

## Uganda, August 2011 - brief highlights and itinerary ideas from a short birding trip

### Introduction

This report is just to give details of a successful and compact Ugandan itinerary; and also to confirm what many others have already discovered, that Alfred T can provide an excellent guiding service to birders visiting Uganda. A few other details are thrown in along the way (oh, and some of the birds we saw).

Uganda is a tremendously attractive destination for birders and has been for many years. When **Green-breasted Pitta** was 'unmasked' a couple of years ago, and became a realistic possibility on even a short visit, the country zoomed firmly to the top of my list. Mark Edgeller, Gavin MacLean and Ollie Wardman were also keen to bird Uganda so we teamed up in August 2011 for a whistle stop tour. We had limited time but some careful reading made it clear that we could see many of the best birds in a short period given some effort, luck and a little help along the way. Reasonably priced, overnight flights direct from London were ideal.

After plenty of thought about expensive **Chimpanzee** and **Gorilla** tracking, our consensus was to omit dedicated efforts to see either. In a way, it was a choice of compromising or not visiting Uganda at all. Birders regularly come across **Chimps** in any case so we opted to take our chances. **Gorillas** are a different kettle of fish but as it happens I might be back one day, and if I save up I may still get to meet the languid gaze of a **silverback** on a chilly Ugandan mountainside.

August falls within one of the country's dry seasons, a good time for all-round birding; and current thinking has the **pittas** displaying during June, peaking in July and continuing into August. Alfred suggested that their display period may peak even later, perhaps in October or November but we were unable to test the theory. In any case, **pittas** are notoriously unpredictable, and our timing options were limited. It seemed well worth a try in early August and we followed an anti-clockwise route to get us to Kibale as early as possible.

### Guiding, ground agents and reports

We really prefer to find our own birds but reading up on previous trips, we couldn't help but notice that the experienced guide, Alfred Twinomujuni consistently received glowing references. The tour company Alfred helped set up also received rave reviews so we negotiated a bespoke package including accommodation, essential boat trips, park entry, vehicle and driver, plus Alfred's help for the trickiest 11 days.

Neither *Avian Watch Uganda* nor Alfred let us down. Every emailed query was accorded a thorough and prompt reply by Agatha in the office, and Alfred is the most able bird guide I've ever been privileged to spend time with. We suggested, in all seriousness, that when he next visits the Rutland bird fair in England (might be 2012), he should find some way of displaying his astonishing bird call impersonation skills at a talk or slide show. As for his razor sharp eye-sight, and knowledge of the birds and sites - well, it's hard to lavish too much praise. We also had great fun with Alfred and our hard-working and cheerful driver, Martin (or **MARTIN!** as he quickly became known).

Alfred soon picked up on what sort of birders we were - what made us tick, our priorities for the trip, when we needed coffee, etc etc - and was efficient and flexible when we wanted to tweak the itinerary at a couple of crucial points. He's guided lots of larger groups in the past and is perhaps focussed on getting initial views,

sometimes at the expense of careful stalking. We worked well as a team though and he responded positively on the few occasions that we asked to approach birds more slowly or quietly.

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This was an expensive trip. AWU offered the best price but the other two companies we approached for quotes were efficient in response to our questions and competitive. I am sure that there are several well-known ground agents in Uganda that can offer an excellent service to birders.

A big thank you is also due to Rainer Summers at *Rockjumper* who kindly gave us some tips on sites and species. I'm certain that the *Rockjumper* team would provide a superb Ugandan trip for anyone keen to bypass the reading and emails: <http://www.rockjumperbirding.com/>

We used various other trip reports and books, details as follows. Sincere thanks to all for posting or publishing:

Chris Goodie: [http://www.pittasworld.com/Site/Buy\\_The\\_Jewel\\_Hunter\\_Book.html](http://www.pittasworld.com/Site/Buy_The_Jewel_Hunter_Book.html)

Ian Merrill: [http://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=580](http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=580)

Geoff Dobbs: <http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/uganda/uganda7/ugan-04.htm>

Petri Hottola: [http://www.bongariliitto.fi/matkakertomukset/Afrikka/Uganda/Uganda\\_2007-10-11\\_Hottola.pdf](http://www.bongariliitto.fi/matkakertomukset/Afrikka/Uganda/Uganda_2007-10-11_Hottola.pdf)

Jos Wanton: <http://www.birdingreports.nl/ugandapart1.htm>

Rossouw & Sacchi: *Where to watch birds in Uganda*

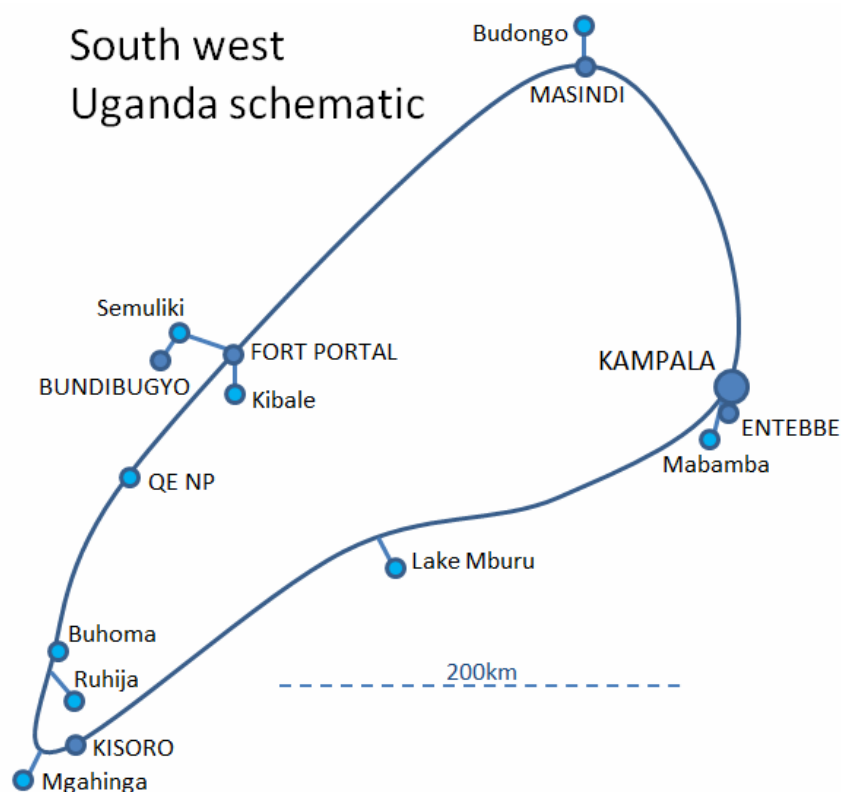
And so we had 14 full days to play with...

### Itinerary, travel, weather and accommodation

Take a look at our schematic and itinerary below and compare the travel times between sites. You'll soon see the difference in getting from, say, Entebbe to Mabamba (a horrible 1.5 hours), and from Kampala to Masindi (3 to 4 hours but a piece of cake). The good roads are comfortable and fast; the bad roads are purgatory and very, very slow. There is plenty of construction going on however (courtesy of the Chinese from what we could see), so things should only improve. If all the rough track was changed to asphalt, it would make an enormous difference to what a visiting birder could achieve in a limited amount of time.

Long drives were always punctuated with birding stops, some with great results, but the longest drives on the worst roads were almost unbearable. Keeping one step ahead of the punctures and various other mechanical problems was something of a game. On several occasions, Martin was off to town to make vehicle or tyre repairs while we went birding with our fingers crossed.

We were lucky with the weather as even during the dry seasons it can be very wet. We lost just half a day to rain and that was at Ruhija. A morning in bed was most welcome by Day 11, and in the afternoon the birds were jumping. All the accommodation was perfectly acceptable for a birding trip. My ratings below are roughly based on the overall experience - quality of rooms, available food, service, ambiance, etc.



Birding and travel, August 2011	Approx. travel times	Accommodation
3rd - land Entebbe 0745, Mabamba am - NIGHT MASINDI	1.5hrs + 5hrs	Court View Hotel**
4th - day at Budongo - NIGHT MASINDI	1.5hr	Court View Hotel**
5th - long drive Budongo to Kibale - NIGHT KIBALE	9hrs	Chimp Guest House***
6th - day at Kibale - NIGHT KIBALE	<1hr	Chimp Guest House***
7th - Kibale am - NIGHT BUNDIBUGYO	3.5hrs	Vanilla Lodge*
8th - day at Semuliki - NIGHT FORT PORTAL	3hrs	Tooro Resort Hotel*
9th - day at QE NP - NIGHT QE NP	2hrs	Mweya Hostel***
10th - QE NP am & Buhoma/Bwindi pm - NIGHT BUHOMA	3hrs	Community Rest Camp**
11th - day at Buhoma - NIGHT BUHOMA	none	Community Rest Camp**
12th - day at Buhoma - NIGHT RUHIJA	2hrs	Gorilla Friends Camp**
13th - day with rain at Ruhija - NIGHT RUHIJA	<1hr	Gorilla Friends Camp**
14th - day at Ruhija - NIGHT KISORO	3hrs	Tourist Hotel*
15th - Mgahinga am, long drive to Mburu - NIGHT MBURU	9hrs	Mantana Tented Camp***
16th - Lake Mburu am & Mabamba pm - NIGHT ENTEBBE	6.5hrs + 1.5hrs	Central Hotel**
17th - depart Entebbe 0905	10mins to the airport	-

## Sites

A few notes on each major site follow plus some of the birding highlights. I can supply a comprehensive trip list with locations on request (including every **greenbul**, **cisticola** and **illadopsis**).

**Mabamba** is an essential destination these days on a short trip for almost-guaranteed **Shoebill**. We scored on our boat trip soon after landing at Entebbe and just had time to return at the end to search successfully for **Lesser Jacana** and **Long-toed Lapwing**, being lucky to see another (or the same) **Shoebill**. A brief, fly-over **Blue Swallow** was also welcome! There is a more reliable **Blue Swallow** site close by, which would be a good option if the species was a priority and time allowed.

**Budongo** was attractive for a long list of birds seen nowhere else in Uganda - some of which are really special - plus a decent chance of bumping into **Chimpanzees** (no such luck for us though here). Highlights were brief **Nahan's Francolin**, cracking **White-spotted Flufftails**, **Black-shouldered & Pennant-winged Nightjars**, striking **Spotted Greenbuls**, **Chocolate-backed**, **African Dwarf & Shining Blue Kingfishers**, **Ituri Batis**, **Forest Robin**, **Forest & Chestnut-capped Flycatchers**, and **Sabine's & Cassin's Spinetails**.

The gruelling drive from Budongo to Kibale was broken with several excellent stops yielding amongst others **White-crested Turaco**, **White-winged Warbler**, **Papyrus Gonylek**, **Grey-headed Oliveback** and **Brown Twinspot**.

**Kibale**. We gave ourselves two days here to search for **pittas** and the limited range of other species available, with an option to leave early if things went well. Mornings were key as the **pittas** are known to display just before dawn and for a short period after. Hearing a displaying bird should allow you to get close enough to locate it and try for views as it gets light. Well, we heard a few displays - a deep, short burr of wing beats - thrilling in itself but not enough to let us get very near. Alfred assured us the displays were linked to rain and in the event, our stay was rather dry. A couple of isolated, single displays were actually heard later on our first morning and as we quickly approached the area, something dropped out of a tree and away. Excruciatingly, Gavin then heard the distinctive whirring wings of a flushed **pitta** as we all searched for the bird. So no views of **Green-breasted Pitta** for us - and perhaps I will have to go back!

Our forest ranger at Kibale was Jessica. Charming and knowledgeable, she helped us locate **Red-chested Owlet** amongst others and briefly saw a **Blue-throated Roller**, a species that eluded the rest of us. Was it perhaps Jessica who guided Petri at Semuliki back in 2007...?

We knew that Kibale was another great spot for **Chimpanzees** and we had some luck when an adult male and two smaller individuals passed close to the trail giving some brief but nice views. An unexpected and exciting encounter and certainly a trip highlight.

**Semuliki** is a fantastic stretch of primary, lowland forest 'on the other side' of Uganda's western mountains. Our day was just a taster but we saw an awful lot of good birds. Remote and beautiful, I wouldn't have been too surprised if Tarzan had appeared on a swinging liana... The Vanilla Hotel was also good - a surprise after dire accounts in trip reports so perhaps significant improvements have been made recently.

Our best birds included **Yellow-throated Cuckoo**, **Yellow-throated Nicator**, **Red-billed Dwarf**, **White-crested & Black-casqued Wattled Hornbills**, **Fire-crested Alethe**, **White-breasted & Pale-fronted Nigrofinches** and **Red-headed Bluebill**. There was no sign of **Rufous-sided Broadbill** however, or **Green-breasted Pitta**, the latter being present but apparently seen only occasionally by the forest guards (and Alfred has heard a display on one occasion).

**Queen Elizabeth NP** provided a nice, short break from the shadowy jungle and confusing **greenbuls**. Cruising round in the van with the pop-up top raised was great fun. We found **Lions** in the savannah, the tree climbing group having retreated to a remote area during our visit, and lots of other animals including **Elephant** and **Buffalo**. **Brown-chested Lapwings** and **African Skimmers** were carefully sort out, and late or early drives produced **Small Button-quail**, **African Crake**, **Dwarf Bittern**, **Verreaux's Eagle-owl**, **Black Coucal** and **White-tailed Lark** amongst others.



**Buhoma** was predictably excellent. Top birds seen included exciting **Red-chested Flufftails** in the damp, village farmland; and in the forest, **Bar-tailed Trogon**, displaying **African Broadbill**, **Black Bee-eater**, **Black-faced Rufous Warbler**, **Woodhouse's Antpecker**, **Red-throated Alethe**, **Equatorial Akalat**, **White-bellied Robin-chat** and the very beautiful **Kivu Ground-thrush**.

A calling **Short-tailed Warbler** defeated us on our first day and led to careful scrutiny of the remaining itinerary over dinner. A minor change gave us an extra half day on site but after another epic attempt in the morning, we were about to give up. One last try - like you do - and success. We all had great views, though some of us had to crawl into the **warbler's** chosen thicket on hands and knees to get them; and **Short-tailed Warbler** instantly became a strong contender for bird of the trip.

A quick insight into **Gorilla** tracking: one family group was just across the valley from the Buhoma tourist lodges, and Alfred even heard a male beat its chest (while we were talking so we missed it). The valley trail was accordingly closed and there was no way you could stumble upon them without laying yourself open to crippling fines. The official tracking group who were allocated this family the next day not surprisingly found them after just 10 minutes. Another group tracked for 10 *hours* on the same day to find their family. Make of it what you will. All I know is that I would love to see one one day.

We passed through **The Gap** after leaving Buhoma but our time there was short after making the extra effort for the **warbler**. Our couple of hours was quiet on a cloudy afternoon and we saw little of note, perhaps missing our best chance to have caught up with **Blue-throated Roller** or some extra **raptor** species.

**Ruhija.** We ascended to a very damp and misty mountain resort causing no little worry as this was our slot to hike for **African Green Broadbill**. Our fireside dinner was rather subdued... We woke to solid rain, which thankfully eased off after lunch but left us too little time to walk to Mbwinda Swamp. A busy couple of hours birding the local, roadside forest allowed us to make good inroads to the high mountain specials and went some way to ease the **broadbill** tension. We heard a brief **Rwenzori Nightjar** after dark but didn't manage any views.



Thankfully, the next day dawned dry and we were able to get to the swamp in good time. We'd already been told the exciting news that a pair of **broadbills** was actively building a nest but the previous day's rain could have washed it out. Add to that the fact that this was the pair's 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt of the season and we were not optimistic. As we arrived, it was clear that the nest had survived the night, and after viewing it from several angles, we eventually made out a rotund, greenish head peering out of a neat entrance hole - a bird was incubating. A short wait and the second **broadbill** flew in to take over on the nest. Fantastic.

We recently learnt that this **broadbill** nest was ultimately successful. It's great to know that a new generation of bizarre, stubby, green frugivores occupies this remote swamp-side valley...

Other highlights included **Mountain Buzzard**, **African Crowned Eagle**, **Grauer's Rush & Grauer's Warblers**, **Stripe-breasted Tit**, **Rwenzori Batis** and a cracking **Lagden's Bush-shrike**.

Our short visit to **Mgahinga** focussed on **Rwenzori Turaco**, which proved quite straightforward. **Shelley's Crimsonwing** would have been nice but we saw none on our morning walk. Brief views of a second **Kivu Ground-thrush** were welcome, plus **Rwenzori Double-collared Sunbird** and **Western Green Tinkerbird**.

**Lake Mburu** was a fantastic place to recover after one of the most punishing drives of the trip. All four of us had chequered histories looking for **African Finfoot** but the lake lived up to its reputation as the easiest place on earth to see one. Skilfully dodging the many **Hippos** in the lake, Andrew our boat man got us close to six; males, females and even a juvenile. Lovely views of displaying **White-backed Night-herons** and a brief **Red-faced Barbet** were other highlights here.

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Uganda was superb. With hindsight, there would be few changes, if any, to improve our final 2-week itinerary to target the range-restricted species and other specialities - as long as a few long drives are acceptable. Having some flexibility was valuable; in our case to work around one problem **warbler**; to allow for half a day of rain; and to take advantage of extra time at the end with a return to Mabamba. Assistance from an expert guide such as Alfred certainly allowed us to see many of the best species in a short period of time.

Our thanks go to Alfred, Martin and Agatha. We sincerely wish them well in their tourism, farming, driving and guiding enterprises.

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*photos by Gavin & Mark*