

Uganda and Rwanda Highlights Tour

Shoebill, Green-breasted Pitta, Grauer's Broadbill and Red-collared Mountain Babbler

July/August 2016

Tour report by trip leader Michael Mills

Summary

Our 2016 Uganda and Rwanda Highlights Tour was once again a resounding success, with great views obtained of the four main target birds. On the second morning of the trip we enjoyed the first of two excellent encounters with a group of **Red-collared Mountain Babbler** at Nyungwe, watched foraging at length across the mossy boughs of some large forest trees. At Bwindi, **African Green Broadbill** had left the nest, but we located an adult nearby, that perched lower down than normal allowing for outstanding views. **Green-breasted Pitta** demanded by far the most from us, with no birds heard displaying during the dawn chorus on two consecutive mornings. Only after 13 hours of trudging through the undergrowth of Kibale National Park did we finally connect with a pair, but it was worth the wait and the views were extraordinary; we watched the male displaying for almost 30 minutes, much of the time at eye level. Finally, **Shoebill** at Mabamba Swamp was straightforward, as after only a short search did a single bird give a great display, flying in from nearby and landing in the open where its first lunge produced nothing but a beak full of grass, but the second a wiggling lungfish.

Besides these four specials, we focussed our attention on the mountainous Albertine Rift forests and their endemics, accessed at Nyungwe in Rwanda and Bwindi in Uganda. Among the key endemics found were **Purple-breasted Sunbird, Handsome Francolin, Kivu Ground Thrush, Short-tailed Warbler, Chapin's Flycatcher, Ladgden's Bushshrike** (not a strict endemic), **Grauer's Rush Warbler, Dusky Crimsonwing, Kungwe Apalis** and **Ruwenzori Turaco**.

During the three weeks we also visited wetlands at Mabamba Swamp, Lake Bunyoni, Murchison Falls and Nyabarongo in Rwanda, mid-altitude forests at Kibale and "The Neck" of Bwindi, grasslands and savannas at Queen Elizabeth and Murchison, and lowland forest at Budongo. Most participants opted to spend an hour in the company of Eastern Gorillas. A total of 549 species were logged, including many other species are worthy of special mention. At Nyabarongo Wetlands there were **Papyrus Canary** and **Carruthers's Cisticola**, en route Nyungwe, **Ruaha Chat**, at Nyungwe **Red-throated Alethe, White-bellied Robin-Chat, Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo, Bar-tailed Trogon, Equatorial Akalat, Red-chested Owlet, Willard's Sooty Boubou, African Broadbill, Ruwenzori Nightjar, Grauer's Warbler, Regal Sunbird** and **Ruwenzori Double-collared Sunbird**, at Lake Bunyoni **White-winged Swamp Warbler** and **Papyrus Yellow Warbler**, at Ruhija **Dusky Twinspot**, at "The Neck" **Grey-headed Sunbird** and **Toro Olive Greenbul**, near Kihiki **Red-winged Francolin, Brown-chested Lapwing, Stout Cisticola, Pennant-winged Nightjar** and **Swamp Nightjar**, at Bigodi **White-spotted Flufftail**, at Mabamba **Lesser Jacana, Long-toed Lapwing, Blue Swallow, Weyns's Weaver** and **Papyrus Gonolek**, at Budongo **Ituri Batis, Dwarf Kingfisher** and **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher**, and at Murchison Falls, **Pel's Fishing Owl, Dusky Babbler, White-crested Turaco** and **Northern Carmine Bee-eater**. Mammal

highlights included *Chimpanzee* at Nyungwe, *Central African Red Colobus* and *Grey-cheeked Mangabey* at Kibale, *African Elephant* at Queen Elizabeth and *Lion* at Murchison Falls.

For the second year running we commenced our travels in Rwanda, where three full days at Nyungwe National Park made for a well-paced start. Of the accessible patches of forest in the Albertine Rift (thus excluding those in the DR Congo), Nyungwe is the richest in bird endemics and the only place to see the charismatic **Red-collared Mountain Babbler**. This year the weather played along well and we fared very well on birds, tracking down two parties of babbler, one on our first and one on our third morning. We also enjoyed excellent views of the grey-eyed **Willard's Sooty Boubou**. The little-known **Kungwe Apalis** was found and descended from the canopy. **Red-throated Alethe** put in an incredible appearance, following us at for some time at arm's-length. **Purple-breasted Sunbird** joined **Regal Sunbird**, **Blue-headed Sunbird** and **Ruwenzori Double-collared Sunbird** in adding a splash of colour. **Kivu Ground Thrush** sang sweetly and everyone managed to see it. **Grauer's Rush Warbler** was more extrovert than normal. **Ruwenzori Turaco** showed off. The unusual little **Neumann's Warbler** came very close and sat up rather nicely. The usually-skulking **Grauer's Warbler** came out in the open. We enjoyed an excellent day-time sighting of **Red-chested Owlet**. **Bar-tailed Trogon** was a very popular find. Special mention should be given to the hyliotas, currently assigned to **Violet-backed Hyliota**, but distinct in vocalisations and plumage and perhaps an as-yet-unnamed Albertine Rift endemic. **Ruwenzori Nightjar** was seen well after dark. Four **Cassin's Hawk-Eagle** displayed low overhead. **Handsome Francolin** was persuaded to cross the track several times. And during our three days we also had opportunities to admire many other Albertine Rift endemics and forest birds, which included **Olive Woodpecker**, **Bar-tailed Trogon**, **African Broadbill**, **Ruwenzori Batis**, **Black-faced Rufous Warbler**, **Many-coloured Bushshrike**, **White-headed Wood Hoopoe**, **Cabanis's Greenbul**, **Mountain Buzzard**, **Stripe-breasted Tit**, **Pink-footed Puffback**, **Red-faced Woodland Warbler**, **Cinnamon Bracken Warbler**, **Mountain Sooty Boubou**, **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**, **Equatorial Akalat** and **White-bellied Robin-Chat**.

Our journey back to Kigali was broken by a short stop in some savanna habitat, with the first **Ross's Turaco** of the trip, our best views of **Trilling Cisticola**, and only sighting of **Red-faced Crombec**, and Nyabarongo Wetlands, where we enjoyed good looks at **Papyrus Canary** after a long search, and **Carruthers's Cisticola** showed well.

Continuing with the highland theme we crossed the border into Uganda, pausing at Lake Bunyoni for **Papyrus Yellow Warbler** and **White-winged Swamp Warbler**, before we arrived at Ruhija in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.

Our reason for visiting Ruhija was twofold: firstly to lay eyes on the most charismatic of the bird endemics, the rare **African Green Broadbill** and, secondly, the opportunity of coming face-to-face with *Eastern Gorillas*. Putting birds first meant the long descent to Mabwindi Swamp, the best-known locality for the broadbill, was tackled on the first day. 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** into view. Further down the valley we found **Black-faced Prinia**, **Black-billed Turaco**, **Yellow-eyed Black Flycatchers**, **White-bellied Crested Flycatcher**, **Grey-chested Illadopsis** (which everyone managed to see something of), **Mountain Oriole** and

White-headed Wood Hoopoes, but **Lagden's Bushshrike** called from a distance and refused to come any closer. Arriving at the bottom we positioned ourselves where some broadbills had been constructing a new nest just two days previously. After a short wait, the leader of a nearby birding group, Johnnie Kamugisha, kindly called us to where they had just seen **African Green Broadbill**, and although the birds had moved on it wasn't long before we relocated one. It was feeding actively, which meant it kept moving, but in the end we got everyone onto it, and then it sat and preened low down where we all had excellent views. Very happy we continued on towards the swamp, and just before arriving Chris spotted a bird whose description matched that of... **Lagden's Bushshrike**! An agitated bird moved back and forth, giving everyone a chance for decent looks before melting back into the dense foliage. Around the swamp **Dusky Crimsonwing** and **Kandt's Waxbill** gave good views, and **Carruthers's Cisticola** and **Grauer's Rush Warbler** were spotted. The walk back up was productive too, with an excellent sighting of **Yellow-billed Barbet**, another, even better **Lagden's Bushshrike**, **Mountain Yellow Warbler** and **Elliot's Woodpecker**. In the late afternoon a short stint of birding along the road culminated in scope views of **Western Green Tinkerbird**, and **Handsome Francolin** crossed the road on our way back.

The next day, while most of the group went off piste after gorillas, the rest of us took the easy option of birding mainly from the road. Excellent views of **White-browed Crombec**, **Yellow-bellied Waxbill**, **Mottled Swift**, **Scarce Swift** and **Doherty's Bushshrike** were welcome, but the highlight was three separate sightings of **Dusky Twinspot**, including some good views in the scope. With the gorilla trekkers back an afternoon outing produced only brief views of **Dusky Twinspot**, but a stroll along the school track brought a flurry of birds, including **Red-throated Alethe**, **Strange Weaver**, **Luehder's Bushshrike**, **Ruwenzori Apalis**, **Mountain Masked Apalis**, **Red-faced Woodland Warbler**, **Yellow-streaked Greenbul**, **Ruwenzori Batis** and a row of eight **Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters** getting ready for the night.

All too quickly our time at Ruhija had come to an end, and it was time to descend to lower altitudes, starting at "The Neck". More than half a day was spent here, and how productive it was! The early morning seemed to be especially good for flycatchers, and we located in short succession **Dusky-blue Flycatcher**, **Grey-throated Tit-Flycatcher** and the rare and localised **Chapin's Flycatcher**. Excellent views of **Ansorge's Greenbul** and **Grey-headed Sunbird** were very welcome. And we notched up a long list of other forest goodies, including **Many-coloured Bushshrike**, **Blue-throated Roller**, **African Black Duck**, **Mountain Wagtail**, **Black Bee-eater**, **Buff-throated Apalis**, **Willcocks's Honeyguide**, **Toro Olive Greenbul** (which somehow failed to impress) and **Green Crombec**. Continuing on through farmlands we paused for **Double-toothed Barbet** and **Cassin's Honeybird**, before we arrived at our hotel near Kihhi in the late afternoon, a short stint of evening birding nearby producing **Ross's Turaco**, **Grey-backed Fiscal**, **Pennant-winged Nightjar**, **Swamp Nightjar**, **Brown-chested Lapwing** and **Red-winged Francolin**, now very rare in Uganda.

The next morning we reconnected with all of the previous evening's important birds, and special mention must be given to the astonishing pre-dawn display by **Pennant-winged Nightjar**, with at least six males in full regalia flying low over our heads. After this we entered and made our way up through Queen Elizabeth National Park, pausing for roadside goodies such as **White-headed Barbet**, **Crimson-rumped Waxbill**, **Crested Guinea fowl**, more **Brown-chested Lapwing**, and **Stout Cisticola**. In the Mweya area we enjoyed some good views of **Grey-capped Warbler**, and in the late afternoon a boat trip on the Kazinga Channel produced a fine flock of **African Skimmers** among the many other waterbirds.

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**, **Black Coucal**, **White-tailed**

Lark, Black-rumped Buttonquail (flushed off the road), **Red-necked Spurfowl, Black-bellied Bustard, Compact Weaver** and **Fan-tailed Grassbird**. Bushy areas held **Spot-flank Barbet, Blue-naped Mousebird** and **Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat**.

After a short stint in savannas we again found ourselves back in forest, this time at Kibale where our main aim was to get to grips with the much-desired **Green-breasted Pitta**. A very early breakfast saw us setting out in the dark and walking to the heart of a Green-breasted Pitta territory before the sky had lightened. As the birds slowly woke up around us we strained our ears for the distinctive croak of the pitta, but there wasn't a word from them, so as the forest brightened up we made our way along various forest trails, hoping to bump into one. Seven hours after entering the forest we'd still not caught a glimpse of a pitta, although we had seen quite a few other forest birds, so we decided to call it quits for the day and hope for better tomorrow. Unfortunately events repeated themselves the following morning, and although we'd now spread ourselves across two pitta territories the sun was up and we'd still not heard anything from the pitta. All we could do was hit the trails and keep on trying. It was now already midday and I had begun to formulate plans for our third and final morning searching for pittas, when a phone call from our guide came in; he'd just seen two pittas, not far from us! We quickly made our way to him, and although the pittas were still nearby we were struggling to see them, as the undergrowth was dense and the birds kept flushing. For what felt like an age we'd lost them, but fortunately the pair started to display, not 100 m from us! We quickly made our way to them, and finally each and every one managed to put together a puzzle of turquoise, red and green and had had reasonable looks at the pitta which was still well hidden. I then crawled (literally) into the forest, and found a superb vantage point to watch the displaying bird, completely in the open. The trouble was that the bird was very close, and there wasn't much space to manoeuvre bodies without flushing it. So over the next half hour we took turns in ones and two. In the mean time a phone call to a nearby group of birders meant they were on their way, but it took them a while to arrive and by the time they were on site we'd all enjoyed prolonged and brilliant views of the pitta, so could give the new arrivals the space they needed to enjoy the pitta too.

Of course the pitta was by far the highlight of Kibale, but there were many other new birds too, in forest and at Bigodi wetland, such as **Scaly-breasted Illadopsis, Brown Illadopsis, Narina Trogon, Western Bronze-naped Pigeon** (rare at Kibale), **White-throated Greenbul, Blue Malkoha, Green Hylia, Sabine's Spinetail, Speckled Tinkerbird, Yellow-throated Tinkerbird, Yellow-spotted Barbet, Hairy-breasted Barbet, Least Honeyguide, Chestnut Wattle-eye, Equatorial Akalat, Western Black-headed Oriole, Velvet-mantled Drongo, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher, Dusky Tit, Western Nicator, Honeyguide Greenbul, Purple-headed Starling, Narrow-tailed Starling, Sooty Flycatcher, White-tailed Ant Thrush, Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher, Little Green Sunbird, Olive-bellied Sunbird, Blue-throated Brown Sunbird, Yellow-billed Barbet, White-breasted Nigrita, Grey-crowned Crane, Grey-headed Nigrita**, a cracking male **White-spotted Flufftail, Brown-backed Scrub Robin, Black Bishop, Shining-blue Kingfisher, Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill** and **Red-headed Malimbe**.

From Kibale we journeyed to Kampala, with just a couple of short stops en route producing a colony of **Golden-backed Weaver**, and the only **Grey-headed Bushshrike** and **White-throated Bee-eaters** of the trip.

The final day had come, and it was time for the biggest of our four specials, **Shoebill**, at Mabamba Swamp. Following only a short search were we found ourselves admiring a hefty **Shoebill** at close range. Most of the time it stood statuesque, glaring intensely at the water before it. During the half hour we spent in its presence, it broke its pose only twice, first for an unsuccessful lunge at breakfast, and then for a successful

grab at a wriggling lungfish, swallowed with a considerable amount of vegetable matter. There was plenty else to keep us entertained. **Weyns's Weaver** gave us the run around, and although there was some activity around the breeding colony, it was only after a lengthy search back on dry land that we had good views of a perched male. Other highlights were **Slender-billed Weaver**, **Northern Brown-throated Weaver**, **Grey Parrot** in flight, a perched **African Hobby**, **Papyrus Gonolek**, both **African Marsh Harrier** and **Western Marsh Harrier**, **Long-toed Lapwing**, a surprise **Rufous-bellied Heron**, a couple of **Lesser Jacana**, **Blue-headed Coucal**, **Blue-breasted Bee-eater**, **Grey-rumped Swallow**, and a very scruffy **Blue Swallow**.

Time had come to say goodbye to a couple of our travel companions, whereas the rest of us continued for another five days on a northern loop. Along the way to Masindi our first stop at some swamps produced **Western Banded Snake Eagle**, **Yellow-shouldered Widowbird** (a potential split from **Yellow-mantled Widowbird**) and **Hartlaub's Marsh Widowbird**, and the second, **Piapiac**, **White-shouldered Black Tit** and an uncooperative **White-crested Turaco**.

We arrived at Budongo in good time for an afternoon session along the Royal Mile, where we found **Chocolate-backed Kingfisher**, **Chestnut-capped Flycatcher** for the family hunters, **Forest Robin** and **Jameson's Wattle-eye**, and scoped **Lemon-bellied Crombec** sat still in the canopy. Surrounding farmlands produced **Black-bellied Firefinch**, **Marsh Tchagra** and **Heuglin's Francolin**. The next day was overcast and unproductive, and the forests of the Royal Mile were very hard work, although numerous **White-thighed Hornbill** and **Cabanis's Bunting** were seen near the forest edge. Inside the forest, **African Dwarf Kingfisher** obliged, **Pale-breasted Illadopsis** showed briefly and **Fraser's Forest Flycatcher** was seen well, but that was just about all our notable sightings for the morning, so we relocated to Busingiro for the afternoon. Bird activity was much higher here, and we got **Ituri Batis** in the scope for most of the group, saw several **Rufous-crowned Eremomela**, and lured two groups of **Nahan's Francolin** very close to use, although they remained invisible in the dense undergrowth.

One final stint at Budongo the next morning almost got us **Nahan's Francolin**, but unfortunately Michael was the only one to lay eyes on it. However, we did improve our views of **Yellow Longbill** and enjoyed reasonable looks at **Grey Longbill** before we journeyed to the Butiaba Escarpment. Here, a little flock of **Cardinal Quelea** greeted us as we stepped off the bus. **Foxy Cisticola** was tracked down and **Green-backed Eremomela** showed very well. Several **Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weaver** were seen. And just before lunch we managed to lure some **Brown Twinspots** from the thicket. Continuing on to Murchison we paused for **Northern Red Bishop** at the roadside and **Black-billed Barbet** at the entrance gate, and an evening stint at the top of the falls produced good views of **Rock Pratincole** and a brief sighting of **Bat Hawk**.

The next morning we set off to catch the early ferry, with good perched views of two **Greyish Eagle-Owl** along the road to Paraa. Across the Nile, in the open grasslands we found **Black-chinned Quail-Finch**, **Black-bellied Bustard** and **Abyssinian Ground Hornbill**, whereas thorn thickets held **Shelley's Sparrow**, **Red-throated Bee-eater**, **Black-billed Wood Dove**, **Speckle-fronted Weaver**, **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater**, **Silverbird** and **Northern Carmine Bee-eater**, denser patches of forest were home to **Red-winged Grey Warbler** and the scarce **Dusky Babbler**, seen well after some effort, and short grasslands along the Nile were home to numerous lapwings, including a few **Black-headed Lapwing** a surprise pair of **Brown-chested Lapwing**, the third sighting of our trip. We ended the day off with a relaxed boat trip to the bottom of the falls. Although it wasn't very birdy, we had good looks at **Horus Swift** along the way, and for many the highlight of their entire stay in Uganda; good day-time views of an adult **Pel's Fishing Owl**, seen on both the upstream and

downstream parts of the trip! Luckily the boat trip was over before too much celebratory beer could be consumed!

On our final day of the tour we braved the Tsetse flies for a few hours in the early morning before returning to Entebbe. Overcast conditions meant that things were off to a slow start, but we found a few goodies, including **Red-winged Warbler**, a lovely **Brown-rumped Bunting**, and, best of all, enjoyed good looks at the striking **White-crested Turaco**, a fine finale to a great trip! We ended just one species shy of 550.