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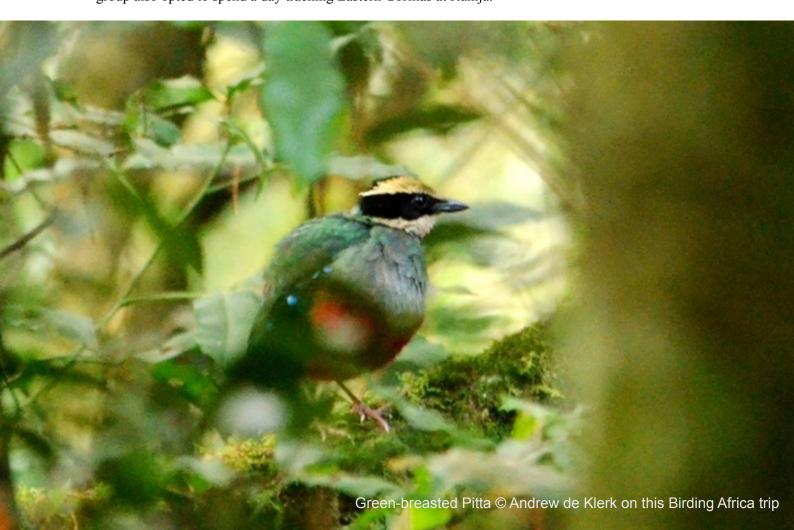
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Trip Report: Uganda and Rwanda, July 2013

by tour leader Michael Mills

Summary

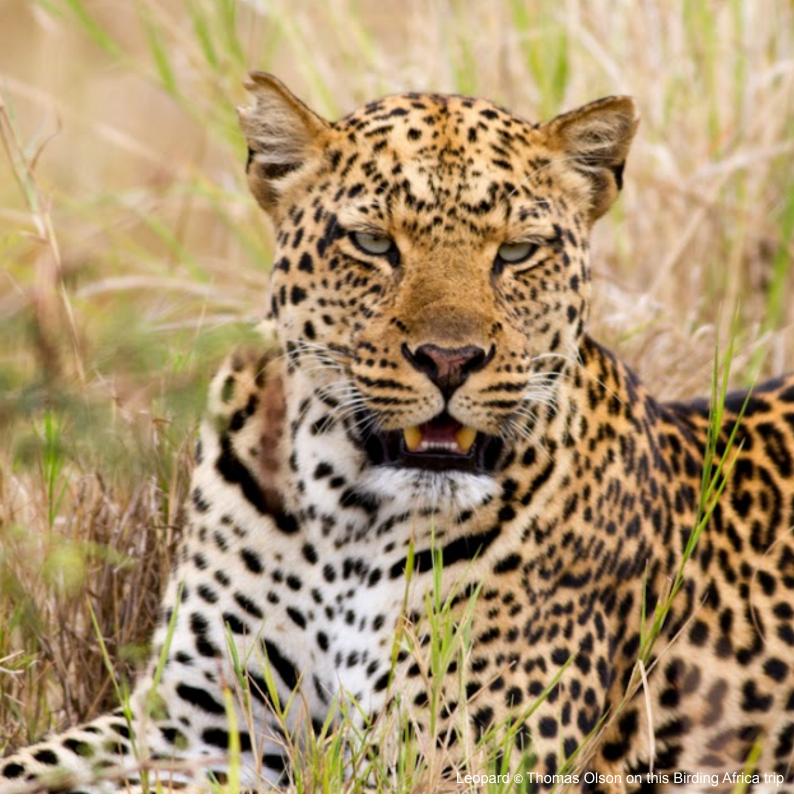
Our journey through Uganda and Rwanda was once again a resounding success, with great views obtained of the four main target birds: **Shoebill** at Mabamba Swamp, **Green-breasted Pitta** at Kibale, **Grauer's Broadbill** at Mabwindi Swamp in Bwindi and **Red-collared Mountain Babbler** at Nyungwe, Rwanda. Our standard "highlights" tour was supplemented with a quick pre-tour loop through the lower-altitude forests of Budongo and savannas of Murchison Falls, adding substantially to our species list. Our highlights tour focussed on the four aforementioned species plus the lofty Albertine Rift forests and their endemics, and took in various other habitats en route. During the two weeks we visited wetlands at Lake Victoria's Mabamba Swamp, Lake Bunyoni and the Nyabarongo River in Rwanda, mid-altitude forests at Kibale and "The Neck" of Bwindi, grasslands and savannas at Queen Elizabeth, and montane forests at the Ruhija sector of Bwindi and Nyungwe. Some of the group also opted to spend a day tracking Eastern Gorillas at Ruhija.





Besides the four biggies, other highlights included Ituri Batis, Nahan's Partridge, African Dwarf Kingfisher, Black Bishop, Cardinal Quelea, Puvel's Illadopsis and Brown Twinspot in the Budongo area, Heuglin's Francolin, Pennant-winged Nightjar, Red-winged Grey Warbler and Shelley's Sparrow at Murchison Falls, Lesser Jacana, Long-toed Lapwing, Blue Swallow, Weyns's Weaver and Orange Weaver at Mabamba Swamp, Papyrus Gonolek nearby, Specklebreasted Woodpecker and White-winged Swamp Warbler en route to Kibale, Toro Olive Greenbul, Grey Parrot, Joyful Greenbul, Thick-billed Cuckoo and White-collared Oliveback at Kibale, Senegal Lapwing and White-tailed Lark at Queen Elizabeth, Swamp Nightjar and Redthroated Wryneck en route to Bwindi, Many-coloured Bushshrike and Grey-headed Sunbird at "The Neck", Handsome Francolin, White-headed Wood Hoopoe, Ruwenzori Nightjar, Grauer's Warbler, Doherty's Bushshrike, Regal Sunbird, Grauer's Rush Warbler and Dusky Crimsonwing at Ruhija, Papyrus Yellow Warbler and Carruther's Cisticola at Lake Bunyoni, Ruaha Chat en route to Nyungwe, Mountain Buzzard, Red-throated Alethe, White-bellied Robin-Chat, Equatorial Akalat, Dwarf Honeyguide, Kungwe Apalis, Willard's Boubou, African Broadbill, Lagden's Bushshrike, Neumann's Warbler and Purple-breasted Sunbird at Nyungwe and **Papyrus Canary** at the Nyabarongo wetlands. We logged a total of just over 530 species, including heard-onlys. Mammal highlights were *Chimpanzee* at Budongo, *Leopard* in a tree at Murchison Falls, Central African Red Colobus and Grey-cheeked Mangabey (Uganda Mangabey) at





Kibale, *Leopard* beside the road in Queen Elizabeth, *l'Hoest Monkey* and *Eastern Gorilla* at Bwindi and *Angola Pied Colobus* at Nyungwe.

Detailed Trip Report

This year we commenced our journey through Uganda and Rwanda with pre-tour extension to Murchison Falls National Park and Budongo Forest. We set off from Entebbe. Arriving at Masindi just in time for lunch, with great views of **Western Banded Snake Eagle**, perched **Tambourine Dove** and **Brown-backed Scrub Robin** en route, we quickly dropped our bags, grabbed some food and then continued on to the Busingiro section of Budongo Forest for the afternoon. Things started off a bit



slowly, but it didn't take too long before our main targets, Ituri Batis and Nahan's Partridge, were located. The thin piping call of the batis helped us locate it perched in the canopy and soon the scope was swung in its direction for prolonged views. The partridge took a little more work, but again its calls first alerted us to its presence. We tip-toed into the undergrowth and after waiting quietly for a few minutes managed to lure them close-in for views. The pressure was now off and we could enjoy the vast array of other forest birds that Budongo had to offer, by concentrating our efforts on the Royal Mile, plus spend some time in the adjacent open habitats. We built up a good list of specials. African Dwarf Kingfisher sat on the road in front of its nest, Chocolate-backed Kingfisher was scoped in the canopy and Blue-breasted Kingfisher hunted insects right besides us. An Afep Pigeon descended to the road to feed on berries, quite unexpected for this shy, canopy species! A singing Uganda Woodland Warbler was watched feeding high up and a zippy little Jameson's Wattle-eye observed lower down. Overhead Grey Parrot, Cassin's Spinetail and Sabine's Spinetail were welcome additions. Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo teased us and showed briefly when everyone else was looking the wrong way. A lovely Forest Robin showed well, Red-tailed Ant-thrush and Whitetailed Ant-thrush were seen in short succession and Scaly-breasted Illadopsis approached very close. Other species recorded during our time in Budongo included Scaly Francolin (heard), African Pied Hornbill, White-thighed Hornbill, Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill, Yellow-crested Woodpecker, Western Oriole, Dusky Tit, Spotted Greenbul, White-throated Greenbul, Redtailed Greenbul, Lemon-bellied Crombec, Chestnut-capped Flycatcher, Black-throated Apalis, Buff-throated Apalis, Rufous-crowned Eremomela, Brown Illadopsis, Purple-headed Starling, Fraser's Rufous Thrush, Fire-crested Alethe and Grey Tit-Flycatcher at the forest edge. The adjacent moist savannas and farmland areas also produced some great birding. One of the highlights was an opportunity for a lengthy side-by-side study of Red-headed Quelea and Cardinal Quelea, both in glorious full breeding plumage. We also flushed a pair of Black-rumped Buttonquail, found a striking male **Black Bishop**, enjoyed good flight views of **Red-headed Lovebird** and were impressed by several male **Pennant-winged Nightiars** after dark. Other species in these habitats included White-headed Saw-wing, Whistling Cisticola, Short-winged Cisticola, Copper Sunbird, Compact Weaver, Yellow-mantled Widowbird, Red-collared Widowbird, Brown Twinspot, Black-bellied Firefinch, Singing Cisticola, Verreaux's Eagle Owl, Moustached Grass Warbler, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Fawn-breasted Waxbill and Western Citril, before it was time to head for the Nile River at Murchison Falls National Park.

We broke up the journey with a lengthy walk at the Butiaba Escarpment, where new birds came thick and fast. Perhaps the most localised species found was Foxy Cisticola, which allowed very close approach. Other highlights included Flappet Lark, Spotted Palm Thrush, Black-billed Barbet, Cabanis's Bunting, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Western Black-headed Batis, Mocking Cliff Chat, Black-winged Red Bishop, Chestnut-crowed Sparrow-weaver, stunning Silverbird, Lesser Blue-eared Starling, Red-winged Warbler, Rattling Cisticola, Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike, Croaking Cisticola, Northern Crombec, Spot-flanked Barbet, Marsh Tchagra, Blue-naped Mousebird, Grey-headed Kingfisher, White-rumped Swift, Levaillant's Cuckoo and Vinaceous Dove. It was then on to our accommodation on the banks of the Nile River for a late lunch, spotting Black-rumped Waxbill, Dark-chanting Goshawk and Northern Red-bishop before we arrived. In the later afternoon, birding near our accommodation added Buff-bellied Warbler, Beautiful Sunbird, Western Violet-backed Sunbird, Red-winged Grey Warbler, Grey-capped Warbler and





Brown Babbler, and after dark, Slender-tailed Nightjar and more great views of Pennant-winged Nightjar.

With only a short time available to explore the varied habitats of Murchison, we set off early the next morning to catch the first ferry to the north bank of the Nile and spend the morning in the grasslands and wetlands there, followed by a afternoon boat trip to the bottom of the falls and some late afternoon and early morning exploration in the Guinea woodlands south of the Nile. Birding highlights were good looks at **Heuglin's Francolin** on two occasions, a breeding colony of **Horus** Swift along the Nile River, a lovely Green-backed Eremomela, a pair of Shelley's Sparrow perched in a patch of whistling thorn, great views of Black-faced Quail Finch on the ground, a breeding plumage Black Coucal, a couple of Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, lots of bright Northern Carmine Bee-eater, great looks at the gabonensis subspecies of Black Cuckoo, close-up views of Denham's Bustard and several Long-toed Lapwing. Other more widespread species included Saddle-billed Stork, Intermediate Egret, Western Osprey, Rueppell's Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Yellowbellied Hyliota, White-shouldered Black Tit, Black Scimitarbill, Piapiac, Yellow-billed Shrike, White-crested Helmetshrike, Nubian Woodpecker, Lesser Honeyguide, Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Red-throated Bee-eater, Senegal Coucal, Black-billed Wood Dove, African Skimmer, Rock Pratincole, Black-headed Lapwing, Senegal Thick-knee, Grey Crowned Crane, Martial Eagle, Pink-backed Pelican and Goliath Heron. On our way back to Entebbe, for the start of the main tour, a short stop at Kaniyo Pabidi quickly produced Puvel's Illadopsis, plus good views of Yellow Longbill and Grey Longbill, and a stop closer to Kampala is some large swamps turned up some displaying male Marsh Widowbirds.

On the Uganda "Specials tour, our very first port of call was the famous Mabamba Swamps near Entebbe. And not minutes after taking to the water, were we admiring a hefty **Shoebill** at close range. We marvelled at it for about half an hour, during which time it lunged to grab a lungfish and quickly disposed of it down its gullet. During our Shoebill vigil we were distracted by some nearby **Long-toed Lapwings**, an **African Marsh Harrier** that drifted by and a lovely **Blue Swallow**. A short detour on the water quickly bagged the hoped-for **Lesser Jacana**, but all too soon we were back on shore admiring **Weyn's Weaver** and a variety of other Ploceids such as **Black-headed Weaver**, **Northern Brown-throated Weaver** and **Orange Weaver**, plus **African Pied Hornbill**, **Swamp Flycatcher**, **Plain-backed Pipit**, **Green-throated Sunbird** and **Red-chested Sunbird**.

From Mabamba we started our journey to Kibale. We stopped for lunch before passing Kampala, where Papyrus Gonolek gave good views and a few other goodies such as Hairy-breasted Barbet, Nubian Woodpecker (in the middle of the papyrus!?) and Sooty Chat put their first appearances. Beyond Kampala a productive stroll through some farmland habitats produced the scarce Speckle-breasted Woodpecker, Black-throated Canary, our first Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills and the only White-throated Bee-eaters of the trip. Still further along our route in some thorn-savanna we found Trilling Cisticola, Holub's Golden Weaver, Purple-banded Sunbird, Black-headed Gonolek, Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat, White-chinned Prinia and Copper Sunbird, and White-winged Swamp Warbler and Marsh Tchagra in some swampy areas.

During our stay at Kibale our main aim was to get to grips with the much-desired **Green-breasted Pitta**. This year we were fortunate, as it came easily. On our first morning we set off expectantly,





walking through the dark forest interior behind our expert local guide, who brought us to where he had heard the birds displaying the morning before. And it wasn't long before we could hear the strange, mechanical thud of a pair displaying nearby. As we were waiting for the light to improve we enjoyed the forest waking up around us, and lured in a confiding **Scaly-breasted Illadopsis** for good views. Once the light was good enough to enjoy the pitta, we started to search nearby for them, and our guide soon located the birds feeding on the ground. As calmly as possible we stalked forward to where he'd seen one pitta flit up to a branch and soon all of us were admiring one of these rare and beautiful birds perched out in clear view, where it stayed for several minutes. During this time it exhibited a strange sort of display in which it kept stretching its head skywards, seemingly to better expose the red and green underparts. Now on an endorphin high we happily turned to other forest birds, and our very rapid success meant that this year we had ample time for them.

Our best birds at Kibale included more views of **Afep Pigeon**, perched and scoped, great views of the rare Thick-billed Cuckoo in flight and perched, several bright Black Bee-eater, fantastic views of Brown-eared Woodpecker, a few sightings of Red-headed Bluebill, good looks at Toro Olive Greenbul after hearing them several times, Joyful Greenbul, Lowland Masked Apalis, Tiny Sunbird and a preening White-collared Oliveback also scoped! Many other more widespread species were registered too, including a clacking flock of Crested Guineafowl, great views of Redtailed Bristlebill, Thick-billed Seedeater, a displaying Crowned Eagle, a pair of Grey Parrot, Blue Malkoha, shimmering Klaas's Cuckoo, African Emerald Cuckoo, Sabine's Spinetail, Narina Trogon, Speckled Tinkerbird, Yellow-throated Tinkerbird, Yellow-spotted Barbet, Greythroated Barbet, Hairy-breasted Barbet, Cassin's Honeybird, Willcocks's Honeyguide, Buffspotted Woodpecker, Elliot's Woodpecker, African Shrike-flycatcher, Black-and-white Shrikeflycatcher, Chestnut Wattle-eve, Bocage's Bushshrike, Luehder's Bushshrike, Petit's Cuckooshrike, Western Oriole, Velvet-mantled Drongo, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Dusky Tit, Western Nicator, Honeyguide Greenbul, Cabanis's Greenbul, Green Crombec, Green Hylia, Chubb's Cisticola, Buff-throated Apalis, Black-billed Turaco, Olive-green Camaroptera, Purpleheaded Starling, Narrow-tailed Starling, Waller's Starling, Fraser's Rufous Thrush, Redcapped Robin-Chat, Cassin's Flycatcher, Sooty Flycatcher, Dusky-blue Flycatcher, Greythroated Tit-Flycatcher, Little Green Sunbird, , Olive-bellied Sunbird, Blue-throated Brown Sunbird, Dark-backed Weaver, White-breasted Nigrita, Grey-headed Nigrita and Mountain Wagtail. We also made a short, rather damp (from rain) visit to Bigodi wetlands, where notable additions were Shining-blue Kingfisher, White-spotted Flufftail, Yellow-billed Barbet and Whitetailed Ant Thrush.

With our second biggie in the bag we happily made our way to Queen Elizabeth National Park for a brief visit. Our lunch stop en route turned up a few good savanna birds, such as our first Senegal Lapwing, Spot-flank Barbet, Western Black-headed Batis, Grey-capped Warbler and Black-lored Babbler. Out on the open plains we added Rufous-naped Lark and Flappet Lark, and after some diligent searching White-tailed Lark was found. Red-necked Spurfowl scurried from the road, as did African Crake, whereas Water Thick-knee, Spur-winged Lapwing, Senegal Lapwing, African Wattled Lapwing, Crowned Lapwing and Kittlitz's Plover were easier to spot and Black-bellied Bustard strode with confidence. Raptors were conspicuous and included Palm-nut Vulture, White-backed Vulture, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Brown Snake Eagle, Bateleur and Martial



Eagle, and other species included Grey-backed Fiscal, Banded Martin, Rufous-chested Swallow, Red-rumped Swallow, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Southern Red Bishop, Collared Pratincole and Croaking Cisticola. Wetlands added Greater Flamingo, Pink-backed Pelican and White-breasted Cormorant and the more bushy areas were home to Little Bee-eater, Olive Bee-eater, Common Scimitarbill, African Grey Woodpecker, Buff-bellied Warbler, Yellow-bellied Apalis, White-browed Scrub-Robin, Northern Black Flycatcher, Swamp Flycatcher, Slender-billed Weaver and Golden-breasted Bunting. And our lunch was endangered by Marabou Stork.



Leaving Queen Elizabeth to the south, we bumped down the road to our accommodation. The drive didn't turn up too many new species, but Stout Cisticola was seen right beside the bus, a flock of Crested Guineafowl were spotted on the roadside and a pair of African Cuckoo-Hawk circled low overhead, before we arrived at our accommodation with some very obliging Ross's Turaco and Swamp Nightjar in the garden!

Having notched up a good list of savanna birds, it was now time to turn our attention back to forests...this time at Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. En route a short stop turned up excellent views Red-throated Wryneck and some



more widespread species, before we arrived at "The Neck". Here birding started off slowly, but the pace picked up as it warmed up. **Ansorge's Greenbul** was again seen here, and proved to be quite common, excellent views were obtained of the localised **Grey-headed Sunbird** and we enjoyed good looks at **Many-coloured Bushshrike**. Other goodies included **Scarce Swift**, **Black-faced Prinia**, **Red-tailed Greenbul**, **Pink-footed Puffback** and **Brown-capped Weaver** and a splash of colour was added by **Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater** and **Black Bee-eater**. After a productive stint at "The Neck" we climbed to the higher altitudes of the Ruhija sector, arriving in time for a introductory birding stroll in late afternoon. Near our accommodation we had our first encounters with **Ruwenzori Apalis**, **Mountain Masked Apalis**, **Red-faced Woodland Warblers**, **White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher** and lovely **Regal Sunbird**, species with which we would become well acquainted over the following week.

Our reason for visiting Ruhija was twofold: firstly to lay eyes on the most charismatic of the bird endemics, the rare **Grauer's Broadbill** and, secondly, the opportunity of coming face-to-face with *Eastern Gorillas*. Our "birds first" policy meant the long descent to Mabwindi Swamp, the best-known locality for the broadbill, was first up. As we descended in the early morning we paused to try our luck with some of the under-storey skulkers and succeeded in luring **Mountain Illadopsis** and **Archer's Robin-Chat** into view. Other birds that drew our attention were our first **Mountain Orioles**, wing-flicking **Yellow-streaked Greenbuls**, **Ruwenzori Batis**, **Ruwenzori Hill Babbler**, **African Olive Pigeon**, **Sharpe's Starling** and **Grey Cuckooshrike**. But we were keen to get into range of the broadbill, so pressed on down to the bottom, where after a relatively short wait our local guide called us to where he'd spotted the broadbills. Initially we could hear them calling above us, but it took what felt like ages before they finally moved and we spotted them flit across a clearing. Unfortunately they perched in a difficult spot, requiring us to clamber through some dense undergrowth and up the nearby slope, where even in the scope the birds were difficult to fully appreciate. But we stuck with them and after a while they eventually moved again, this time to a much better spot which allowed vastly improved views, and we could all appreciate them fully.



With our main target in the bag we continued on to the swamp for lunch, where Grauer's **Rush Warbler** showed well for a change but Carruther's Cisticola was much harder to see. Our first Dusky **Crimsonwing** also put in an appearance, but was little more than a red-and-grey



streak. On our afternoon ascent to the road the crimsonwings showed much better and we also registered Yellow-eyed Black Flycatchers, Tullberg's Woodpecker and Mountain Yellow Warbler, although good views of the warbler had to wait until later. Lagden's Bushshrike called in the distance but refused to come any closer.

The next day, while some of the group slogged up and down impenetrable mountain slopes in search of gorillas, the rest of us took the easy option of birding mainly from the road. Most legs were heavy and the birding slow, but we did managed excellent views of a male **Narina Trogon**, enjoy much-



improved sightings of Chestnutthroated Apalis and see a very smart Doherty's Bushshrike, plus other species such as Streaky Seedeater, Equatorial Akalat (a surprise at this altitude), Stripebreasted Tit, Grauer's Warbler, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, White-headed Wood Hoopoe, Black Sparrowhawk and Yellowcrowned Canary.

All too quickly our time at Ruhija had come to an end as we headed for the exit gate, having enjoyed excellent views of Ruwenzori **Nightiar** before breakfast. En route several short stops produced some good birds, including superb sightings of Western Tinkerbird, Kandt's Waxbill, Mountain Yellow Warbler and, best of all, a pair of **Handsome Francolin** that crowed and clucked in annoyance. From the Bwindi exit gate 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 the best bird here is the inexplicably local and rare Papyrus Yellow Warbler, of which we enjoyed two excellent encounters! Other goodies seen here included Greater Swamp Warbler, Western Citril, the only

Mackinnon's Shrikes of the trip,



Black-crowned Waxbill, White-winged Swamp Warbler, our first proper views of Carruther's Cisticola and an African Rail that was persuaded to cross a trail through the papyrus.

Moving south we crossed into Rwanda without hassle and slowly wound our way to the far south of the country, with a lunch and farewell stop in Kigali to break the long journey. En route to Nyungwe a couple of **Ruaha Chats** put in a roadside appearance and once we arrived in Nyungwe we enjoyed





several excellent sightings of **Handsome Francolin** on the road. But it was a long travel day and we were happy to arrive at our destination where so many great birds awaited us.

Of the accessible patches of forest in the Albertine Rift (thus excluding those in the DRC and Burundi), Nyungwe is the richest in bird endemics and the only place to see the desirable Red-collared (Mountain) Babbler. Despite somewhat cold, windy conditions we managed to track down a party of these charismatic birds on our second morning and followed them for about half an hour as they fed among lichen and over mossy branches. Almost equally desirable was the bulky Lagden's Bushshrike which made us wait until the very last hour to put in a performance, sitting out and calling in the scope. Dwarf Honeyguide was another bonus and we all enjoyed scope views of this miniscule *Indicator* as it gleaned in the canopy. We also enjoyed excellent views of the grey-eyed Willard's Boubou, which was building a nest. The little-known Kungwe Apalis was tracked down in the canopy and seen well from below. Red-throated Alethe posed at arm's length, forcing the big lenses to retreat for photos! Purple-breasted Sunbird put in a great performance in the crown of a *Symphonia* tree and sat still for long enough for everyone to enjoy scope views. Ruwenzori Double-collared Sunbird showed very well on some giant lobelias. Abyssinian (Kivu) Ground Thrush sang sweetly and perched where we could all see it. There were several opportunities to admire Ruwenzori Turaco. The unusual little Neumann's Warbler came very close and sat up rather nicely.



The usually-skulking Grauer's Warbler came right out in the open. And during our three days we also had opportunities for views of many other Albertine Rift endemics and other forest birds, which included Olive Woodpecker, African Broadbill, Ruwenzori Batis, White-browed Crombec, Cassin's Hawk Eagle, Mountain Buzzard, Stripe-breasted Tit, Red-faced Woodland Warbler, Evergreen Forest Warbler, Cinnamon Bracken Warbler, Ruwenzori Apalis, Mountain Masked Apalis, Chestnut-throated Apalis, Grey Apalis, Ruwenzori Hill Babbler, Mountain Sooty Boubou, White-starred Robin, Stuhlmann's Starling, Slender-billed Starling, Brown Woodland Warbler, Scarce Swift, Equatorial Akalat, White-bellied Robin-Chat, White-bellied Crested Flycatcher, Blue-headed Sunbird and Regal Sunbird. Eventually it was time to return to Kigali for the end of the trip, the highlight of the trip back being a short stop at the Nyabarongo wetlands where Papyrus Canary showed very well.

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