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Uganda and Rwanda

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Trip report by tour leader Michael Mills (assisted by Tertius Gous)

Photographs by Tertius Gous taken on this tour

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Summary

Our “highlights” tour of 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 (African Green) Broadbill** at Mabwindi Swamp in Bwindi and **Red-collared**



[Mountain] Babbler at Nyungwe. Besides these four specials, we focussed our attention on the mountainous Albertine Rift forests and their endemics, and took in various other habitats en route. During the two and a half weeks we visited wetlands at Lake Victoria's Mabamba Swamp, Lake Bunyoni and the Nyabarongo River in Rwanda, low-altitude forests at Budongo (northern Uganda only), mid-altitude forests at Kibale and "The Neck" of Bwindi, grasslands

and savannas at Queen Elizabeth and Murchison (Murchison on Northern Uganda only), and montane forests at the Ruhija sector of Bwindi and Nyungwe National Park. Some of the group also opted to spend a day tracking *Eastern Gorillas* at Ruhija.

Besides the four biggies, **Lesser Jacana, Long-toed Lapwing, Western Banded Snake Eagle, Weyns's Weaver** and **Orange Weaver** at Mabamba Swamp, **Papyrus Gonolek** nearby, **Orange-tufted Sunbird, Freckled Nightjar, Grey Parrot** and **Golden-backed Weaver** and en route to Kibale, **Toro Olive Greenbul, Speckle-breasted Woodpecker, Joyful Greenbul, Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat** and **Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo** at Kibale, **Senegal Lapwing** and **Brown-chested Lapwing** at Queen Elizabeth, **Swamp Nightjar** and **Red-throated Wryneck** en route to Bwindi, **Many-coloured Bushshrike** and **Grey-headed Sunbird** at "The Neck", **Handsome Francolin, Lagden's Bushshrike, Grauer's Warbler, Doherty's Bushshrike, Regal Sunbird, Grauer's Rush Warbler, Dusky Twinspot** and **Dusky Crimsonwing** at Ruhija, **White-winged Swamp Warbler, White-collared Oliveback, Papyrus Canary, Papyrus Yellow Warbler** and **Carruther's Cisticola** at Lake Bunyoni, **Ruaha Chat** en route to Nyungwe, and **Red-throated Alethe, White-bellied Robin-Chat, Bar-tailed Trogon, Equatorial Akalat, Dwarf Honeyguide, Kungwe Apalis, Willard's Sooty Boubou, African Broadbill, Ruwenzori Nightjar, Neumann's Warbler** and **Purple-breasted Sunbird** at Nyungwe. On the Northern Uganda extension, other highlights included **Nahan's Partridge, Ituri Batis, African Dwarf Kingfisher, Jameson's Wattle-eye, Yellow Longill, Black Bishop, Cardinal Quelea, Grey-headed Oliveback** and **Magpie Mannikin** in the Budongo area, **Pennant-winged Nightjar, Pel's Fishing-Owl, Shelley's Sparrow, Black-billed Barbet, Yellow-bellied Hyliota** and **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver** at Murchison Falls. We logged a total of just over 535 species (460 on the Uganda Specials and Rwanda sections combined), including heard-onlys.



Mammal highlights were *Chimpanzee*, *Central African Red Colobus* and *Grey-cheeked Mangabey* at Kibale, *African Elephant* in Queen Elizabeth, *l'Hoest's Monkey* and *Eastern Gorilla* at Bwindi, and *Angola Pied Colobus* and *Dent's Monkey* at Nyungwe.



As has now become custom, the very first birding stop on our “highlights” tour is at the famous Mabamba Swamps, not far from Entebbe. We arrived early in the morning, having seen **African Pied Hornbill** en route and soon took to the water in our wooden boats. Following only a short search were we admiring a hefty **Shoebill** close to us. We marvelled at it for about half an hour, during which time it broke its concentrated glare by pacing only a few steps to convince us that it was indeed alive. With the first biggie under the belt we could now turn our attention to other birds that were around. **Weyns's Weaver** was very active at their swamp breeding colonies, small flocks flying from their nests to feed nearby on the adjacent shoreline and perching temporarily on some of the taller trees to allow good looks. Other weavers were also active around their nests and we saw **Slender-billed Weaver**, **Northern Brown-throated Weaver** and, back on land, **Orange Weaver**, during our short visit. Both **African Marsh Harrier** and **Western Marsh Harrier** drifted by, allowing good comparisons. **Western Banded Snake Eagle** and **Brown Snake Eagle** were studied. A party of smart **Long-toed Lapwings** was located and good looks at **Lesser Jacana** followed. **Brown-backed Scrub Robin** and **Marsh Tchagra** were good finds too. And we made our first acquaintances with **Swamp Flycatcher**, **Hamerkop**, **Blue-headed Coucal**, **Double-toothed Barbet**, **Blue-breasted Bee-eater**, **Red-chested Sunbird** and **Olive (Madagascar) Bee-eater**.

From Mabamba we started our journey to Kibale, with an overnight stop en route. Our first birding stop at a papyrus swamp gave excellent views of **Papyrus Gonolek**, and a few other goodies such as **Angola Swallow** and **White-winged Swamp Warbler** put in their first appearances. Beyond Kampala a productive stroll adjacent to a small, remnant forest patch produced **White-throated Bee-eater**, **Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill**, a surprise **Yellow-mantled Weaver**,

Velvet-mantled Drongo, Red-headed Malimbe, Chestnut-winged Starling, African Emerald Cuckoo and perched **Grey Parrot**, with **African Grey Woodpecker** and **Lizard Buzzard** seen not long after. Overnight we watched **Freckled Nightjar** on the roof of our hotel. Still further along our route in some savanna we enjoyed an excellent couple of hours of birding. Birding was easy and we racked up a long list in a short time, including **Trilling Cisticola, Grey-capped Warbler, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Grey Kestrel, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Buff-bellied Warbler, African Cuckoo-Hawk, White-browed Scrub-Robin, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Northern Black Flycatcher, Fan-tailed Widowbird, White-winged Widowbird, Holub's Golden Weaver, Meyer's Parrot, Arrow-marked Babbler, Black-lored Babbler, Grey-backed Fiscal, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Bare-faced Go-away-bird, Nubian Woodpecker, Black-headed Gonolek, Copper Sunbird, Ross's Turaco, breeding Golden-backed Weaver, an unexpected group of Purple Starlings, our first Grey Crowned Crane** and the scarce **Orange-tufted Sunbird**.

During our stay at Kibale our main aim was to get to grips with the much-desired **Green-breasted Pitta**, and this year we were fortunate, as it came easily. On our first morning we set off hopefully, and by the time our expert local guide had brought us to where he had heard the birds displaying the morning before, we could already hear the strange, mechanical thud of a bird displaying nearby. It seemed keen to display this morning and kept going for at least ten minutes, allowing us not only to locate it in the canopy, bouncing up and down, but to study it at length, with the light improving all the while. This was good news, as it meant that our two backup mornings could be dedicated to more general birding, with many good species to be found in the area.

First we turned our attention to birds within the primary forest, and quickly lured in a confiding **Scaly-breasted Illadopsis** for close-up views. Following shortly was **Narina Trogon**, before we were distracted by a noisy party of *Chimpanzee* that were foraging nearby. Eventually we tore ourselves away from the chips to look at a calling **Brown-chested Alethe**. During the rest of our time at Kibale we focussed our attention on birding the main roads through the forest, which proved very productive. Our best birds at Kibale included perched **Afep Pigeon**, good looks at **Toro Olive Greenbul, Joyful Greenbul, Lowland Masked Apalis**, soaring **Cassin's Hawk-Eagle** and **Ayres's Hawk-Eagle**, an approachable **Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat** and a very co-operative **Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo** that sang in the scope. Many other forest birds were seen

during our stay, and these included **Brown-eared Woodpecker, Red-headed Bluebill, Thick-billed Seedeater, White-throated Greenbul, Brown Illadopsis, Blue Malkoha, Green Hylia, Sabine's Spinetail, Speckled Tinkerbird, Yellow-throated Tinkerbird, Yellow-spotted Barbet, Grey-throated Barbet, Hairy-breasted Barbet, Willcocks's Honeyguide, Elliot's Woodpecker, Chestnut Wattle-eye, Bocage's Bushshrike, Luehder's Bushshrike, Petit's Cuckooshrike, Western Oriole, Velvet-mantled Drongo, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Dusky Tit, Western Nicator, Honeyguide Greenbul, Blue-throated Roller, Blue-breasted Kingfisher, Green Crombec, Chubb's Cisticola, Buff-throated Apalis, Purple-headed Starling,**



Narrow-tailed Starling, Cassin's Flycatcher, Sooty Flycatcher, Red-chested Cuckoo, Grey-throated Tit-Flycatcher, White-tailed Ant Thrush, Little Green Sunbird, Olive-bellied Sunbird, Brown-capped Weaver, Blue-throated Brown Sunbird, Yellow-billed Barbet, Narrow-tailed Starling, White-breasted Nigrita, Grey-headed Nigrita and Mountain Wagtail. We also made a short visit to the Bigodi swamp, where notable additions were **White-spotted Flufftail, Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat** and **Speckle-breasted Woodpecker** at its nest hole.

With some excellent forest birds under the belt we happily made our way to Queen Elizabeth National Park for a brief visit, soon after arrival finding ourselves out on the Kazinga Channel and enjoying a mixture of *buffalo*, *hippopotamus* and various waterbirds at close range. The biggest surprise of our evening cruise was seeing two **Ruddy Turnstone** among the other waders that lined the banks of the channel; these included **Three-banded Plover, African Wattled Lapwing, Spur-winged Lapwing, Water Thick-knee** and **Kittlitz's Plover**. We also found **Spot-flank Barbet, Saddle-billed Stork, White-breasted Cormorant, Knob-billed Duck, African Spoonbill, Blue-naped Mousebird** and **African Pygmy Kingfisher**.



Before sunrise the next day **Square-tailed Nightjar** put in a good appearance and once the sun was up the open savannas added goodies such as **Senegal Lapwing** and **Temminck's Courser** (both with small chicks), **Black Coucal, Rufous-naped Lark, Flappet Lark, Red-capped Lark, Red-necked Spurfowl, African Crake, Crowned Lapwing, Black-bellied Bustard, Compact Weaver** and **Fawn-breasted Waxbill**. Raptors were conspicuous and included **Palm-nut Vulture, White-backed Vulture** and **Bateleur**, and other species included **Rufous-chested Swallow, Red-rumped Swallow, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Southern Red Bishop, Collared Pratincole** and **Croaking Cisticola**. However, the undoubted highlight was finding at least 10 **Brown-chested Lapwing** among the many other plovers out on the short-grass plains.

Leaving Queen Elizabeth to the south via Ishasha didn't turn up too many new species, but **Stout Cisticola** was seen right beside the bus, another **Western Banded Snake Eagle** was spotted on the roadside, many **Sooty Chat** were seen, **Harlequin Quail** was flushed for good views and our first **Black Bee-eater** dazzled us, before we arrived at our overnight stop. Here some great birds were seen in the surrounds of our lodge: perched **Red-headed Lovebird**, angry **Red-throated**



Wryneck, White-headed Barbet and more **Brown-chested Lapwings** were enjoyed before nightfall, and **Swamp Nightjar** and **African Wood Owl** after dark!

It was now time to turn our attention back to forests...this time at Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, starting at "The Neck". Here birding started off slowly, but the pace picked up as it warmed up. **Ansorge's Greenbul** was again seen here, excellent views were obtained of the localised **Grey-headed Sunbird** and we enjoyed good looks at **Many-coloured Bushshrike**. Other goodies included **Scarce Swift, Red-tailed Greenbul, Grey Apalis, Black-throated Apalis, Olive-green Camaroptera, Dusky-blue Flycatcher, Black Sparrowhawk** and a splash of colour was added by more **Black Bee-eaters**. After a productive stint at "The Neck" we climbed to the higher altitudes of the Ruhija sector, arriving in time for an introductory birding stroll in late afternoon. Conditions were perfect – sunny and still – and we enjoyed an excellent hour with **Ruwenzori Apalis, Mountain Masked Apalis, Red-faced Woodland Warblers, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Grauer's Warbler, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher, Stripe-breasted Tit, Ruwenzori Batis, Grey Cuckooshrike, Mountain Illadopsis** 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 (African Green) Broadbill** and, secondly, the opportunity of coming face-to-face with *Eastern Gorillas*. 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. Further down the valley we found **Black-faced Prinia, Black-billed Turaco, Mountain Oriole**, and flocks of fruit-eaters like **African Olive Pigeon, Sharpe's Starling** and **Slender-billed Starling** were conspicuous. We were just getting onto our first group of **White-headed Wood Hoopoes** when the nearby whistles of a **Lagden's Bushshrike** quickly diverted our attention. We took some time to persuade it out of its tangle of vines, but was worth the wait, as eventually it emerged at the top of the tree out in full sunlight, and sat long enough for a good study through the scope before creeping back into its thicket. We were just celebrating the great find when another, a pair of **Dusky Crimsonwing**, was spotted just ahead of us in the trail, and soon we were all enjoying views of another localised beauty. Then, nearing the bottom of the valley several high-pitched calls above us alerted us to a group of **Grauer's (African Green) Broadbill**,

perched rather low down near the trail. A few tense moments ensued while some of the group battled to spot them, but soon we were all feasting our eyes on the emerald and blue oddities. After that things couldn't get better, so we happily continued on to the swamp, enjoying our first **Yellow-eyed Black Flycatchers**, **Western Citril**, a circling **Ayres's Hawk-Eagle** and some lovely **Oriole Finch**. At the swamp itself **Grauer's Rush Warbler** put in a few brief appearances but Dwarf Honeyguide was nowhere to be found, so after a relaxed picnic lunch we commenced our return journey. The best birds on the way up were a perched, juvenile **Crowned Eagle**, **Mackinnon's Shrike**, a pair of **Mountain Buzzard** at the nest and some finely-banded **Tullberg's Woodpeckers**.



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. A **Dusky Turtle Dove** was a welcome surprise, as was **Wing-snapping Cisticola**, but the highlights of the morning were a party of ten **Dusky Twinspot**, an incredibly confiding **Doherty's Bushshrike** and a **Dwarf Honeyguide** that showed well but very briefly. **Yellow-crowned Canary** and **Yellow-**



bellied Waxbill were also seen well. By lunch time our gorilla-tracking friends had returned, so we set off to see the twinspace and bushshrike again, before heading up in to the bamboo zone. Here **White-starred Robin** showed very well, **Western Tinkerbird** was a welcome find, **Mountain Yellow Warbler** was seen and a pair of **Strange Weavers** sat out for excellent looks.

All too quickly our time at Ruhija had come to an end as we headed for the exit gate. En route several short stops produced some good birds, including superb sightings of **White-bellied Crested Flycatcher** and, best of all, a male **Handsome Francolin** that fed by the roadside and cautiously crossed the track in front of us. From the Bwindi exit gate we wound our way down to the shores of Lake Bunyoni and on to Kabale for an overnight stop en route to Rwanda. The papyrus swamps along our route 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 an excellent encounter, alongside a very co-operative **White-winged Swamp Warbler**. Other goodies seen in the swamps were **Greater Swamp Warbler**, **Black-crowned Waxbill**, our first proper views of **Carruther's Cisticola**, singing **Papyrus Canary**, a party of scarce **White-collared Oliveback**, several "**Victoria Masked Weavers**" and a couple of **African Rail**. In the late afternoon we successfully tracked down the high-pitched calling race of **Little Rush Warbler**, a potential future split.

Moving south we crossed into Rwanda without hassle and slowly wound our way to the far south of the country, with our numbers swelling en route with the arrival of our Rwanda-only companions. En route to Nyungwe a couple of **Ruaha Chats** and **Giant Kingfisher** put in a roadside appearance, but it was essentially 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 charismatic **Red-collared (Mountain) Babbler**. This year the weather was far more pleasant than the previous two and accordingly we fared very well on the birds, tracking down two parties of babbler on our second morning. **Dwarf Honeyguide** was another bonus and we all enjoyed eye-level views of this miniscule *Indicator* and even heard it singing. We also enjoyed excellent views of the grey-eyed **Willard's Sooty Boubou**. The little-known **Kungwe Apalis** was tracked down again in the canopy and lured almost to the forest floor. **Red-throated Alethe** put in several good appearances. **Purple-breasted Sunbird** joined **Regal Sunbird**, **Blue-headed Sunbird** and **Ruwenzori Double-collared Sunbird** at some giant lobelias. **Abyssinian (Kivu) Ground Thrush** sang sweetly and some of the group managed to see it. There were several opportunities to admire **Ruwenzori Turaco**. The unusual little **Neumann's Warbler** came very close and sat up rather nicely on three occasions. The usually-skulking **Grauer's Warbler** came right out in the open. We enjoyed two excellent day-time sightings of **Red-chested Owlet**. Everyone had good looks at the very secretive **Grey-chested Babbler**. **Bar-tailed Trogon** was a very popular find. **Ruwenzori Nightjar** was seen at arm's length. **Cassin's Hawk-Eagle** displayed low over the forest. And during our three days we also had opportunities to admire many other Albertine Rift endemics and other forest birds, which included **Olive Woodpecker**, **African**



Broadbill, Ruwenzori Batis, Many-coloured Bushshrike, White-headed Wood Hoopoe, Cabanis's Greenbul, White-browed Crombec, Mountain Buzzard, Stripe-breasted Tit, Kandt's Waxbill, Pink-footed Puffback, Violet-backed Hyliota, Red-faced Woodland Warbler, Evergreen Forest Warbler, Cinnamon Bracken Warbler, Ruwenzori Apalis, Mountain Masked Apalis, Chestnut-throated Apalis, Ruwenzori Hill Babbler, White-starred Robin, Stuhlmann's Starling, Slender-billed Starling, Brown Woodland Warbler, Scarce Swift and Equatorial Akalat and White-bellied Robin-Chat.



Eventually it was time to return to Kigali for the end of the trip for some. En route some savanna birding added **Red-faced Crombec, Southern Black Flycatcher, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Brubru** and **Common Scimitarbill** and **Lesser Honeyguide**. And our last stop of the day, at the Nyabarongo wetlands, produced several **Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu, Papyrus Canary, Marsh Tchagra, African Yellow Warbler, African Reed Warbler, African Swamphen** and **Crimson-rumped Waxbill** as the last birds of the day: pushing our trip list to over 460 species even before the Northern Uganda extension.





The Northern Uganda post-tour extension to Budongo Forest and Murchison Falls National Park, led by Tertius Gous, followed the next day and the first new bird for the tour was **Marsh Widowbird** en route to Masindi. We headed straight for the Busingiro section of the Budongo Forest for the afternoon and

picked up **Black Bishop** and **Compact Weaver** along the way. At Busingiro a very active **Jameson's Wattle-eye** entertained us while **Rufous-crowned Eremomelas** flitted about in the upper story. **Nahan's Partridge** called from the undergrowth but no amount of searching could reveal them, and we had to wait until the next day at "The Royal Mile" to finally get a decent sighting. The following day was spent at "The Royal Mile" and here we located both **African Pygmy** and **Dwarf Kingfishers** and we observed a pair of African Dwarf Kingfishers building a nest. There was a loudly singing **Uganda Woodland Warbler** high up in the canopy while the diminutive **Forest Robin** hopped on the forest floor below. We had good views of both **Chocolate-backed** and **Blue-breasted Kingfishers**, and **Red-tailed Ant-thrush** was seen shortly after. Other species recorded here were **White-thighed Hornbill**, **Yellow-crested Woodpecker**, **Brown-eared Woodpecker**, **Spotted Greenbul**, **Fraser's Forest Flycatcher**, **Chestnut-capped Flycatcher**, **Purple-headed Starling**, **Grey Longbill**, **Yellow Longbill**, **Black-throated Apalis**, **Buff-throated Apalis**, **Fraser's Rufous Thrush**, **Ituri Batis**, **Western Oriole**, **Scaly-breasted Iadopsis** and **Pale-breasted Iadopsis**. The moist savanna and farmlands adjacent to the forest was very rewarding and produced species such as **Magpie Mannikin**, **Grey-headed Oliveback**, **Red-headed Quelea**, **Cardinal Quelea**, **Black-winged Red Bishop**, **Whistling Cisticola**, **Short-winged Cisticola**, **Singing Cisticola**, **Copper Sunbird**, **Yellow-mantled Widowbird**, **Marsh Tchagra**, **Moustached Grass Warbler**, **Fawn-breasted Waxbill** and **Western Citril**.





The following day we set off for the Nile River at Murchison Falls National Park but broke the journey with a birding stop at the Butiaba Escarpment where we found **Foxy Cisticola, Croaking Cisticola, Rattling Cisticola, Flappet Lark, Spotted Palm Thrush, White-shouldered Black Tit, Black-crowned Tchagra, Golden-breasted Bunting, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver, Silverbird, Lesser Blue-eared Starling,**

Blue-naped Mousebird, Vinaceous Dove, Violet-backed Starling and Brown-backed Scrub Robin.

The short time we had at Murchison was very productive and we decided to explore the grasslands, open savanna woodlands and wetlands north of the Nile after our arrival in the afternoon. Here we saw large numbers of *Oribi*, *African Elephant*, *African Buffalo*, *Giraffe* and *Kob*. Primates such as *Vervet* and *Patas Monkeys* also showed well. The birding was excellent and we found **Shelley's Sparrow, Speckle-fronted Weaver, Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, Grey Kestrel, Dark Chanting Goshawk, Bateleur, Northern Carmine Bee-eater, African Quail-Finch, Black-billed Wood Dove, Black-billed Barbet and Piapiac**, while the wetlands produced **Black-headed Lapwing, African Wattled Lapwing, Gull-billed Tern, Fulvous Whistling Duck, Knob-billed Duck, Intermediate Egret, Black Heron and Glossy Ibis**. A lone **Western Osprey** greeted us at the ferry on our way back but the last bird of the day was a magnificent male **Pennant-winged Nightjar** displaying above our lodge. The next morning we took a boat trip on the mighty Nile River to the bottom of the Murchison Falls. The boat provided an excellent vantage point to observe wildlife and birds on the shore and we were treated to *hippopotamus* pods, nesting **Horus Swifts, Goliath Herons, Little Egrets, Red-throated Bee-eaters**, nesting **Thick-billed Weavers** and the undoubted highlight of the trip, a pair of **Pel's Fishing-Owls!** At the base of the falls **Rock Pratincoles** were seen and the walk to the top of the falls produced **Yellow-bellied Hyliota, Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver, Cabanis's Bunting and Green-backed Eremomela**. Eventually it was time to return to Entebbe but not before we enjoyed spectacular views of the Murchison Falls from the top!

