



Uganda: Birds, Gorillas & Chimpanzees 2025 Trip Report

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Mackinnon's Fiscal Shrike © Jan Shadick

When recalled from under a grey and cold sky, observing nature outside in “up in the Northlands” of a world in late winter, any claim that there is a little nation of year-round warmth, of an almost unique lushness, and a verdant beauty, all compressed, yes into one small country, it is called

Uganda, all this might seem somewhat fanciful, unlikely at best. Yet we found out: it is true! And undoubtedly our collected experiences, being there in January 2025, amounted to much more than the sum of all of our glorious sightings. All those natural wonders, and we found everywhere, throughout our tour, all readily available. Welcoming each of us, as if to witness Eden first hand. Nature's splendour. In Uganda perhaps best encapsulated by all of the beautiful birds we saw as well as by the pantheon of primate relatives. Experiences that were complimented by a brief encounter with a somehow secretive yet certainly fearsome, Leopard. This on our last night in the bush. Assessed as a whole our Uganda tour certainly 'delivered' the all-encompassing-wildlife-traveller-experiences. The ones that we so often find ourselves, especially in those quiet moments at home in winter, fervently wishing that they will come again and soon. We began and ended our immersion into the ecological joys of Equatorial Africa, Uganda-style, on the shores of Lake Nyansa-Victoria. Here we were based out of a modern hotel, convenient and happily close to the airport, in an uptown district of Entebbe. There were a few "good" birds residing in this leafy neighbourhood including: the Manta-Ray or pterodactyl-like **Marabou Storks** soaring high in the unscarred blueness of an African sky. There were **Pink-backed Pelicans** up there too and nearer to earth some approachable **Bat Hawks**, a family of three, trying to snooze despite our attention, at their day-time roost in a tall white-barked Terminalia tree. Furthermore there were seven, hardly magnificent but definitely interesting, **Hooded Vultures** 'kettling' overhead. Moreover these were the only ones of their kind that we saw during this tour. On the last morning of our stay in Uganda we visited the long established Entebbe Botanical Gardens, easily walkable, the gardens are located just behind the hotel and here we added about half a dozen species, including the very localised **Orange Weaver**, all of whom were new for our trip list. Our first full day birding in-country began with our early arrival at the Mabamba wetlands. Here we were able to find a single **Shoebill**, unsuccessfully stalking lung fish out in the heart of the papyrus swamp. Finding this huge bird, rare, enigmatic in ashen-grey yet somehow peaceful, almost meditative, and getting fabulous views of it both foraging and in flight, undoubtedly will be one of the highlights of our ecotraveller's year - 2025.



Shoebill excursion © James Wolstencroft



Shoebill © Lynn Gratz



Shoebill swamp © James Wolstencroft

Being still somewhat hung-over from our very long air journeys to East Africa it was a pleasure to spend this first proper night in the delightfully understated tranquility of Nkima Lodge. This small hotel overlooks the swamp, even better one can walk unimpeded in the spacious naturally forested grounds. The simple but adequate 'Banda' rooms are very secluded hidden away beneath the deep green canopy and at dusk we were serenaded by the raucous ventriloquial calls of **Great Blue**

Turacos (members of an endemic family and avian order) as they bounded through the canopy to their roost sites.



Nkima Lodge nature walk © James Wolstencroft

Here we found our first true forest birds. For example we were able to compare two species of forest passerines - **Negritas (the Gray-headed and the White-breasted)** as they gorged on little crimson berries in an evergreen bush outside the restaurant. Thanks to the sophisticated playback techniques of our driver-guide Johnnie Kamugisha we were able, close to sunset, to entice a Western Nicator, an inveterate silvery-spotted skulker and one gifted with a golden voice, out of the deepest jungle tangle into a brief but wide open view. The next day was the first of a few long drives. Nevertheless by afternoon we were happily birding the bird-rich grounds of our hotel, a former residence of the colonial administrators at Fort Portal, on the edge of the extensive dry evergreen forests which constitute Kibale National Park. Next day we trekked and tracked for about forty minutes to reach one family group of Uganda's famous and well protected Eastern **Chimpanzee** population. We passed a delightful hour, along the edge of a lush palm swamp, while this loose family group went about some of their morning routines mostly in the trees just above us. It's a somewhat noisy business tracking chimps, who together with the Bonobo are our nearest extant relatives in Africa, consequently opportunities for jungle birding were remarkably few.



Chimpanzee tracking © James Wolstencroft



Chimpanzee © Lynn Gratz

The next morning we explored the Edgar of the excellent Begodi Swamp close to the forest. From the dry forests of Kibale we made a long day trip, round the northern spur of the fabled Rwenzori Mountains, down into the lowlands of the Semuliki river valley. The tall forests here, along the border of Congo DRC are unique in East Africa, providing naturalists with an opportunity to observe the “western wildlife” of the only lowland Congolese forest in what is currently thought of, politically

as East Africa.



Birding in Semuliki Forest © James Wolstencroft

We were not disappointed. Although the forest was exceptionally dry we found a good selection of the special birds. Pre-eminent among these was a delightful **Gray Ground-thrush** that we flushed from beneath the boardwalk, as we ventured out into the hot spring clearings, after our packed breakfast at the very quiet park headquarters. One or two participants managed to fire-off some record shots of this rare and secretive, little-known bird as, most unusually, it perched obligingly in the open albeit somewhat distant, on the frond of a low palm. At the hot springs a pair of the near-threatened **Hartlaub's Duck** flew over. However it was the huge flocks of **African Green Pigeons** coming-in to drink, and the dapper **De Brazza's Monkey** spying on us from a tall tree on the edge of the glade that, for most, stole the show.



De Brazza's Monkey © Jan Shadick

Here we saw our first wintering Palearctic shorebirds of the tour in the delicate form of a few **Wood Sandpipers**. Certainly the three or four species of very secretive greenbul that were calling noisily from the surrounding forest failed to impress us with their unobliging and highly secretive behaviour! There were some impressive insects along the forest trails, but not in the numbers one would expect to see here under moister conditions. Yet we managed to identify a few of the butterflies, including the large, bright orangey-yellow and hence aptly named, Lurid Glider! From Semuliki we headed south, across the Equator, and into Queen Elizabeth National Park. Now we were in the savannas, for which eastern Africa is so rightly famous. Although we failed to connect with any pride of lions we were enthralled by the large herds of **African Buffalo**, and the gymnastic antics of their attendant **Yellow-billed Oxpeckers**.



Yellow-billed Oxpeckers on an African Buffalo © Lynn Gratz

From the roadside at the equator itself we were able to 'scope a very distant pair of the critically endangered **White-headed Vulture**. Whilst from within the park we got much better views of several **White-backed** and a few **Lappet-faced Vultures**. Here we took an afternoon cruise along the Kazinga channel and were treated to marvellous views of several species of waterbird including a large loafing flock of the amazing **African Skimmer** on a sandy bank. There were many **Savanna Elephants**, up close and personal, lots of delightful Warthogs and herds of somewhat irascible, semi-submerged **Hippopotamus** plus on one beach eight skittish, sooty-black **Giant Forest Hogs** - a mammal lifer for us all. We stayed at "Queen Elizabeth" in a beautifully located lodge, on the very edge of an escarpment overlooking what is nowadays an unvisited section of Queen Elizabeth national park. A place where Elephants came in the night attempting to raid the crops just a few hundred metres below our rooms. On our last morning here we were treated to wonderful views of a displaying **Gray-headed Bush-shrike** in the garden. A bird that is normally hard-to-see. At last it was time to visit the gorillas of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park. Every nature lover, who makes the pilgrimage to the mountains of the Virunga region, undoubtedly suffers their own preconceptions about what "the meeting" will be like. For this truly is a definitive bucket list experience. Personally I can vouch for the fact that it can be a truly transformative experience. The early morning ascent to the hill forest home of the gorillas is unquestionably somewhat arduous. Thankfully however there are numerous porters on hand. "Porter" is a very unsatisfactory name for these fine local people. Whilst hiring a porter, at an annually fixed rate in US dollars, provides their families with a significant "hard cash" boost to their monthly budget. It also helps ensure that the immediate local communities benefit materially from the continued presence of the gorillas. In fact almost as much as we do by making the effort of going to see them! Consequently we all agreed that hiring a porter here is pretty much an essential component of the tour programme. Necessary in our case to help the ordinary tourist navigate slippery, and occasionally rather muddy trails that lead up into the mountain refuge of these seemingly peace-loving beings. Creatures who are the greatest and probably gentlest of all the apes. I was not in the least disappointed by the whole experience and I don't think anyone in our group came away unmoved. It really is something one has to do, given the opportunity. With good planning we reached our **gorilla family** quite early in the morning. On the way down to a luxuriant seepage area, around which they were "lying-up", relaxing

after their hearty early vegan breakfast, we were very fortunate to encounter a stocky Great Lakes Bush Viper resting on a mossy trunk. As with the **Gray Ground-thrush**, which we came upon seemingly by chance in Semuliki, this was a great bonus for our tour. For this is also a creature that is seldom seen in the wild, especially by any of we foreign folks in these “impenetrable mountain jungles of darkest Africa”.



Gorilla © Lynn Gratz

The day after “the gorillas” was much more relaxed as we birded the moss-draped woodland and hill forest edge not far from our luxurious lodge. For many of us this was the best birding day of the tour. We saw a goodly number of the so-called Albertine Rift Valley endemics. For me the best of all was the Regal Sunbird but I am sure that each participant had their own favourite species - there were so many to choose from on this day. After the gorilla experience high in the misty mountains, it was very much downhill. On the way we made a stop at a lakeside campsite where we saw some new birds, as well as a delightfully tame **Hammerkop** building its colossal domed nest in the crotch of a big tree overhanging the car parking area. Our last ‘reserve for Nature’ was Lake Mbuoro National Park. Here we stayed at what was for many of us our first old-style safari camp. A permanent tented camp set in a gorgeous location on a hill top, overlooking the lake and surrounded by the quintessential East African savanna of many peoples’ imagination. Fortunately we went for a late afternoon boat trip along the eastern shore of the lake and managed to get intimate views of two rare and special bird species: a pair of **White-backed Night-Herons** at their nest in an overhanging tree and a beautiful female **African Finfoot** who was deftly catching whirligig beetles and pond skaters from amongst the floating lilies and water lettuce of the shallows nearby.



White-backed Night-Heron © Jan Shadick

On game drives within the park we had splendid encounters with herds of **Plains Zebra**, beautiful **Topi antelope** and the exquisitely pale **Northern Giraffe**. And there were lots of birds including some of the East African savanna classics such as **Lilac-breasted Roller** and **Martial Eagle**. After the boat trip, returning after dark to our camp on our second night, we made an “impromptu night game drive” and were treated to our first **African Scops Owl**, as three species of nightjar started calling nearby. Dawdling home certainly paid-off because shortly afterwards, as we turned up the hill to our camp, we spotted a **Leopard** stalking through the knee-high dry grasses to starboard. Close enough that those standing up in the back of the open-top Toyota Landcruiser had pretty decent views, when it turned towards us glaring in a way that only a big cat can. Our last day was mostly a travel day as we made our way slowly out of the park and back to Entebbe. Nevertheless we picked-up a few more good birds along the edge of the park in the morning hours along the way, including the aptly-named and very local **Red-faced Barbet**. By late afternoon we were back ‘at home’ in the modern convenience world. Back at The Best Western situated, as already said, just outside the much more famous and distinctly un-modern Botanical Gardens, in Entebbe town Uganda.



Yellow-throated Longclaw © Lynn Gratz

[Uganda Birding Tour species list](#)