to euros and USD to U.S. dollars. In Uganda one needs at least the first two. At the moment, many prices may be quoted in USD, but can be paid either in shillings or euros. In any case, the volatile USD is not the best currency choice for anybody anymore, and may also become less acceptable in Uganda in the near future.

ENTEBBE AIRPORT & KAMPALA

Brussels Airlines has a regular connection from Brussels to Entebbe via Nairobi. It is a circular route, the stop in Nairobi delaying the flight only on the first leg. The day flight time from Brussels to Nairobi and Entebbe was around 9,5 hours, the leg from Entebbe to Brussels being only 7 hours under favorable conditions. The airport and on board services, including meals, were of rather good standard, seats being the only negative exception. In fact, the seats of Brussels Airlines are among the worst in the airline industry. They are exceedingly narrow, with bulging (read: painful) but unavailable control unit, stationary arm “rests” and poor trays. The often complained leg space is average, and not really an issue with these “outstanding” features!

The Entebbe International Airport was under renovation during my visit, the project being late of its schedule but under some pressure to finish, a major international meeting approaching. The arrivals hall was a temporary one, and immigration procedure rather informal, the main thing being the collection of USD 50 from each international visitor (Visa fee; be sure to have the exact amount in euros or dollars). My hotel room included transportation, and a sedan was waiting in front of the building. This is a good idea, especially when arriving late, as the price of the transit to Kampala obviously tends to rise when options are few. Alternatively, one could easily spend the first night in Entebbe, and request the car being delivered there. This probably is the best option for birders.

There are many good options, such as Hotel Equatoria, to stay in Kampala, and mine was not necessarily the best one, even though convenient for the conference part of the visit. Fairway Hotel is one of the older establishments in Kampala, and located relatively close to the Garcen City shopping center. It charged USD 72 per night for an airconditioned double room (best rooms on second floor and upwards), breakfast and airport transfers included. The restaurant had good food and fast service. The room was well kept, with fridge, color cable tv, and an interesting selection of channels with Bollywood movies, my earlier research topic. The nights were peaceful enough, unlike for example at the well known Speke Hotel, said to be noisy because of heavy traffic and the adjacent Rock Bar. If requested, the Fairway Hotel will provide transportation in the city, for competitive rates.

The Entebbe airport departure procedures were equally pleasant, with friendly and efficient airport services. Interestingly, there were five showers (free) at the male toilet unit, in the

departures area, a first for me on 100+ airport visits in 70+ nations. After a long drive to Entebbe, a shower may be a nice way to start one's journey back home. Do, however, bring your own soap and shampoo, and do not expect towels.

I myself did not bird at Entebbe, which was only visited in darkness, as a consequence of my timetable. Kampala also had quite a few widespread bird species, the many **Marabous**, **Hadada Ibises** and **Yellow-billed Kites** being the most visible (and audible) ones. At Makerere University, overlooking the city, soaring **White Storks**, **Yellow-billed Storks** and a few **Grey Parrots** could be observed during breaks.

THE ESSENTIALS

1. Agent

Even an independent traveler needs some sort of information and support to successfully realize his plans in Uganda. Much time and effort can be saved by working in cooperation with a local expert, or a travel agent. As already brought out, the problem is: How to find a good, reliable deal? Having discovered and tested one, I am glad to recommend the Avian Watch Uganda. They can be contacted at alfred@avianwatchuganda.co.ug, or 0782-884037 by phone. The AWU home page is located at www.avianwatchuganda.co.ug/

The manager of AWU, Alfred Twinomujuni (Fig 1) is the foremost birdwatching guide in Uganda, who has started his own business together with a team of partners, all of whom appear to originate from the Bwindi region. Setting an admirable example, he has proceeded step by step, from being a part time gorilla guide to a teacher, to a bird guide who first worked for international tour operators, eventually becoming an independent entrepreneur himself. On the way, he has educated not only himself, but a generation of new professional Ugandan bird guides. Unlike in some other parts of Africa, these people fully understand their trade, and do not have illusions of mastering it all after a two week guide training course. Becoming a professional bird guide of truly international standard may easily take ten years, and there is plenty to learn also afterwards.

In addition to the excellent service and competitive rates, there are other important reasons to choose companies such as Avian Watch Uganda. This is the kind of tourism business anybody with even slight concern for sustainability and self-initiated development should support. It is owned and run by local people and most of the money you spend will remain in Uganda, with a considerable multiplier effect beyond the company itself, both economically and in terms of knowledge building. The business is about Ugandan natural and cultural heritage being preserved and controlled by the Ugandans, in ways also acceptable for the international conservation community. Moreover, it is about people genuinely interested in birds and nature, and being there not just for the money.

In Kampala, the resident man in charge of the AWU office is Emmanuel Bisamaza. Whenever Alfred was away, probably working for another group of customers desiring to see it all in a week or so, Emmanuel replied all my email requests with promptness lacking in so many other agencies. The replies arrived within a day, being both comprehensive and to the point. It was a relief to communicate with people who actually understood the needs of a birder. They were also ready to tailor their services according to my needs, which were: car, driver and budget accommodation, professional bird guide only in Bwindi.

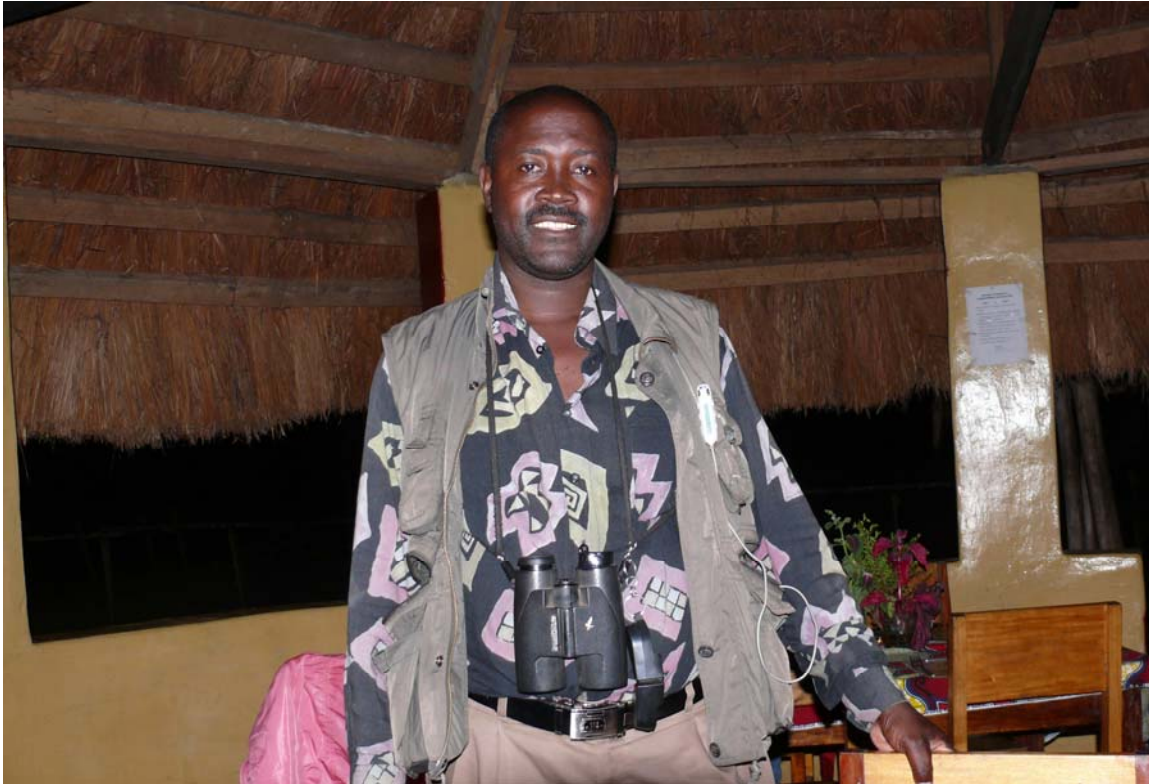


Fig 1. Alfred Twinomujuni, one of the best bird guides in Uganda and the manager of Avian Watch Uganda, at the Buhoma Community Restcamp restaurant.

2. Money

Changing money can be a slight problem in Uganda, if you arrive on a weekend. The rates at airport arrival were 20% lower than in the city, meaning that changing EUR 100 would have involved a highway robbery style commission of EUR 20. At midnight, it was clearly too late to change money in the town of Entebbe. Having already learned that ATMs offer the best rates available, I decided to try them the next morning. In Kampala, most of ATMs were out of order on Saturday morning, and currency exchanges opened too late for me. Fortunately, the ATM number eight (Barclay's) in the center was on line, and provided the cash with ease, for a quite competitive rate. Later on, I also used the ground floor currency exchange at Garden City Shopping Mall. Avian Watch Uganda accepted cash euros. Entrance fees (Bwindi, Semuliki) and Kampala accommodation were paid in cash dollars. To the guides and military escorts I paid in shillings, euros or dollars (tips in shillings).

3. Car

One needs a car to birdwatch in Uganda. The physical distances may not be great, but many roads are slow, and transportation is not easily arranged in the more remote regions. For a bus tour, one needs plenty of time, and rather good level of fitness, as walking will be needed to reach some of the birding locations.

For a prospective renter, there are two basic options for car hire in Uganda. First, there is the self-drive, renting a car from a major company. Driving in Uganda is not too complicated, trying to not to hit potholes being the main task on the way. Some dirt roads

have problem spots (Fig. 19) or a very large number of potholes, but the majority of them are quite fine, if you drive slowly. In Kampala, driving may be demanding (traffic jams) and orientation difficult, but most drivers would manage. Having a newish car and back-up of the rental agency certainly helps. On the downside, the self-drive car will be very expensive, partly because one needs to pay a comprehensive insurance. Moreover, when something eventually happens (flat tyre, getting stuck in mud etc.), one has to deal with the situation by himself. Additionally, looking after the car will be on the renter's responsibility.

Second, one may consider a car with a driver. Actually, this will be less expensive than self-drive. There are no insurance costs and the Ugandan salaries are not that high. Additionally, the driver is responsible for maintenance and security. He is there to sort out problem situations, to orientate through cities or smaller country roads, and to provide you interesting and valuable pieces on local information, not to mention good company (in most cases). When birding, it is also good to have somebody to move the car around, as you walk along roads, and to look after your things in the car, even though theft is not a major problem in Uganda.

On the downside, the car is probably not going to be new and totally reliable, but requires regular maintenance, putting some stress on your precious birding time. Nevertheless, new cars may also break up, and you will have no guarantee that repairs or replacement will happen soon enough to not to disturb your birding programme. Paying a tip at the end of the journey is customary, and a pleasure as long as everything has gone reasonably well.

Personally, I chose the second option, having already driven 30 000+ km in Namibia and Botswana in 2007. Going through the car hire companies, the international ones proved to be the most expensive, just like the local safari companies, who occasionally requested three times the going rate, and also insisted in including other services essentially geared for package tourists. The Jinja based Walter Egger, recommended by the Bradt Uganda travel guide, has quite competitive rates, but somewhat questionable reputation among some of his (perhaps a bit revengeful) clients, to say the least (see [www.kmrackermann.com/Bad Man In Jinja.pdf](http://www.kmrackermann.com/Bad_Man_In_Jinja.pdf), and make your own conclusions). Clearly, there was one option above the others, the AWU. They charged USD 70 (EUR 50) per day for day trips from Kampala, and USD 100 (EUR 70) per day for the rest of the country, inclusive of a Toyota 4x4 Landcruiser and a driver and his expenses, petrol costs excluded.

My AWU driver was Phenny Gongo (Fig 2), a good man with both the skills and patience to be an excellent driver and travel companion. What is more, he also joined the birding and mammal-spotting, with genuine knowledge and interest. The money was paid up front in Kampala, in cash euros, against a receipt, before hitting the road. Emmanuel also proposed to pick me up on arrival at Entebbe, but I did not need this, having already the hotel coach, inclusive of the room rate.

Some companies have tested ability to act in emergencies, including Avian Watch Uganda. During the "test drive", we run into mechanical problems in Fort Portal, on my last day, just before our planned departure for Kampala and Entebbe (late night flight to Brussels). First, Phenny tried to fix the problem on spot, while I had a lunch in a nearby restaurant. There happened to be a mechanic just across the street. Unfortunately, the repair took more than

the time we had available. Consequently, Alfred arranged a car from the Fort Portal based Kabarole Tours to pick me up and take to Entebbe. He and Emmanuel were in contact with us by mobile phone during the whole process. Eventually, I caught the flight on time, thanks to their help. AWU is not likely to leave you stranded on the road, as some other companies are known to have done.



Fig 2. Phenny Gongo, and our green Toyota 4x4, on a high ridge facing the Virungas and the Ruandan border (Kabale-Ruhija road).

Estimating one's diesel costs in Uganda is somewhat complicated but with the mountain roads and large 4x4 cars, it is safest to expect high consumption (between 16-20 litres per 100 km). In November 2007, diesel cost from UGX 1900 to UGX 2200 per liter, depending on your locality. The lowest rates were seen in Kampala (excluding centre). In fact, it is good idea to fill your tank (in out case, two tanks) up there, before leaving the capital area. The highest prices were recorded in the rural west. Diesel (and petrol) is widely available, also relatively close to Buhoma, in case you run out of it. In Fort Portal, the lowest price discovered was close to UGX 2000.

4. Guides

Personally, I very much prefer to bird without guides. Discovering and identifying bird species by oneself is to me an essential part of the enjoyment of birdwatching. Given there is plenty of time available, the majority of bird species can be found without a guide. There are, however, destinations where having a guide is compulsory, such as certain national

parks and reserves of Uganda. Moreover, it is a good idea to employ a local expert in situations where time is limited, and many of the endemics are skulkers, difficult to spot.

Avian Watch Uganda, with their extensive network of trusted partners, will be able to arrange you the best guide available for each location, if you so wish. In Uganda the situation with bird guides is significantly better than in many other African nations. There are professionally oriented persons available, and several of them are indeed experts in their local patch, in some cases including the whole of Uganda. They know the songs and calls, and will therefore be able to point you to Robin-Chats, Illadopsis, Akalats, and other difficult to see species.

According to what I experienced, and heard from others, the Ugandan guides have but two weaknesses: identification of birds of prey, especially soaring, and migratory shorebirds. This is, after all, quite understandable, because they have had their focus on forests and endemic species, the main targets of the customers, and normally have no experience in monitoring migrations, or of other birding activities involving telescopes. Otherwise, those who have been in the field for several years, have good or excellent field competence.

I had the pleasure to meet two men in the last category, Alfred Twinomujuni and Saul Ampeire (Fig 3). In Bwindi, we were also accompanied by Alex Gabito (Fig 4), a trainee (six years of guiding experience) who followed Saul and me for three days to learn more about birds and sites.

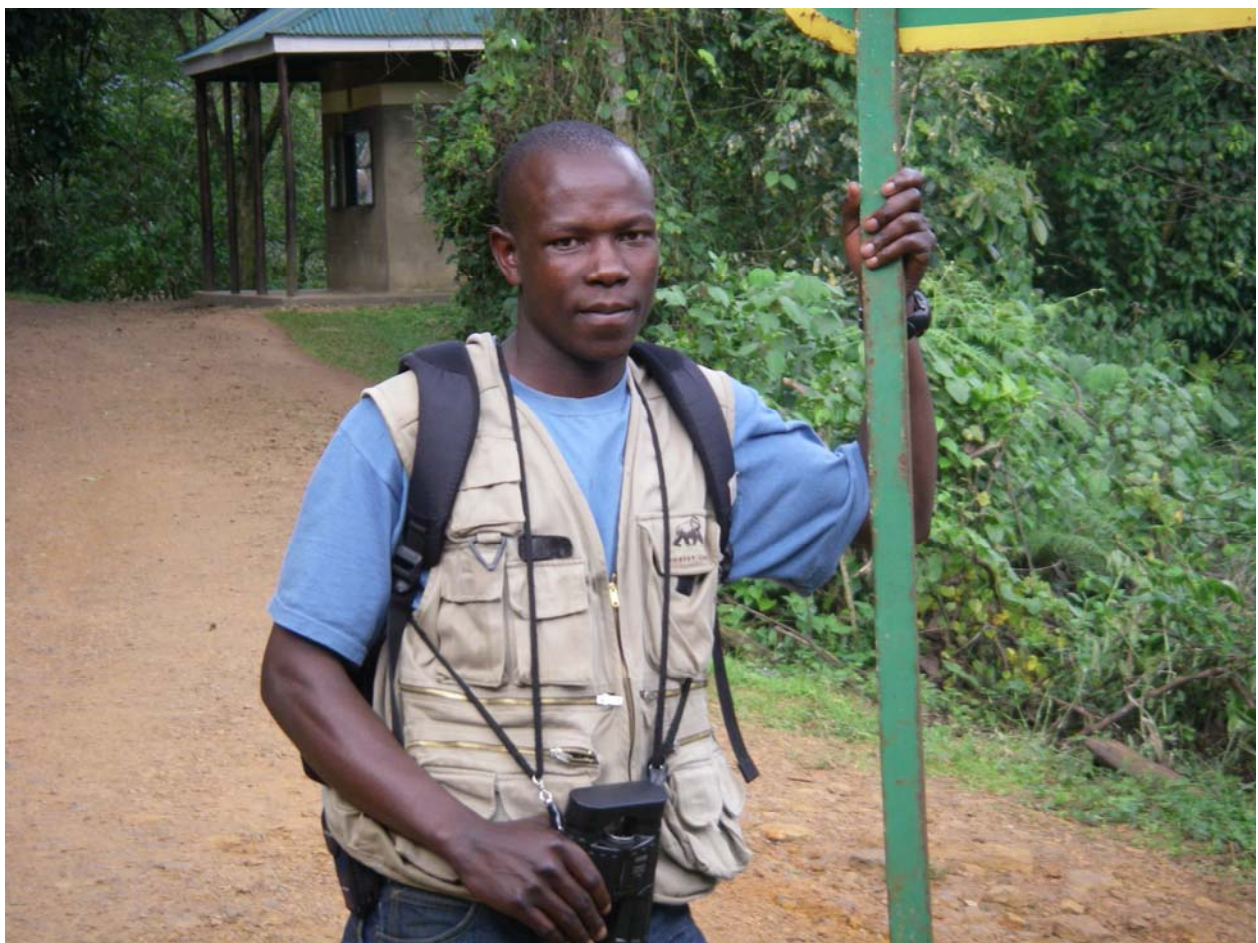


Fig 3. Saul Ampeire, the number one resident bird guide in Buhoma, Bwindi National Park.

As already explained, Alfred is one of the top guides in East Africa, and the mentor of several other bird guides (see also <http://www.ugandabirdguides.org/>). Saul Ampeire, on the other hand, was originally one of Alfred's students in Buhoma, taking part in birding activities, eventually developing from a committed bird-lover to a professional bird guide. Equipped with a pair of Zeiss binoculars, he is currently the top guide in Bwindi. He charges USD 50 per day, or equivalent in euros or Ugandan shillings, and will not give up until you have seen most of the Albertine Rift endemics. Unfortunately, his mp3 player has recently gone broke (bring him one, if you have a spare one).

Saul can be contacted either by mobile phone (+256 78 243 8251) or by email at saulampeire@yahoo.com. He is also interested in providing the full package, in other words guiding you from Entebbe to Entebbe (rate negotiable), and is just about ready to do it, after 8 years of practice in the field and Uganda Bird Club training. Consequently, Saul is a great second option if Alfred happens to be already reserved.



Fig 4. Alex Gabito, a trainee guide who accompanied us in Bwindi.

5. Meals

Finding meals is not a problem in Uganda. Eating well may occasionally be. Some of the Ugandan food is not exactly delicious, even though it may be safe to eat (no tourist diarrhoea in one and half weeks). As already mentioned, delicious meals were had in Kampala, and bottled water and snacks could easily be bought on the way, including a good variety of fresh fruit (Fig 5). I also purchased a full box of water in the beginning, 15

litres, and this proved to be more than enough, a few bottles of water and sugar free soda being bought on the way in connection with meals.

Food was also fine in Bwindi, at the Buhoma Community Rest Camp, where huge buffet dinners with a number of dishes were prepared for gorilla tourist groups. In Semliki Valley, however, food became a problem to be considered (more detailed account in the end of the report). For Bundibugyo, provisions are best reserved at Fort Portal.

On our long transits between Kampala and Bwindi, Bwindi and Semliki Valley, Semliki and Kampala, lunch stops were made in tree locations, all well worth recommendations. The White Horse Inn (Fig 6) at Kabale had excellent grilled steak and large helpings for a fair price, in a well maintained garden with good birding while we waited for 25 minutes. Some of the best birds seen there included three **Whitewinged Tits** and a first calendar year **Lesser Grey Shrike**.

In Kasese, on the way to Fort Portal, the Ruwenzori International Hotel served excellent roasted chicken in about forty minutes after my sudden arrival (no other customers), the time being easily spent by going through earlier bird records, and preparing oneself for the Semuliki National Park identification challenges. In Fort Portal, Gardens Restaurant had tasty lunches for UGX 5000 – 6500, and delivered the food in fifteen minutes, contradicting its reputation (cf. Bradt's Uganda guide) for exceedingly slow service. All in all, no extended waits at lunch time.



Fig 5. Another roadside fruit and vegetable stall, by the Kampala – Kabale highway.



Fig 6. White Horse Inn, Kabale; a pleasant location for lunch and garden birding.

MABAMBA SWAMP

The Mabamba Swamp Ramsar site, located on the shores of the mighty Lake Victoria, is currently the easiest place in Africa to locate the enigmatic **Shoebill**, one of the star species of the continent. Be sure to arrive at the swamp early enough, leaving Kampala at 6 AM, or even one hour earlier, to reach the site before spotting the birds becomes less likely. On the way to the Mabamba ferry landing, it is a good idea to stop (a half an hour or so) at an obvious papyrus swamp (Fig 10), for early morning **White-winged Warblers**, **Hartlaub's Marsh Widowbird**, **Papyrus Gonolek** and others. After the **Shoebill** boat trip, these birds may be next to impossible to spot, even though they will probably continue calling from their dense papyrus haunts.

After reaching the main landind site (Fig 7), with many wooden canoes and a simple ferry for larger loads, the boatman is contacted (he is already waiting, if arranged by AWU). My guide was Ismael, who knew the marsh birds quite well after a six-year-long career, and was soon able to locate an adult **Shoebill** (Fig 11), spotting another further away. We picked him up in a village crossing few kilometers before the swamp. Phenny, also interested in observing the birds, joined the boat trip. The four of us paddled through a narrow channel fringed by reeds and papyrus, eventually arriving in more open waters, reed beds and a network of even more channels. The charge for the boat, boatman and guide was UGX 40 000, the boat trip lasting about three hours. There are three guides, ex-fishermen, working for a community-based bird tourism development project.



Fig 7. The Mabamba Swamp ferry landing, a starting point for Shoebill excursions.



Fig 8. The boatman and our guide Ismael, ready to go for the **Shoebill** “hunt”.



Fig 9. In the swamp, a network of narrow channels is negotiated.



Fig 10. The road crosses a papyrus swamp, a stake out for **White-winged Warbler**.

After the boat trip, Ismael encouraged me to do some general birding in dry bush habitats, but we eventually focused on **Orange Weavers**, as I had no interest in the common savanna species. He had a reliable spot for the weavers, and a single **Weyn's Weaver**, close to the second landing site north of the main one, in a thicket next to tall trees, just by the Lake Victoria shoreline. Walking there along the shore was, however, not a good idea, as the water level proved to be high, the standing muck being in a rather unhygienic state. I was also happy to see a **Magpie Mannikin** at one of our village stops, a species which has repeatedly eluded me in South Africa. There were **Long-toed Lapwings**, **Grey Parrots**, **Angola Swallows**, **Red-chested Sunbirds**, **Yellow-backed Weavers**, **Grey-headed Negrofinches** and many others at the swamp. Palearctic migrants were well present, including a **Lesser Spotted Eagle** and many shorebirds.

In regard to mammals, a squirrel thought to be a **Gambian Sun Squirrel** was observed close to the **Orange Weaver** site.



Fig 11. The target achieved; an adult **Shoebill** in its preferred fishing habitat. It was a relief to see this “must-to-see” species, and I enjoyed observed it for a long period of time. The photograph was taken with Pentax Optio WPi, an optically mediocre but waterproof pocket camera.

MPANGA FOREST RESERVE

After visiting the Mabamba Swamp, a good and convenient option to spend the afternoon is the close-by Mpanga Forest Reserve at Mpigi, where tall trees and extensive canopy provide much appreciated shade. The reserve is also a chance to do some solo birdwatching, as guiding is not required for exploring the safe and easy to orientate site. There is a camping site by the headquarters, a nice place to have a picnic lunch, in my case a packed lunch provided by the Fairway Hotel.

I had a four-and-half hour leisurely walk through the reserve. The Baseline Trail was wide, level, straight and dry. Unfortunately, the dry forest was rather silent in the afternoon and did not provide as many birds as I had expected (not a single bird party in four hours). The best bird was undoubtedly a **Spotted Greenbul**, a species which I later failed to see at the Semuliki National Park. **Chestnut Wattlebirds** performed a memorable lek by the trail, much in a similar manner as manakins do in South America. **African Pied Hornbills** were easy to see next to the campground, even though they were clearly outnumbered by **Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills**, the most common hornbill in Southern Uganda. Other goodies included **Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo**, **White-throated Greenbul**, **Green Hylia**, **Grey-headed Sunbirds** and **Lesser Blue-eared Starlings**. Returning to the hotel, on the outskirts of Kampala, I saw a group of **Piapiacs** flying around at a petrol station, as we visited a supermarket to buy provisions for Bwindi and Semuliki.

In regard to mammals, six **Red-tailed Guenons** and a rather dark subspecies of **Eastern Red Colobus** were observed.

BWINDI (IMPENETRABLE) FOREST

After the Mabamba–Mpanga day trip, it was time to start the longer journey to the southwest. From Kampala (start at 6.30), we drove 9 hours (12.5 h with stops) to Buhoma via Kabale, using the ‘back door’ of Ruhija road to enter the Bwindi Forest. The highway to Kabale is not as good as the one between Fort Portal and Kampala, but it is fast enough as long as you manage to miss the occasional potholes. My only **Afep Pigeons** and **Redfaced Lovebirds** were seen along this route, the former ones in a partly forested section. The road from Kabale to Bwindi was gravel, but in good condition, excluding few muddy spots beyond Ruhija. The Ruhija road was peaceful in the evening, with **Kivu Ground-Thrush** and other nice birds on or by the road, but I did not spend enough time there, not fully realizing how good the habitat and the timing actually were. **Handsome Francolins** can also be seen on this stretch of road. We arrived later, after sunset, in the lantern lit Buhoma Community Rest Camp.

In Bwindi, a good idea is to focus on three different sectors, unless you have the time and stamina required to walk the Mubwindi Swamp trail. First, there is the Buhoma trail (driveable level track, but strictly for walking, with some benches for rest). This we did the first morning, by walking about 2,5 km forward and back, with two Ugandan army soldiers with AK-47s as our security escort. There was a USD 10 per day fee for the military escort, compulsory when walking in the park (entrance was another USD 50 for three days). I also gave them 2000-2500 shillings as tips, after hearing that the dollars would go straight into the governmental coffin. A side trail follows a stream which runs just below the Buhoma Community Rest Camp, and meets the main Buhoma track about 300 m from the camp.

The armed guards (Fig 14) are there not only to prevent Congolese guerilla attacks across the border. At Ruhija, **Elephants** do occasionally visit the bamboo zone, as they did just the previous day before our visit, and one needs to be careful to not to disturb them. Spotting a **Forest Elephant** in the thick bamboo is, however, a difficult task. Well, they will let you know that they are there if you stumble too close to them. In extreme situations, arms may be used to scare or stop charging beasts.



Fig 12. The Bwindi forest is among the best in East Africa (a view from Ruhija road).

Some of the better birds observed along the Buhoma trails were **African Hawk-Eagle**, **Western Bronze-naped Pigeon**, **Black-billed Turaco** (common), **Bartailed Trogons**, **Black Bee-eaters**, **Blue-throated Rollers**, **Finebanded** and **Elliot's Woodpeckers**, **Petit's Cuckoo-Shrikes**, **White-bellied Robin-Chats**, **Kivu Ground-Thrushes** (shy, did not see properly), **White-tailed Ant-Thrushes**, **Red-faced Warblers**, **Short-tailed Warblers** (only heard), **White-browed Crombecs**, **Black-faced Rufous Warblers**, **Olive-green Camaroptera**, **Buff-throated**, **Black-throated** and **Mountain Masked Apalises**, **Dusky-blue** and **Sooty Flycatchers**, **White-tailed Crested Flycatcher**, **White-tailed Blue-flycatcher**, **Mountain Illadopsis**, **Green Sunbirds**, **Grey-headed Sunbirds**, **Lühder's Bush-Shrikes**, **Pink-footed Puffbacks**, **Montane Oriole**, **Stuhlmann's Starlings**, **Waller's Starlings**, **Yellow-mantled** and **Black-billed Weavers**, and **White-breasted Negrofinsches**. A surprise bonus was not just one but two parties of **Red-fronted Antpeckers**, a scarce sight in Buhoma!

By the rest camp, my late afternoon sunbird hunts and guided walks produced the only **Blue Malkoha**, four **Sabine's Spinetails** (high, early morning), **Snowy-headed Robin**, the only **Vanga Flycatcher** of the trip, two **Purplebreasted Sunbirds**, **Olive-bellied Sunbird**, **Tiny Sunbird**, **Green Sunbirds** and **Narrow-tailed Starlings**. Around the Buhoma village, there are also a few spots where interesting species can be seen. Saul has stake outs for skulkers such as **White-spotted Flufftail** and **Whitecollared Olivebacks**, which may be difficult to see without tapes. **Rwenzori Nightjars** frequent the hillsides, and may be spotted on the roads, or flying at dusk.

Second, there is the high altitude (over 2000 m) Ruhija section (Fig 12, 13) with bamboo thickets and roadside birding, also along the side roads and tracks. The birds seen included an **African Hobby**, **Willcock's Honeyguide** (lower down), **Red-throated Alethe**, **Archer's Robib-Chat**, **Grauer's Warblers**, **Chestnut-throated** and **Rwenzori Apalises**, **Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher**, **Grey-throated Flycatchers**, **Rwenzori Batis**, **White-tailed Blue-flycatcher**, **Stripe-breasted Tits**, **Blue-headed Sunbirds** (above the Ruhija checkpoint), **Regal Sunbirds**, **Mountain Black Boubous**, **Doherty's Bush-shrikes**, **Montane Orioles** and **Strange Weavers**. **African Green Broadbills** do also occasionally occur there, and we scored splendidly, with excellent close views of a pair! (cf. page 17).



Fig 13. The Ruhija checkpoint.



Fig 14. Our military escort, courtesy of the Ugandan Army, on the Ruhija road.

Third, there is the region in-between, the narrow part of the reserve called “the Neck”. In this section, it is best to focus on the bridge, and the riverside forest 1 to 3 km to each direction. **Cassin’s Grey Flycatchers** should be readily seen by the bridge, with several sitting on rocks and driftwood by the river. This is also an excellent site for the endangered **Chapin’s Flycatcher** (on top of tall trees). Other good species seen here included **African Hawk-Eagle**, **Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo**, **Yellow-throated Tinkerbirds**, **Yellow-spotted Barbets**, **Hairy-breasted Barbets**, **Speckle-breasted** and **Yellow-crested Woodpeckers**, **Brown-chested Alethes**, **White-tailed Ant-Thrushes**, **Rufous Flycatcher-Thrushes**, **Green Hylia**, **Green Crombec**, **Black-faced Rufous Warblers**, **Buff-throated Apalises**, **Brown Illadopsis**, **Green**, **Olive** and **Little Green Sunbirds**, **Pink-footed Puffbacks**, **Bocage’s Bush-shrikes**, **Stuhlmann’s Starlings**, **Purple-headed Starlings** and **Sharpe’s Starling**.

All the Albertine Rift endemics of Uganda may have been seen in Bwindi, but do not hold your breath for **Rwenzori Turaco** (go to Mgahinga), **Dwarf Honeyguide** (need to be lucky), **Rwenzori Double-collared Sunbird** (Mgahinga) and **Shelley’s Crimsonwing** (less than five recent records). **Grauer’s Scrub Warbler** and **African Green Broadbill**, the crown jewel of Bwindi, normally require the 16 km mountain trail hike to Mubwindi Swamp and back, too much for most visitors. Saul does, however, know an easy to reach stake out for the **Broadbill**, only 100 meters from the main road, where the birds regularly come to feed after their breeding season. Among the other Bwindi target species, also the **Oberlaender’s Ground-thrush** is both scarce and seasonal.



Fig 15. Looking for a **Brown Illadopsis**; roadside birding at the “Neck”.

In regard to mammals, there are quite a few species around, and we recorded **Dusky Baboons**, **Blue** and **L’hoechst’s Monkeys**, **Redtailed Guenons**, **Black-and-White Colobuses**, **Mountain Sun Squirrels**, **Giant Forest Squirrels** and **Boehm’s Squirrels**. Both **Yellow-rumped** and **Blackfronted Duikers**, one of each, were observed on the Buhoma track. **Chimpanzees** will call on the ridge opposite of the Buhoma village, and may occasionally be spotted along the Bwindi roads. We saw at least two in trees close to “the Neck” bridge. I did not even consider visiting the habituated **Mountain Gorillas**, the trip being too strenuous, time-consuming and expensive (USD 500 “per head”). According to my discussions with other travelers, there are, however, many who would be ready to pay even more for the 40 minute encounter, sometimes preceded by 6 hours of climbing on steep, muddy slopes. Especially, if the money goes for nature conservation.

Buhoma Community Rest Camp

There is a variety of expensive and more expensive options for accommodation at the Buhoma entrance of Bwindi National Park. Buhoma Community Rest Camp (Fig 16) is currently the best option among the expensive ones. It is a welcoming place with good variety of services, but also some shortcomings. For example, there is no electricity available, with the exception of the main service buildings, and charging batteries for cameras, mobile phones etc. is therefore not possible without special arrangements (can be done in the village). Oil lanterns are provided for bandas and walkways, and hot water for showers, if it is not all consumed by gorilla tour groups.



Fig 16. Buhoma Community Rest Camp, with Saul and overlanders from Sweden (yes, they drove all the way from Stockholm!) and South Africa.



Fig 17. My tent banda, with attached toilet and shower.

I had a tent banda (Fig 17), which was adequate after the initially missing lock was discovered. The nights were rather cold and damp, but comfortable enough in a sleeping bag (bring one!). Food was good and plentiful, but at the same time surprisingly expensive, partly because I took part in the package tour buffet dinners. Ordering meals separately instead of full board with buffet option would have been significantly less expensive. Business is good here, with thousands of customers annually, and improvements may be expected in the near future. Unfortunately, the already high prices may go up, as well.

QUEEN ELIZABETH NATIONAL PARK

Driving from Buhoma to Fort Portal and Semliki valley, via Kihhi and the Ishasha gate, one crosses the extensive Queen Elizabeth National Park. I did not do much birding here, but preferred to stop only when something special was spotted. The distance between Buhoma and Semliki valley may not be that great, but one needs the whole day to cover it, around 12 hours with birdwatching and lunch stops, more than 9 hours spent for driving. The first half of the journey had literally thousands of potholes and one swamp crossing (Fig. 18) not recommended for 2x2 after rains. Later on, an excellent tarmac highway goes to Kasese and Fort Portal, from where to Semliki valley it will be dirt road once again, blessedly without potholes. On the way, one has a chance to see the lakes of Ruisamba (also known as Edward and Idi Amin), George (?) and Albert (Mobutu Sese Seko), the last one being visible from the Rwenzoris, between Fort Portal and Semliki.



Fig 18. Crossing a marshy bit, Queen Elizabeth National Park. “African highways”, commented Phenny, and through we went, passing the two trucks stuck in the mud.

There is no entrance fee for the Queen Elizabeth National Park, if you just drive through on public roads, and do not enter the side tracks. A few birds were seen by the road, including two splendid **African Crakes**, a **Levaillant's Cuckoo**, **Sooty Chats**, several species of **Cisticolas** and **Fawn-breasted Waxbills**.

In regard to mammals, there were many **Ugandan Kobs** and **African Buffaloes** (N of the Kazinga Channel). **Elephants** and (tree-climbing) **Lions** are less common, we did not spot them. Otherwise, **Vervet Monkeys** and **Dusky Baboons** were seen on the road, as well as a big and fat **Puffadder**, almost too full to be able to move from the sun, as we slowly approached it by the car. It had probably eaten another snake of almost similar size for its breakfast, being evenly filled from "head to toe".

SEMULIKI NATIONAL PARK

In the valley of Semliki, the extension of the Congolese Ituri Forest extends across the border to Uganda, being protected as the Semuliki National Park. Several dozen of Congo rainforest bird species occur only here in East Africa.

The road from Fort Portal to Semuliki national park and Bundibugyo was in good condition (Fig 19). Nowadays, there is even a full size coach commuting between the towns, even though the bus barely makes some of the tight curves. It took two hours for us to reach the park headquarters, next to Sempaya hot springs. Entrance was UGX 52500 for a 3+ hour visit, with a compulsory guide, the money being kindly collected after hours by the most beautiful female officer one can imagine to meet. Few hundred shillings was paid for a park employee with a motorbike to transport the guide to the beginning of Kirumia trail at 7 AM the next morning, thereby saving us an hour of extra driving.

Visiting Semuliki was a kind of extra treat for me, and the plan was to "grab all you can" in the short time available. As there was only one full day and one morning available, walking the 15 km Kirumia trail to Semliki River and primary forest was clearly out of question. Additionally, I had met a group of Swedish birders at Buhoma, who had just done an equally short visit with Alfred, but had walked up to km 8 and back, and later regretted spending more time for walking than birdwatching. Carefully considering all the factors involved, I preferred to spend five morning hours on the first 1,5 kilometers (just beyond the first bridge) of secondary forest, where visibility was good and a good variety of canopy species could be expected. Alfred supported the decision, when we discussed my options at Buhoma.

Even in the secondary forest, the skulking birds were difficult to spot early in the morning. It was raining, and the sky was cloudy. Consequently, there was not enough light inside the forest, and the birds did not initially move at all. I had the national park guide with me, and he could help with the unknown songs, even though spotting the birds was solely on my own responsibility. Being at first eager to hike forward, he actually scared few birds off, including a **Long-tailed Hawk** which I would have preferred to admire sitting on a canopy branch. It is not always easy to judge the needs of one's customer, as his questions and remarks revealed in the beginning: "Have you ever seen a Hamerkop?", "Look, there is a Common Bulbul!"



Fig 19. A good gravel road follows Semuliki Forest to Bundibugyo, Kirumia River bridge in the background, the start of Kirumia trail on the right, behind the large tree.



Fig 20. The main trail of Semuliki N. P., the Kirumia River trail, starts opposite of this sign.

Eventually the species started to come in, many of them in diverse greenbul-dominated mixed flocks. I was, however, not really prepared for the late morning 'mega party' of over 500 birds, including few dozen Common Bulbuls but also many local specialities (see below). One seldom sees mixed bird parties of this size, and following the seemingly endless flow of very active birds was quite an experience, peppered with several lifers. The species observed included, among others, **Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo**, **African Piculet**, **Gabon Woodpecker**, **Rufous-sided Broadbill**, **Western Nicator**, **Cabanis's Greenbul**, **Icterine** and **Xavier's Greenbuls**, **Simple Greenbuls**, **Leaf-love**, **Red-tailed Greenbuls**, **Lowland Akalat**, **Fire-crested Alethe**, **Red-tailed Ant-Thrush**, **Lemon-bellied Crombec**, **Yellow Longbill**, **African Shrike-Flycatchers**, **Blue-headed Crested Flycatcher**, **Tit-Hylia**, **Red-eyed Puffback**, **Maxwell's Black Weavers**, **Crested**, **Red-bellied** and **Blue-billed Malimbos**, **Chestnutbreasted Negrofinsches** and **Red-fronted Antpeckers** (third record for this short trip!).

The morning rain proved to be a blessing in disguise. Bird activity remained high till noon, peaking soon after the rain stopped, to start again late in the afternoon. There was enough canopy to protect our lenses from the light rain, and the occasional showers brought the already active canopy mixed flocks down, helping observations. Some of the more skulking species were undoubtedly also easier to see in the mixed conditions of rain and sunshine.

There were not that many hornbills around at Semuliki National Park at the time of my visit, and seeing the **White-crested** and **Black Casqued Wattled Hornbills** proved to be a challenge. I spent a full afternoon at Sempaya hot springs for nothing, thereby probably missing some forest species. In the last morning, I had only 3,5 hours of time to look for birds, and wasted half of it by walking on the main road (not really productive; logging going on the other side, in the remnant patches of forest), but eventually managed to score, after discovering an ideal observation point without entering the park proper.

First, we went up from the Sempaya hot springs, returning back until the car was just above the tree tops in the valley (Fig 21). There we parked, and observations were made from the car roof, with the company of close by **Superb Sunbirds**, **Green Sunbirds**, **Western Black-headed Orioles** and **Black-winged Red Bishops**. Among the hornbills observed were **African Pied Hornbills**, **White-thighed Hornbills**, **Piping Hornbills**, two **Whitecrested Hornbills** (the best of the lot!), two **Black-casqued Wattled Hornbills**, and many **Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills**. The Sempaya hot springs area also had **Blue-breasted Kingfisher**, more than 2000 southward migrating **Abdim's Storks** in six flocks, and **Swamp Palm Bulbuls**.

A few mammals were seen at the Semuliki National Park, including **Blue** and **De Brazza** (2) **Monkeys**, **Black-and-White Colobuses**, **Redtailed Guenons**, **Grey-cheeked Mangabeys**, **Dusky Baboons** and **Boehm's Squirrels** (I guess), most of which were seen around the Sempaya hot springs. The first of the springs also had two impressive monitor lizards (Fig 22). The Kirumia trail had **Forest Elephants**, but we could only hear them moving, and saw the fresh piles of dung. Unfortunately, no snakes were spotted in the park.



Fig 21. Canopy observation point, on a level ideal for spotting the hornbills.



Fig 22. Sempaya hot springs, with a monitor lizard on the foreground.

Hotel Vanilla

There are few accommodation options close to Semuliki National Park, the recommended place being Hotel Vanilla at the small town of Bundibugyo, a half-an-hour's drive from the start of the Kirumia trail. The hotel has competitive rates (room UGX 30 000 per night, chapatis & eggs breakfast included) and relatively nice rooms with good beds. Currently, there are also enough room to accommodate a group of bird tourists. Mosquito nets are provided, and needed, as there will be one or two in the room. There is no hot water, but cold showers are tolerable in the warm climate. Generator provides light and electricity till 11 PM; charging one's batteries is not a problem. I stayed there for two nights.

The problem of the place is food. Chapatis and boiled eggs are fine for breakfast and as a packed lunch, and beer and tea (no biscuits) are available, but otherwise meals are probably best avoided. I tried once, but could not really eat the rubbery chicken with a rather interesting flavor, preferring to rely on biscuits for the rest of my stay. The cook did his best, and apologized for not being able to meet my needs with his skills, and the materials available. Phenny had similar complaints in regard to his place, proving that this was not a cultural issue. Additionally, the Bundibugyo has limited supplies of snacks. For example, yellow bananas proved to be periodically difficult to obtain in the valley, including the restaurant of Hotel Vanilla. Fortunately, I had brought ample snack supplies, anticipating the situation after some remarks from the Swedish birders I met in Buhoma.

P.S.

Two weeks after our visit, there was a major outbreak of Ebola virus in Bundibugyo. The "incubation" period being between 2-21 days, normally less than 4 days, I should be clear at the moment, 30 days after leaving the site. Ebola occurs sporadically in Uganda, and is highly contagious. It therefore is a good idea to check the situation beforehand, as I had also done prior to my visit. Today, up-to-date information is readily available in the Internet, and should not consider its occurrence as a deterrent to visit Uganda. It is, however, a matter to be taken into consideration when planning one's travel route.