

Uganda, part one.

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Mostly in the relative luxury of a rugged landrover, the first part of this trip took me through 2850 km of potholes, ravines that passed for roads and occasional dustbowls to enjoy some of the best landscapes and birding opportunities that Africa can throw at you. Beginning with a couple of days in Entebbe and the Mbamba wetlands, the route first took us northwards to Murchinson Falls, a locality of spectacular birding to the stunning backdrop of the mighty River Nile plunging through a narrow gorge as it empties into a bird-rich delta. With an abundance of mammals and birds, and chimpanzee-filled forests to the south, four days were spent here, before enduring the diabolical road southward to Queen Elizabeth National Park. The drive was well-rewarded, the southern Ishasha sector in particular is amongst the most beautiful localities in Africa I have yet to visit and, camping on the Congolese border, full of birds and mammals. From Queen Elizabeth, it was up into the highlands and to Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, home to the Mountain Gorillas and a potential 350 species of birds. Spending four days in the Buhoma sector of Bwindi, but skipping Ruhizha, it was then a hike back westward towards Kampala, but with a stop over at Lake Mburo, an excellent locality with a range of species, both mammal and bird, not easily found elsewhere in Uganda.

And so it was, a month to trapse the equator, all beginning on the 6th December in far away, cold Lithuania...

6 December The joys of living in Eastern Europe mean that direct flights to the likes of central Africa are either not available or cost an arm and a leg, so the late evening of the 6th saw me fleeing on a flight westbound, direct to London, home of cheap flights and the gateway to the rest of the world! 7 December After a morning of wandering London, stocking up on a few bits and bobs and feeding the Grey Squirrels in Hyde Park, it was off to Heathrow for my late afternoon flight to Amsterdam and onward to Nairobi, the final connection to be made before my final arrival in Uganda. Uneventful flights, most of the time aboard being spent planning the route I would take over the subsequent month. 8 December, planes and pelicans And at last I arrived! After three hours of peering out of the windows at Jomo Kenyatta airport in Nairobi, marvelling at the hundreds of Little Swifts breeding in the terminal and at the occasional Marabou and Black-shouldered Kite passing overhead, my short flight to Entebbe was underway. Touchdown in Uganda was most scenic - with the airport abutting Lake Victoria and my nose firmly against the aircraft window, Grey-headed Gulls and Cattle Egrets were seen before even landing! In fact, should the plane land short, you would actually join the birds in the lake! Of course, it didn't and instead we scattered Ringed Plovers and two Spur-winged Plovers from the short turf. Zipped through immigration and moments later was on the back of a motorbike, backpack and all, for the 5 km jaunt into town, clouds of Marabou Storks and Black Kites overhead, trees laden with the nests of Black-headed Weavers and Pink-backed Pelicans winging their way over, I was suitably impressed with my entry into Uganda! By 3 p.m., my tent was up, the temperature was 30 C, Hadada Ibises were plodding about and I was ready for my first taste of birding in the country. Entebbe suburbia is fantastic, lush gardens full of flowers, weedy corners, an abundance of trees and bushes and a large golf course ...they were all teeming with birds! In a four hour stroll, I notched up a few dozen species, common birds of the area such as African Fish Eagle, Hammerkop, Broad-billed Roller, Ruppell's Long-tailed Starling, plus various doves and weavers, the identities of which needed the first glances in the fieldguide! Other birds in abundance included Scarlet-chested and Red-chested Sunbirds, Pied and Woodland Kingfishers, the stunning Red-headed Gonolek and, on the golf course, dozens of Yellow Wagtails, migrants from the north. By sunset, I was back in the campsite, but the treats continued - the first Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills of the trip flew over and, an unexpected bonus on the first day, a Bat Hawk appeared in the darkening skies! Fantastic end to a fantastic start!

9 December, Entebbe Botanical Gardens

No worries about oversleeping - Eastern Plantain-eaters, Hadada Ibises, Black-headed Gonoleks and assorted others all combine to create a pre-dawn chorus that is a right royal racket ... whoops, whistles and eerie wails!!! Up and out of my tent and straight into the first birds of the day - a super Red-chested Sunbird singing in the hedge, an impressive Double-toothed Barbet on the wires and, overhead, the first Marabous and Black Kites already streaming out from roost. My first port of call was the nearby Entebbe Botanical Gardens, a landscaped parkland set on the shores of Lake Victoria and home to an excellent array of birds, including many easier to see here than anywhere else in Uganda.

I began with a wander along the lakeshore - a Palmnut Vulture still at roost, several Fish Eagles up and about, a flock of about 15 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters making their first sorties of the day. Luxuriant lakeside vegetation held my first identification challenges ...the multitudes of weavers! Soon began to sort them out - Slender-billed and Black-headed Weavers by the bucketload, Baglafaecht's Weaver common enough too. Soon added Northern Brown-throated Weaver to the list and both Yellow-backed and Jackson's Golden-backed Weavers too, shortly followed by a pair of Spectacled Weavers. Quite an impressive collection, but the best was still to come - I eventually found one of the garden's special birds, namely Orange Weaver. Lots of other birds too - White-browed Coucal, Crowned Hornbill, Swamp Flycatcher and

a Brown-crowned Tchagra to mention a few. Then I saw the first bird of the trip that foxed me! A most distinctive bird at that - fairly secretive, but a bulky thing with a stunning chestnut throat, strong black eyestripe and ashy crown. Couldn't even place it to a family immediately and even pondered the bush shrikes, but it turned out to be a most unwarblerlike warbler! A Grey-capped Warbler and a real stunner of a bird, far more so than the image in the fieldguide! There then followed a whole series of good birds - skulking Snowy-crowned Robin-Chats, amazing African Black-and-White Shrike-Flycatchers, four Common Wattle-eyes, and so it went, good bird after another.

By now, the sun was turning the day into a rather hot affair and so I thought it time to retire for a cup of tea and so sought out the garden's little tea shop, a very nice little spot - I sat and drank to an accompaniment of White-fronted Bee-eaters behind, Angola Swallows in front and Black-and-White Colobus Monkeys to the side! Plus, Vervet Monkeys that would be all too happy to steal anything within reach! The remnant of rainforest just adjacent to the tea garden attracted yet more - Great Blue Turacos were common, both Pied and Crowned Hornbills, plus Splendid Starlings and both Diderik and Klaas's Cuckoos. From there I returned to the lake shore, where amongst the exotica, there were also plenty of Palearctic migrants to be found - Whinchats, Great Reed Warblers, a Whitethroat and, at the water's edge, amongst umpteen Marabou Storks, Grey-headed Gulls and Pied Kingfishers, several Marsh Sandpipers and an assortment of other waders.

Mid-afternoon I had to leave the garden to collect the landrover that we would be hiring for the following 17 days, but, all in all, it had been a good morning - about 110 species recorded in what had really amounted to an easy-going stroll! Having duly taken delivery of the landrover, and having pretended to have understood all the repercussions of leaving the 'dif lock' on whilst on asphalt, I then headed out to the Entebbe sewage farm, a wonderfully fragrant place to end the day, but a good selection of birds regardless - a flock of White-faced Whistling Ducks, an assortment of migrant waders (mostly Common, Wood and Green Sandpipers) and, stone me, yet another Bat Hawk to bring the day to an end. With that, off I went back to the airport to pick up my fellow traveller, an enthusiastic Lion spotter and enforced birder! Of course, having transferred via Nairobi, they arrived minus luggage!

10 December, Mbamba and Kampala, wetlands and backstreets

Having somehow navigated the backstreets of Kampala the night before, a task made ever more difficult by horrendous queues, a total lack of rules, a complete absence of roadsigns and an extremely heavy tropical downpour, I was about to find out the first problem with having a landrover - its fuel consumption was staggeringly high and there was no petrol left! So started the day, a walk to the nearby petrol station! Next problem was changing money to buy fuel - the local banks didn't want foreign currency and suggested I go to the city centre, which I couldn't do due to no fuel! Eventually managed to get 15 litres of petrol on credit, leaving my passport as deposit ...ah freedom, off I went, not back into the city, but to the Mbamba wetlands, some 40 km west.

These wetlands are superb, renting a dugout, you meander through channels cutting through papyrus swamp and flooded grasslands. Malachite Kingfishers, Long-toed Lapwing, both European and African Marsh Harriers all put in performances on cue, but the star of this locality is the Shoebill, perhaps Uganda's most sought after bird and my number one target to see and photograph. Through all the best areas I went, a Purple Heron flushed, several Lesser Jacanas flitting off across the lilies, African Fish Eagles calling overhead, but not a sign of the bird! A couple of hours of paddling around and things were beginning to look less hopeful, one last area to look, but it too proved devoid of my Shoebill! 'Ah well', I thought, 'still a month more to find the bird' ...but just as those popped into my head, there was a Shoebill! Not standing in the marsh, but up above, a monster bird soaring on a thermal, not where I had expected to see one! What a bird, what a beak! And just to ensure I got a good view, he had the good grace to come right overhead, circling low for some minutes before gradually drifting off across the swamp, the last views being as he was mobbed by a Fish Eagle. Didn't get the photographs I had wanted, but left feeling very happy regardless, that had been a magical moment, the photographs could wait.

The rest of the day is better forgotten! Heading back into Kampala and getting snarled by the choking traffic, I realised I was dangerously close to running out of petrol for the second time in the single day ...and I still had no Ugandan currency, nor a passport to barter! So, no fuel, no money and a 3 p.m. deadline to get across town to meet my friend who, glutton for punishment, was spending the first day of their holiday doing an international finance exam! I parked the landrover and hopped onto a motorbike - far more efficient in the city! First zipped into the centre to change money, then zoomed across to the examination centre. Arrived in plenty of time to see my friend emerging, a solo white face in a sea of local students, I guess exams are not a usual tourist activity! Then onto two motorbikes, back to the landrover and onward to collect my passport from the first petrol station! With all in order and a full tank of petrol, it was then back to Entebbe to the airport to collect the bag which had finally arrived!

All I could say at the end of that day was thank goodness I had seen the Shoebill!

11 December, Upcountry and the Heaven's Opened

It was supposed to be the dry season, but clearly it wasn't! Being back in Entebbe, I had decided to return to the botanical gardens at dawn and, as had been a couple of days earlier, the birding was excellent - Great Blue Turacos, Pink-backed Pelicans, Woodland Kingfishers, assorted hornbills, etc. However, to the south, an ominous blackness was developing over Lake Victoria, a blackness that was steadily advancing and threatening nasty things! As the skies darkened and the first spots of rain came down, I turned and ran, jumped on a motorbike and got back to base just in the nick of time - the heavens opened and the most mighty of rainstorms followed, intense rain and gusting winds. Palm trees wondered what the hell had hit them and not a bird was to be seen! Half an hour later, in a brief lull, I retrieved my tent and slung it in the back of the landrover. Rain or no rain, it was no big difference, today was to be a travel day and northwards we went, destination Murchinson Falls National Park.

With rain on and off much of the day, the next 270 km were all rather uneventful, up through rolling hills and down through deagglagled villages. Not much in the way of birds to distract, bar several Harrier Hawks, so it was we finally arrived at the gates of the impressive 4500 square kilometres that makes up the Murchinson Falls National Park and adjacent forest reserves. The rain had stopped. Sliding and slithering, we advanced a further 20 km to our final destination, not the Murchinson Falls themselves, but Kaniyo Pabidi, a portion of the lush Budongo lowland forest, rich in over 350 species of birds and primates of various sizes and shapes. By the time we got there, barely an hour before dark, there was little to see - Baboons lining the roads, Helmeted Guineafowls strutting about, plus a superb little Forest Flycatcher - but we were just kilometres from one rather special animal, one we would be out to track the next morning.

12 December, Budongo Forest, Puvel's Illadopsis and Chimpanzees

Up early and a quick peep out of the tent revealed a wonderfully sunny dawn, the rainforest echoing to birds unseen and tempting exploration. Minutes later I was out and wandering along a nearby track, butterflies drifting about, steam rising, but in the dense tangles and undergrowth that is Budongo there lurk many difficult to see birds. There was a target bird of course, but in the first hour it did not reveal itself, instead I satisfied myself with snatched glimpses of Yellow-whiskered and Little Greenbuls, Violet-backed Starlings and Broad-billed Rollers, the list went on, but all too soon, having barely scratched the surface of the forest, I had to return to base, I had an appointment! There, as I waited, Red-bellied Paradise Flycatchers busied themselves at the nest, both Collared and Green Sunbirds flitted across, but I was waiting for a research worker. In his company, the destination was a nearby area of fantastic forest, high stands of Mahogany and Ironwood, home to some rather special inhabitants. Moving quietly through, quietly bar the loud persistent call of a Chocolate-backed Kingfisher, we first sought out an elusive dweller of the ground and understory, best found by its quiet but distinctive call. Puvel's Illadopsis, a species with its entire East African range restricted to this little block of forest, not even occurring elsewhere in the Budongo Forest. Fortunately it is not very uncommon and soon, after hearing one or two, we had one calling a few metres in front of us ...a few metres through some of the thickest undergrowth imaginable! Squatting, inching forward and following its calls, swiping off marauding ants at the same time, the bird had to be skulking literally a metre or two away, then suddenly the bird flitted across and there it was, sat on a low branch barely above the gloom of the forest floor. For what is essentially a dull brown bird with a pale throat, it was a remarkably nice bird! With that target out of the way, and a flock of White-throated Greenbuls passing by too, it was time for the real reason we were in the forest. A few hundred metres more and we began to stop, listening intently for what would lead us to our quarry, not a bird, but the Chimpanzees, troops of which favour the canopies of these dense forests. It did not take long, perhaps half an hour, before the wild screams revealed their location - a family group of eleven or so Chimpanzees. There, finding gaps in the canopy, we peered up, they peered down. Absolutely magical, the encounter was more than I expected, quite an experience watching these inhabitants in their forest home, even more so for the vocals - every now and then, shattering the relative calm of the forest, the entire troop would erupt in a bout of excitement, screaming across the treetops and charging from tree to tree. Emotive to say the least, the arrival of Guereza Colobus Monkeys, potential dinner for the Chimps, did little to keep them quiet!

With the morning ranked a full success, we backtracked and took down my tent, it was time for the next segment of the trip, the short drive up to the River Nile and the heart of the Murchinson Falls National Park. And what a place it is ...staying at the Red Chilli camp on a bluff overlooking the Nile, the wildlife adventures could begin whilst sat in the wicker chairs sipping tea! A distant Saddle-billed Stork flew along the Nile, several Bateleurs 'wobbled' their way across the sky and both Spotted Morning Thrush and White-browed Robin-Chat emerged from adjacent bushland cover. And then there were the mammalian neighbours! Warthogs by the dozen, strolling about with not a care in the world, other than to worry about which mud pool would be the best to wallow the day away in! So, after replenishing ourselves with rather fine toasted sandwiches, we deemed it time to peel ourselves out of the comfy chairs and begin some exploration. And what better place to start than an amble over to the absolutely stunning Murchinson Falls themselves, a drive of only some 30 km or so, but one through birdrich savannahs and a track best described as 'rather rocky'! Barely had we left the camp and we were already making the first of our many stops - be it for a Black-bellied Bustard slinking off into the scrub, a flock of roadside Brown Twinspots or a most stately pair of Abyssinian Ground Hornbills, all very spectacular birds. One major nuisance along this stretch were tsetse flies, gee those blighters bite! Through jeans and totally impervious to overdoses of toxic insect repellants, they seemed to simply relish the pain they inflicted ...to bird, beast and human

observer alike! Trying to photograph the Ground Hornbills was a race against time - as they strutted across the track, themselves suffering the tsetse, it was a crusade to be endured, snap as many pictures as you could before the pain forced you onward, legs and arms bleeding as a reward. It would have been very nice if the numerous Red-throated Bee-eaters, right stunners that they were, had turned their attention to the tsetses!

Many a tortuous kilometre later and the great rumble of the Murchinson Falls could be heard, we had arrived at the top of the falls, the raging Victoria Nile storming its way into a narrow gorge before tumbling over the precipice. And not just stunning views, but stunning birds too! Up above the falls, hawking and sitting in rows upon exposed stones, Rock Pratincoles offered a touch of real class, a classic bird in a classic location. Also plenty of Common Sandpipers, occasional African Darters and plenty more, but the real treat was due an hour or so later ...at dusk, from caves adjacent to the waterfall, a flight of bats was scheduled to take to the air. By all accounts, this should be one of nature's most impressive sights, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, would be pouring out, darkening the sky and attracting raptors to the easy-pickings of the supper emerging. So, clambering down to a viewpoint, the wait was on, us on a steep grassy bank with the Nile below, an assortment of raptors overhead - Black Kites and Wahlberg's Eagles for starters, a Brown Snake Eagle and Osprey for added interest. Dusk began to creep in, but so too did something else! As the appointed hour for the mass bat event grew ever closer, the mother of all tropical storms began to build - rumbles of thunder began to echo across the falls, flashes of lightening illuminating the darkening skies. For a while, I had hoped the storm might miss, but ever closer it loomed and by dusk, just as the bats should appear, it was on top of us - the skies a threatening black, gusting winds picking up and an oppressive feel that all too soon it would be bucketing it down with rain. Eeks, it is time to run for it! Sod the bats, they wouldn't fly into the storm anyhow, so back up the slope we began to scramble and, looking back, just as the first drops of rain began to fall, what did I see? Bats! Admittedly not in their thousands, but there they were, a few brave souls heading out into the night sky ...and when the bats emerge, so too does one super bird. And there he was, in their midst, a stunning Bat Hawk, one captured bat already in his talons and serious effort going into catching a second! No real time for admiration, however, we had a kilometre of land to cover and not many minutes to do it! Almost to the second, we jumped into the landrover as the world outside changed - torrential rain was lashing down, battering the car so bad we could barely see the end of the bonnet, lightening was flicking down and winds were whipping up. This was going to be one interesting drive ahead!

That drive ahead had the potential to be one of the top night drives in Africa - not only for the possibility of nocturnal mammals, but also a plethora of nightjars, not least the mind-blowing Standard-winged Nightjar, a species near guaranteed to be encountered sat on the track. Or at least it would have been guaranteed if (a) the track had not turned into a slippery quagmire with water gushing across at regular intervals, (b) we could actually see anything other than the rain pelting down, and (c) any nightjar would be stupid enough to venture from cover on such a night! And so it was, a washout in every sense of the word, a slow attempt to get back to camp, stopping on occasion when lightning seemed to be striking ever closer or the rain simply became too heavy to see anything. It began to rain on my feet ...and my feet naturally were inside the landrover! Slipping, sliding, the four-wheel drive did its job, somehow the lightning bolts never decided to hit this exposed metal box edging its way across the plains and, two hours later, having not seen a single bird and only one mammal - a very bedraggled Cape Hare - we were back at camp! I was mighty impressed to find not only was my tent still standing, but not a drop of water inside ...top marks to Coleman tents!

13 December, Murchinson Falls National Park, north of the Nile

It is rather hard to sleep with three tons of Hippopotamus grazing and grunting outside the tent, but that is how the morning started, a predawn beginning to a day that was excellent for both animals and birds. Crossing the Nile, we spent the entire day exploring the many tracks that wind through extensive savannahs and open woodlands.

Almost immediately we were stopping not for birds, but for the masses of mammals that dotted the grasslands - large herds of Ugandan Kob, a few Kongoni, occasional Giraffes grazing the acacias, the day was starting well. Soon, a few birds were vying for attention - Piapiacs and Yellow-billed Oxpeckers attending the wallowing Buffalos, Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, both Crested and Heuglin's Francolins, a Short-toed Eagle in a dead tree and, amongst the best of the passerines, four Silverbirds, Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu by the dozen, a few flocks of Quail Finch and, the only ones recorded on the trip, several Rufous Sparrows and Speckle-fronted Weavers. Atop one tree on the open savannah, there was also a Patas Monkey.

After a couple of hours, our track descended back towards the river and thereafter along the fringes of the Nile Delta, a mosaic of short grasslands, wetland edges and papyrus beyond. This was truly a fantastic area - with yet more Giraffe, abundant Waterbuck, and herds of Elephant, the mammal list was beginning to burgeon, helped too by good numbers of Oribi, several Bushbuck and a family group of Banded Mongoose. A super area for birds too - sheltering under small bushes, remarkably tame Senegal Thick-knees, along with a pair of Spotted Thick-knees, but just as I photographed these, one of the highlights of the day came strutting out - the first of two stunning Denham's Bustards! Along the water's edge, Grey-headed Kingfishers joined the abundant Pied Kingfishers, Blue-breasted Bee-eaters hunting from the swamp

edge and a Black-and-White Cuckoo put in an appearance, as did a Diederik Cuckoo. Further along, reaching the banks of Lake Albert, in amongst many Oribi and Waterbuck, the open expanses of short grass attracted a new set of birds - stately Grey Crowned Cranes, small flocks of Spur-winged Plovers, occasional pairs of Wattled Plover and, one of the target birds, a single Black-headed Plover, also the only one seen on the whole trip. Masses of Buffalo here too, including a single herd numbering a hundred or so, plus more Elephants and Warthogs running each and every direction!

By now, with the sun high, we decided to return to camp for a couple of hours, first via the only petrol pump in the whole area ...quite a novel experience - with no electricity, it was hand-cranked, but better still a massive Hippopotamus went wandering past! Taking the ferry back to camp for a couple of hours gave opportunity for yet more birds - Wire-tailed Swallows were nesting on the ferry itself and just downriver a small marshy area attracted both a Saddle-billed Stork and a flock of about 15 African Skimmers, splendid.

After coffee and more toasted sandwiches, it was back to the ferry and another leisurely drive on the north bank ...or it would have been a leisurely drive if we hadn't bumped into someone who gave very vague directions to some Lions somewhere up near Lake Albert! By a corner near the big Buffalo herd was all I could really ascertain, but that was enough to make it worth our only 'twitch' of the trip - if it was the same Buffalo herd that we had seen in the morning, that made it about 30 km in front of us, rather many kilometres given the poor state of tracks in that part of the world and that we only had a couple of hours of daylight left. Anyhow, off we went, one Martial Eagle overhead, one Denham's Bustard trotting off to the right (probably one of the birds from the morning), plus Heuglin's Francolins everywhere, but we were pushing time ...probably doing the landrover no favours and turning it a rather nice shade of mud brown, we covered the kilometres in a remarkably short period of time, arriving up on the Lake Albert shoreline to begin our search. Of course, though there were plenty of Elephants, there was neither sign of Lions nor any indication we were really in the correct area and, after an hour, we reluctantly realised we had to leave or risk missing the last ferry back across the Nile. Off we began and then, up peeps my friend 'Stop, Lions'. And indeed there were, not the ones we had driven like crazy to reach, but two well-grown cubs peering out of the bushes at us. I did contemplate getting out to get a better picture, but where there were cubs I reasoned, there must be a mother too, so I settled for standing on the doorway! Splendid animals always, we admired these for a good while, before we really did risk missing the ferry. If the drive here had been slightly crazy, the route back was more like a manic rally, not what I would really recommend for a national park! Plunging through waterfilled hollows one moment, kicking up dust the next, unexpected bumps saw us meeting the roof on several occasions and one very big snake saw us making an emergency stop, but we made it - with precisely 90 seconds to spare, we turned the last corner, drove straight onto the ferry and relaxed as we made our last crossing of the day!

But the day was not finished yet. As the sun set and darkness loomed, the temptation of nightjars got me out on the tracks again ...but again the weather seemed to take a cue from my enthusiasm! After a day of cloudless skies and barely a breeze, yet again rumbles of thunder disturbed the calm of the night, a wind began to rustle through the bushes and the chances of night birds went down! Put in a good effort, covering about 20 km, but it was clear that the stars - the Standard-winged Nightjars - were not going to show, a darn shame. Still, not all was lost, two Plain Nightjars flitted up from the tracks, plus a Spotted Eagle Owl. Hippopotamus in the campsite again at night.

14 December, lurking upon the River Nile

Spent the dawn hours exploring the dry thorn scrub between the Red Chilli camp and the River Nile beneath the bluff - plenty of Warthogs scuttling off into the bushes, a good sized troop of Baboons too, but it was the birds that stole the show. In a couple of hours of wandering across an acacia-covered plateau dissected by steep vegetated gullies, the bird selection read like a who's who of dryland specials - Spot-flanked Barbets in the acacias, a Spotted Morning Thrush and both a White-browed Scrub Robin and two White-browed Robin Chats all sneaking out from thickets, a half dozen Silverbirds in low trees, mixed flocks including Northern Crombecs, a Yellow-breasted Apalis and a Northern Puffback, plus a good few Black-headed Gonoleks, both Brown-crowned and Black-crowned Tchagras, several Green-winged Pytilia and a flock of Black-faced Waxbills. I could quite easily have spent a few more hours walking this area, but at 9.00 a.m. it was time for another treat ...a voyage up the River Nile. Not quite in Livingstone's footsteps, but a fascinating journey nonetheless - aboard a small motorised launch, the journey was to take us about 10 km to the bottom of the Murchinson Falls. Ten kilometres of river absolutely teeming with wildlife, Hippopotamus in numbers that must have exceeded several hundred, massive Nile Crocodiles adorning sandbanks, Waterbuck and Buffalo on the banks and the birds! Fantastic birding from start to finish ...African Skimmers, Black Crakes and Saddle-billed Stork before we had even left the bank, Pied Kingfishers packing in at many dozens per kilometre and a White-crested Turaco in a fruiting tree on one bank, the birding bonanza was superb. Manoeuvring through pod after pod of Hippopotamus, each turn brought new attractions - a large colony of Red-throated Bee-eaters in a sand bank, Spur-winged Geese and a Yellow-billed Stork on a marshy bank, Goliath Herons on papyrus islands and, dotted about, a good selection of other herons, including half a dozen Squacco Herons, at least three Green-backed Herons and plenty of assorted egrets. Also African Darters flying up and down, a couple of Ospreys overhead and Fish Eagles by the dozen. However, for all the birds, it was the Hippos and Nile Crocodiles that forever turned your head, some absolutely stunning individuals amongst them. Just short of the falls themselves, we pulled up against a beach ...but not a beach you would wish to venture onto, it was crawling with Crocodiles of all sizes, at least 20 crammed into one small area! All in all, this was one most pleasant way to spend a mid-

December morning!

And then it was off, packing up tent and saying goodbye to the Warthogs semi-submerged in mud holes, we left the Murchinson Falls area and headed north, passing en route again Abyssinian Ground Hornbills, plus Chestnut-crowned Sparrow-Weavers and the resident Red-throated Bee-eaters. At Masindi town, we paused for lunch, admiring Hooded Vultures overhead and enduring the rabble at the local market to obtain pineapples. The next destination was the so-called 'Royal Mile', a western extension of the Budongo Forest. Lying 40 km west of Masindi, on a drive through extensive sugarcane plantations, home to little other than European Bee-eaters, a Long-crested Eagle and countless Black-headed Weavers, this locality had the potential to offer some of the best birding in Uganda. We arrived at dusk and began to realise, due to local bureocracy, this was going to be more effort than it was worth! Still, at the local Forestry College, we did find rather nice accommodation - though basic, it did offer a veranda overlooking a stunning valley that came complete with a Great Sparrowhawk and massive White-thighed Hornbills, a pair of the latter choosing to roost in a tree right outside our window!

15 December, Budongo and the Royal Mile

One of the largest areas of natural forest in East Africa, occupying 800 square kilometres, Budongo is both vast and brimming with excellent birds, so after having visited the Kaniyo Pabidi section some days earlier, now was the turn of the 'Royal Mile', a former logging track that runs through a superb section of high forest. Not superb though were the access restrictions - now part of a community-based ecotourism project, you are both required to obtain a permit and obligatory guide. Though I did not want a guide anyway, neither of these requirements would have been of undue hassle if they were available at the forest itself ...but they are not! Arriving the evening before, we were told the permit should be obtained from an office 4 km back (which was closed) and the guide from Busingiro, another 16 km beyond!!! Thus, for a dawn start in the forest, obviously preferable, the only practical way to do it would be to stay at Busingiro itself or prepare for an extremely early start, allowing for the near 40 km round trip on not amazing roads. The guide would also have to be returned later in the day. Now, not being a fan of guides anyhow, the thought of all that hassle to obtain one did not appeal, so instead I spent perhaps 20 minutes making various phone calls to various officials and finally wangled a compromise whereby I would get 'a guide for the day' and he would meet me near the forest.

So dawned the morning and so arrived the guide - he proved most inept, preferring to talk or use his mobile, and he tried to state that I only had one and a half hours in the forest! 'Hmm, enough of this', I thought, 'time to give him the slip', so at the very first opportunity, when he stopped to chat with someone, I took a sharp left into the forest, zigzagged down a number of small tracks and then had the place to myself. Bliss, and the birding was good! Crested Guinea-fowls on the tracks, Blue-breasted and Pygmy Kingfishers in the understory, Buff-spotted, Brown-eared and Yellow-crested Woodpeckers moving through and both White-headed and Black Saw-wings overhead. Other excellent birds included a couple of Chestnut Wattle-eyes, several Western Black-headed Orioles and Violet-backed Starlings. And then there were the greenbuls - mixed flocks almost designer-made to cause confusion as they flitted through the dense foliage, alternating between giving the briefest of views to appearing out in the open, but at the very top of the canopy! Eventually, I began to nail a few down - on top of the ever present Common Bulbuls, several Cameroon Sombre Greenbuls, a few Little Greenbuls, at least two White-throated Greenbuls and a Yellow-throated Leaflove. Had I put more time in, several more could have been added to this list!

After three hours, guessing my guide would still be looking for me, I began to feel like a hunted fugitive, so I opted to leave. The birding had been good but, although there were still many special birds yet to be seen, it wasn't my style of birding. Back at the accommodation, the White-thighed Hornbills still sat in the valley below and, a major bonus, a Black-collared Lovebird appeared in an adjacent tree ...so too did my guide on a motorbike, none too amused! It was definitely time to leave!

And leave we did, first backtracking to Masindi, then taking the 'main road' north to Fort Portal. Though this is a main transit route to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the road is absolutely diabolical - probably impassable after rain, this voyage took us to strangely enjoyable new depths of discomfort. With bum rarely on the seat for more than a few minutes at a time, there were potholes in the potholes! More than once did I send my long-suffering passenger flying across the car's interior as I manoeuvred the best route through some chasm that blighted the road. I don't remember any birds of

note along here, but do remember needing to change the wheel after rupturing the tyre whilst bouncing over one rather violent bump! Needless to say, we got to Fort Portal after dark.

16 December, Queen Elizabeth National Park and crossing the equator

Money problems again, or rather currency problems, plenty of euros, plenty of dollars, even a fair bundle of British pounds, but trying to get a few Ugandan shillings for them was like trying to extract blood from a stone! No chance with the banks, all either closed or not interested in foreign exchange, not much more luck when pleading and begging with likely money changers in the street! A typical encounter would lead to a merry dance around town, followed by the same general response ...our dollar bills were too old (they are very picky in Uganda, not liking anything older than the year 2000, and of course all of ours were 1996 issue!), our euro notes were mostly in denominations too small (they don't like notes in anything less than 100 euros) and they didn't know current rates for pounds, so offered very poor deals!

Eventually managed to exchange 'enough' at a petrol station and we were off again, southwards from Fort Portal and onwards to the equator. And what a scenic spot the equator was! On a little hill, smack bang on the equator, the view was rolling grasslands, scattered acacias and a fantastic lake. Mammals were abundant, herds of Ugandan Kob dotting the landscape, gatherings of Buffalo around the lake, Waterbuck standing on the fringes and Warthogs doing what Warthogs always do, wallowing in the mud or trotting along, tails held high. The lake, shallow with extensive muddy margins, was proving a magnet to birds - not only to waterbirds, but a variety of raptors and other species attracted in to drink. On the waterbird front, Great White and Pink-backed Pelicans headed the list, supported by the ever-present Marabous, a Woolly-necked Stork and a flock of migrant White Storks, plus the usual Black-headed Herons, Great White Egrets and assorted others, including a single Goliath heron and a Sacred Ibis. And as for the raptors ...Bateleurs everywhere, Black-shouldered Kites over the grassland, a small flock of Lesser Kestrels, one Grey Kestrel and, at the lake, one White-headed Vulture, one White-backed Vulture, several Palm-nut Vultures and numerous African Fish Eagles. On top of all of that, oodles of Black Kites, a Harrier Hawk, several European Marsh Harriers and no less than five Long-crested Eagles! As things go, this was very good for what was essentially a roadside stop to simply enjoy being on the equator.

Next up, we got into a traffic jam! Deciding to take a small dirt track, the idea was to find Lake Munyanyange, but before we could find it, Elephants found us! Feeding both sides and, most inconsiderate of them, hogging the actual road too, we had no option but to stop and wait ..but not an unpleasant traffic jam to be in, though the mother Elephants, with toddlers alongside, were not always so amused to have two gawking tourists in their company. Twenty minutes on and the herd of 30 or so had finally moved off and we were able to proceed. Lake Munyanyange itself was a disappointment, a small group of Lesser Flamingos and that was about it, but nearby grasslands continued to provide birds - Sooty Chats, Southern Red Bishops, Pin-tailed Whydahs, Northern Black Flycatchers, etc, etc, plus northern migrants such as Whinchats and Lesser Grey Shrike. From here it had been our intention to take a boat trip down the Kazinga Channel, a narrow waterway linking Lake Albert and Lake George and said to be a most impressive birding experience, with huge numbers of waterbirds, including literally hundreds, on occasion thousands, of Pied Kingfishers! However, once actually inside Queen Elizabeth National Park, we learnt that the launch was not operating that day and, not terribly impressed by the main Mweya Camp, we decided to leave and return to the lake we had found on the equator. And that is where we ended the day, bush camping on a small hill. And what a fine place it was, all the mammals wandering down to the lake and plenty of bushland birds on our hill to keep me happy - tops being two Holub's Golden Weavers, a Bare-faced Go-away Bird and several Croaking Cisticolas. We had planned to go looking for nightjars, but just as it got dark and just as we turned onto a small track leading across the grassland, the landrover suddenly lost all its gears! Eeks, not renowned for my care of vehicles in general, I thought I must have somehow managed to wreck the landrover! This was not looking good, no forward gears, no reverse ...it seemed the night would be spent at that very spot. Then, just as I beginning to wonder how I would contact the hire company, I decided to play with 'the other gear stick', the one that controlled high drive and low drive. A bit of nudging this and suddenly we lurched backward a bit, a bit more nudging and all was cured! Panic over, the second gear stick had simply jumped into neutral!!!! Decided to play it safe and returned to our hill to snooze the night away.

17 December, Ishasha, African paradise

On reflection, speaking as a person who has travelled to nigh on a hundred countries across the globe, there are few places that I have enjoyed as much as Ishasha, a beautiful jewel that shared its secrets and exceeded all expectations that I'd had. Located right on the border on the Democratic Republic of Congo, getting to Ishasha requires a necessary acceptance of certain hardships, namely 90 km of hardship upon the very rough track that winds its way from the northern sectors of the Queen Elizabeth National Park. However, though the route takes many hours, those kilometres do have an upside - in between being thrown into holes and through ruts that would pass for the Grand Canyon, the roadside wildlife provides hints of what of the wealth of birds and mammals that is to come. The day had started well, with a pre-dawn drive revealing two African White-tailed Nightjars on the track, and as the sun came up, it just got better and

better. Two trees laden with White-backed and Ruppell's Griffon Vultures, several Hooded Vultures, Red-necked Spurfowls by the dozen and four species of cuckoo (five if you include a coucal), and all of that was before the imaginary breakfast which we didn't have! As we wound our way south, forever bumping over a steadily worsening track, multitudes of large colourful butterflies rose in clouds from water gathering in the pot holes, Baboons sat and watched our progress and many more birds appeared - White-winged Black Terns on a small pool, various bee-eaters, two Brown Parrots, Black-lored Babbler, the list continued. Eventually, after one particularly nasty pothole had suddenly appeared from nowhere and bounced us right off our seats, we finally arrived at Ishasha.

The setting is superb, a campsite within the gallery forests that fringe the Ishasha River, rolling hills of extensive grassland savannah to the north and west, and thick acacia woodlands and thickets running down to the fabulous wetlands that border Lake Edward. Birds and mammals were everywhere. White-backed Vultures circling overhead, herds of Ugandan Kobs on the grasslands, big colonies of Lesser Masked Weavers in the campsite and, in the river separating the camp from the Congo, dozens and dozens of Hippopotamus, plus many more birds such as Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Spot-flanked Barbet and Banded Martins. Having settled into a banda on a bluff overlooking a nice stretch of savanna and having had a wander around the camp, I was ready to venture further afield - off into the grasslands and, if I could find the way, down to the Edward Flats, an area supposedly rich in birds, but rarely visited.

I was about to have my best afternoon of the entire trip! Heading off into the grasslands, the basic idea was to wind slowly northwards through the grasslands hoping to bump into some of Ishasha's famous tree-climbing Lions ...I was to do better! The savannas are amazing, teeming with Kobs, dotted with Kongoni and not short in herds of Buffalo too, surely a good area to begin a search for the big cats. Past a Brown Snake Eagle I went, past Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters too and then, at exactly 3.58 p.m., the sun still high and beating down, there was a mammal approaching through the long grass. In a split second response, the first thought was Lion, but it wasn't, it was instead an absolutely stunning Leopard, a rare event indeed to find one out walking during the mid-afternoon. And what an animal he was, not just a distant view, but up he came, passing just a few metres in front of us, yet at the same time not even giving us a sideways glance. Clearly intent on the shade of a nearby bush, this most magnificent of mammals continued on his way, ambling down the slope and into the depths of the cover. I was left a happy person - though I have seen perhaps 15 Leopards before, it was the first that I have encountered out and about in the middle of the day that actually allowed me to get photographs. I took a little walk down the slope, but the bush was thick, I was not going to see this one again!

So, feeling rather elated, onward we continued our journey. The destination was the Lake Edward Flats, a locality I had long set my heart upon visiting. However, the Flats are one of the most remote parts of the entire Queen Elizabeth National Park and, when enquiring as to whether the tracks were passable, the National Park rangers said I would get lost as the tracks were poor, not easy to find and etc, but the reality was it was a doddle, if somewhat bumpy and wet. Not bad for birds too - in habitat that alternated between dense thicket to open bush, occasional marsh to woodland fringes, the selection included loads of Red-necked Spurfowls, along with very fortunate sightings of both Common and Black-rumped Button-quails, not just flushed, but running along the tracks! Also, a Black-bellied Bustard, several Little Bee-eaters and a Black-and-White Cuckoo. Mammals of interest included several Bushbucks, Warthogs trotting off with tails held high and a family of Banded Mongoose.

After a number of kilometres driving through the bush, we arrived at the Edward Flats to find it just amazing, full of birds and full of mammals! An immediate regret was that I wouldn't have much time, the sun would be setting in a couple of hours, leaving it almost impossible to find the way back. Then I spotted a Shoebill miles and miles away, the brief thoughts of regret were forgotten! Till then, I had only seen the one single Shoebill at Mbamba and that been in flight, so off I went. Across a short turf grazed by Hippopotamus, Buffalo and Waterbuck, I was immediately impressed by the large numbers of waders darting out of my way - mostly Kittlitz's Plovers, Spur-winged Plovers and Wattled Plovers, but in wetter areas, Black-winged Stilts, Wood Sandpipers and small numbers of Temminck's and Little Stints. A few hundred metres short of the Shoebill, however, three waders scampered across the short turf 'Oo' I thought 'Pacific Golden Plovers' and on I went, thinking that I hadn't actually expected to see any golden plovers of any species. Anyway, surrounded by African Jacanas and not far from two Grey Crowned Cranes, the Shoebill was just stood there, giving okay views, but unfortunately on the wrong side of a marsh, so the photographs weren't going to be anything special. My quest to photograph this monster of birds was not going to reach its finale on this day! Sat there admiring the bird, my thoughts then wandered back to the plovers and so I got out the Ugandan checklist that was buried in the back of the landrover. Then, eeks, no golden plovers on it at all!

Now, rather alarmed that I had just driven past a potentially new species for the country, it seemed perhaps a good idea to go back and try to photograph them! Fortunately, it took only a few moments to find them again and watching them with rather more attention, I was pleased to be able to confirm they indeed were Pacific Golden Plovers! By now the sun was beginning to sink, I managed a couple of photographs, including one partially illustrating the dark auxiliaries, but it was then time to begin the journey back or I really would have got lost, so left them to it.

From all the searching I have done since, it does seem that these three birds are indeed the first for Uganda! They do winter in small numbers in northern Kenya and parts of Ethiopia, so the occurrence of birds in the Albertine Rift is perhaps not too unexpected and, in reality, the Lake Edward Flats are not the most visited locality in Uganda, it is possible past birds have been overlooked.

So, what an afternoon - one Leopard, one Shoebill, three Pacific Golden Plovers.

18 December, Ishasha, noises in the night.

Nightlife takes on a new angle at Ishasha, perhaps not the best place for someone prone to sleepwalking! Throughout the night, the chomping of Hippopotamus was the backdrop to sleep, the animals grazing right outside the banda, but their grunts, grumbings and pulling of grass was nothing to compare with what came at about 5 a.m. Beginning distant, the haunting rasp of a male Lion could be heard floating in from the west, but this was a Lion on the move, or as it would transpire, a pride on the move. Obviously following the general course of the Ishasha River, their path took them directly into the rangers' camp, a couple of hundred metres from our banda. What a racket, dogs barking, Lions roaring! I hadn't seen any dogs in the camp during the day, but I guess this is their job, to warn when Lions enter the area - it wouldn't be too good to pop out to the loo just at the wrong moment! The dogs took their duty seriously, barking non-stop, but Lions are Lions and they did exactly what they wanted ...and that was to pay us a visit at the banda, the roars in the darkness casting a magical air to the pre-dawn awakening. I took a peek out of the door, even venturing a metre or two, but they were already gone, down off the bluff and into the savannah beyond.

An hour or so later, with the sun soon to rise, a Spotted Hyena took up the chorus and it was time for me to take my morning walk. With a hesitant step, I began in the direction that the Lions had gone, but decided it might be more fruitful along the river, so wandered that way instead. Fantastic place, sitting on the river bank, the Democratic Republic of Congo less than ten metres in front of me, pods of Hippopotamus filling the river and wandering along the banks on both sides of the border, including one or two behind me, which certainly kept me on my toes! The birding was first-class - Great Blue Turacos and Ross's Turacos flew back and fro across the river, Pied and Malachite Kingfishers sat and gazed into the waters, whilst on snags overhanging the river, Cassin's Grey Flycatchers flitted out and, above them, White-throated Bee-eaters took in the morning sun. Two Grey-headed Negrosfinches preferred the greenery of the Congo side, whilst Green Pigeons, Purple-headed Starlings, Black-and-White Shrike-Flycatchers and a Yellow-throated Leaflove all showed more loyalty to Uganda. Two Brown Parrots didn't care two hoots about the border.

As Hippos continued to grunt the morning away, we sadly had to leave Ishasha - petrol shortages left us unable to return to the Lake Edward Flats, which would have been just superb. However, with the first petrol many kilometres away and our tank near empty, we had little choice. I had fully expected to actually run out of petrol before getting to our destination, but by some miracle we managed to roll into what seemed a real frontier town, the last Ugandan outpost for anybody contemplating a voyage into the maelstrom that is the Democratic Republic of Congo. For us though it was merely a chance to fill our tanks, our destination was a little further south ... Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, a name that just stirs the emotions.

With steep forested slopes hugging the mountains from 1190 metres to over 2600 metres, its location on the Albertine Rift, along with the unparalleled range of forest types from dense luxurious lowland to high altitude montane, has left Bwindi in the enviable position of being the richest forest in East Africa ...the richest for birds, for butterflies and for trees. Having wanted to visit this place for many years, another dream was about to be fulfilled.

After some hours of climbing rocky tracks, the dense forest slopes towered above us, we had arrived at Buhoma, 1550 metres above sea level and the heart of Bwindi. Accommodation for the next three nights was my tent pitched in the community campsite, a locality unparalleled with rainforests rising from the steep slopes opposite. Flowering Flame Trees attracted numerous sunbirds, the most abundant being Northern Double-collared, Bronze and Green-headed, though Green, Green-throated and Blue-throated Brown all put in appearances too. Similar trees in the park HQ also attracted a Ruwenzori Double-collared Sunbird, unusual at such a low altitude I believe. Other campsite birds included Black-and-White Casqued Hornbills overhead, White-eyed Slaty Flycatchers (the race here lacking the white eye-ring!) and Grey-throated Barbets. After a cup of tea and an hour or so relaxing, the forest beckoned!

To enter much of the forest, a permit is required ...and a guide and two armed guards, the latter due to rare cross-border attacks by Congolese rebels, which some years back left eight tourists and a Ugandan dead. There is however a track along the Munyaga River that has unrestricted access, allowing you to bird at your own pace for as long as you like. Though only a couple of kilometres long, the track is excellent - winding through secondary forest, but adjacent to primary forest, almost all the expected species at Buhoma can be found here, some being easier than in the forest on the higher slopes. On this first afternoon, three hours of squinting into thick bushes, watching clearings and waiting for feeding flocks to move along the stream, I notched up a good few species, the highlights being both Bocage's and Multi-coloured Bush-Shrikes, small flocks of Narrow-tailed Starlings, a colony of Viellot's Black Weavers, four White-breasted Negrosfinches, a variety of greenbuls, including three Yellow-throated Leafloves, one Cassin's Grey Flycatcher and a

White-tailed Blue Flycatcher.

It was good preparation, I was ready for the next day!

19 December, Bwindi, birding at Buhoma

This day can be dispatched in a single sentence - fantastic birding without wandering further than the Munyaga River Trail. Deciding against entering the depths of the forest, thereby saddling myself with a guide, I opted to slowly work the Munyaga River throughout the day, along with the road that links the park HQ with the beginning of the main track into the forest. Birds were abundant everywhere. Beginning at dawn, I was soon in the thick of it - reaching the Munyaga River, my number one target bird was sitting in a dead tree opposite! I had hoped to see one at Ishasha, but hadn't, but here he was - an absolutely gorgeous Black Bee-eater enjoying the early morning sun. Adjacent, ten Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters, plus eight White-throated Bee-eaters, made for a very nice mix. So, the day had started well and that is how it continued, the next two or three hours adding no less than four species of cuckoo (Emerald, Levillant's, Red-chested and Black), five Petit's Cuckoo-Shrikes in a mixed feeding flock, both Grey-headed and White-breasted Negrofinches, a White-browed Crombec and, all in mixed bird parties, Ruwenzori Batis, Common Wattle-eye, White-chinned Prinia, both Buff-throated and Black-throated Apalis and Black-and-White Shrike-Flycatchers. Add onto these, the forest weavers, including numerous Viellot's Black Weavers and Black-necked Weavers, along with smaller numbers of Baglaffeht, Compact, Black-billed and Brown-capped Weavers, good birds all. And if the weavers didn't provide identification problems, the greenbul did! Probably the greenbul capital of East Africa, the dense cover that they tend to inhabit did little to help discern the subtleties that separate some of these posers. By the morning's end, however, the first few species had been sorted out - Little Greenbul appearing as the most common, with two Cameroon Sombre and Shelly's Greenbuls coming next, with Slender-billed Greenbul also present, plus a single Western Nicator and the ever-present Common Bulbuls. Assorted tails, wings, green blurs and dark shapes were also seen, all belonging to various greenbuls that remained mysteries.

L'Hoest's Monkeys inhabited these forests too, a small troop being encountered on the track. Up on the road, the birding was also good, both Yellow-throated and Yellow-rumped Tinkerbirds could be seen and heard, along with two Yellow-spotted Barbets, overflying Green Pigeons, a Scaly-throated Honeyguide and, emerging from the undergrowth, a Grey-capped Warbler. Overhead, Black Saw-wings were ever present and, nearer the campsite, a White-tailed Blue Flycatcher appeared in a roadside tree and several Stuhlmann's Starlings were seen, along with a Grosbeak Weaver. After a shopping trip into the nearby village that predictably ended up with nothing being bought, it was then back to the Munyaga River to finish the day off. Many of the same species as in the morning, plus a pair of Chubb's Cisticolas in a clearing, two fantastic Black-faced Rufous Warblers creeping near the ground and at least two Dusky Blue Flycatchers.

20 December, Bwindi, Day of the Gorillas

For all their wealth of birds, the Ruwenzori Mountains are more famous for one single species, not a bird, but the Mountain Gorilla. With the entire world population of 800 or so restricted to the steep precipitous slopes of the volcanos and mountains along the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, they turn these hauntingly beautiful forests into something truly enchanting. The 320 square kilometres of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest is home to about 350 of these Gorillas.

Getting to see the Gorillas, however, is not so straightforward - in Rwanda it is possible, in the brutality of war-torn Congo, there is a real risk of being killed, but in Uganda, it is relatively easy ...albeit requiring some fairly serious trekking, forward planning to obtain permits and a healthy-sized wallet! A permit to enter the forest costs US\$ 500 and for this you get one chance, a single day of trekking in the hope of encountering a family group - there is no guarantee and people do miss them, but in reality the chances of finding them are high.

And so it was my turn, four of us set out on the trek to find our family - their approximate location was known from the previous day and trained trackers went ahead to try to find them. Forty-five minutes by truck climbing ever higher, then two-and-a-half hours walking up and down incredibly steep slopes, through tangles and thick undergrowth, and then we were there, in the forest block in which the family resided. In the dense cover, a Gorilla could be ten metres away and you would be struggling to see it, but we were close, you could just 'feel it'. Climbing through ferns and vines, I became aware of a black 'lump' to my right, a large black lump that looked somewhat hairy! 'That looks like a Gorilla', I thought, then 'Oo, it is a Gorilla!!!' Sleeping barely three metres away was an adolescent Gorilla, but before I had time to appreciate him, I suddenly realised there were more, there were Gorillas in the undergrowth all around! The next hour was an experience I guess I will never repeat - to be amongst a family of Mountain Gorillas in the depths of their rainforest. No less than 21 animals surrounded me, a massive Silverback, several matriarchal females and adolescents of all ages from a few months to several years ...and none of them more than ten metres distant.

For a full hour in that small clearing in that big forest, we humans barely moved an inch, simply turning to watch as each of the Gorillas either engaged us or didn't - the Silverback merely gazed our way on occasion, but curiosity got the better of some of his family, a big female and several younger animals approaching to within a metre. Several of the Gorillas had climbed into the low canopy to feed on figs and it was these that needed to be watched - with the light levels very low, photography was difficult and the only effective way to get a sharp image was to lean against a tree for support, all well and good until you glance upwards to see a Gorilla coming down bum-first and about to land on you!!! Words don't really portray these brief moments, the whole experience really was rather special.

As the hour approached its end, a Baboon called nearby - the response was immediate, the Silverback was up and intent, his massive power fully apparent, but this is where we humans had to leave. As part of the strategy to protect the Gorillas, not only are the permit fees ploughed back into the direct conservation of the animals and forest, but visitations are strictly controlled - only one group of visitors is permitted per day and even then the time spent with the Gorillas is limited to a maximum of one hour, how intimate is that hour is the Gorillas' choice - it might be occasional glimpses as they move through the undergrowth or, as in our case, an hour with them as they rest between feeding bouts. Either way, it is an experience that is likely to leave lasting memories.

Needless to say, with eyes firmly fixed to the Gorillas, barely a bird was seen! Having seen them though, one or two little birds were noted on the trek back - Tambourine Dove, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, various sunbirds and the like, but perhaps the more notable birds were in nearby cultivations. An Augur Buzzard sat in a dead tree, a couple of Yellow Bishops buzzed through a grassy field, a Grosbeak Weaver busied itself at the nest and a Mountain Wagtail appeared on a track. A couple of hours later, I was back at the camp and a very content person. Not quite content enough to take the afternoon off though, a quick return to the Munyaga River notching up two more very special sightings - both extreme skulkers, it almost required a crawl through the depths of the undergrowth to get good views I craved. These last two birds, which really provided the cream topping to an excellent day were, firstly, an Equatorial Akalat and then a Red-throated Alethe, both highly-desirable denizens of the deepest darkest interiors of the forest.

Without a doubt, a superb day from start to finish.

21 December, Bwindi, the fall of the elusives

As excellent as the Munyaga River Trail had been, I couldn't leave Bwindi without at least one visit to the 'Main Trail' at Buhoma, a wide path leading up through primary rainforest harbouring many of the forest specials, species that rarely wander from the the superb, and incredibly dense, primary growths. So it was, with a permit to enter the forest and another permit to allow you to enter for the purposes of birding (!), I then engaged the services of a guide, fortunately a very good guide who not only knew his birds, but also the calls. Perhaps I would manage to tolerate this one and not need to try to 'lose' him. The reality is, though I would still have preferred to have birded alone, he did actually pick up several species by call that I might have otherwise missed.

And so into the forest we went ...four hours or so through quite simply wonderful habitat, massive trees and greenery from ground to canopy. As in tropical forests worldwide, birding was far from easy - the forest echoed to birds calling high and low, but actually seeing them was another matter! All too often, even if the bird was just metres away, the calls would manage to circumnavigate you without their owners even as much as showing a fleeting glimpse! However, when the bird did show, they were almost invariably right little corks - first up, a Black Bee-eater, every bit as stunning as the one a few days earlier and arguably one of the best birds of the entire trip. Next, after failing to see several that were calling from the depths of the forest, a sudden flash of red and green and there sat a spectacular Bar-tailed Trogon, a positive feast for the eyes, albeit a brief feast - a few seconds of sitting there quietly and it shot off backwards into the undergrowth, of course never to be seen again! And then there were the ground inhabitants, birds whose very names conjure up images of exotica ...Mountain Illapodsis, Equatorial Akalat, Red-throated Alethe, White-bellied Robin-Chat, all a nightmare to get good views of, a lot of squatting down required to get even half decent sightings! By the morning's end, though, no less than five Equatorial Akalats had finally given good views, against just two White-bellied Robin-Chats and a single Red-throated Alethe. The Mountain Illapodsis were right antisocial little things - calling almost continuously, almost everywhere, they were clearly one of the most abundant birds of the leaf litter, yet only once did I see them ...a flock of five grovelling about in a particularly thick area of vegetation, fortunately choosing the same side of the bush as me and approaching to about a metre. Sharing the semi-darkness of the forest floor, I also encountered two Snowy-headed Robin-Chats, a pair of Black-faced Rufous Warblers (the latter of which gave very good views) and a Short-tailed Warbler (which just crept about calling and refused point-blank to even show a slight rustle of movement!).

The birding, in short, was excellent. With time, more and more species began to reveal themselves - a Cassin's Honeyguide, several Montane Orioles, lots of Collared Sunbirds, a White-bellied Crested Flycatcher and a good collection of greenbuls, mostly similar to the ones seen along the Munyaga River, but with the notable addition of a superb Honeyguide Greenbul, plus better numbers of Red-tailed Greenbuls. Even when the morning was drawing to its end, there was still one last bonus in the offering - whilst watching L'Hoest's Monkeys, a Handsome Francolin strolled across the path, not a very common sighting in the forest. With those, and many more good birds, all under the belt, it

was time to head back to the campsite. There awaited us all the usual sunbirds and, the only one of the trip, a White-naped Raven.

At this point, we should have gone to Ruhizha, a drive of about 55 km that would have taken us to 2300 metres and Bwindi's high altitude forest and bamboo, but for some reason that I cannot fathom, I opted to skip this locality, thereby missing out on the Green Broadbills and a number of Albertine Rift endemics that almost certainly would have been seen. I think the sun had affected my head on that afternoon and instead of taking the rocky track upwards, we instead left Bwindi and began the long dusty drive back towards civilization. By night's fall, we got to the bustling town of Mbarara, a place I simply could not pronounce, and decided to make the best of the offerings of urbania - ice-cream, digestive biscuits, peanut butter and chips, ah back to the real world!

22 December, Lake Mburo, unexpected jewel

Leaving Mbarara whilst still dark, we entered the extensive grasslands that surround Lake Mburo just as the sun was breaking the horizon, a heavy mist rising from the savannah. As we trundled down the sandy tracks, Impalas stood skittish and groups of Helmeted Guinea-fowls scattered into the lingering mist. Some way in we had our first stop - Impalas were alarmed, Vervet Monkeys were going bonkers, there was something moving through the grass! The monkeys from their tree top vantage points were in an enviable position - whilst they could clearly see it, we had to merely watch the monkeys! Somewhere in that long grass, not too many metres in front of us, there was almost certainly a Leopard, but our chances of seeing it fizzled away as the animal began to move off, accompanied by most of the monkeys in tow!

Still plenty else to see - several pairs of Grey Crowned Cranes strutting about, four species of kingfisher, Rufous-chested Swallows over the grass, several Little Bee-eaters, both Crowned and Grey Hornbills and, best of the lot, my one and only African Moustached Warbler, a very nice bird. Continuing our journey, we arrived at Lake Mburo itself, a large expanse of water fringed by papyrus swamp on some sides and overhanging trees on the others, the latter vegetation home to one very special bird here. Initial looks at the lake revealed relatively little - a few African Fish Eagles, an Osprey, a couple of Pink-backed Pelicans, but nothing out of the ordinary, so with that we continued along the lakeshore, driving through very thick thornscrub and actually seeing not very much, bar Bushbucks crashing off through the undergrowth and oodles of starlings, including Ruppell's Long-tailed, Greater Blue-eared and Splendid. Time to stop I thought, so when we got to a second small clearing by the lake, we parked and I took a walk. Hippopotamus in the water, three Water Thick-knees on the bank, but the better attractions were just a short stroll away ...first, ten Brown Parrots, then the true star of the morning - a Narina Trogon! Almost as stunning as its cousin I had seen at Bwindi, it was equally shy, the bird almost immediately disappearing into the bushes!

With the sun rising, we then thought it a good time to make camp and opted for the area near the park headquarters rather than the lakeside - better acacia cover and higher chances of the odd dryland passerine or two. It was a good spot - all from the comfort of a borrowed wicker chair, dozens of Impalas wandering past, plenty of Warthogs, one pair of Crowned Cranes and plenty of small birds, including Chin-spot Batis, Greater Honeyguide, Spot-flanked Barbet, Lead-coloured Flycatcher and a very photogenic Striped Kingfisher.

Having relaxed away the heat of the day, it was time to venture out again, we decided upon a circuit that would take us north into the open savannahs. And how nice it was, Burchell's Zebra and Eland, both new for the trip, plus Buffalo, Common Duiker, Impala by the herdload, Warthog, Waterbuck, Oribi, Vervet Monkey and Banded Mongoose ...an impressive mammal list by any standard! And the birds not bad too - driving through open acacia woodlands, occasional flocks of Black-lored Babblers chattered and scolded, Yellow-throated Longclaws flitted up from damper areas and, rather unexpected, several Purple Starlings appeared amongst the more common species. Stopping at one waterhole to watch Crowned Cranes, there then followed a whole procession of birds - assorted weavers and Red-billed Firefinches to drink, Wattled Plovers and Wood Sandpipers on the muddy fringes and two spectacular Bare-faced Go-away Birds in a dead tree. Bateleur flew across overhead and a Brown Snake Eagle sat nearby.

On the way back, there were two more treats - a Black-bellied Bustard strutting its stuff in the long grass and, being mobbed by Copper Sunbirds, Chinspot Batises and a Buff-bellied Warbler, a very nice Pearl-spotted Owlet. However the

real treat of the day was still awaiting me! As the sun began to set, we retired to the lake where a small restaurant operates - and there, amongst the snorting Hippopotamus and roosting Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, was the final bird of the day. Though I had hoped to see this bird here, I didn't rank the chances too high, but dusk was my best bet, so there I was, scanning the lakeside edges, focussing on the secluded waters beneath overhanging vegetation and then out it swam ...an absolutely amazing African Finfoot, straight out into the open! A full dozen years and more since I had seen my last, that was a real high to finish the day upon, the bird finally disappearing back into the depths of the bankside cover as the sun sank beneath the horizon!

23 December, Lake Mburo, a stonking rarity for tea, a disaster for lunch!

'What is that noise?', I heard someone ask. Lying in my tent in the darkness, I had already heard it - a deep low hooting, resonating from not very far away. 'An owl, one of the big ones', I replied as I staggered out into the African night. A flash of the torch and two hundred eyes glinted back in the darkness, jiggling up and down like synchronised fire-flies! Impalas all, and off they scampered. 'Ooo-ooo-ooo' said the owl, 'Ooh' said I, he was in the next acacia! A moment later, I was looking up and he was looking down, a magnificent Verreaux's Eagle Owl, pink eye lids and all.

Back into the tent I went, but all too soon it was dawn and out I went again, Straight down to the lake and straight into two African Finfoots! A male and a female, barely three metres in front of my nose - I don't know who was the more surprised, me or them! Typical, I had left my camera in the landrover 30 metres behind me and, naturally, by the time I'd fetched it, they had long gone, never to be seen again.

What with night time owls and dawn finfoots, the day was already beginning on a real high and it was very much set to stay that way ...at least until 10.30 a.m.! The events of that latter hour, however, were still several hours in front of me, and for the moment I was stood by the lake, really fancying a hike through the thick bushland. Strictly prohibited due to the presence of Buffalo, I regret to say that I yet again flouted the national park regulations and slunk off into the cover. The rewards were immediate - not in the form of the umpteen Warthogs rooting about, but in the absolutely cracking selection of birds. Trotting from the cover of one acacia to the next, a flock of eight Water Thick-knees, Emerald-spotted Wood-Doves flitting up everywhere and, in a bonanza of bushland species, the thick tangles yielded several Tropical Boubous, a party of Yellow-throated Leafloves, three Snowy-headed Robin-Chats (and one White-browed Robin-Chat), no less than four Grey-capped Warblers, a White-browed Coucal and, topping the lot, a Yellowbill, a stunning if somewhat reclusive species. Additionally, bumped into a Black-headed Oriole, a Buff-spotted Woodpecker and, after having seen numerous Speckled Mousebirds, I finally saw the first Blue-naped Mousebirds of the trip. Back at the lake, the African Fish Eagles and a Palm-nut Vulture had woken up, a Goliath Heron stood sentinel and two Green-backed Herons emerged from the papyrus opposite. Distant Papyrus Gonoleks could be heard, calling their distinctive gonk gonk chonk.

By now a familiar problem was beginning to rear its head - shoddy thing the landrover was, we were beginning to run low on petrol again. Rather than risk running out, we thought it not bad to head for Sanga - a large village about 25 km from our camp and location of the nearest petrol pump. Abundant wildlife all the way - dozens of Zebra, a good herd of Eland, plenty of Sooty Chats, a few Yellow-billed Oxpeckers and a whole bunch of local scarcities, including two Red-headed Lovebirds, a family of Green Wood Hoopoes and a White-headed Barbet.

Rolling into Sanga, I had two goals - to find a tea shop and to find the petrol station and, by luck, they were next to each other. First, a nice cup of tea and a chapatti I decided, so there we sat on their veranda, watching the bustle in the street, cows' heads and tails being traded and their gruesome-looking entrails too, all very nice to accompany your breakfast. Then, at that point, my attention was drawn to the floor - there, amongst a few Grey-headed Sparrows, was a female House Sparrow! Hmm, nice I thought, the first on the trip. And with that, I continued my tea. Latter in the evening I was to have a surprise, House Sparrow was not on the Ugandan checklist!!! Impossible I thought, it must have been recorded in Uganda before, I couldn't believe I had found the first ever House Sparrow for the county! So, I began to read around and ask other birders - it transpired it has only just been added to the Ugandan list, there is one record in Kampala and another not far from Sanga, so it seems that little guest I had for breakfast was, in fact, the third ever for Uganda!!!

So, that was pretty amazing, then things went amazingly wrong! Popped into the petrol station only to find they didn't have any petrol! Oh gawd, now we had a problem - there was really only one option, to try and reach the next place with petrol, several towns down the road. We didn't make it! After splutting up one hill and coasting down the other side, the next slope saw us coming to a terminal stop - a score and more kilometres short of the petrol station. Pushed the landrover into the verge and waited for a passing car. Fortunately the kind folk of Uganda are an understanding bunch and it was not too many minutes before I was in a comfortable landcruiser sailing off towards town, leaving my companion to guard the car. Filled up a little plastic tub with some petrol and repeated the journey on reverse, hitching another lift back without much of a problem. So, with a couple of litres of petrol in the car, we then drove to the town to first change some money and then fill the tanks. Humph, change money - Uganda is the only country I have ever been that has an aversion to foreign currencies, again the dollars were not to people's liking, the banks were closed and we seemed stumped. Miraculously we happened upon an ATM machine and even more miraculously it liked our Lithuanian cards, or at least one of them, so flushed with cash, we jumped back into the Landrover and reversed ...straight into a big

hole in the road! A very big hole! The back of the landrover went down, the body crunched onto the ground and the front went up, leaving the wheels high and dry! We were well and truly stuck, much to the amusement of a crowd already 30 to 40 strong. Entertainment had arrived in this sleepy backwater, and we were it! Nothing much happened for about half an hour, bar the crowd got ever larger and more amused, then capitalism kicked in - for an extortionate sum, everybody could get us out! Eventually, a large truck dangling chains arrived, hooked us up and began to pull ...a rather horrid-sounding grating and then up we bounced, free again! Time to get out of that town, parted with cash, filled the tanks and returned to the sanctity of Lake Mburo.

The afternoon was rather more relaxing! Began with an hour or so sat atop a large koppie - a splendid viewpoint, with Ross's Turaco beneath and a range of raptors appearing over an adjacent ridge. In addition to the regular Bateleurs and Black Kites, aquilas were prominent - first a Whalberg's Eagle, then two Tawny Eagles and moments later a pair of Lesser Spotted Eagles. All these, plus two very noisy Great Sparrowhawks attending their fledgling (in habitat that seemed not ideal for this species). As the afternoon ticked on, and a feeding flock of small passerines moved through, including Common Wattle-eyes and Yello-breasted Apalis, we again began our wanders. Moving through the grasslands, Crested Francolins scattered, a Black-bellied Bustard eyed us through the grass and, top bird of the afternoon, a European Roller fed on a hillside, along with one Broad-billed Roller and a couple of White-bellied Go-away Birds. Back in camp, a Buff-spotted Woodpecker edged its way up a tree, but it was almost dusk, the day's birding was over. One African Scops Owls called in the distance.

24 December, a return to Kampala.

Kampala-bound, but first a last wander around the savannas of Lake Mburo, looping through the northern grasslands. These were simply superb, abundant game in the form of yet more Zebras, occasional herds of Buffalo and Impalas by the dozen, but also many good birds. 16 Senegal Plovers on an area of recently burnt grass supported , three Green-backed Herons, four Squacco Herons and a few African Jacanas on small wetlands and, in the acacia bushland, a Levillant's Cuckoo, ten Blue-naped Mousebirds and a Brown-backed Scrub Robin, the only one recorded on the trip.

And then it was the long trundle back to Kampala, roadside villages crammed with people buying Christmas food, the roads out of the capital busy with persons fleeing for the festive season. Of more interest, a small flock of Abdim's Storks numbered about 15 pairs, whilst other birds en route included two Sacred Ibis, four Lilac-breasted Rollers, a Black-shouldered Kite, one Martial Eagle and, raiding weaver nests, a Harrier-Hawk. And then we were in Kampala, back to the hussle and bustle of the congestion. Clouds of Marabou Storks mingled with Black Kites overhead and, as dusk approached, dozens of Hooded Vultures drifted in, seeking up power lines to roost the night away. It was Christmas Eve, the temperature was almost 30 C and part one of the trip was over, we returned the landrover, slightly more battered than when collected, then headed off into town to celebrate with a rather disgusting meal!

Part one of my trip was over, part two was about to kick off!

[Click here for 'Uganda, Part Two'.](#)

[Click here for systematic list of birds.](#)