

Shoebills and Gorillas tracking in Uganda

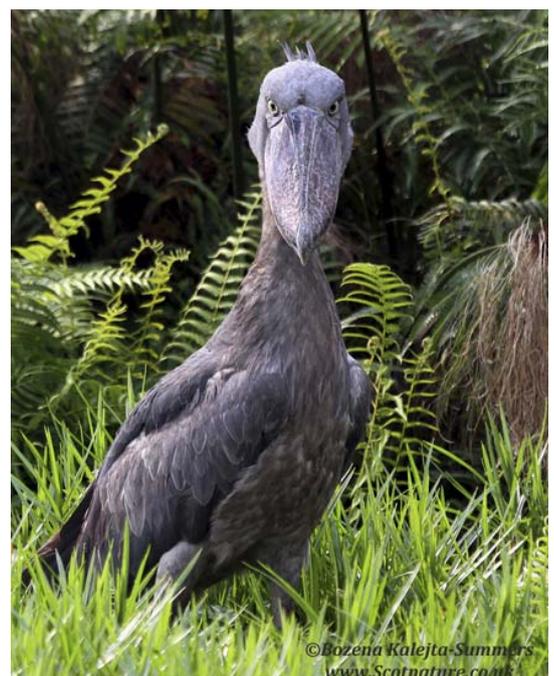
Straddling the Equator, Uganda offers an incredibly rich variety of tropical habitats, unparalleled to any other African country. Those range from the rolling savannas, impressive pristine rainforests, lakes of oceanic proportions (Lake Victoria is the largest lake in Africa) and extensive marshes of Papyrus reed beds to snow-clad mountains (the Ruwenzori Mountains are the highest in Africa). It is also from here that the world's longest river, the Nile, starts its journey from Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea. The most valuable and unspoiled habitats in Africa are embraced here by the protection of 10 national parks.

There are not many areas in Africa that can match Uganda's astounding diversity of habitats. This richness is reflected in the bird list of over 1000 species, representing more than half of the bird species found in the whole of Africa and over 10% of the world bird list.

There are 28 globally threatened species of which one is endemic to Uganda: Fox's Weaver. Although Uganda is poor in endemic species, it shares all species recorded from East and Central Africa. Out of the 38 species of birds confined to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo in the Albertine Rift Endemic Area, Uganda hosts 24. The African Green Broadbill, African Green-breasted Pitta, Rwenzori Turaco are spectacular endemics of the Albertine Rift that are almost impossible to find elsewhere in the whole of Africa but can be easily seen in Uganda. Also here, the bizarre and most sought after Shoebill is most easily accessible in comparison to the inaccessible swamps of southern Sudan and central Zambia, where it also occurs.

In addition, Uganda, has the highest diversity of primates in the world. The country is home to 340 Mountain Gorillas of the 700 remaining worldwide and offers the best Gorilla viewing in Africa. Similarly, once abundant throughout the entire equatorial zone, Chimpanzees can be found here. Their populations are isolated and fragmented, but Uganda is still a stronghold for this species.

Needless to say, the beautiful and dramatic scenery, variety of terrain, unspoiled nature and encounters with the most sought after wildlife on Earth, will make your visit to Uganda the most intense and rewarding experience of Africa. Travelling is made all the more pleasant thanks to the temperate climate. Although Uganda straddles the Equator, the temperature remains around 26°C (75°F) all year round due to its high elevation and the protective barrier of the Ruwenzori Mountains, which keeps the humidity low. The tour is run at a gentle pace to allow us to get to know the huge variety of birds and animals. Accommodation and meals are carefully chosen to add to the wonderful experience that Uganda offers. We will be travelling in a Land Cruiser with a pop roof for game viewing and an experienced local guide will accompany us throughout the trip. Guides with local expertise and rangers will also be hired at some places.



Itinerary

Day 1

You will be collected from the Entebbe International Airport on your arrival in late evening and transferred to our lodge. A light snack will be served on request and we will retire to our beds.

Day 2

After breakfast, we will head northward toward the **Murchison Falls National Park**. As we travel, the landscape will change from the fertile farmland interspersed with swamps and fragmented forests to extensive grasslands and open savannah woodlands. Throughout our journey, we will make several stops to view widespread species such as Marabou Stork, Hooded Vulture, Banded Snake Eagle, Bateleur, Wahlberg's and Long-crested Eagle, Striped Kingfisher, Yellow-billed Shrike, Holub's Golden and Jackson's Golden-backed Weavers, Red-cheeked Cordon-blue, to name just a few. We will break the journey for lunch in a pleasant hotel and should arrive to our historic lodge by late afternoon.

The lodge is tucked away in dry woodland and can only be reached by ferry. Apart from being an excellent area to look for Shikra, Grey Headed Kingfisher; Red-throated Bee-eater and Bar-breasted Firefinch, the lodge offers peace, tranquility and spectacular views.

Day 3

A variety of unique habitats, abundant wildlife, scenic landscape and lots of superb birds (450 species recorded in the park), not least the spectacular falls for which the park is named, make the visit to Murchinson Falls National Park very special. Here, the 40 metre wide River Nile, on its journey from its source at Lake Victoria to join Lake Albert, is suddenly compressed into a gorge only six metres wide, and cascades into a boiling pot 43 metres below. The morning boat trip down the Nile will take us to the heart of the park to view the falls.



Here, nesting Rock Pratincole is likely to be seen. From the boat's upper deck we will be able to get excellent views of hundreds of Hippopotamus, Nile Crocodiles, various game and many waterbirds. A few pairs of Shoebill inhabit a narrow strip of papyrus along the Nile and we might get our first chance to encounter those magnificent birds here.

After a break for lunch, we will continue birdwatching in the park. We will look out for birds like Denham's Bustard, Abyssinian Ground-hornbill, Black-headed Lapwing, Northern Carmine Bee-eater, Black-billed Barbet, Spotted Morning-Thrush, Speckle-fronted Weaver and many more. Some of the mammals we are likely to see here include the graceful Rothchild Giraffe, Jackson's Hartebeest, Uganda Kob, Defassa Waterbuck, African Buffalo and African Elephant.

Day 4

In late morning, after some birding in the Murchison Park, we will head off southwards towards the **Kibale National Park**. *En route*, we will stop in several places to view some of the more interesting species. We should reach our lodge, privately secluded in the jungle, by late afternoon. As the night falls and we drift away to the peaceful sounds of nature, we might even hear the trumpeting of the meandering Elephants in the forest...



Day 5

Kibale Forest, unlike other forests, provides good views of the forest canopy and is filled with the sounds of tropical bird songs. We will visit parts of the forest where birdwatching should be very productive with species such as Chubb's Cisticola, White-chinned Prinia, Masked and Buff-breasted Apalis, Dusky Tit, Red-headed Malimbe, White-breasted and Grey-headed Negrofinches and Petit's Cuckooshrike.

Since the park has the highest diversity of primates in the world, it will be impossible to miss them. Primate encounters should include Red

Colobus, Grey-cheeked Mangabey, Red-tailed and Blue Monkeys. For some, however, the highlight of the day, could be a face to face meeting with Chimpanzee or Africa's smallest primate Demidoff's Galago. In Kibale Forest, local guides keep a close watch on the activities of various groups of Chimps and with their help, there is a good chance that we will encounter a troop of those primates. The Chimp tracking involves a moderate walk and is included in the cost of your trip.

In the afternoon, we will search for local birds such as Red-chested Cuckoo, Great Blue Turaco, Lizard Buzzard, Joyful Greenbul and many more.



and euphorbia, makes game spotting relatively easy. There are almost 100 mammal species that include Leopard, Spotted Hyena, African Elephant, Ugandan Kob, and the elusive Giant Forest Hog. The Primates include Chimps, Black and White Colobus Monkeys, Blue, Black faced Red Colobus, Red-tailed Monkeys and Olive Baboons

For some of us, the biggest attractions of our stay here, will be a boat cruise along the Hippo crowded banks of Kazinga Channel. Eye to eye with a yawning Crocodile, Buffalo drinking the water or a herd of Elephants having a splash along the banks, will put us straight in the heart of African wilderness.

We will also encounter an array of interesting birds, including several hundred African Skimmers, Pink-backed and Great White Pelicans, African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed and Saddle-billed Storks, a huge variety of raptors (Martial Eagle, African Hawk Eagle, African Fish Eagle, Palmnut Vulture) and many species of waders.

Day 6

We will continue birdwatching in the Bigodi swamp in the morning and return to our lodge for lunch. We will then head off for the **Queen Elizabeth National Park**. As we travel along the foothills of the **Rwenzori Mountains** and then cross the equator at **Lake Kikorongo** (compulsory stop for a picture here!), we should encounter an array of new bird species.

We will arrive to our luxurious lodge in the late afternoon and will spend the rest of the day relaxing either by the swimming pool, at the bar or in the privacy of our bedrooms, where from our very own terraces we will be able, not only to admire the beautiful scenery, but also continue birdwatching. The lodge is situated beautifully on the hill and overlooks **Lake Edward** and the **Rwenzori Mountains**. We will spend three nights here. Be aware though, Hippopotamus "mown" the lawn in front of your huts at night here!



Day 9

We will leave the Queen Elizabeth National Park today and travel toward our next destination, the **Bwindi Impenetrable Forest**. We will be sorry to leave our lovely lodge and despite the time spent in the park it will feel as if we just scratched the surface of the bird life here. As we leave the park, a great attraction will be an encounter with Lions which have a rather peculiar habit of lounging in the trees and occupy a southern part of the park.

We will continue relaxed birding and game viewing as we travel and we should reach our next accommodation in late afternoon. *En route*, again, a host of francolins, barbets, chats, cockooshrikes, sunbirds, weavers and widowbirds will all compete for our attention.

Days 7-8

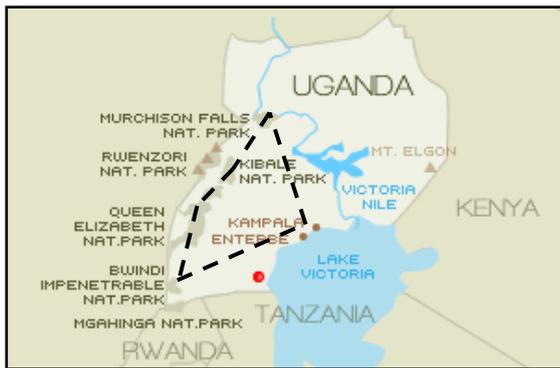
The Queen Elizabeth National Park, with 600 bird species recorded, is renowned for having the second highest list of birds of any park on the African continent and our two-full day birdwatching here will be a very rewarding expedience. Superb birds such as Shining Blue Kingfisher, Bat Hawk and Black Bee-eater could very well be seen here.

The park is also teaming with mammals. Close to the lodge, the open savannah, dotted with acacia

Days 10-11

Bwindi Impenetrable National Park is one of the most biologically diverse areas on Earth, recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. This is a remarkable national treasure sanctuary with 113 species of mammals (including a herd of the rare forest Elephant), over 360 species of birds, 200 species of butterfly, 324 varieties of trees (ten are endemic to the park), 100

species of ferns, 27 species of frogs and many endangered species.



The park is also home to eleven species of primates, including Chimpanzee, Blue Monkey, Red-tailed Monkey, Black and White Colobus Monkey, L'hoests Monkey, Baboons and, of course, the elusive Mountain Gorilla. There are three human-habituated groups in the park and those who would like to undertake the thrilling experience of meeting them, will leave at 8 a.m., accompanied by tracker-guides. The gorilla tracking can be tough and challenging, up steep terrain and in dense and damp forest, so one must be reasonably fit. The tracking may take between 2 and 8 hours, depending on where the gorillas are located. Usually it is possible to get to within a few metres of them and watch them as they forage, play and rest. Needless to say, this will be a truly unforgettable experience. However, please note, that since not everybody will choose this option, the cost of the gorilla tracking is not included in your itinerary and if you wish to undertake it, you will have to add US\$500 to the overall cost of the trip (see the tour details for further information).

Those who opt out of the hike will spend the day birdwatching with our guide. At the end of the day, we will all gather together for dinner back at our lodge.

Bwindi forest is a great place to look for the **Albertine Rift** endemics and species that are expected to be seen in the park are the true gems: Bar-tailed Trogon, Black-faced Rufous Warbler,

Red-faced Woodland Warbler, Red-collared Alethe, Blue-throated Rollers, Barred Prinia, Grey-winged Robin-Chat, Ludher's Bush-Shrike, White-headed Wood-Hoopoe, White-bellied Crested Flycatcher, Red-fronted Antpecker and others.

Day 12

After breakfast, we will leave Bwindi and head back to Entebbe. The journey will take almost the whole day. However, we will be birdwatching along the way and will have a comfortable break for lunch. We should reach our lodge in late afternoon and have enough time to rest and get ready for our evening dinner.

Day 13

This is a day of our late night departure. However, we will devote the whole morning birdwatching. After breakfast we will visit the nearby **Mabamba Swamps**, which is an Important Bird Area. The local community living around the swamps have organized themselves into a conservation group and have guides that can take us around the swamps. In our dug-out canoes, we will head deep into the Papyrus swamps in search for the epitome of our trip, the enigmatic Shoebill. If we



had not seen those birds on our second day, then here an encounter with Shoebill is almost guaranteed. As we explore the swamps, a plethora of other birds will come to our view, including

Long-tailed Cormorant, African Open-billed Stork, Long-toed Lapwing, Blue-headed Coucal, Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Papyrus Gonolek and many more. Six species of weavers have their colonies here and we will make an effort to "tick" them all. If time allows, we will also pop in to the Botanical Garden on the shores of Lake Victoria. There is a host of interesting species including

Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill, African Hobby, Grey Parrot and Madagascar Bee-eaters.

We will spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing at our lodge and getting ready for the late night flight. In the evening, we will conclude our trip with a lovely meal, before we head off to the airport.

