

Uganda, 22-31 July 2022

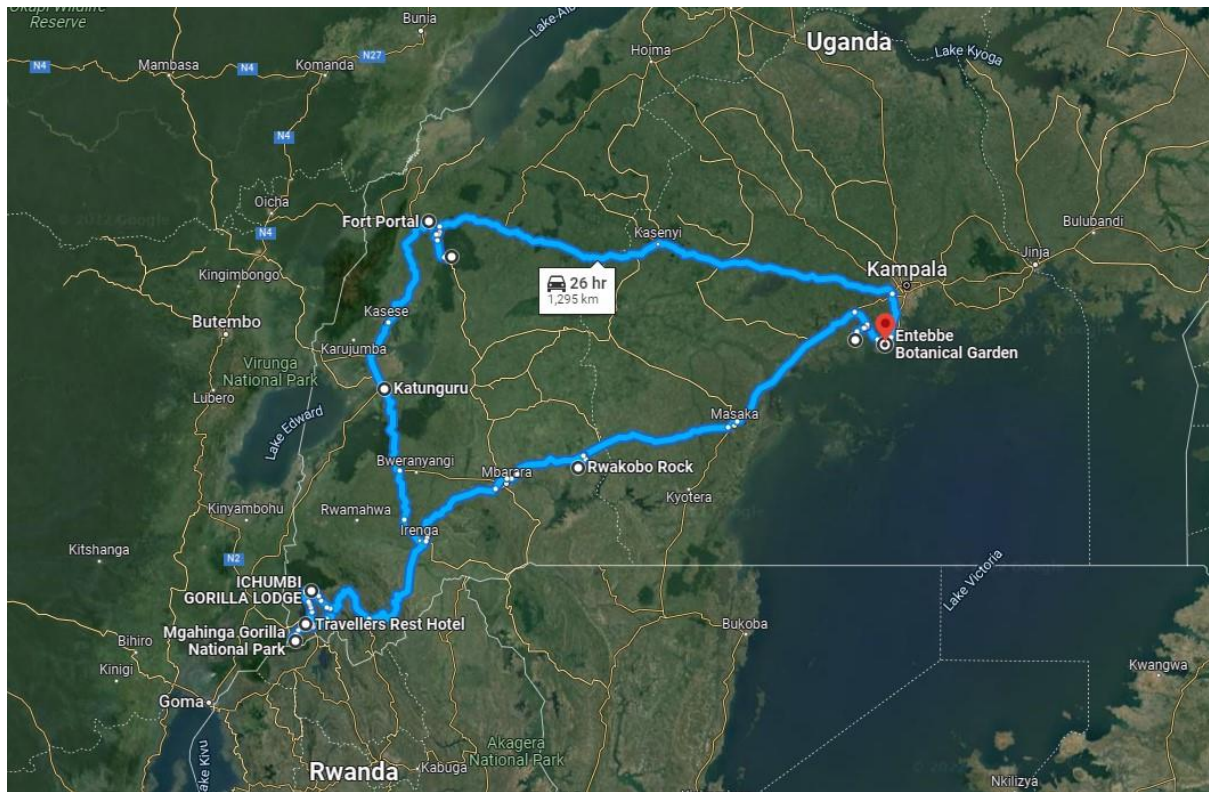
Shoebill is a bird that is on most world-birders' lists of most desirable species. It's rare, monotypic, huge and prehistoric looking and even appeals in a "WTF!" kind of way to non-birders. It was not really on my radar as a specific high-priority target until relatively recently, when cancellation of multiple overseas birding trips got me reflecting on birding and wildlife *for the rest of my life* (eek!). I came to a realisation that I will probably *never* be able to do lots of trips per annum, nor ever get to seven or eight thousand species for the world; at my current rate maybe I have at most another 10-15 trips left. The alternative to increasing the rate a lot (work, family and cold hard cash are all barriers to this) has to be to prioritise quality over quantity, and to plan around a bucket-list of places, species and experiences.

Keen to get cracking on this post-covid regime, I drew up a list of short, potent trips that would strike this new balance of quality experience in a relatively short space of time, including at least one or two *bucket-list* birds. Some destinations on this list I had to eliminate because of unfavourable timing (I wanted a trip in the first half of the year when I would be on sabbatical and therefore much more flexible than usual), and others because of problematic covid restrictions. I also needed to be prepared to go alone, because usual birding buddy Steve, was already committed to a long family holiday in South Africa.

As should be obvious from the title of this post, the timing, cost other factors fell into place for a short but potent trip to Uganda. It would be my first trip as a birder to sub-saharan Africa. *Many* years ago, before I was a birder, I travelled to Zimbabwe and Botswana and met up with college mate Ron Ritter who was doing zoological research in Nxai Pan National Park in Botswana. We pottered around in his ex-SADF landrover that we christened "The Antichrist" (after a similar vehicle in "The Gods Must be Crazy") because it was uncomfortable, it broke down regularly, was basically a pile of shite, and even got us arrested in Gabarone (that's another story entirely). I saw a Secretarybird, but that was just about my only avian memory. This time around I would be going to a place where almost every bird would be a lifer!

I picked Uganda from other possible destinations in Africa not only for Shoebill, but for the other amazing wildlife experiences that could be crammed into just over a week, not least the chance to see Mountain Gorillas and Chimpanzees, bucket-list mammals that I have wanted to see ever since amazing encounters with Orangutan in Borneo in 2014 and 2019. I decided my first trip to Africa could not be independent, and was attracted to the minimalist itinerary of Gunnar Engblom's new venture "[7 Wonders](#)". I was excited and delighted when Jon Porter (with whom I had birded in West Papua) decided to sign up too. A further message to birding mates in both Adelaide and Oxford yielded additional trip participant (and old friend) Tom Bedford and another Oxonbirder, Dave Lowe. Dave's arrival in Oxford pretty-much coincided with my departure in 2012, so we had met only once, very briefly, at a twitch with Tom at Hinksey Heights golf course in 2018 (we all saw what we thought was an Iberian Chiffchaff, but sadly this turned out to be an aberrant Chiffchaff ; see [Ewan Urquart's blog here](#)). Back to the present, and unexpectedly but fabulously, my Uganda trip would be with a core team of friends.

Because we were all similarly motivated birders, and the only participants, we negotiated with Gunnar to add some extra birding days so we could maximise our chances for the Albertine Rift endemics and one or two other avian specialties. Even so, we would have to miss places like Murchison Falls and Queen Elizabeth National Park (famous for its tree-climbing Lions) to keep the time and price down. The trip worked out a fair bit cheaper than an equivalent with more established outfit, but if I were doing it again there are aspects of the planning and itinerary that I would tweak, because we missed what should have been some gettable targets by not being in the right place. Not that I could have, but I regret not taking firmer control of the itinerary long before we set foot in Uganda.



The start of the trip, and even before the trip began, was not without incident. Most notably and regrettably/appallingly, Tom had a serious bike accident a few days after I arrived in England in late June. He was out on a long ride when he came off on a downhill and sustained major injuries that hospitalised him for a week, and required multiple operations to clean and patch up. At least he was alive, which might not have been the case with a slightly different impact, but he was now ruled out of the trip at the last minute. Disappointing for myself and Dave who had been really looking forward to some superb birding with him, and totally gutting for Tom himself.

Come the day of departure, 20th July, I met with Dave and Jon in Oxford and we travelled to Heathrow together; me re-acquainting with Jon after 4 years, and further ice-breaking with Dave, whom I met properly for the first time only a few days ago, over beers in the Royal Oak. LHR was a complete nightmare as far as check-in and security was concerned, so we were glad we had allowed 3 hours pre-flight. We were all booked on the same (and only) Emirates flight from Dubai to Entebbe, but Jon's travel-agent had booked him on a flight from LHR-Dubai departing two hours later than the one Dave and I were on, giving him a very tight transfer time in Dubai of just over an hour. When our own flight was delayed by air traffic congestion over Germany and we sat on the tarmac for 90 minutes, Dave and I fretted and sweated during our 7-hour overnight flight on the notion that if Jon's flight was similarly delayed, he would miss the connection, and therefore miss the whole of the first day. It was a huge relief early next morning to see his beaming face and large frame sat in the departure lounge at Dubai — although we'd been delayed, his later flight had left on time and arrived into Dubai minutes after our own!



The final pre-trip stress happened as we arrived at our pleasant night one accommodation, Precious Guest House right next to the Entebbe Botanical Gardens. Eager to get birding, we grabbed our bags from the minivan and dumped them in the suite we had been allocated to share. Or at least, Jon and I grabbed our bags. Where the Dickens was Dave's silver hard-shell suitcase? Faaark! We replayed to ourselves leaving the terminal — we had collected bags from baggage claim, scanned them (as seems to be de-rigueur in most third world airports), then paused to withdraw shillings for beer money from the ATM. Entering the open air Dave and Jon were already on the case with new birds — **Little Swifts** wheeled overhead, **Red-eyed Doves** flew between palms and an unidentified sunbird buzzed around — and we added 4-5 species just walking with our host to the van. However in the process of birding and taking gratuitous selfies, we'd all been distracted and not realised/remembered that Dave's case was the one item of luggage not on the trolley. It had been left unattended somewhere between the terminal and the minivan. This could ruin the trip before it had even started. Jon and I waited at the guesthouse while Dave returned with the driver, fingers, toes and other crossable appendage crossed, hoping it would still be there, though imagining it would probably be gone, stolen or maybe even blown up by airport security. After what seemed like an age, but in reality was probably not a lot longer than the 15min drive back to the airport, a WhatsApp message came through from Dave: "Got it!". "Phucking Phew" I replied, and we collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

Just 100m from Precious Guesthouse are the Entebbe Botanical Gardens where Gunnar (who'd flown in earlier in the day) had arranged for us to be met at the gate by a local bird guide, Bright. The weather was amazingly pleasant, around 25 degrees — considerably cooler than England! — with few clouds and just a light breeze, and we used the remaining 2-3 hours



of light wandering around the gardens as Bright helped identify and demystify our first birds and birding in Uganda. For Dave and Jon, both of whom already had a bit of African birding experience, it was a chance to re-hone their skills. For me it was all new, and though that is a potential excuse, in truth I was rather under-prepared and almost totally reliant on their collective expertise.

Immediately Bright, Dave and Jon were on the case. Our first bird was a smart **Double-toothed Barbet**, appropriate that we should see the bird that adorns the cover of the field guide so early on. We also noted **Red-billed Firefinch**, and Bright pointed out a pair of attractive **Woodland Kingfisher**. Soon after a tiny **African Pygmy Kingfisher** showed itself briefly; I initially missed it but we were able to track it down to a semi-hidden perch in the middle of a bush before it zipped off again. **Levaillant's Cuckoo** was seen early on also; I noted the partially hidden bird and took others' word for it. This

would be the only one of the trip, so I now regret that I was somewhat overwhelmed by the “newness” of it all and therefore not paying full attention.

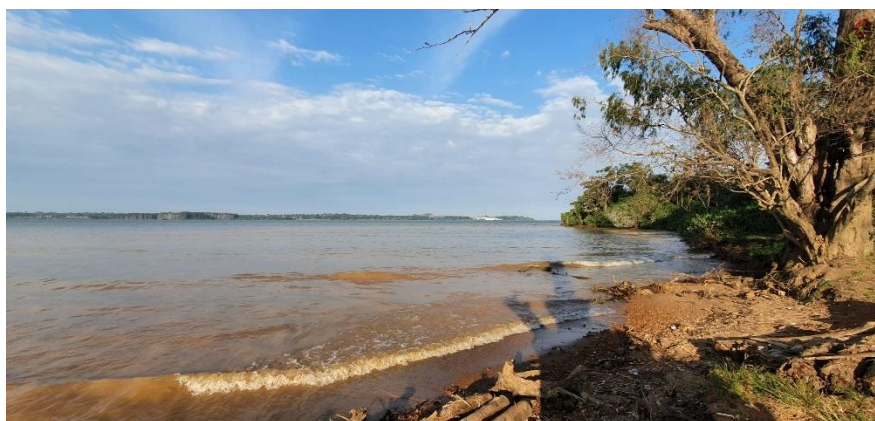
We walked slowly down the hill towards the shores of Lake Victoria, picking up a decent array of generally common, but quality birds, and a few primates to boot, notably Black-and-white Colobus. I was especially keen to connect with one of the stars of the gardens, and indeed one of Africa’s best and most iconic birds, **Great Blue Turaco**. We found several, though they were wary and distant, running with surprising agility along tree boughs into cover each time we happened to see one on a more exposed perch. Already a contender for a top-10 trip bird, but I craved better views over the next week.



We also managed to get UTB (under the belt) several other iconic species — in several cases new families for me — in this first, gentle foray: **Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill** were massive and conspicuous, betraying their presence with a huge whoosh of their wings; we also found both **Crowned** and **African Pied Hornbills**; a fabulously weird **Hamerkop** flew over (Spoonbill’s closest relative). Bright heard and then found for us an **African Grey Parrot**, such an iconic and familiar species, though it stayed in the high tree tops, so our views were distant and I didn’t even bother with photography. Conspicuous and common were **Eastern Plaintain Eaters** (turaco close relatives), and **Speckled Mousebirds**, from a generally a nice and easy, but endemic African family. As the afternoon dragged on and the sun got lower **Broad-billed Rollers** filled the sky coming in to roost in the gardens, many doing the rolling display flight that gives the family its name. We also noted a couple of **African Hobby**; Dave and Jon were gratified by the find, having picked it out as a gap in their existing African lists; a pair gave excellent flight views in the evening light after an earlier silhouetted suspect looked good on jizz, but had been impossible to pin down unequivocally. Although Sunbirds were not a new family for me, Africa is their stronghold and it was good to see **Red-chested** and **Variable Sunbirds**.



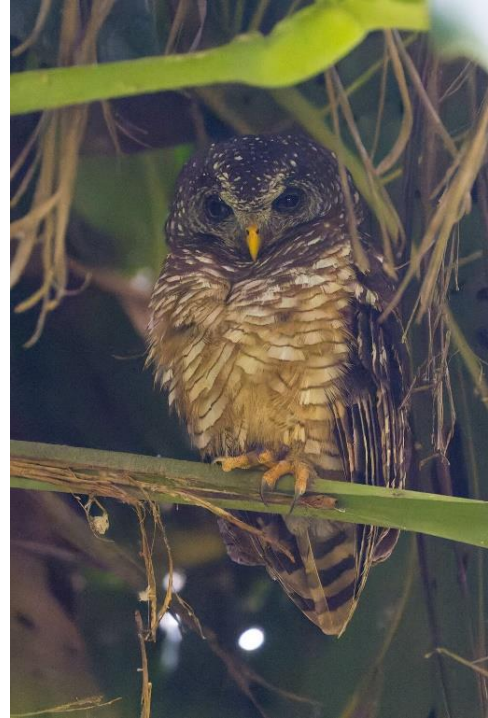
As we descended towards the lake, suddenly Gunnar realised he'd lost his laser pointer. A big hole in his jacket pocket was the culprit; it had evidently dropped out somewhere. While Gunnar went off in an ultimately vain search of it (and we hoped there would be no subsequent impact for finding forest birds over the next week) the three of us and Bright carried on down to the shore. Where the waters of the impressive Lake Victoria lapped at the edge of the gardens, we scanned the lake, the shore in either direction and the vegetation that overhangs the water. Distantly we picked out a **Palm-nut Vulture** and **Pink-backed Pelican**, while closer we noted **Maribou Stork**, **Black-necked Heron** and **African Openbill**. A couple of small, sparse bushes rising out of the lake itself were dripping with **Pied Kingfishers**, **Long-tailed Cormorants** and various versions of **Weaver**, including their famous, pendulous weaved nests (here we had **Slender-billed**, **Black-necked** and **Village**).



One of the “joys” of African birding is needing to distinguish between several, even dozens, of similar species in families such as Weavers, Sunbirds and Honeyguides. I discovered in this first birding experience with Dave that he was not only a very sharp and knowledgeable birder, he was particularly diligent in trying to nail down an ID while still in the field using careful cross-referencing of mental field-notes and the field guide, which he carried around in a large pouch. I could only admire and envy (or just occasionally mock ;-)) his dedication to the craft which

was ultimately to all of our benefit, nailing down several tricky species that would have gone in my personal too-hard basket. As well as his dedication to unequivocal ID, Dave also took on the mantle of official ebird list-maker and keeper, compiling an ebird list at each site. Over the coming week this superbly organised and useful practice would yield a valuable real-time record of the trip that we (and others) can refer to online.

Earlier, Bright had promised us a “guaranteed” African Wood Owl at a known roost, yet for some reason we had not gone directly to the roost. Down by the shore he alerted us that his friend had called to say it was showing, and that we needed to get up there before it left the roost in the fading light. Always eager to see night-birds, suspicious of any “guarantees” of easy birds, and even a little perplexed that we had not made this the top priority, I got cracking back up the hill. I’d covered 50m or so before realising that I really had no idea where we were going (other than back up the hill) and also that the others were still poring over the field guide and in a detailed discussion about the finer points of distinguishing Slender-billed from Village Weavers. Eventually I was able to cajole them away from their hugely important debate (or perhaps they just worked out the ID) and we followed Bright to a garden gate in the western boundary wall. Bright’s friend let us in and straight away pointed out a superb **African Wood Owl**, quietly roosting in deep shadow under large palm fronds. The light was terrible for photography but I did my best with high ISO and some fairly aggressive noise reduction and contrast enhancement in post-processing.



Once installed at the bar back at Precious Guest House we ordered beers all round. The local brew, Nile Special, proved particularly tasty, though at 5.6% on the strong side for a crew that needed/wanted to stay alert and avoid hangovers. I have been burned by imbibing too much on Day 1 of a trip in the past (see my [trip to Sichuan](#), for instance), so limited my consumption to 2 bottles. It went well with the very tasty tilapia curry I ordered for dinner. Partway through dinner a young, smiling chap sidled over and introduced himself as Herman, our guide for the next week. Young, sharp, knowledgeable and enthusiastic, and seemingly immune to tiredness on long drives, Herman was both guide and driver, and an invaluable asset on the trip.



Our first birding had been a fairly gentle, almost perfect introduction to Ugandan birds and birding — just what was needed to put the stresses of travel and luggage behind us, and get into a solid groove for the week to come. Dave's welcome practice of a real-time ebird list rendered the evening bird-call somewhat superfluous, and tonight we could fully concentrate on the beer and the craic. Here is the list for that first birding:

[\[ebird checklist\]](#)



22 July

Our first morning was set to be one of the most important of the trip. The drive from Entebbe to Mabamba Swamp — an extensive and minimally disturbed wetland of mixed papyrus and reedbeds on the edge of Lake Victoria — took about an hour, much of which was on mediocre unsealed roads. Our aim was to arrive at 7am, the earliest it would be possible to get a boat out into the swamp. Arriving bang on time we soon boarded a dugout canoe with a local guide, Innocent, stood on the bows like a figurehead so he could survey the area looking for our quarry. A stunning **Malachite Kingfisher** had chosen the next-door canoe as its roost, and a **Northern Brown-throated Weaver** also posed nicely for my lens. We chuntered out through head-high papyrus, cruising past many more gorgeous Malachite Kingfishers, before the tall papyrus gave way to lower reeds and mixed vegetation, every available perch seemingly occupied by multiple smart **Pied Kingfishers**. On grassy banks we noted dozens of **African Jacanas** and **Long-toed Lapwings**, and as we pushed through some of the narrower backwaters we even flushed a few **Black Crakes**.





Inevitably when birding for a specific target, the cost and time invested ratchet up the tension, especially as time passes without finding the bird. But this morning the birding gods smiled on us and barely 20 minutes into the trip, much sooner than expected, Innocent shouted “**Shoebill**”. The pilot cut the motor and we all turned to see the unmistakable profile of the monster. A bush had momentarily inserted itself directly between Dave and the bird and I could sense the tension and panic in his voice as he begged for directions, but this lasted for mere seconds as we drifted slightly further to the right and it came out in full view for all of us. It was some way off but fairly settled and we were able to manoeuvre the boat for great viewing. It really is a unique, prehistoric looking monster with that ridiculous slab for a bill that gives rise to its name. Side-on the shape of the bill gives the bird a smug smile — “I’m the king of the swamp!” — but when it turns to look directly at you the piercing pale eyes either side of the massive clog give it an appearance that bizarrely seems to alternate between menacing-and-sinister, and cartoon-like comical. Our bird was presumably aware of our presence and after a couple of minutes it took to the air, initially flying almost directly towards us but then diverting to land in an inaccessible channel and largely disappearing behind tall papyrus. Now we could understand how on occasions they can be tricky to find, but super-relieved and excited to have the number one avian target nailed already!



We had a further couple of hours on the boat to explore, and we carried on deeper into the swamp on a more open stretch of water, where we noted a flyover **Palm-nut Vulture**, **African Palm-swifts**, a small flock of **Spur-winged Geese**, **White-faced Whistling-duck**, **Yellow-billed Ducks** and **Purple Herons**. Our hosts planned to take us to where a (rarely seen) nesting Shoebill had been discovered in the last two weeks, so we left the open water heading up a narrowing channel. Reaching a point where the channel was clogged with vegetation and wrapping around the prop, the driver had to cut the engine and start to punt us along. Soon even this was ineffective, at which point Innocent and the driver disembarked to punt, push, pull and generally cajole our boat through the clogged up, shallow channel for a further 300-400m.



After 20 minutes of this very slow progress we arrived at a spot where the channel ran out. It seemed we could go no further. Even so I was completely unprepared for the sight that appeared after one more push, as we slid past a tall stand of papyrus. Standing barely 8m away, we had come almost face to face with an adult Shoebill, apparently unconcerned by the arrival of uninvited guests. Innocent pointed to the left of it — hidden lower down in a rough nest, but exposed regularly as the wind blew the reeds, was a pale, downy, “tiny” Shoebill chick. “Tiny”, in quotes, because it was already the size of a smallish raptor, just small in comparison to the adult which stands nearly a metre-and-a-half tall. At this range we were eye-ball to eye-ball with the adult, and through bins and the camera’s long lens I could make out the intricate pink patterning on that amazing bill and stare deep into the bird’s soul.



As we departed (once again being pushed and pulled and slid along the too-narrow, too-shallow channel), another canoe was arriving and we observed more boat-loads heading in that direction once we hit more open water. We were grateful that our early start had got us to this point first, and avoided the “traffic jam” that was about to ensue in the narrow approach.

In a different part of the swamp we went in search of another elusive inhabitant, Lesser Jacana. The field guide describes it as “widespread but generally scarce and local”, and Jon was especially keen to see one, having dipped previously on a few occasions in his other African birding sojourns. We also discovered that unlike its larger cousins which are often conspicuous, Lesser seems to be pretty wary. We had a couple of false alarms (including some stringing of juvenile African) before all getting at least tickable, if not brilliant, views of the petite grey-brown **Lesser Jacana**, scuttling away into the reeds, behaving more like a rail than a jacana.

It was now time to head back to base, though I insisted on a quick pitstop, not confident my straining, and at times almost painful bladder, would last the final 20 min or so. Everyone was good enough to look away as I clambered to the stern, found a couple of firm footholds with my back to the strong breeze and leaned out over the edge for some welcome relief. I just about managed not to fall in or catch anyone with the spray.

Back on dry land we birded for a few minutes, finding **Red-chested Sunbird**, **Speckled Mousebirds**, **Ruppell’s Starling**, and **Eastern Plain-tailed Eaters**. A week or two back Weyn’s Weaver had been present but we were told the flock had moved on and would be almost impossible to locate. Now we loaded up into the van once more in preparation for a long drive, though we left slowly, stopping a few times along the road, no longer under any time pressure and with the light now good for birding. We added a few nice species including **White-throated Bee-eater** and **Viellot’s Black Weaver**, though I dipped on a Brown-throated Wattle-eye and would have to claw this back on the final day.



[\[Mabamba ebird list\]](#) [\[Roadside ebird list\]](#)

The drive along the main highway that leads to the south-west was uneventful for a couple of hours. We had occasional stops if someone spotted anything interesting, and also at one or two of Herman's spots for local specialties (eg Rufous Heron, but no joy). We noted **Lizard Buzzard**, but not much else until we reached Kayabwe for a lunch stop. I had no idea of the significance of this tiny town until I noticed a gaggle of tourists on the roadside and realised they were taking photos at the Equator. This was the first time I have ever crossed the Equator on land, so during lunch I popped out and took an obligatory selfie, one foot and one bollock in either hemisphere. I returned to find the crew birding again as we waited for our food orders to arrive. This lunch-stop yielded our only **Green Woodhoopoe** of the trip: long-tailed, gaudy birds with a long down-curved red bill — another new African family for me!



[\[ebird list\]](#)

Another hour south-west and at Masaka, the largest town we'd encountered since Entebbe/Kampala, we turned more westerly, away from Lake Victoria. Twenty km west of Masaka, Herman pulled up again at a roadside papyrus stand. Though it was still a bit windy, he played a few calls. I was not hopeful of any change in fortune for our roadside birding when

suddenly Herman got super excited. He'd heard a **Papyrus Gonolek** call back. And then the excitement ratcheted up even further because the skulker decided to show itself: rich orange-red underneath, mainly black on top with a bright yellow-orange cap, this was a very dashing specimen. Herman was delighted and told us this was the showiest he'd ever seen. Also here we noted a **Slender-billed Weaver**.



As we tracked further west the countryside became less green, with reedbeds and gardens giving way to drier savannah. Approaching Lake Mburo we realised that some of the animals we were seeing were not livestock, but wild Zebra! Now looking with more intent into the bush we also observed Impala bouncing through the undergrowth. Late afternoon, Herman pulled the van onto a dirt track south of the highway. Up to this point our transport had been a bit of a disappointment, not one of the better birding vehicles I've travelled in. It was tricky to get in and out of, heavily tinted windows made viewing outside difficult, and only the two foremost of the rear seats had opening windows. Blocking the view to the front was a large completely superfluous TV screen. However now one aspect of the design came into its own — the roof was a pop-top and we were able to raise it so we could stand and scan as Herman drove on slowly the 10km to our overnight lodging. Now at least we could actually see what was coming from in front, and view unobstructed 360.

A dam near the turnoff gave a load of waterbirds including a couple of new ones, **Wattled Lapwing** and **Sacred Ibis**. When I started birding this latter species shared a name with a common bird in Australia, which has since changed its name to Australian White Ibis (or as we know them locally, the noble "Bin Chicken"). There were also a few **Hadada Ibis** (or, as Jon liked to call, them, "Ha-dee-dah"!). A **Grey Kestrel** cruised through. The new habitat yielded a number of new birds quite quickly, with the dry savannah grasses and low bushes home to species such as **Red-billed Quelea**, **Yellow-fronted Canary**, **Golden-breasted Bunting**, **African Pipit**, **Familiar Chat** and a stonking **Green-winged Pytilia**. Inevitably a number of **Grey-backed Fiscal** were among the most conspicuous, perching atop bushes. **Chinspot Batis** was the first member of this family for my life list, a neat, mainly black-and-white bird that seemed somewhat intermediate between a tit and a chat. Over the week we saw a few members of the family, but Chinspot was the commonest for us with observations at several (lower altitude) sites. Likewise, we ended up seeing **Northern Puffback** (a relative of the fiscals and shrikes) at several sites, but here was our first. A **Black-headed Gonolek**, all black above and rich crimson underneath had some star quality and nicely complemented our earlier sighting of Papyrus Gonolek.



We were sharing the road with a herd of Ankole Long-horned Cattle, aptly-named beasts with ridiculously impressive horns. They were being herded along the track in more or less the same direction as we were travelling and once or twice we needed to move on to avoid getting caught up in the herd. More Zebra, Impala and a Waterbuck reminded us we were moving from cultivated land toward a wilder part of the country, though we would not actually enter Lake Mburo National Park.



Other new birds noted included **Blue-naped Mousebird**, **Little Bee-eater**, **Spot-flanked Barbet**, **Croaking Cisticola**, **White-browed Coucal** and **Northern Black-flycatcher**. Several swallows swooping over the more open areas had the look-and-feel of large red-rumped types and decent views proved them to be **Mosque Swallow**.

A few francolins dashed across the track ahead of us and we were able to get views of these as they slunk away into the bush and confirm them as **Red-necked Francolin**. A little further on we saw movement on the deck and found some **Crested Francolin**. Closer to the lodge a small group of **Helmeted Guinea fowl** flushed into the bush as we drove past. These were one of the few non-lifers for me, as one of the few birds I actually remembered from that fateful trip to Botswana. A particular highlight came when I saw a small dumpy shape on a low perch 15m or so from the car. I called for Herman to stop the van and was excited to land my bins on a **Pearl Spotted Owlet** and we observed it being mobbed by a collection of small birds including several **Red-cheeked Cordonbleu**. We were looking almost directly into the setting sun, but after a burst of playback it flew to a much better lit photogenic perch on a euphorbia (candelabra).



[\[ebird list\]](#)

As sun tracked to the horizon we could still not see any obvious lodge, but but Herman drove on just another couple of km up an incline to a granite topped hill. We unloaded from the van and walked through some bush and huts to emerge onto the granite at a stunning safari lodge, views sweeping forever across the savannah. This was my first experience of any such African lodge and I felt like Simba surveying my kingdom as I stood and watched the light fade over the plains.



A large family of baboons was hanging around on the rock below the restaurant (we were warned not to leave anything edible or interesting lying around or risk having it pinched by the baboons). During an excellent dinner and of course a couple of beers we remarked that the rock surface looked like perfect night-time nightjar habitat, so after dark, Gunnar, Dave and I spent some time checking it out with torches and a bit of playback. We neither saw nor heard anything, but this did not put a damper on what had been an incredible first full day that had delivered our #1 target, a fantastic supporting cast and some quintessential views of Africa.

23 July

We assembled pre-dawn on the rock, next to the dining area, hoping for nightjars. Gunnar had stayed up the previous evening later than all of us, probably on a high from all the stimulants he'd taken, attempting to stave off the worst effects of a cold (or was it covid?). But he reported zero owls or nightjars.





After breakfast, as the sun was just rising, Herman and a local guide escorted us around the resort where we had some excellent, relaxed birding.

Almost immediately two nightjars flushed from a patch of vegetation. I saw only one, and very little on it, certainly not enough for an ID. The manner of nightjars is that they tend not to flush far, and as we hunted around in various likely looking patches of scrub it flushed a couple more times. At the third time of asking, however, we got a visual on it before it was scared by us, finding a window through the vegetation where it was visible on the deck: **Black-shouldered Nightjar**. Gunnar and I were able to approach carefully as it stayed put for decent



pics. But as I was photographing the nightjar a pair of Black Goshawk cruised through and I missed them. I would not be able to claw them back. Such are the sacrifices one makes for one's "art". Convinced of much larger size from his initial views of the other bird, Jon's list was also augmented by Freckled Nightjar, but I had not even seen the bird let alone get anything identifiable on it.

Prior to the trip, the African endemic Turaco family stood out as A-listers in the field guide – big, gaudy, colourful forest

dwellers, each seemingly with some unusual feature (the anti-honeyguide, perhaps?) such as the lipstick of Great Blue. We'd dipped on **Ross' Turaco** in the Entebbe Gardens, so when one showed well as pretty much our second bird after the nightjars, it was great to clock its crazy red hairdo that stood out from its black plumage and chonking yellow bill and yellow eye wattle.

Gazing down from the rock we located an **African Green Pigeon**, some **Little Bee-eaters** and **Red-headed Lovebirds** (sweet, iconic parrots), while later on Jon found a stunning **Sulphur-breasted Bushshrike**. The same area yielded a **Tropical Boubou** and some **Meyer's Parrots**, which landed for some nice, perched views. I was gratified to see my lifer **Bateleur**, a must-see African raptor because of its unique, almost tailless shape



As we worked our way around the area slowly, Herman occasionally played for a couple of trickier Barbet targets. We heard a **Crested Barbet** calling faintly but distinctly and walked off into the savannah a few hundred metres to track it down to a distant candelabra. A **Red-backed Scrub-robin** eventually yielded decent views, though was also out of decent range for my 400mm lens. Unfortunately, we left empty-handed with regard to the near-endemic Red-faced Barbet, a key target here.

It would have been great to spend more time in this area going into the National Park proper, and taking a cruise on the lake (which would guarantee encounters with Hippos and give a chance of African Finfoot). But our compressed itinerary meant that Rwakobo Rock was really just a stopover to break the long journey from Entebbe to the far south-west of the country, where we were headed today. To make Kisoro by nightfall we would need to drive most of the afternoon.

We continued to bird from the van with the top up as we slowly drove back out to the highway, retracing our steps from yesterday. **Mosque Swallows** were again prominent, but we also picked out some similar but smaller **Rufous-chested Swallows**, and a **White-headed Sawwing**. Searching for bush birds on foot we came across two more **Crested Francolin**, an **African Thrush** had us thinking we were onto something more interesting for a while, and we noted more Zebra. I spied a larger bird on top of a distant bush and called for Herman to stop and back up a bit: lucky we did, because this was **Bare-faced Go-away-bird**, surprisingly our only Go-away Bird of the trip!

[\[ebird list here\]](#)

The 300km drive to Kisoro was initially fairly flat and straight, but increasingly winding and slow as we hit the mountains in the south. We stopped occasionally to bird from the roadside. We scanned wet areas for Rufous-bellied Heron, previously seen on this route in a few places by Herman. We dipped on this but at one place were able to pick out several distant **Grey-crowned Cranes**, my first encounter with Uganda's incredible-looking national bird; another of my pre-trip targets. The distant views were blurred by heat-haze in the scope, but we would see more cranes once the dry savannah and its grazing cattle gave way to lush agriculture such as the shimmering green tea plantations of the foothills. A very close roadside pair of **Grey-crowned Cranes** in a tea plantation gave excellent views as a **Wahlberg's Eagle** drifted over.





[[ebird lists here](#) and [here](#)]

We had one main birding stop, late afternoon, where the road cuts through Echuya Central Forest Reserve. Having driven through many km of horribly deforested foothills we arrived into a valley whose steep slopes were lined with excellent looking rainforest. We would have to bird from the roadside, so Herman identified a suitably wide verge to pull over where we could bird in relative safety from the passing traffic. Immediately the forest was buzzing with small passerines and we began to build a list of higher altitude species, including **Rameron Pigeon**, and **Northern Double-collared Sunbirds**, as well as our first Albertine Rift endemics: **Regal Sunbird** and a few with the desirable moniker “Rwenzori”: **Rwenzori Batis**, **Rwenzori Apalis**, and **Rwenzori Hill-babbler**. I was unable to get onto a sole Scarce Swift that Dave found, but I would claw this back at Rushaga in a couple of days. Prinias are not normally a family to get the juices flowing but a small skulking bird creeping about in dense vegetation looked interesting and certainly new, and was eventually pinned down as superb dark-grey, spotty **Banded Prinia**: it looks a bit like a mini antbird and definitely breaks the mould of largely uninteresting brown warblers.

[[ebird list](#)]

We had become accustomed to people walking along the road, in the towns and even in the rural areas we passed through: women in brightly coloured dresses sauntered along with tall baskets and unwieldy, heavy bundles of logs balancing on their heads; kids carried large yellow water cannisters, a stark reminder that no one has running water here; men rode unsteadily on push-bikes laden with unfeasible quantities of green bananas, and had to push them on foot up slopes too steep to pedal; in the towns, blokes in Premier League football shirts hung about smoking (to keep ourselves amused we took to spotting shirts, with Arsenal and ManU shirts taking on the status of Grey-crowned Sparrow as “trash”). After our birding in Echuya, as we approach the outskirts of Kisoro, we came across a throng of people the like of which we had not seen in any other town. Herman pointed out the confronting reality: they were mostly from a huge UN refugee camp that has been set up here to care for refugees from the war in Democratic Republic of Congo. Here was a stark reminder of how close we were – barely 10km – from the border to this troubled country.



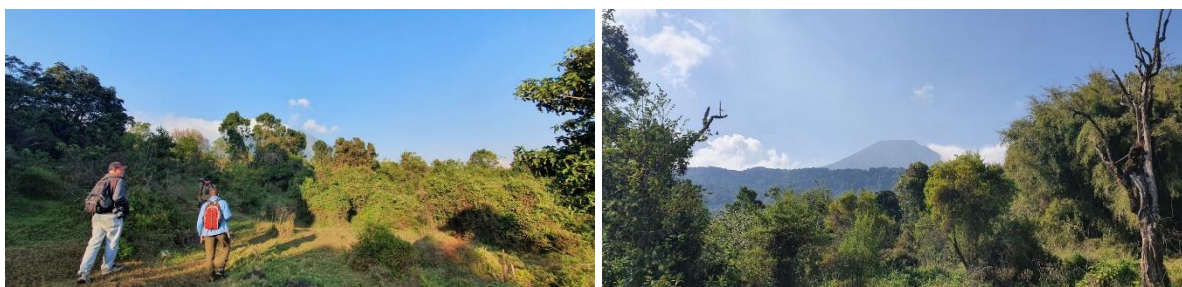
Our digs for the night, the Travellers' rest, was a pleasant colonial hotel on the far side of Kisoro. We followed a couple of beers and decent meal by an early night.

24 July

Today was one of the days we had added as our "birding extension". In my research back in March I had noted Mgahinga National Park as one of the few places in Uganda – and most certainly the best – to see the rare and spectacular Rwenzori Turaco. Perhaps because this park is so far south, it is a bit off the usual birding tourist routes, so the turaco is not often on standard birding lists, adding to its allure. In truth I was also somewhat nervous about today, feeling some personal responsibility for the success or otherwise because it had initially been my idea to change the itinerary.

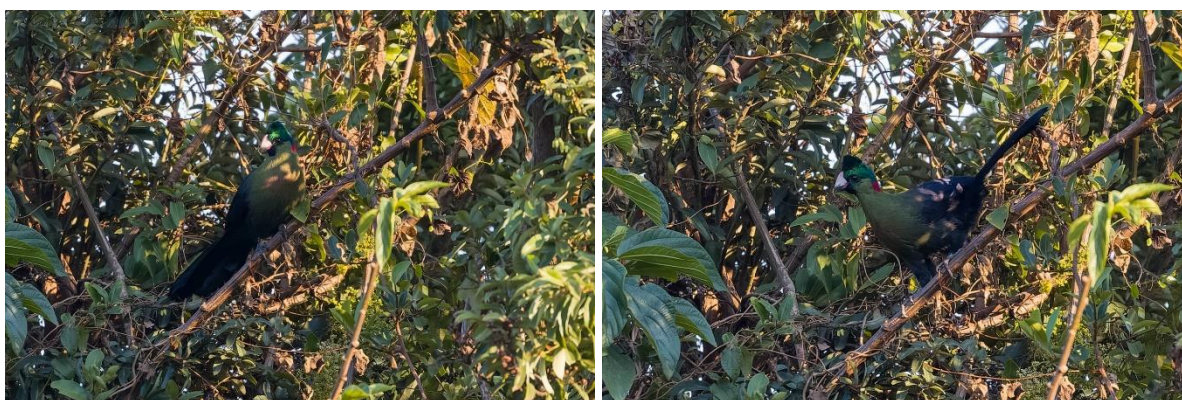
Mgahinga is the Ugandan part of an extensive area protected area of the Virunga Mountains that straddles the three countries, Rwanda, DRC and Uganda. The scenery is fabulous with views across the forest to the 5 peaks of Mount Sabyinyo, at the point where the countries all meet. Like the more famous Bwindi NP only 40km to the north, Mgahinga is home to Mountain Gorillas, but it also holds a population of the spectacular Golden Monkey. Entry signs were adorned with the catch-phrase "*Where silver meets gold*" a reference to its two famous primate inhabitants. It is possible to do monkey and/or gorilla trekking in Mgahinga but we were here for the birds and would have to hope we might luck onto a monkey.





During the formalities of registering our visit with passports, organising the local park escorts and the like (all of which Herman took care of), we were kept entertained by a troupe of locals who beat drums, sang welcome songs and danced vigorously (in the case of one young girl, so vigorously I feared she would do herself an injury). I am sure the welcome was officially intended for the other groups on more formal trekking outings than us, but we enjoyed it as a side benefit without the need to give it our full attention. We were eager to get birding, and as the singers and dancers carried on with their pre-trek welcome performance, we headed up a forest trail in single file, armed escorts at the front and rear. The armed guards were fortunately not required because of our proximity to either Rwanda or DRC, but because of the presence of forest Elephants. Ahead of us we heard a rifle being fired, a sign that a guide had encountered elephants too close to our trail for human comfort, so had sent a warning shot into the air to scare them away.

Remarkably after barely 100m, still in earshot of the singing, our local guide drew our attention to a Turaco calling. "Which one?". "Rwenzori Turaco". "What, already???". Based on the few trip reports from Mgahinga, I had come to expect we'd have to walk much further up into the jungle than this. I was excited at how quickly this opportunity had come, but now immediately nervous that the success of this bit of the extension depended almost entirely on seeing this one bird. It didn't seem to respond to some initial playback, and the viewing was difficult through the dense vegetation. Then it went quiet, and we were interrupted a couple of times as non-birding trekkers made their way past en route to the summit(s). Had we missed our chance? My heart sank. Ten minutes passed (it felt like more) and we tried some more playback, this time with an answer – it was still there! I found a spot on the trail-edge where I could get a slightly better view of the canopy some 30-50m back, and as I scanned I landed my bins on the head of a **Rwenzori Turaco** emerging from dense cover about 40m away. As each of us successively got on it, it came further out into the open, peering around inquisitively, as if to find out where our guide's playback had come from. Top target in the bag already, vindicating the choice to come here and add an extra day to the trip!



A Doherty's Bushshrike was not so cooperative, but we did not have long to wait for the next stonker – along a small creek-bed just off the main trail our guides located an **Archer's Robin-chat**. Soon after we also found a lovely **White-starred Robin**. Later we would

add **Stuhlemann's (Rwenzori Double-collared) Sunbird** another specialty of Mgahinga rarely seen on standard itineraries. Some of the group also saw another endemic, **Blue-headed Sunbird**, but I would need to wait until the last morning to claw this back. **Black-faced Apalis** is an Albertine Rift endemic which we ticked off with a flyover bird on our walk up, but which we get better views of later in the week in Bwindi; similarly another endemic, **Stripe-breasted Tit**, went on the list but would have better view in Bwindi. We also found a smart **Albertine Sooty Boubou** (also called Mountain Black Boubou) which despite its "Albertine" moniker and small Rwenzori range marked in the field guide, is not listed on albertinerift.org as one of the Albertine Rift endemics. Go figure!

Until 1991 these mountains were inhabited by Batwa Pygmies. For 1000s years they were the only human inhabitants of the mountain forests, but when Mgahinga and Bwindi were gazetted, they were evicted with no compensation or anywhere to go, deemed to be a threat to the wildlife (notably the gorillas) that the parks were established to protect. The Batwa, numbering less than 7000, are now among the poorest people on the planet, dispossessed of their tradition lands, squatters on the land much more recent immigrants' land, and with poor



economic and health outcomes: life expectancy is just 28 years old. I had been unaware of this tragedy, or how recent it happened, until long after our visit. At the top of our walk we visited several shelters, erected specially to showcase to tourists how the Batwa used to live. Not realising the sad history, on the day we took photos and carried on birding.

Around the camp we craned our necks to get views of both **White-browed Crombec** and – eventually – rift endemic **Red-faced Woodland Warbler**. This latter bird had been consorting with the crombecs and took both Dave and I an age to find. I had pretty-much reached the point of deciding the others must be stringing Crombec, until I too saw a small, pale but long tailed bird where previously I had been seeing the stunted-tailed Crombecs.

A **Chestnut-throated Apalis** called, but before we could try to attract it, one of the guides whispered that he had a Francolin. Forest Francolins and Partridges can be a bugger to see, and this one lived up to that reputation. We hoped to tempt it onto the track with some playback but it decided to stay 10-15m back in the dense forest; I managed a reasonable and tickable view of the head of a hard-to-see **Handsome Francolin** as it picked its way through the tangle of logs, vines and ferns on the forest floor. Others managed a short flight view as our guide moved in to try and push it towards us. Realising this was the best we'd do, but elated that we'd scored yet another tricky species, we went back for the Apalis and a short burst of playback had it landing atop a nearby tree and posing nicely.

Here we learned about "Elephant beer". The guide picked up a melon and explained that elephants like to eat them because they ferment in their stomach's and make the drunk! Probably have explained this story many times, our guide was a natural in front of the camera, shooting an explanation for Jon in a single take.



It was now late morning and we descended back to the park entrance. A rustle in the undergrowth next to the trail might have been a small mammal, but was probably a **Chubb's Cisticola**. I decided to check it out more closely, and as I approached the spot a **Rwenzori Nightjar** flushed. It swooped around and landed not far away. Our guide moved to where we thought it was and sure enough it flushed again, this time gliding right past our faces for a fabulous view. It seemed to land again about 30m away, and by clambering up a bank we were able to track it down to a roost on small log. I was beckoning Dave over and helping him get on it as it flushed once more, a second or two before I could get any sort of photo.

Back at the park entrance we noted a friendly adult and juv of **African Dusky Flycatcher** and ate our packed lunches. About 30 minutes earlier I had remembered that this place is also good for another iconic species, Rwenzori Three-horned Chameleon. Herman explained that we should have asked the guards at the entrance to look for one for us before setting out. It was now probably too late, but he sent a message ahead of us just in case they could find one while we were eating our lunch. This seemed pretty low probability, but the locals came good again, with one of our men at the gate finding this stonker, a mini colour-changing triceratops!



[\[ebird list\]](#)

We returned to Travellers' Rest to pick up some medicine Gunnar had left in the fridge, and Jon had the sterling idea we should indulge in a lunch-time beer as we waited for the next part of our journey to commence. Lunchtime drinking will often result in a headache later, but on this occasion I decided it was worth the risk, and indeed it was. Cracking idea, JP!

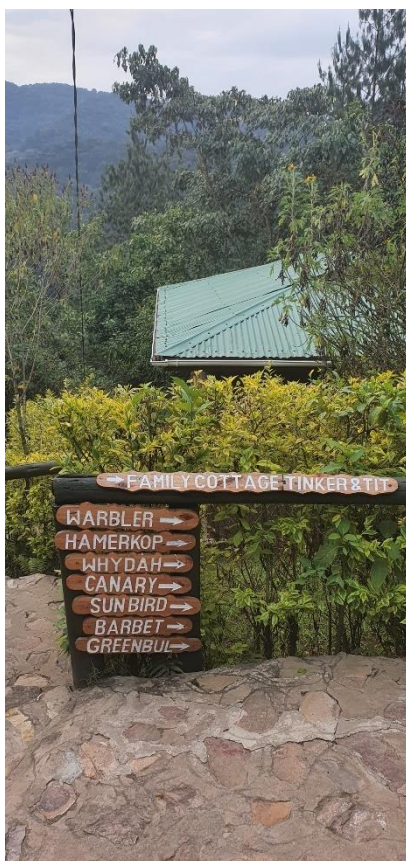
Our trip to Rushaga, on the south side of Bwindi NP, was not far as the crow flies – barely 20 km, but was on slow windy roads so took us two hours. Of course we birded along the way, stopping to note various weavers and bishops and waxbills and other birds of the open maize fields. **Bronze Sunbird** is a large, impressive looking sunbird and we saw a few on our drive; they were present at most spots we stopped. Other birds noted on the drive included **Grey-capped Warbler**, **Brimstone Canary** (chunkier than its smaller cousin Yellow-fronted, that we'd seen a couple of days earlier), **Streaky Seedeater**, **Black-crowned** and **Common Waxbill** and several **Yellow Bishop**. In amongst the black and yellow bishops, I found another different yellow and black bird, identified for me by Herman as **Black-billed Weaver**. Jon heard us announce it, but never got on it, and Dave didn't even hear us call it. It would be the only one of the trip (sorry Dave!).



[ebird lists [here](#) and [here](#)]

Our lodge at Bwindi, Ichumbi Gorilla Lodge was exquisite. Rooms were all named after African birds; Jon and I shared “Turaco”, and appropriate assignment. The dining area and bar had a wonderful view over to the primary forest of Bwindi with a few **Scarce Swift** cruising past (grip back), the rooms comfortable and the staff friendly and very attentive (if not a little obsequious in their attempts to be “professional” and welcoming). There was no time for much birding, and it was certainly impossible get even to the forest edge, but we walked to the helicopter pad – a flat area of grass that stretched out like a tongue into the valley, and noted more than twenty species in only about 30 minutes. These included new birds **Black-and-white Mannikin**, **Yellow-bellied Waxbill**, **Western Citril**, and **Pin-tailed Wydah** (sadly without its ridiculous tail). As we walked back a couple of kids were bothering us, trying to get our attention. After ignoring them as best we could, Jon eventually turned and realised why they were chasing us: one of the boys had a long stick with a Chameleon on it that they wanted to show us! We admired their discovery, encouraged them to look after it and put it back (they are smart enough to know it's in their interests to be able to show to future tourists again!), then gave them a small tip – which is presumably why they'd been chasing us all along.

At dinner we planned the next day. It had emerged that Herman was expecting that we would be going birding on the forest edges tomorrow, before heading into Bwindi proper on Day 3 (Day 2 was our designated Gorilla Trekking day). This was the first sign that our plans and the ground agent's were not well aligned for the “extension”, and I wished that I had taken more personal responsibility prior to the trip. Dave, Jon and I pointed out that as the paying punters, we should get to set the itinerary, and we had not added extra days to look for forest edge birds, but to “penetrate the Impenetrable Forest” to look for its specialties like Grauer's Broadbill and Grey-chested Babbler (Kakamega). Initially Herman resisted this, but we found out later it was because to head into the forest you need armed escort, and none had been arranged. Fortunately he was able to make a phone call or two, and get a last-minute escort arranged for us.



25 July

The park itself is not open to punters until 7am, so we convened for breakfast around 6am — a relative lie-in. While we waited for the van to take us the short distance to the park entrance a **White-browed Robin-chat** popped out onto the lawn by the restaurant. My camera settings were all wrong for the early morning dim light so I managed only a horribly blurred record shot, and sadly I would not have another better opportunity.

Once we got to the park itself and crossed the stark border between deforested agriculture and primary forest, we birded around the reception area while Herman sorted out formalities. A **Black-billed Turaco** called from a nearby tree. Though we saw several **Sharpe's Starling**, we struggled to find the turaco until it decided to change trees and we had excellent flight views of our 4th turaco species.

Once Herman had sorted out permits and returned our passports, we were able to start walking up the mountain while the Gorilla trekking punters were still having their briefing session and welcome songs. An early excellent find by the guides was endemic **Dusky Crimson-wing** a stunning – and surprisingly skulking – grey and crimson forest finch. Not long after we were trying to track down a **Mountain Illadopsis** (which we did – cracker!) when an orange bird appeared at the base of a gully. Dave and I got on it – not sure if anyone else did – and it was clearly an **Equatorial Akalat**. We then had an extended (IMO far too long) battle with a few Black-faced Rufous-warblers which steadfastly refused to show themselves despite calling from vegetation seemingly right at our feet.

The rest of the day felt slightly odd to me. It was enjoyable, the scenery in primary forest was superb, and of course we saw some cracking birds. But I was also twitchy to get to where I

thought we'd have best chances for the two key targets as I saw them: Grauers' Broadbill, because it is rare, beautiful and only ever seen in Bwindi, and Grey-chested Babbler (or Kakamega), which is not confined to Bwindi but does sit in a family of only three that includes Dapple-throat and Spot-throat, hence desirable from a family listing perspective. I'd expected that we would target these and get other stuff along the way. Perhaps that was what was happening but it didn't seem that way to me, and according to the field guide (and my altimeter) we never got high enough for the Broadbill. Perhaps I was being too much of the twitcher. Herman reassured that the gnarly old trees covered in lichen and wispy hanging moss were prime Broadbill habitat, but it is rare and unobtrusive. I had flashbacks to Wattled Broadbill in Mindanao, similarly rare and unobtrusive, and one of my worst ever dips.

A big raptor cruised over and we were all on it quickly. Huge barred, bulging wings meant this was a superb **Crowned Eagle**. It was close, and gave a superb view, but before I could wield the camera it disappeared behind a large tree (there were a few of these in the forest, inconsiderately blocking our view from time to time – if only I'd had a chain-saw). I lined up with the camera where it would emerge, confident of a great picture using my new R6's super-fast autofocus, but it changed course while out of sight and we didn't relocate it until it had drifted much further over the valley. I managed a record shot but not the frame-filler that the occasion deserved.



Some **Great Blue Turacos** called and were conspicuous but distant. We also connected with both a stunning orange and black **Luhder's Bushshrike** and smart, but less impressive, **Grey-green Bushshrike** (also known as Bocage's Bushshrike), but not our most-wanted, Lagden's Bushshrike.



Around lunchtime Herman had been calling for Many-coloured Bushshrike and seemed to be getting a response. Suddenly he dropped his hands and turned to us: "Guys, it's not a bushshrike. That is **Rufous-chested Owlet!**". It was close but the vegetation was ridiculously dense. Amazingly, a few minutes later he beckoned us over – he'd got the little fucker! Successively he was able to get Dave and Jon on it, but it took me ages of increasing frustration as they tried repeatedly to give directions, until eventually I too was able to find a tiny window through to a small patch of rufous that betrayed the bird's presence. As I watched the same place, the leaves and branches swayed back and forth, gradually revealing various bits and pieces – notably the streaked white belly (the local race has rufous chest above a paler belly) and piercing yellow eyes — of the superb tiny owlet. It carried on calling and we must have spent at least 30mins or more trying to get Gunnar onto the bird but it simply would not show itself to him and I started to grow impatient that we were seemingly wasting time

trying to find a bird for the “guide” when the paying punters had all had our fill. In the end, as Gunnar slid down the slope from our trail to try for a different angle, the owlet flushed and I selfishly relaxed a bit because he would be forced to give up (that did not stop him continuing playback for another 5-10 minutes in the vain hope it would come back). Remarkably, this was our fifth night-bird species, one per day since we started, and all had been found in daylight (African Wood Owl, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Black-shouldered Nightjar and Rwenzori Nightjar)!

We accumulated a decent list of “padders” including a variety of **Greenbuls**: **Shelley’s** (previously the local race was split as Kakamega Greenbul, but they are now lumped with Shelley’s), **Eastern Mountain** (which we’d had at Mgahinga also), **Yellow-whiskered**, and **Yellow-streaked**. Likewise a few **Cuckooshrikes**: **Grey**, **Black** and **Petit’s** (I am used to grey, white and black cuckooshrikes in Australia, but Petit’s a glossy deep purple male like a starling, and a yellow and grey female: quite the cracker); and we did well for Apalises also: **Rwenzori Apalis**, **Black-throated Apalis**, **Black-faced Apalis** (better views today so able to untick flight views from yesterday), **Buff-throated Apalis** and **Grey Apalis**. One of the first birds called for the morning’s trek was a small honeyguide that I saw perched before it flew, never to be seen again. Herman thought it was Dwarf Honeyguide, but he and I were, I think, the only ones on it, and I was not happy counting this just on the basis of Herman’s ID. But we did also find two unequivocal members of the family, **Willcock’s Honeyguide** and **Greater Honeyguide**.

As well as the padders, we also carried on adding to our list of rift endemics. **Yellow-eyed Black-flycatcher** seemed relatively easy – we saw two today and would see at least one on each of our forays into the forest.



We returned to the park entrance after several hours, bade goodbye to our patient but extremely bored-looking armed guard, then walked beyond the park entrance, through a small village and down a side-track. **Mosque** and **Angola Swallows** were using electricity wires through the village as convenient roosts, as as we walked downhill through agricultural land we noted **Baglaffeht Weaver** and **Northern Puffback** among other birds of the farmland and forest edge.





As we descended we came to a lovely looking camp where a raised platform gave a lookout over a swampy area. A Red-chested Flufftail responded to Herman's playback and seemed incredibly close, but would simply not show itself. Once I saw a shape move behind dense grass, but that was as close I got. Jon might have seen a bit more, but Dave was also unhappy with untickable views.

I realised that the double-dip on my top two targets Grauer's Broadbill and Grey-chested Babbler, meant much would rest, from a birding perspective, on our walk in two days' time. Tomorrow would be all about Gorillas and we could not count on much birding. Over another excellent meal back at Ichumbi, the staff entertained us with a special performance and some cake for Gunnar's birthday.



26 July

Today was really only about one non-avian target, Mountain Gorillas. These impressive apes are the main reason 99% of punters come here. When Attenborough filmed his iconic sequence in Rwanda nearly 40 years ago for *Life on Earth*, only 500 remained on the planet. Since then, conservation efforts have seen the population grow to a still precarious 1000, of which around 600 live in Bwindi. Around half of the families in Bwindi are habituated to humans and so can be visited (with a suitable escort) regularly by tourists such as ourselves. Families have no fixed location, but move around in large areas of the forest. Trackers stay with a family 'til dusk, and return early the next morning to exactly the same spot, picking up the trail to follow and relocate the family if it has moved overnight (which they often have). Once located, they radio back to base to let the guides and their punters know.

Of course, while waiting for permits to be sorted and other punters to arrive, we birded. Initially we played a tape for Snowy-bellied Robin-chat hoping it would hop onto a dark, narrow trail that led away from the reception area. After a minute or so, the guys saw a shape drop onto the track "There it is!". We all locked on, but it turned out to be a (still good) **Red-capped Robin-Chat**. As we watched, it flushed as a large red beast came trundling towards us. A superb **Red River Hog** got to within 5m then looked up, saw us, stopped dead in its tracks, then turned and bolted away back down the track. It was like something from a cartoon and I half expected the sound of bongos as its little legs pumped the ground trying to get away.

After an overly long and slow briefing session and welcome songs (ok, so it was very sweet and a great performance by the locals, but it did go on a bit) we were joined up with an Indian family: father, mother and two sons, both of whom work in Silicon Valley for big tech. We were assigned a guide, XXXX, and two armed guards. The guide explained that we would be trying to visit a family with four babies and a "Black-back", a young, 13 year old male who had not yet developed the classic silver patch on his back that gives the alpha-males their name. Excited to see babies, but privately, we each were disappointed that apparently there was no Silverback in the group we had been assigned. At first I kept this thought to myself and resolved to enjoy the experience to the full. Perhaps we had we misunderstood anyway?

Gunnar's unconventional footwear attracted the attention of the guide, who started to insist he change into boots, until Herman intervened, explaining to the guide there was no way he could persuade Gunnar to change out of his Vibram5Fingers.



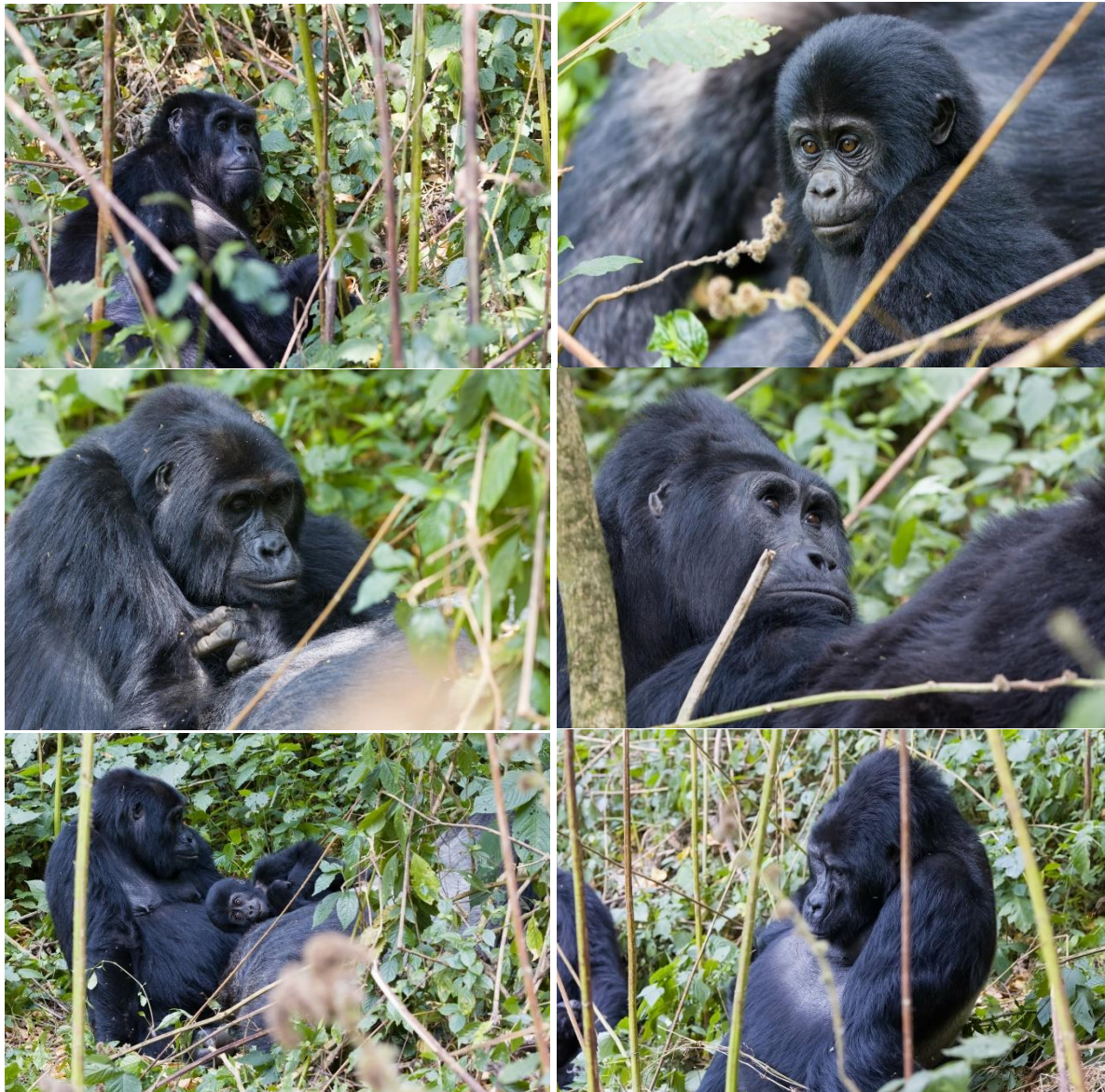
We loaded back into vehicles for a short drive back out of the National Park to a new spot, closer to “our” family, then we set out on foot for a couple of kilometres following a stream. The stream marked one of the starkest boundary contrasts I’ve ever seen, open fields to our right, dense rainforest on our left. Part-way along our guide gave us some negative news – the trackers had not yet relocated the family this morning – ratcheting up the tension another notch. A small bridge led across the stream into the forest and we dropped into single file and shuffled along. Fresh, still steaming Elephant droppings were a reminder of why we had armed guards with us at all times.





In a small clearing we regrouped and the guide informed us that he now had news that the trackers had found our Gorilla family, so we would head directly there, perhaps another 20min walk. We headed upwards into a valley with fewer big trees, but overgrown with nettles, the jungle floor became denser and we pulled fingers and hands into sleeves to avoid being stung. Gunnar's unconventional footwear was not well designed for the conditions and he was stung repeatedly on the soles of his feet as we walked through increasing dense vegetation up a slope. He was surprising stoic about it. After another 10 minutes we stopped and regrouped once more. We were close, and the guide instructed us to don masks, because Gorillas are susceptible to human diseases. As we were doing so we realised we could already see our first Gorilla, young one playing on a vine, barely 15m away.

Walking up beyond the young gorilla the guide stopped. I moved up behind the others and was blown away to realise that our group of 8 humans was now standing in a tight group, right amongst the gorilla family. I'd imagined we'd be close, but not *this* close. To our left a mother and baby sat quietly, baby tucked tightly under her arm away from us, while in front, barely 3m away we had walked right up to 4 or 5, huddled together either sleeping or grooming each other. As the biggest of these shifted position we could see a large grey back and realised this was the group's Silverback. Yes, the group had a testosterone-fuelled Blackback, but he was still subservient to the alpha male, around 20 years old. He was the one being groomed by his favourite ladies. He even gave us a tremendous comedy moment, letting out the longest and loudest fart I have ever heard. It's good to be the King!



We stayed with this group for at least 40 minutes, then they started to move up the slope. We followed and moved into a position just above them. I was now looking down on a mother and baby, as well as the Silverback. The rest of the (human) group had moved a bit further up the slope and I was left with one of the guards. He suggested we move down closer to the baby for better photo ops, but I didn't want to leave *my* group so instead I edged up the hill closer to where Gunnar and Dave were standing. As I did so I turned to see the Silverback walk on a similar trajectory, but a little lower down the slope. "Are we ok here? Am I safe?" I questioned the guard. Even if I wasn't safe, it was too late as the huge beast emerged between some overhanging vines barely a metre from me. He lingered with his back to me, and then just as it seemed he would carry on away from us, without warning he turned and decided – probably as a show of strength – to walk directly between Gunnar and Dave, almost brushing them as he strode past. No argument from us: as Dave pointed out later, if the Silverback says it's Wednesday, it's fucking Wednesday!

With our allotted hour with the gorillas now nearly up, the animals themselves were clearly used to this being the limit and were starting to move off into the forest, not expecting to be followed. We walked off in the opposite direction down the hill, on a high from an experience that we had known would be good and once-in-a-lifetime, but had still managed to exceed expectations. We ate our picnic lunch in a clearing, but didn't do a great deal of birding. The only notable birding came as we departing the forest: I was unable to get onto an Emerald Cuckoo that Dave found, but I did manage some pics of what we suspect is/was our only **Dwarf Honeyguide** of the trip, important because it is an Albertine Rift endemic.



[\[ebird list\]](#)

Once out of the forest we travelled back to Rushaga in the vans then birded the forest edge down to N'Shongi Camp and the swampy area.



The highlight of the birds on the way down to N'Shongi was a stunning **Doherty's Bushshrike**. I heard it call unprompted by our tape and once Herman played for it became superbly inquisitive and posed for cracking views. A real stunner in Ugandan flag primary colours, red, yellow and black. We'd seen **Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater** at a few places but in the same spot as the bushshrike, one gave its best photo ops of the trip.

Once at N'Shongi itself we enjoyed a very civilised 40 minutes, drinking cold beer on the viewing deck, and this time getting excellent views of a superb **Red-chested Flufftail** (though it was still too quick and sneaky for photos). Meanwhile an **African Paradise Flycatcher** posed nicely. What a brilliant way to end a superb day!





[\[ebird list\]](#)

27 July

We returned to the forest for a full day's birding today. Our guard seemed even less interested today, positively pissed off at being with us apparently. I have to admit, once or twice I too felt like we could be doing more or moving faster to give ourselves more chance at our missing targets. Today we walked a slow loop up to around 2200m, clawing back some species we'd missed two days ago, finding some nice ones, but still missing the top 3 (Grauer's Broadbill, Grey-chested Babbler and Lagden's Bushshrike). I still don't really know if we just had not conveyed our priorities to the guides clearly enough or perhaps this was just Remi's way of birding and Herman didn't want to get involved. Of course we still had an excellent day. Highlights of the morning included another **Black-billed Turaco**, more **Great Blue Turacos** (hard to tire of such a gaudy, beautiful taxon), a flock of **White-headed Woodhoopoe**, and both **Yellow-billed** and **Grey-throated Barbets**. We were finally able to get tickable clear views of a mega-skulking **Black-faced Rufous-warbler**. An African Broadbill sang, but we could not tempt it any closer unfortunately, so it stayed in the heard-only basket, and **Elliot's Woodpecker** eventually revealed itself to all of us.

Around lunchtime we came to a more open area that, despite the time of day, was alive with birds. Initially these were mainly **Common Bulbuls** – there must have been 30-40 chasing each other around vociferously – but we also found an excellent array of other species. In some cases it was better views of earlier birds, such as **Banded Prinia**, **Black-faced Apalis**. But we also accrued a good list of new birds as well: **Tullberg's Woodpeckers**, **Dusky Tit**, **Little Greenbul**, **Rwenzori Hill Babbler**, **Tiny Sunbird**, **Red-headed Malimba**, **White-**

breasted Nigrita. All the while we strained our ears for the faint, high-pitched song of the Broadbill, but it was no to be, even though this now seemed like our best chance. In fact I was so keen to concentrate on this 3-star taxon, I made a point of showing mock disgust at how much attention the rest of the group was paying to the field guide in their attempts to identify the small, non-descript Honeyguide.



On our way down the hill in the afternoon we further found **Velvet-mantled Drongo** another **Grey-throated Barbet**. One of the few birds that I managed to find (most were found by one of Dave, Jon or Herman) was a cracking **Emerald Cuckoo**, one of Africa's prettiest birds. Further down, in a superb bit of birding, Jon announced that he'd just seen a bird fly "trogon height" into a distant thicket. This seemed a pretty big call (though he'd been sure not to announce the species itself), but as we got closer Dave locked his bins on a cracking **Bar-tailed Trogon**. It was disappointingly distant for photos, but I bagged a record shot.



We descended this part of the loop trail, initially along a ridge, then down into a shaded, damp valley. Ahead of the group with Herman, all of a sudden I heard one burst of song that was

unequivocally the Grey-chested Babbler (or Kakamega). I looked beyond a fallen log but could see nothing. We had been playing it a bit higher up, partly to get to know it, and partly in the hope we'd get a response, so it was imprinted on my brain. This song may well have been in response to Gunnar's phone, but as the others arrived we played again and all was silent. That single burst of song was the closest we would get to the *Modulatricidae* family. Herman explained that this was the main area where Kakamega is seen, and once we realised how close to the reception area we were – barely another 15mins walk, we questioned why we had not come here first thing this morning, or even first or last thing yesterday before or after Gorillas. Our playback did get a pair of **Mountain Illadopsis** excited and we had nice views of the skulking chats – though of course this was not new, because we'd seen one well two days earlier. Chubb's Cisticola, common but generally a bit skulking, posed very nicely for photos.



[\[ebird list\]](#)

Back at the reception area we had one more half-hearted attempt for Snowy-bellied Robin-chat without success. We were all rather birded out after our triple dip again, so we returned to Ichumbi Lodge for beer, shower, and an excellent dinner to revive the spirits. Over dinner, I had one more attempt to adjust the plan, maybe to give us final crack at the Broadbill.

Looking at ebird I had noticed all the red pins for Grauer's Broadbill were in the Ruhija area, where our original itinerary had us staying. We never really got a satisfactory answer for why we ended up in Rushaga, not Ruhija where most birding groups go. I assumed it was because of our late booking, only a few months in advance, so Ruhija was full — but this was never confirmed. Perhaps if we set out early enough tomorrow we would we have time for a detour to Ruhija, and a frog-march up the mountain, before travelling north? Not worth it according to Herman – the chicks from the nest site where all those pins were located had fledged, so all the birds would now be just as difficult there as in Rushaga. Or at least that's what we were told and accepted at the time. I relaxed, knowing we'd given it a decent crack. Birding goes like that sometimes.

However in a rather masochistic move, once back in Adelaide I checked ebird over the coming weeks. It was galling to see several subsequent reports of a pair of Grauer's Broadbill, still at that same site. In all likelihood, the detour *would* have been a success. Once again I reflected that had I taken more control of the itinerary earlier, instead of relying on the tour organisers to understand our priorities, perhaps I could have insisted on one of our "extension" days/nights being spent at Ruhija. Rushaga itself was great, the lodge beautiful, and the forest had delivered a superb gorilla experience and some other great birds. But to have added a day at Ruhija instead of both at Rushaga would probably have aided our quest.

28 July

We had the longest drive of the trip ahead of us today: 7 hours not counting any stops. Our birding would be restricted largely to the roadside and small detours. As we wound our way along the unsealed roads south and east of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest it was frustrating to see roads signs to Ruhija, barely 20km away. This was the first of several regrets I'd have during the day – I had to reconcile that in any long transit day you are forced to bypass places you'd otherwise be keen to spend time in, but today I experienced that more than on any other

trip, ever. Not only would we go past the turnoff to Ruhija, but we would not be able to go into the famous, iconic Queen Elizabeth National Park, bird in or near – much less cruise – the Kazinga Channel, Kalinzu Central Forest, the Kyambra Game Reserve that borders Kazinga Channel and Lake George. We would even arrive too late to have a first look at Kibale Forest. At least we knew we would have full day there tomorrow.

A few stops got our eyes in but did not yield anything new or especially interesting, and we missed some potential targets such as Ruaha Chat. Finally at our 4th or 5th brief stop of the morning some roadside papyrus paid dividends when Herman heard a **White-winged Swamp-warbler** call. A pair of these reed and papyrus skulkers showed nicely, though not well enough for photos, low down on the stems.

The scenery remained interesting as we cruised past roadside raptors and cranes, tea-covered hills, papyrus swamps and sweet villages. As we passed though one town a red-and-white football striped scarf gave fleeting views, not enough to pin down an ID. “Stoke City” queried Jon. “That’s a big call” replied Dave instantly. “You’ve gone straight to the Championship. Why not Southampton? Or Sunderland?”. We were unable to pin down the ID and so this one slipped through the net. We kept ourselves amused with various other inane chatter. Dave made sure to circulate the important health advice that adorned many service station urinals: the number one cause of prostate cancer is, according to this advice, masturbation: “Stop it, or you’ll go blind” has been replaced with “Stop it or or you’ll get cancer” (in direct contradiction to [recent science](#)). Meanwhile, Tom had been in touch overnight asking about the Kolibri merch that Gunnar had supplied. Why would the cap be adorned with the motto “MORE BIROS”, surely more appropriate for OfficeWorks?



PROSTATE ENLARGEMENT / CA



What is a prostate?
Is a gland in a male reproductive system located just below the bladder, surrounding the urethra.

What is prostate enlargement?
Is the situation where the prostate starts swelling and changes in shape.

What are the causes of prostate enlargement?

1. Masturbation, which is the most dangerous cause.
2. Taking high sugar diets.
3. Engaging with many sexual partners.
4. Alcoholism
5. Continuous loss of Zinc & Calcium through sperm production.

Are you urinating frequently at night?

What are the signs and symptoms of prostate enlargement?

1. Feeling pain or burn urinating.
2. Difficulty in starting to urinate.
3. Frequent urination at night.
4. Failing to hold back urination.
5. Passing out sperms.
6. Painful ejaculation.
7. Dribbling after urination.
8. Urine that has an unusual color or smell.

CHECKUP AVAILABLE
For Treatment Call: 07...



Our lunch stop was supposedly a possibility for Black Bee-eater, one of the 3-star supporting cast. Herman found a **Yellow-spotted Barbet**, and briefly we thought we'd got lucky with a silhouetted bee-eater high up on distant forest edge. But closer scrutiny through the scopes revealed it to be a **Cinnamon-breasted Bee-eater**, and we did not have time to go further into the forest. After another hour of driving at another brief stop, we looked back over some decent secondary forest and picked up a distant pair of impressive **Crowned Eagles**. But you get the idea of the day: lots of driving with not a lot of birding in between.



[[Ebird List 1](#); [List 2](#); [List 3](#); [List 4](#); [List 5](#); [List 6](#); [List 7](#); [List 8](#)]

Early afternoon we came to a high lookout over seemingly endless savannah: Queen Elizabeth National Park, famous for its megafauna and tree-climbing lions, stretched out below us, so near, and yet so far. Our compressed (and cheaper) itinerary had de-prioritised the park and we would not have any time to explore it. It had been a conscious decision but I still felt the pangs of regret to have come this close but not be able to experience one of the iconic wildlife areas of Uganda. I consoled myself with thoughts of an unlikely future trip with the family on a more generic, less bird-focused trip. Maybe one day I'd be able to convince them and be able to afford it!





Nevertheless, Dave had the excellent idea of a very short diversion just to get a taste of a different habitat and pick up some different birds. Herman agreed, and we enjoyed a 30-40 minute excursion along the entrance track, once again with the top of the van popped up so the three of us could bird 360 as we drove slowly along. We picked up a few species here that were new for the trip, including **Striped Kingfisher**, **Cardinal Woodpecker**, **Fan-tailed Widowbird** and **Yellow-throated Longclaw** (doing a passable impression of an Eastern Meadowlark). A **Tawny Eagle** perched in the same Acacia as a **Palm-nut Vulture** was a particular highlight. We were tossing up between Steppe and Tawny – either would be a lifer addition to add to my aquila “collection” – and came down in our post-hoc discussions on the side of Tawny as being a better fit for our observation, and also higher probability based on range and ebird frequency. Back on the main road a large family of Baboons sauntered along the road, unconcerned by the passing traffic.

[\[Ebird list\]](#)

Pied Kingfishers lined wires across the Kazinga Channel and, as with QENP, it was tantalising to think what we were driving straight past, and what a short cruise along the Channel might have yielded. Perhaps only a few lifers but surely some amazing wildlife experiences with Hippos and African Skimmers. We didn't even turn back for a better look when what we thought was a cow turned out to be a Buffalo. Although I'd seen Buffalo well Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe more than 30 years ago, it was a mammal lifer for Dave!

We rolled into Fort Portal very late afternoon and wound our way tortuously through minor roads on a seemingly endless trip to our accommodation. For the first time we found ourselves not at a safari lodge or colonial outpost, but a rather characterless western hotel, trying hard to be up-market and probably mainly catering for local conference and wedding market rather than tourists. It was certainly comfortable enough, but lacked any view and had no wildlife appeal, being far from decent habitat (though we did see some **Alpine Swifts** overhead for a trip tick). I wondered if this was another misstep in the organisation, but a quick look on the internet revealed that all of the characterful lodges in/near Kibale were either full or crazy-expensive! This was not the company's fault, just a consequence of our late booking.

29 July

Shoebill, Gorillas, Chimpanzees. These were the headliners for the trip, but almost on equal footing was Green-breasted Pitta. Until relatively recently GBP had almost mythical status, but

the last decade it has become regular – even reliable – in Kibale Forest. Today was our only chance at *both* chimp and pitta, so with two of the four key trip targets at stake, it was a massive day. Our dip on the Broadbill (and a couple of other targets) in Bwindi had added to the pressure: get the big four and the trip is still a huge success; dip on either and we go home disappointed and other dips and itinerary choices start to rankle even more.

Our hotel was 15 mins the wrong side of Fort Portal and still another half-hour to Kibale, so we needed a very early start the next morning, because our rendezvous for pittas was 6am, before sunrise. The pittas are known to call and display in the dim pre-dawn light; we needed to be in position before this.

As we milled around waiting for park staff to arrive, my heart sank as more vehicles with birders pulled up. It then became clear as we did the usual pre-excursion official registration, that we were not the only people going for pittas. We would be a group of 11 punters (including two children and two large, older, unfit looking people) plus 3 guides and 2 armed guards (for elephants, as elsewhere). Never have I tried to do forest birding in a group this size, let alone look for a notorious skulker. Herman still seemed relaxed and confident, but Dave and I exchanged glances. He was sharing my jitters about how badly our chances might be damaged by the size of the group.

We set out in single file, head torches on, following the lead local guide who had already prepped us with worrying words: “we will try hard but we don’t always see the pitta”. Oh shit. My heart had sunk further with these words, but like the others in *my* group, I tried to stick close behind him rather than get stuck at the back of the trail.

He was understandably keen to look and listen for elephants – we would not want to come across one in the dark — so we proceeded with haste moderated by a good degree of caution. After about 20 minutes of thankfully elephant-less walking I heard a tell-tale very brief drumming – unmistakably this was the weird un-pitta-like call (or is it a wing-clap?) of a displaying Green-breasted Pitta. The guide confirmed and the excitement levels grew. I followed even closer for another 5 minutes as he seemed to be trying to get us into a reasonable position. The bird – and another – continued to call sporadically. We tightened into a compact group and then a particularly close call told us it was somewhere above our eyelines in the mid-storey. We scanned frantically then the Spanish guy behind me announced “I have it”. I scanned with even more haste, turning into panic. Unsurprisingly the directions were garbled and ambiguous as they usually are in dense jungle, let alone when coming in Spanish and broken English – and I simply couldn’t find it until the fateful words came: “it’s gone”. “Yep, you knew that much English, didn’t you!”, I ungraciously thought. A single call came from further off to our right confirming it had moved, but then it went silent. The Spanish guy seemed to be the only one who’d got enough in the bird. I dreaded that we had now missed our chance. Fuck!!!

Time passed and it was clear the bird had stopped displaying, so we began filing towards the last place we’d heard it. But I was now at the back of the group. All of a sudden a message filtered back through the “queue”: the guides are on it, on the deck. We upped our pace but now the big German woman got herself caught trying to squeeze her oversized frame through a narrow part of the trail and completely blocked our progress. “*FFS!*, Come on, come on!”, I muttered to myself, even as we could hear excited whispers that it was showing.

“How long does getting thin take”, asked Pooh anxiously?

“About a week, I should think”, said Christopher Robin

We don't have a fucking week, I thought. The guides managed to help the old dear prize herself away, and we bombed through the forest to arrive a few seconds too late. It had gone. I stared despondently at the spot it had been.

Everyone else still seemed inordinately relaxed and one of the guides went into the forest, aiming to push it back towards the track. Then that moment I was anticipating, needing but also dreading: "It's back". What if I failed to get on it again? I followed Dave's directions to look along the track, barely a few metres, and there it was in the gloom, Green-breasted Pitta! I viewed with bins, and with its back turned to me I could see the stocky body, strong super' and eye-stripe and some faint dots on the wings. I decided to switch to camera and hope it would turn to face me. But what the fuck was wrong? My gear simply wouldn't focus. And then the bird hopped away off the trail into denser jungle before I could get any kind of image. Had I accidentally changed the setting or damaged the lens somehow last night? Pressing the back-button-focus had no effect whatsoever.

Fortunately the pitta reappeared, slightly further away – about 10m now — but arguably better for viewing. It seemed to be aware of our presence – how could it not be when there were flipping 14 of us huddled in a swaying, fidgeting, whispering group as stragglers still tried to get on it – but it proceeded to hop around on the open trail in front of us, seemingly unconcerned. I wish I was better at describing the appearance of bird itself, but TBH although it's a great looking bird, I would just be rehashing the field guide and making it up from my photos. This was about the whole experience.

As the "official" photographer of the group – neither Dave nor Jon carries a camera – the guys were urging me to get to the front to bag at least some record shots. I crouched down at the front, breathing heavily, and tried but still couldn't get it focused. Maybe there was something seriously wrong, maybe I was panicking, or maybe it was just too bloody dark on the forest floor. I was on the verge of giving up when further words of encouragement from Dave, crouched to my right helped me regain my calm. As the bird seemed to stay put, I switched to fully manual focus, zooming the viewfinder (as you can do on an EVF) to ensure I had focus and fired away dozens of shots at crazy-high ISO. Still shaking, but now at least with one or two banker record shots I carried on shooting stills and even had the presence of mind to grab a short, wobbly video. As well as the zoom on the EVF, I was grateful for the high-ISO performance of the R6. I knew the images would be noisy, but they would be a damn-site better than anything I would have managed with the 7D2.

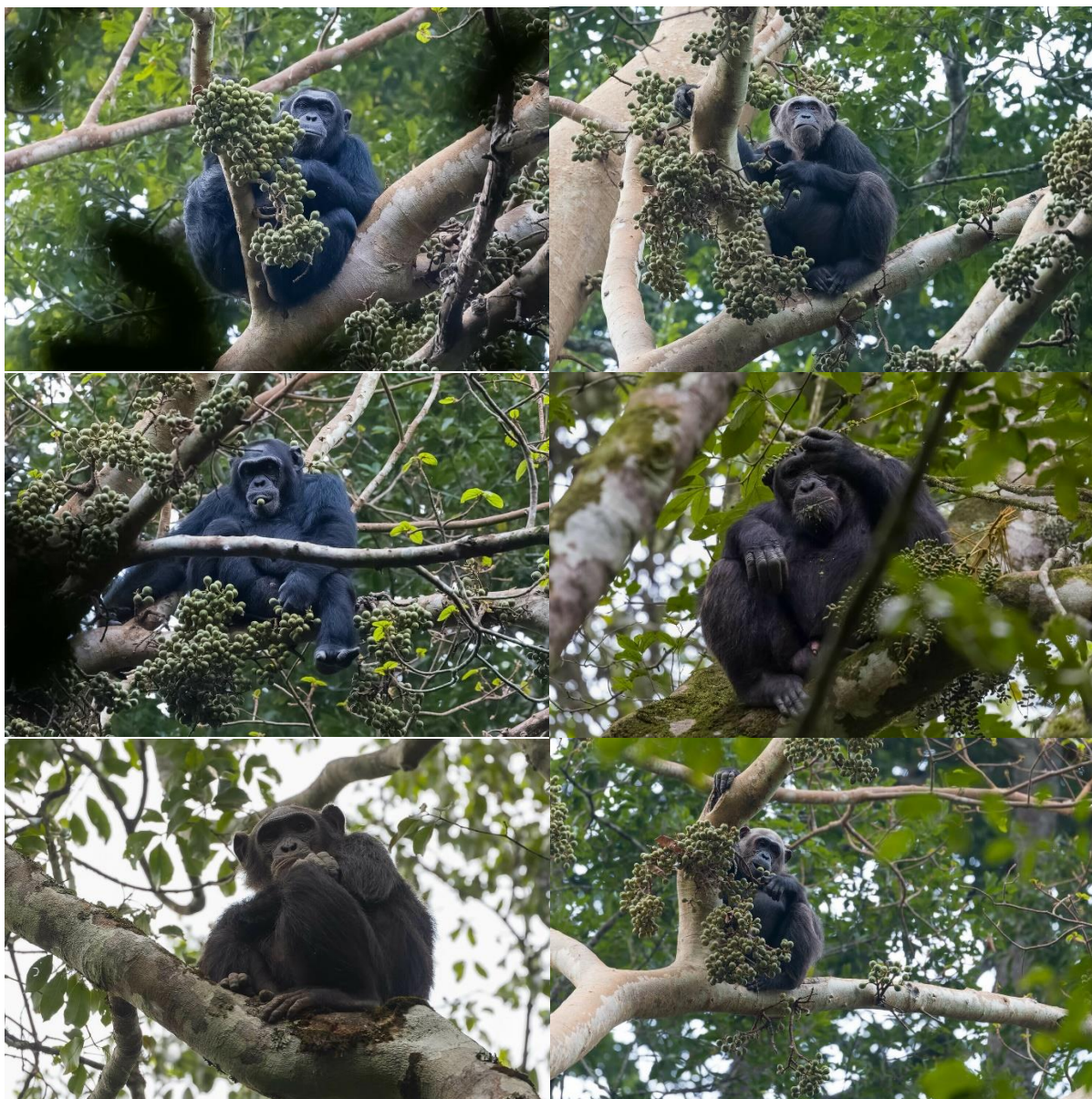
We viewed for a few minutes, and amazingly everyone got great views — even the kids and the fat, old German – before it hopped off the track and we turned for grins and high-fives with our guides. Wow, what a fantastic overall experience. It would be awesome if you could guarantee every star bird behaved like this: ratchet up the tension by playing hard to get, before delivering a cathartic, walk-way experience. Of course you can't, and those highs at the end are only made so high by the sore memories of times when the tension got ratcheted up but instead ended in deflating, dispiriting disappointment.



We filed off gradually through the forest, only now splitting into smaller groups to look for Chimps. Some Ugandan Magabeys noisily chased each other above our heads through the canopy and we paused to try for reasonable views of these. In fact we would end the day with an amazing 9 species of primate (from an incredible 13 species that live in the forest). Our ebird list for the morning, meanwhile, had only 3 species seen – but who cares when one of them was the Pitta!

Now in a group with just us and the Spanish family we followed along another trail where one of the guides had heard a Chimpanzee. After a surprisingly short walk he pointed out the dark shape high in a fruiting tree. The view was not ideal, but we got improved views (though no pics yet) as it moved around in the canopy, eventually settling in a fruiting tree where we also noted another Chimp. A Red-tailed Monkey ran about above them, apparently unafraid despite the fact that Chimpanzees have been known to hunt and eat Red-tailed Monkeys. On this occasion the pair seemed completely content with fruit. Chimps typically hang out in fairly large family groups, and our guides speculated that these two were somewhat ostracised from their main group, forced to forage here away from the best fruiting trees and make do with young, unripe fruit.

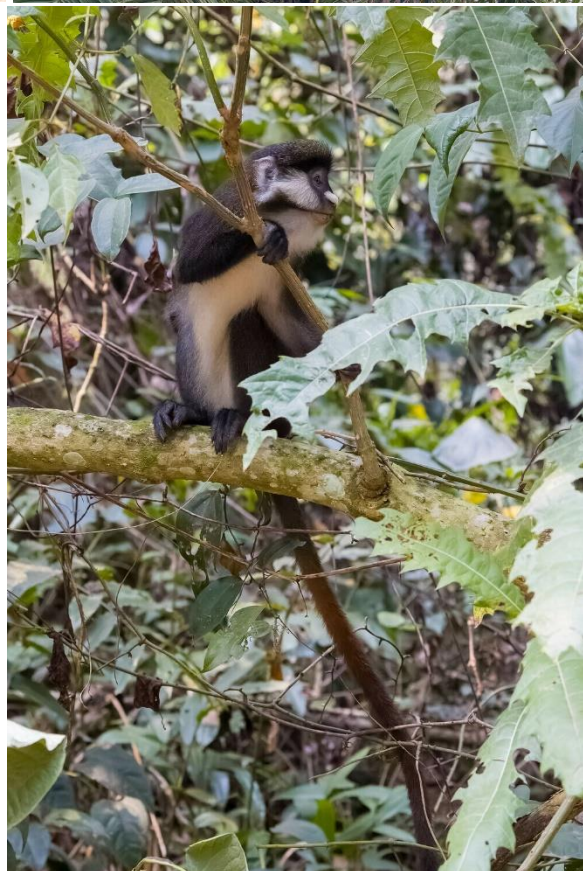
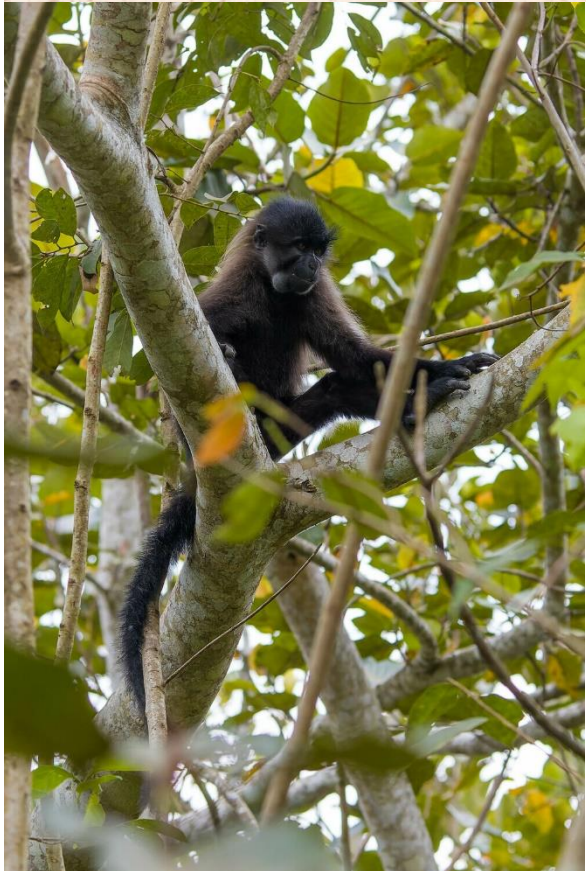
At times it was difficult to find a suitable window through the leaves, but they were fairly settled, and despite the steep viewing angle I was able to get nice views, photos and even a short phone-scoped video through the guide's scope. After the frantic lows and highs earlier in the morning, our Chimp tracking and viewing was an altogether more relaxed experience. Not to say this was not a highlight – it was also a fabulous experience – but it did somehow feel slightly anti-climactic. Reflecting on this feeling afterwards I realised that at some point on our way to Kibale – not sure when – the pitta had become elevated in my ranking to #3 target, ahead of Chimps.



It was now only 8am and we already had the two main targets of Kibale Forest, #3 and #4 (in whatever order) of the whole trip, under our belts. We drove back to the ranger station then headed off into the forest again to hook up with a larger group of Chimps that most of the non-pitta punters were tracking. We'd travelled barely 200m when suddenly from the head of the group there was a shout from our guide: "Elephant! Run!". We saw him turn and run towards us. Bear in mind this was the armed guard running – it must be serious – so we all turned and started running back along the decidedly rickety boardwalk. Dave tripped and went sprawling, face down, into the mud by the side of the trail. In those few seconds he was down he must've felt like the entire group had carried on running past him, and the elephant bearing down about to trample him. Luckily he was not badly injured and able to pull himself up, and we looked back along the track to the reassuring sight that we were not being stampeded.

At a brisk, but now less break-neck pace, we retreated and then our guide sought an alternative route to where others were viewing chimps. After 20 minutes we found our way to the others, and now enjoyed several more chimpanzees. Like our earlier apes, these were also feeding mid-storey, and I found myself thinking: "Ok, time to move on. What's next? Let's not waste these good birding hours on apes we have now already seen". I grabbed some more

photos – none that improved on my earlier efforts – and then started making noises to the others that I was satisfied. The rest of our group agreed and eventually so we filed out.



Back at the ranger station we jumped at the chance to enjoy a beer on the café balcony. Suitably refreshed, Herman took us off to another, quieter part of the forest edge for some more birding. New for the trip were **Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher**, **Western**

Nicator and **Grey-headed Nigrita**. Padders all, but nice to see anyway. We returned to the café for lunch (a welcome change from our packed lunches of the previous 4 days, even if it was only a miscommunication that meant we didn't have them today also).

[\[Ebird List 1; List 2; List 3\]](#)

With the top-2 targets in the bag, Herman had some new habitat lined up for us in the afternoon and we headed for Bigodi Swamp, just outside Kibale Forest. A **Red-chested Cuckoo** was an excellent roadside find by Herman en route to the swamp.



Herman hooked us up with another local guide for a guided walk around Bigodi, and we had an excellent couple of hours. The path took us along the edge of the more-or-less protected area, cultivated land to our left, swamp forest to our right. We padded our lists with **Green Hylia**, **Green White-eye** and **White-chinned Prinia** in the bushes and trees that lined the path. We passed various local craft stalls, all keen to sell us carved pittas, shoebills or chimpanzees. Still on a high from our earlier score with GBP, Dave resolved to help the local economy with a carved and painted Green-breasted Pitta, which became a mascot of sorts for our group later in the day.

Part-way around Bigodi, Dave's keen eye-sight and concentration picked out a bright-red but skulking passerine. Initially unidentifiable, but once another Malimba had been eliminated as a possibility, this was surely something good. With some effort we were able to get excellent views of a pair of stonking **Red-headed Bluebills**. On the dingy, swampy forest floor we looked hard for White-spotted Flufftail, one of the specialties of Bigodi, and while searching for this added both skulking **Grey-winged Robin-chat** and **Snowy-crowned Robin-chat**.

As we progressed into more open country we had our best encounter of the trip so far with **Great Blue Turaco**, then in more open savannah country we picked up a couple of local specialties, **Grosbeak Weaver** and **Magpie Mannikin**. Other birds new for the trip included **Black-necked Weaver**, **Black Bishop**, while some of the others noted Violet-back Starling (which I failed to get onto). The wider vistas gave us the chance to pick up raptors as they cruised through, including **Banded Snake-eagle**, **Wahlberg's Eagle**, **Gabar Goshawk** and **European Honey-buzzard**. Likewise a couple of **African Wolly-necked Stork** drifted overhead.





At the end of the boardwalk we finally connected with a **White-spotted Flufftail**, when one responded to playback: it walked right under Jon's carefully (or luckily) chosen station on the boardwalk giving him great views directly down to it, dashed across an open area (giving me the tickable views I needed), before disappearing into dense reeds. Like the other flufftail from a few days ago, it was so small and quick it was impossible to get a photo, barely even bins, but it was so close it did not matter. The whole experience was a flashback to my Lewin's Rail at Swanport Wetlands on the Murray, 9 months earlier (when I managed a photo of its arse as it too ran away after barely 4 seconds in view).

[\[Ebird List 1; List 2\]](#)

Herman met us after we'd completed about ¾ of a circumnavigation and we cut the walk short in favour a formal "wind-down": we headed to a spot that seemed appropriately named for a quick celebration of our last major birding of the trip, Da Legend's Bar. We'd spotted this bar on our way to Bigodi, and although when we arrived at 1730 didn't look very open, the owner magically appeared from out the back as our group of westerners piled out of the van, and kindly opened up specially for us. She produced superbly cold bottles of Tusker Lager and helped us with souvenir photos, including our new mascot, Dave's carved pitta. We made our way back to Fort Portale and our very non-birdy accommodation for the official final night of the trip.



30 July

Our timing today, the last official day of the trip, was dictated by evening flights from Entebbe in our various directions home to three different continents. Dave, Jon and I had all booked on Emirates to Dubai, while Gunnar was heading to Amsterdam (and then Lima) using KLM. Kibale is around 6 hours from Entebbe, but with roadworks, traffic and of course some birding stops, Herman reckoned on more like 9 hours. Both flights, KLM and Emirates, were early evening, picked by us deliberately to allow some morning birding around Kibale especially – if necessary – a last-gasp crack at the pitta (which was fortunately not needed, as you know from the tale above). Some time in April, Emirates retimed its flight to make it late afternoon, throwing our carefully calibrated plan into disarray. Rather than jeopardise our last morning, the three of us booked on Emirates requested a change to the following day. Dave, Jon and I would say our farewell to Gunnar in Entebbe today, and have an independent 1-day extension. On our long drives the previous few days we'd tried to think out of the box about how we might use it to maximum effect, but one-by-one we had to rule out our more creative options, leaving us with birding around Entebbe as the only viable use of the extra time Emirates had "gifted" us.

After a fairly leisurely breakfast on our official final morning, we wended our way back to the centre of Fort Portale where Herman suggested we look for the highly localised **Northern Masked-weaver**. This taxon is very similar to Village Weaver, distinguished primarily by a dark eye, not the red of Village. In unhelpful rainy conditions – our first of the week – we found at least one scraggy and wet looking individual by some allotment gardens. Several **Maribou Stork** stalked across damp ground by a stream, and numerous more lined the rooftops of nearby factories.

[\[Ebird list\]](#)



Half an hour later pulled over at a stream crossing where the main highway cuts through the northern edge of Kibale Forest. In intermittent rain I clawed back **Blue-headed Sunbird**, and we eventually pinned down **Cassin's Honeyguide**, but could not get views of **Jameson's Wattle-eye** which taunted us by calling loudly and for a lengthy period but refused to show itself. Keen to keep the camera dry, I wandered up the road to grab my umbrella from the van. As I was returning, wielding camera, bins and umbrella, I heard Dave ask: "What's that on the stream? Looks like a Moorhen or something". As I moved over to look for myself, trying to balance umbrella against my neck and stabilise my bins, suddenly he exclaimed "It's a fucking Finfoot!". Now there was a scramble and I managed to get directions just in time for Jon to exclaim: "Flying". Now I wondered where on earth I should be looking – in the air or on the water – until I saw a bird, cormorant-like skimming across the water's surface flapping its wings but failing to launch from the stream surface. Before I could get any plumage detail it disappeared behind dense foliage. In an eerie echo of my only previous encounter with a *Heliornithidus* (Sun-grebe at REGUA in Brazil), a long-necked grebe-like shape drifted briefly behind a fallen log and then once again went out of sight, never to be seen again. Dave and Jon were rightly elated, and Herman very excited at such an out-of-range but unequivocal record. Me, I felt a bit deflated. I could probably tick the bird, but maybe not. It was certainly not the experience I would have chosen for an iconic African species and could have been elevated immeasurably by a mere second's worth of plumage view, or enough light to illuminate the bright red bill.



Another stop an hour later, in the final piece of forest we would travel through, yielded some more trip padders and pushed our total close to 300: **Western Black-headed Oriole**, **Honeyguide Greenbul**, **Toro Olive-Greenbul** and **White-breasted Nigrita** were all new for the trip.

[\[Ebird list1; List 2; 3\]](#)

The remainder of our trip back to Kampala and Entebbe was largely uneventful. A few more roadside stops gave us nice encounters with **Lilac-breasted Roller** and **African Grey Hornbill**, both hawking amongst a swarm of insects above the main road, and many of the usual roadside raptors plus a **Black-shouldered Kite**, new for the trip but none of our life lists.

[\[Ebird List 1; Ebird List 2\]](#)



Late afternoon we rocked up to Precious Guesthouse and bade farewell to Gunnar who went more-or-less straight to the airport for his multi-leg journey that would end back in Lima. Herbert Byaruhanga, founder and owner of the company that had been our “host” for the week was there to greet us and I took the opportunity to ask him about some prospects for birding on our final morning. Our somewhat unadventurous extension began soon after with a late afternoon stroll around the Botanical Gardens, and down to the shores of Lake Victoria, where our trip had commenced only 8 days earlier. This yielded nothing new, but armed with some new knowledge from Herbert, we hoped for some last-minute quality on our final morning.

[\[Ebird list\]](#)

31st July

Our day began, as it had 9 days earlier, with a decent breakfast (replete with omnipresent avocado) in the dark in the outdoor, upstairs dining area. But soon enough we were in a pre-arranged taxi to Florence’s Guesthouse where Herbert had told us we would have a chance of roosting Bat Hawk, Dave’s remaining top target. We’d dipped in the Botanical Gardens the night before, and although not a lifer for me (I’d seen one in Borneo a number of years ago) I was still keen to end the trip with a bang by seeing this sinister-looking, special raptor.

Finding the guesthouse, a few km from our accommodation, was not straightforward, and we drove back and forth trying to find the spot until we called Florence herself. Unknowingly we were parked right outside and had the name wrong – Entebbe Crane Guest House. This was not the only thing we had wrong: my preconceptions of a guesthouse owner called Florence being ageing and “traditionally” built were blown away as young, slim, pretty Florence emerged from the small door in the gate. While I arranged with the driver to wait for us and wrestled my scope from the back seat, Florence was already pointing out some roosting owls in a tree in her front yard! The guys beckoned me over and I was able to clock a pair of pretty Southern White-faced Owl. We would return for better looks in a bit, but the Bat Hawk was our priority and Florence led us out onto the road to peer up into some huge trees visible above the walls of her neighbour opposite. Although the first was “empty”, just 20m along the road we stared up into another massive tree where two creepy-looking **Bat Hawks** were quietly roosting. As the morning wore on they left the roost a few times, returning with what appeared to be nesting material!





Quickly we added a range of other good species, including our best views yet of **Ross' Turaco**, **Meyer's Parrot** and **Black-headed Gonolek**. Despite being in "suburbia", the birding here was excellent, and I'd recommend a stay at Florence's as an alternative to Precious.





[Ebird]

Our driver had waited for us for a pre-arranged fee and dropped us back at Precious, where we had one final saunter around the Botanical Gardens.

[Ebird]

Some final drama ensued with me needing to get cash from the local mall because it turns out Precious does not take credit cards. Fortunately we had enough time up our sleeves, and while I grabbed cash, Jon bagged some last minute souvenirs for his family. Check-in and security at Entebbe Airport were as bizarrely organised and tortuous as I have come to expect at third world airports (though smoother than Heathrow on 21st!) but once we were near the gate we relaxed with a snack and final beer together. It had been an excellent trip, delivering on the pre-trip promise of a short, sharp, and highlight filled sortie into the “Pearl of Africa”. It was great to end on a high with our extension, and I was sorry to say goodbye to Jon and Dave, who were not only brilliant birders but excellent company. I hope we can bird together again some time – and get Tom into the action next time too! As I write this, Tom has now made more-or-less a full recovery, is back on the bike, and finally after some false starts, perhaps the Birding Gods are finally smiling back on him.



Rather than a full list in this doc, here is a link to the ebird trip report.

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/69295>