
Birding Trip Report:

Southern Uganda and Rwanda with Birding Africa www.birdingafrica.com

Shoebill, Green-breasted Pitta, Grauer's Broadbill and the Albertine Rift

27 July - 11 August 2012, Tour Report by tour leader Michael Mills

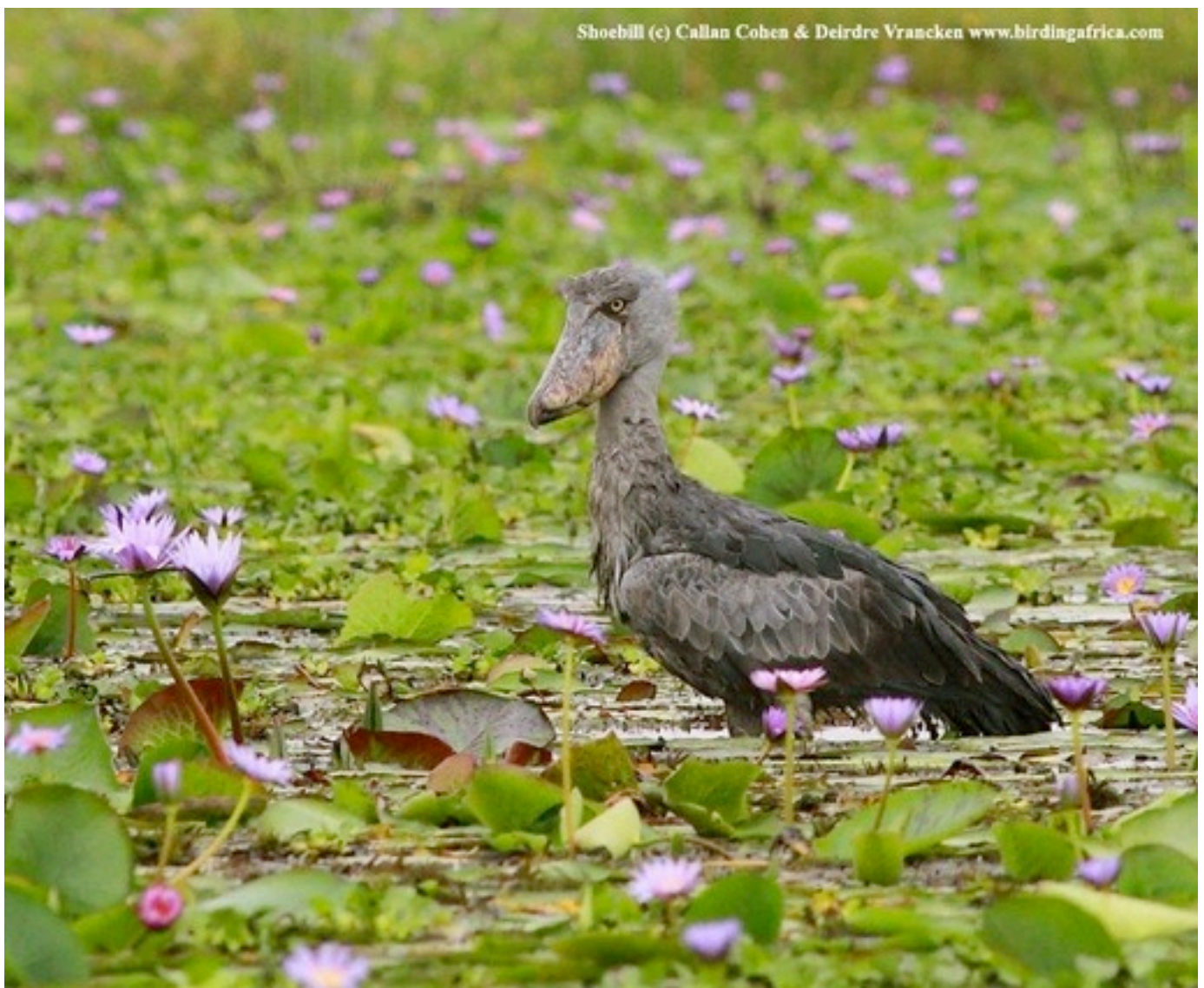


Summary

This year's journey through southern Uganda and Rwanda was a resounding success in all respects, with great views obtained of the four main target birds, namely **Shoebill**, **Green-breasted Pitta**, **Grauer's (African Green) Broadbill** and **Red-collared (Mountain) Babbler**. This short trip focussed on these four desirable species plus the lofty Albertine Rift forest and its endemics, and took in various other habitats en route. During the two weeks we visited wetlands at Lake Victoria's Mabamba Swamp and Lake Bunyoni, mid-altitude forests

at Kibale National Park (specifically for the pitta) and “The Neck” of Bwindi Impenetrable NP, grasslands and savannas at Queen Elizabeth NP, and montane forests at the Ruhija sector of Bwindi Impenetrable NP and Nyungwe NP. A day was also dedicated to seeing Eastern Gorillas at Ruhija. Little time was spent birding marginal habitats, with the bulk of our time focussed on finding the tricky specials.

Besides the four biggies, other highlights included **Lesser Jacana**, **Long-toed Lapwing** and brilliant views of **Weyns’s Weaver** at Mabamba, **Papyrus Gonolek** nearby, **Toro Olive Greenbul**, **Grey Parrot**, **Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat**, **Brown-backed Scrub Robin**, **Black Bishop**, **Red-chested Owlet**, **Narina Trogon**, **Uganda Spotted Woodpecker**, **Crested Guineafowl** and **Yellow-mantled Weaver** at Kibale NP, **Senegal Lapwing**, **Temminck’s Courser** and five species of vulture at Queen Elizabeth NP, **Red-throated Wryneck** en route to Bwindi Impenetrable NP, **Chapin’s Flycatcher** and **Many-coloured Bushshrike** at “The Neck”, **Handsome Francolin**, **White-headed Wood Hoopoe**, **Grauer’s Warbler**, **Regal Sunbird** and **Dusky Crimsonwing** at Ruhija, **Africa Hobby**, **Papyrus Yellow Warbler**, **White-winged Swamp Warbler**, **Carruther’s Cisticola** and **Victoria Masked Weaver** at Lake Bunyoni, **African Cuckoo-Hawk**, **Mountain Buzzard**, **Red-chested Flufftail**, **Red-throated Alethe**, **White-bellied Robin-Chat**, **Equatorial Akalat**, **Grauer’s Swamp Warbler**, **African Broadbill**, **Lagden’s Bushshrike**, **Doherty’s**



Bushshrike, Neumann's Warbler and Purple-breasted Sunbird at Nyungwe NP, and **Ruaha Chat** on our way back to Kigali. We logged a total of **just over 400 bird species**.

On the mammal front, we enjoyed great views of specials such as Leopard, Giant Forest Hog, Chimpanzee, Eastern Gorilla (for those who went gorilla tracking) and 5 more primate species.

Detailed Trip Report

This year we embarked on our tour from Uganda's tranquil lakeside town of Entebbe, with our very first port of call being the nearby Mabamba Swamp. And it wasn't long before we sat eye-to-eye with a hefty **Shoebill**. The birds here seem to be getting tamer with time, and even when I feared we were too close, the bird actually walked towards us. We marvelled at it for about half an hour, during which time it lunged to grab a lungfish, and after trying to separate it from the vegetable matter it had gathered at the same time, quickly disposed of it down its gullet. During our Shoebill vigil we were distracted by some nearby Long-toed Lapwings, an African Marsh Harrier drifted by and, best of all, Lesser Jacana put in a good appearance, although it felt disrespectful watching such small fry while a Shoebill stood no more than 20 metres away. Once we'd come to terms with the unusual bird we made a wider foray to the nearby swamp, spotting another more distant Shoebill, African Swamphen, Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Red-chested Sunbird, Grey Crowned Crane, Swamp Flycatcher, our first Northern Brown-throated Weaver and a variety of other more common waterbirds. Back on land we were thrilled to find a fruiting tree with about 10 full-breeding plumage **Weyns's Weavers**; they gave us the best views I've ever had of this localised species, and I managed to make what may be the first song recording of this scarce species.

From Mabamba we headed back to Entebbe via Kampala, stopping for lunch on the way where we hoped to find Papyrus Gonolek. I'd just finished warning the group about how skulking the bird can be, when it popped out on an open branch of papyrus no more than five metres away and remained there until it had defied all skulking reputation. We also notched



Papyrus Gonolek
on a Birding Africa Conservation Tour
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up some neat Red-headed Lovebirds and Hairy-breasted Barbet feeding in a fruiting tree nearby. At Entebbe itself we made a late afternoon foray down to the lake shore, where we managed to track down African Pied Hornbill, our first Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill, Double-toothed Barbet, several Slender-billed Weavers, Black-headed

Gonolek, a very excited Grey-capped Warbler, Broad-billed Roller, Western Citril, Olive Bee-eater, Grey Woodpecker, White-throated Bee-eater and a male Orange Weaver that proved a bit hard to see as it foraged inside a dense bush.

From Entebbe we struck out for Kibale NP to the east, with Ross's Turaco in the garden before we headed off. We didn't see a lot of birds en route, but most memorable were Bare-faced Go-away-bird, another Red-faced Lovebird and an Ayres's Hawk Eagle circling overhead. As we approached Kibale itself a roadside Black Bishop brought us to a rapid halt, and around our accommodation a late afternoon session turned up Luehder's Bushshrike, Purple-headed Starling, Green-throated Sunbird, our first Chubb's Cisticola and Brimstone Canary.

During our stay at Kibale our main aim was to get to grips with the much-desired **Green-breasted Pitta**, and fortunately we'd scheduled a generous amount of time for this species, as we needed every minute of it. Our first encounter was brief, as just two of us spotted it the mid-storey where it had been displaying, before it dropped to the forest floor and out of sight. The second encounter was a bunch better, as a bird landed on an open branch in the mid-storey, giving clear, well-lit views for several seconds. Unfortunately, in the excitement, some of the group missed it all together, so we persisted. And persisted. Finally, at the 11th hour, our skilled local guide called us while we were birding nearby. When we reached him, he told us that the bird had just flushed. BUT... it was busy building a nest. We crowded into a spot where we could enjoy clear views from a safe distance, and over the next half hour we watched this dazzling bird fly in (there may have been two birds) with bits of building material six or seven times, until everyone had seen the bird from every angle. Whew, all the effort had paid off!

Despite our unwavering dedication to seeing Green-breasted Pitta, we saw several other good birds in the Kibale area. The under-storey was hard work, but we watched Scaly-breasted Illadopsis circling around us at close range, had a very close encounter with an obliging White-tailed Ant Thrush and Fraser's Rufous Thrush, and persuaded White-throated Greenbul and the scarce Toro Olive Greenbul to reveal themselves to all. But the star of the thicket was an uncharacteristically obliging Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat, which gave front and back views while it sat right out in the open just a few metres away. It's not often seven people can see this species at the same time! In the mid-storey we enjoyed Narina Trogon,



Red-throated Alethe

on a Birding Africa Conservation Tour

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Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Brown-eared Woodpecker, Chestnut Wattle-eye and Grey-throated Tit-Flycatcher. However, seeing birds in the canopy was far easier, and by birding along the road we enjoyed some good sightings, including a dazzling male African Emerald Cuckoo, superb views of Red-chested Owlet during the day, which called for us in the scope, Western Nicator, bright Black Bee-eater, Speckled Tinkerbird, Yellow-throated Tinkerbird, Cassin's Honeybird, Honeyguide Greenbul, Olive-bellied Sunbird, Petit's Cuckooshrike, Little Green Sunbird, Green (Grey-chinned) Sunbird, Western (Black-headed Oriole), Elliot's Woodpecker, Velvet-mantled Drongo, Black-and-white Shrike-Flycatcher,

African Shrike-Flycatcher, Dusky Tit, Cassin's Flycatcher, Mountain Wagtail, Buff-throated Apalis, Sooty Flycatcher, a perched Grey Parrot, Narrow-tailed Starling, several scarce Yellow-mantled Weaver and Red-headed Malimbe. We were also treated to a relaxed flock of Crested Guinea fowl on the road. And finally, in the surrounding farmlands we saw the scarce Uganda Spotted (Speckled-breasted) Woodpecker, our first Mackinnon's Shrike of the trip and our only Brown-backed Scrub Robin. And of course all the primates deserve a special mention too. Our first morning with the pittas produced a close encounter with a very noisy band of Chimpanzee, and one of our group decided to join a tracking expedition in the afternoon. Other species included Olive Baboon, Guereza Colobus, Red-tailed Monkey, Grey-cheeked Mangabey and Central African Red Colobus.

With our pitta in the bag we happily (and a bit wearily) made our way to Queen Elizabeth NP for a brief visit, where we hoped spotting birds in its open grasslands and savannas would be easier. Our progress was slowed by a large breeding herd of elephant near the main road, some Cape Buffalo and a pod of Hippopotamus. On arrival at our accommodation we were treated to great views of Giant Forest Hog, before we turned our attention back to feathers. The open grasslands proved very productive. Red-necked Spurfowl fed along the road. Vultures descended on a carcass and included Lappet-faced, Rueppell's, Hooded and White-backed Vulture. A colossal Martial Eagle perched up in a large tree, as did the smaller Grey Kestrel. Senegal Lapwing seemed to be over-abundant this year, with about 25 birds seen. We flushed a pair of Common Buttonquail from the roadside and spotted a lovely Temminck's Courser nearby. A healthy flock of Collared Pratincole passed overhead. A male White-winged Widowbird sat up on a Euphorbia. Black-lored Babbler cackled in the thickets. Grey-headed Kingfisher sat out on the telephone wires along with Grey-backed Fiscal. Black Coucal, Fan-tailed Grassbird, some very distant Compact Weavers, Sooty Chat, Fawn-breasted Waxbill and African Moustached Warbler favoured the more rank grassland. Rufous-naped Lark and Flappet Lark sang and displayed. And more wooded areas turned up Nubian Woodpecker, Common Scimitarbill, Purple-banded Sunbird, White-winged Black Tit, Northern Crombec, Buff-bellied Warbler and Copper Sunbird. On the mammal front, we were also treated to some great day-time views of a Leopard, before it was time to turn our attention back to forest birds...

This time at Bwindi Impenetrable NP. En route a few short stops turned up a very fine pair of Red-throated Wryneck, a confiding Levillant's Cuckoo, White-headed Sawwing, and some more widespread species, before we arrived at "The Neck". Birding along the road here was highly productive, and in fact the only time we were overwhelmed by birds during the trip was when a large foraging flock moved past us here. In a matter of minutes we saw Tullberg's Woodpecker, Pink-footed Puffback, Petit's Cuckooshrike, Red-tailed Greenbul, White-browed Crombec and Olive-green Camaroptera, although they came so quickly that some were hard to get on to. Other birds gave us more time to admire them. The scarce Chapin's Flycatcher



was scoped on its canopy perch, although regrettably flitted off before everyone could study it. Many-coloured Bushshrike called near us for a long time before we spotted it among some lianas, where everyone obtained good views. Bocage's Bushshrike was more obliging, and a pair of Yellow-crested Woodpecker even more so, along with an excited party of White-chinned Prinia, another Cassin's Flycatcher along the river, Dusky-blue Flycatcher nearby and Brown-capped Weaver. We were also surprised to see Ansorge's Greenbul here, a species normally seen only at Buhoma.

After a productive period at "The Neck", we climbed to the higher altitudes of the Ruhija sector, with some roadside stops en route producing our first montane specials and Albertine Rift Endemics, including Olive-breasted (Mountain) Greenbul, Ruwenzori (Collared) Apalis, Mountain Masked Apalis, Ruwenzori Hill Babbler, White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher and Regal Sunbird, species with which we would become well acquainted over the following week. We also watched a loose flock of all-dark African Black Swift-lookalikes calling like Little Swift, probably an undescribed species I first encountered in Angola (and which Callan has previously recorded on last year's trip in Rwanda) and have subsequently seen in the Malawi mountains, and others have reported from Uganda.

The reason for our visit to Ruhija was twofold: firstly to try to lay eyes on the most charismatic of the endemics, the rare Grauer's (African Green) Broadbill, and the opportunity of coming face-to-face with Eastern Gorillas. While the latter matter was out of my hands, I focussed all attention on succeeding in the prior, and for these purposes we concentrated our birding efforts on the forest in the vicinity of Mabwindi Swamp, the best-known locality for this species. Highlights here and on the way here included noisy parties of cackling White-headed Wood Hoopoe, several confiding Ruwenzori Batis, a couple of good encounters with Dusky Crimsonwing, Mountain Oriole, wing-flicking Yellow-streaked Greenbuls, very co-operative Red-faced Woodland Warblers, skulking bands of Banded Prinia, Northern Double-collared Sunbird, Black-throated Apalis, ringing Chestnut-throated Apalis, furtive Mountain Illadopsis, a pair of perched Stuhlmann's Starling, numerous Waller's Starling, a very generous Archer's Robin-





African Green Broadbill, Uganda
(c) Callan Cohen www.birdingafrica.com

Chat, some smart Yellow-eyed Black Flycatchers, darting Blue-headed Sunbird, Brown-capped Weaver, Streaky Seedeater, Thick-billed Seedeater, Stripe-breasted Tit, Dwarf Honeyguide and some very neat Oriole Finches. At the swamp itself Grauer's Rush Warbler was rather unfriendly and we'd have to wait for Rwanda for decent views.

However, for much of our stay there was no sign of the said broadbill, and I was beginning to think we were out of luck when suddenly our local guide called us to where he had spotted the broadbills.

Over the next couple of hours we followed the birds on and off. Initially our

views were through binoculars only, but later we scoped them high up in a tree canopy and finally, only after the rest of the group that had been tracking gorillas nearby had managed to join us, we enjoyed prolonged scope views of a lovely **Grauer's (African Green) Broadbill** taking its midday break and preening. This made the long walk back up to the main road considerably easier. Several short outing here, birding along the road, produced repeats of many of the previous species, plus a few additions like Grauer's Warbler, Grey-throated Barbet, Mountain Yellow Warbler and, best of all, a large male Handsome Francolin that gave superb views along the roadside.

All too quickly our time at Ruhija had come to an end as we wound our way down to the shores of Lake Bunyoni for an overnight stop en route to Rwanda. The papyrus swamps here are some of the most productive for birding, and besides enjoying excellent views of a tail-less Greater Swamp Warbler, White-winged





Swamp Warbler and Carruther's Cisticola, we were very pleased to be treated to a very responsive Papyrus Yellow Warbler that sat out in the open right on the edge of the papyrus bed. Another bonus here was a lovely perched African Hobby, its streaky underparts indicating it was a juvenile. And we took time to examine the so-called Victoria Masked Weavers,

which are variously treated as hybrids or a distinctive species.

Moving south we crossed the Rwanda border without hassle, although some minor vehicle problems took longer than hoped and tested our patience. While we waited we watched some African Wattled Lapwings nearby and enjoyed a close encounter with some Grey Crowned Cranes, but we were very pleased to be on our way again, and even more pleased to arrive at Nyungwe National Park many hours later.

Of the accessible patches of forest in the Albertine Rift (thus excluding those in the DRC and Burundi), Nyungwe is perhaps the richest in bird endemics, and is the only place one can see the desirable Red-collared (Mountain) Babbler. During our visit we were plagued by unseasonal bad weather, with rain, wind and constant cloud cover putting a dampener on bird activity. Yet with patience and persistence we slowly built up a great list of birds. A confiding African Cuckoo-Hawk sat quietly nearby. A female Bar-tailed Trogon was admired through the scope. A party of noisy White-headed Wood Hoopoes entertained us in the treetops. Several Olive Woodpecker were spotted. A male African Broadbill amused us with his display antics. Ruwenzori Batis





was very approachable. White-browed Crombec eventually left its cover. **Neumann's Warbler** gave some superb views (at least by its standards). Other repeats

and more widespread species seen included Stripe-breasted Tit, Grauer's Warbler, Red-faced Woodland Warbler, Evergreen Forest Warbler, Cinnamon Bracken Warbler, Ruwenzori Apalis, Mountain Masked Apalis, Black-throated Apalis, Chestnut-throated Apalis, Grey Apalis, Mountain Illadopsis, Ruwenzori Hill Babbler, Abyssinian Thrush, White-starred Robin, Scarce Swift, Equatorial Akalat, White-bellied Robin-Chat, Archer's Robin-Chat, White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher, Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher, Blue-headed Sunbird, Regal



Sunbird, Streaky Seedeater, Thick-billed Seedeater, Golden-breasted Bunting and Black-billed Turaco.

However, a few birds are worthy of special mention. A smart Lagden's Bushshrike showed itself very well and sang for the microphone. A bright Doherty's Bushshrike came out for everyone to see. After much effort we all had superb views of Grauer's Swamp Warbler. Two tame Red-throated Alethes fed on ant swarms no more than three metres away. Several elegant Purple-breasted Sunbird fed actively in a flowering *Symphonia* tree, and everyone enjoyed views through the scope although the poor light meant it was difficult to fully appreciate its colourful plumage. Ruwenzori Double-collared Sunbird showed very well.



Ruwenzori Turaco was seen at close range. And best of all, two parties of **Red-collared (Mountain) Babbler** were located. The first group seemed to be in a hurry to drop down into

the adjacent valley, and after we watched them preening at eye level disappeared down the slope never to be seen again. However, the second party was much more obliging and spent at least 15 minutes foraging over the mossy branches nearby, giving everyone ample time to appreciate the finer details of their plumage.

Eventually it was time to return to Kigali for the end of the trip. The highlight en route was a party, including young, of Ruaha Chat, which hopped among the buildings in a roadside village and perched on the brick walls. Eventually the gathering mass of birdwatcher spectators became too much, so we escaped back onto our bus and continued nearby for lunch, shared with Trilling Cisticola, Yellow-breasted Apalis and Marico Sunbird as the last new birds of the trip.

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