

THE BIZARRE AND THE BEAUTIFUL – BIRDING IN A UGANDAN RHINO SANCTUARY

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The Lugogo swamp runs along the whole of the southern border of Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary in Uganda. With an early start to arrive at the water's edge at daybreak and after a short walk, the chances are high that there will be a lone Shoebill Stork in the shorter grass in front of the tall papyrus reeds. A solitary bird that begs the peace and



Shoebill Stork



Swamp birding

quiet of the swamp, it is, according to the African Bird Club, "one of the great African species, one of the major challenges in bird-watching and always a bird to cherish".

The Shoebill really is a challenge! It is classified as being "nowhere common". It prefers remote, secluded and extensive permanent swamp where it will stand silently watching for prey. It is almost impossible to get close to without it flying off so standard photography in the early morning light and from 100 metres or more yields limited results. The keen birder with a telescope or specialist camera has nothing to fear. Nevertheless, just to watch this bizarre bird through binoculars is a thrill for all. Ziwa have recorded as many as six Shoebills together and a two or three day stay is all but certain to result in a sighting.

Having found the Shoebill, the next action has to be a ride in a traditional



Malachite Kingfisher

swamp canoe, the mokoro, whose flat bottom and human muscle power means a slow and noiseless passage along the narrow channels looking for wetland birds. Perhaps the most iconic and beautiful is the Malachite Kingfisher with its vivid colours, diving into the water for food. Always in attendance is the African Jacana which can be seen swooping over the swamp grass, then hovering before landing. A range of storks, geese, kingfishers, herons, cormorants and darters are



African cuckoo



Hadada Ibis



Dry birding



Mvule Trail



White-crested Turaco



Opio Raymond and Taban Rashid, senior rhino ranger/guides specialists for bird identification and monitoring training

among the swamp species that can be found.

Back on dry land and further into the sanctuary, there are two further distinct habitats – savanna grassland with bush and woodland. Bee-eaters, shrikes and kingfishers inhabit the savanna grasslands where the Hadada Ibis is ever present while cuckoos, warblers, woodpeckers, barbets, thrushes,

flycatchers and sunbirds favour the woodlands. The Thick-billed Cuckoo was only discovered in Uganda in 2011 and can be seen at Ziwa. In either of the two habitats, eagles, kestrels, weavers and parrots are found and you can be sure there will be a range of starlings and the aptly named Common Bulbul.

It may seem strange to go to Uganda's only home to wild rhinos to look for birds but it is the very fact that it is a well protected area (for the rhinos) that birds, all 326 (and counting) species, thrive there. Effectively there is only one main road for all vehicles so there is minimal noise and disturbance throughout the 69 sq km. Not only is the solitude good for the birds but it makes for a particularly pleasant birding experience.

The potential of Ziwa as a special bird area in Uganda has been realised and it now contributes to the Uganda bird population monitoring scheme carried out twice a year under the auspices of NatureUganda. Ten transects of 200

metres length have been identified throughout the sanctuary that characterise the different habitats. Twice a year, each transect is walked and the birds seen and heard are recorded on a special field recording sheet. This technique enables changes to bird species populations to be highlighted but also ensures a complete knowledge of the species that can be found in different parts of the sanctuary.

Ziwa sent two of their senior rhino ranger/guides for specialist bird identification and monitoring training and they in turn are training the remaining rhino guides. Ask Taban Rashid or Opio Raymond any question about Ziwa's birdlife or where best to see a specific species and they will have the answers. With this knowledge, Taban and Opio have created four 'bird trails' covering varying habitats within the sanctuary where most of the sought after birds can be found.

Two such examples are the Mvule Trail which starts in woodland,

SPOTLIGHT



Saddle-billed Stork bears the colours of the national flag of Uganda.

progresses into savannah grass and open bush and ends in closed bush and the Amuka Trail which skirts around the newly established mid range Amuka Lodge. This trail, of some 2.5km, takes in such woodland specialities as the White-crested Turaco and the Double-toothed Barbet.

One serious birder booked for three nights stay at Amuka Lodge just to record the sounds of the Grey Woodpecker. Within 30 minutes of arriving, that job was done which left, of course, ample time to visit the only wild rhinos in



Grey Woodpecker

Uganda too. Another birder thought they saw a Papyrus Gonolek going into the tall papyrus in the swamp so followed in until up to the waist in water, but without success. A Speckle-breasted Woodpecker sighting was the target for an avid enthusiast whose appreciation was matched by a sizeable tip.

Ziwa is home to three of the Uganda Red List category birds – the Shoebill rated as vulnerable, the Grey Crowned Crane rated endangered and the Hooded Vulture also rated as endangered.

The Hooded Vulture is regularly seen following grass burning carried out to improve the habitat for the rhinos while the Grey Crowned Crane can be seen at Ziwa in large numbers after the rains in March/April and is the national emblem of Uganda. The Ugandan flag has at its centre piece a Crowned Crane within the stripes of red, black and yellow – the same colours as the bill of the very common Saddle-billed Stork which can be found in both the permanent freshwater swamp and in the midst of dry grassland areas of Ziwa. Any of the



Black headed heron

Ziwa habitats is suitable for the Grey Headed Heron.

In October 2012 Uganda was declared the Preferred Birding Destination with its conducive climate and good forest cover, which is the perfect environment for birds all year round. Ziwa, located in the centre of Uganda some three hours drive north from Kampala is a real gem for the birder – be it serious twitcher or avid enthusiast – with its vast array of species in a largely undisturbed environment and varying habitats. ●



Ross's Turaco

TABAN'S TOP TEN FOR THE SERIOUS BIRDER

- SHOEBILL
- ROSS'S TURACO
- WHITE CRESTED TURACO
- AFRICAN DWARF KINGFISHER
- THICK-BILLED CUCKOO
- WHITE-SHOULDERED TIT
- AFRICAN GOLDEN ORIOLE
- HOLUB'S GOLDEN WEAVER
- SPECKLE-BREASTED WOODPECKER
- YELLOW-BELLIED HYLIOTA



Grey Crowned Crane – the national bird and symbol of Uganda.

OPIO'S OPTIONS FOR THE AVID ENTHUSIAST

- BATELEUR (EAGLE)
- MARTIAL EAGLE
- DIEDERIK CUCKOO
- GREY CROWNED CRANE
- RED-SHOULDERED CUCKOO-SHRIKE
- BLACK AND WHITE SHRIKE-FLYCATCHER
- NUBIAN WOODPECKER
- BARE FACED GO-AWAY-BIRD
- PIED KINGFISHER
- BRUCE'S GREEN-PIGEON

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To view the list of bird species found in Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary, visit: www.ziwarhino.com

AUTHOR'S COMMENT

Taking photographs of Ziwa birds to accompany this article with a camera/lens bought for capturing rhinos was not an easy task – and even then they often flew off prematurely. Most birders are more than satisfied with a good view by binoculars or they will have the right photographic equipment for the task.