

## **Uganda birding trip November, 2007**

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# Uganda birding trip, November 2007

In October, November we were four keen birdwatchers, all from Stockholm, Sweden that spent roughly ten days in Uganda birding. This is the trip report and quite some few photos. All bird shots except for the Angola swallow by Björn Christensson. All other photos shot by Klacke.

It is a bit of a gamble to visit Uganda in November, the autumn rains end at the beginning of November. We were lucky though, we did indeed have some rain, but it just happened to fall at convenient times, when were on the road, or during the evenings.

The birders are me, Claes (klacke) Wikström, my son Mårten Wikström, Björn Christensson and finally Robert Thor.



Klacke Wikström      Mårten Wikström      Björn Christensson      Robert Thor

Robert missed the flight in Amsterdam, but was eager enough to not miss the trip in its entirety by simply paying up dearly for a little detour over Dubai. He promptly arrived at Kampala some 12 hours after us.

## Friday, Oct 26

Arrived late in the dark to Entebbe, Kampala. As we usually do on our trips, we took a bet on the plane as to which would be the first spotted species. I went for "Hooded Vulture" and lost. Marten spotted a couple of "Black headed herons" in the floodlight at the airport

We were picked up by our guide, Alfred with whom we had made an arrangement for a full package deal. Alfred, a driver, a fairly ok Land cruiser Jeep and all food and accommodations for \$100 per day. It is highly recommended to use a guide when birding in Uganda. The birding can sometimes be difficult, especially in the jungle where more than good familiarity with the different calls is essential. Alfred was more that excellent and his <http://ugandabirdguides.org/> page is here

Drove into Kampala where we spent the night at a nice, but slightly shabby place called "The Hot Chili" or something.

## Saturday, Oct 27

This is our first day of birding in Uganda. We're just the three of us. Robert is in Dubai waiting for the next flight. The plan is that he'll hook up with us tomorrow morning when we're at Murchison Falls.

Woke early and started eagerly to bird in the surroundings of the hotel, Hooded vulture in the trees and African Thrush on the grounds.

Anyway, we have been on the road all day driving from Kampala to Murchison Falls which is a huge National Park in north west corner of Uganda. The roads are good but the driving has been slow since we have been

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birding from the car all day.

It's always special the first day, everything is new. Not just the bird species, but also the country. It felt as if the birding en route was a bit poor but when we in the evening made our daily tick off list we had seen a total of 100 species all together. Nothing spectacular but "Dusky blue flycatcher" got us excited during a pee break.

Other noteworthy observations today include *Narina Trogon*, *Klaas Cuckoo* and *Marabou Storks* in Kampala downtown acting as garbage men collecting litter. Apparently the folks in the cities even encourage the Marabou Storks in the cities because they are far more efficient at keeping the streets clean than the equivalent human counterparts.

Furthermore we enjoyed a large flock of *Abdims Stork* taking advantage of the termic winds. We also saw *Hoopoe* and *Yellow-billed Kites* at lunch As it turned out later, the *Black Kites* were common in all cities all over the country. We never saw the kites on the countryside, only where people lived.

We spent the night at Red Chili Lodge at Murchison Falls. Fairly ok lodge with bungalows, tents and a decent bar. We slept in bungalows.

Camp was filled with Warthogs - - cool.



The everywhere occurring Grey-headed sparrow.



Abdims storks chilling in a tree.



Ugly and powerful, Marabou Stork.

## Sunday, Oct 28

Woke early and did some leisure birding before breakfast. Saw *Silverbird*, *Spotted morning thrush* and *Red-winged grey warbler*. The warbler was rare and Alfred got all worked up. We are still fairly ignorant as to what is rare and what is not. Yesterday we all got all excited over a *Speckled mousebird* when it later turns out they are everywhere.



African palmthrush a.k.a Spotted morning thrush which IMHO is a far



Silverbird, common in Murchison. We never saw one anywhere else



Red-throated Bee-eater, spectacular and with a lot of

Saturday, Oct 27

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better name.

though.

colour.

After breakfast we drove down to the Nile and took the ferry across towards the savanna on the north side. Finally we are a fully assembled group since Robban Thor joined us at breakfast. At the north side of the Nile, just at the ferry we immediately saw *White crested helmet shrike*, *Yellow throated greenbul*, *Red throated bee-eater* and an *African Darter* flying by.

We took off in the good 4-wheel-drive jeep where we could raise the top. We were not allowed to wander about by foot in the park, and for a good reason. The park was filled with fierce looking Water Buffaloes

We drove slowly through the beautiful Savanna country, filled with Elephants and spotted:

*Abyssinian ground hornbill*, *Nubian Woodpecker*, *Spotted Thick-knee*, *Denhams bustard* *Isabelline Whetear* *Carmine Bee-eater* and many more species. Fantastic abundance of everything.



Abbyssinian Ground Hornbill, looks like the devils right hand sidekick.

The spotted thickknee, just next to the Nile.

A Dark chanting goshawk - unmistakable.



African Pied Wagtail.

Black-headed lapwing.

Palm-nut vulture.



Isabelline shrike, a rarity at home.

Isabelline wheatear, also a rarity at home.

Batteleur, we saw some in Murchison, and later on many more in Queen Elisabeth.

Took the ferry back to the Chili Lodge for a late lunch. Alfred pushed on and we drove towards Masindi. Took a one hour walk in some hills on the road, an escarpment, and spotted *Cinnamon-breasted rock bunting*

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and a *Tawny Eagle*. Heard a *Foxy Cisticola* but never saw it.

Finally arrived in the dark to Masindi where we entered a hotel which felt almost luxury. Bar, shower, food, beer, sleep.

### Monday, Oct 29

Left really early from Masindi, a sturdy breakfast at 5.30 served in the dark by really helpful personnel at the hotel. Drove maybe an hour to Royal Mile in Budongo forest. Local school kids joined us initially on the walk into the forest.

Budongo is an old protected rain forest with a variety of species populating the canopy. That can put some considerable strain on the neck of the keen birder. Looking up for several hours is tiresome. Highlights at the Royal Mile included:

The extremely hard to spot *Ituri Batis*, *Chocolate-backed kingfisher*, *Black-capped Apalis*, *Black-throated Apalis*, *Cassin's Hawk Eagle* and *Blue-shouldered robin-chat*.

Joining us on the Royal Mile was a local apprentice guide who was risen in a village inside the Budongo forest. On the middle of the Mile, he spotted 3 chimps sitting high up in a tree. We stood right under the chimps when one of them decided to pee on us from the canopy.

At the very end of the walk, the apprentice guide (Ramon) heard a *White spotted Flufftail*. It has an incredibly cool sound. We played the sound from my Ipod, and the Flufftail came closer calling all the time. Marten was the only one to see it.

Had lunch at Njabie Forest Collage where we saw: *African Citronil*, *Ross Turaco* and *Yellow-fronted Canary* while drinking our beer and eating a fairly boring beef stew.

It's not easy to concentrate on the food when so many spectacular birds are surrounding the lunch area.

In the afternoon we continued birding in the Budongo forest. Not at all as many birds in the afternoon as before lunch. In general, bird activity during the week was low in the afternoon. We saw several "hard-to-identify" Greenbuls and Bulbuls. Alfred knew them all by sound but it was hard for us to make certain identifications. We played *Toro Olive Greenbul* from the Ipod, it responded well but never showed. The *Toro Olive* is a skulker. We did however identify: *Green Crombec*, *Green Hylia*, *White throated Greenbul* and *Cinnamon-Chested Wattle-eye*. We also saw our first *Western Black-headed Oriole* in the forest. One other little nice "hard-to-identify" bird was the tiny *Sooty Flycatcher*.

When we got out from the forest it started to rain heavily and we sought shelter under a roof. While waiting for the rain to stop, *Western Nicator* called with it's characteristic sound.

A *Grey Headed Negro Finch* landed in a dead tree next to a marvellous 17 cm *Superb Sunbird*, one of the few sunbirds that are unmistakable due to its size.

Waited for the the rain to stop and then birded our way slowly back to the Forest Collage where we were planning to spend the night. Saw *White browed robin-chat* and *Didriks Cuckoo*. Dinner was served extremely slowly. The guy opening the beer bottles did it in ultraaaa-rapid. The shadow girls streaking along the walls acted as if on some weird zombie drug - spooky. Went as usual to bed early.



Black-capped apalis.



Yellow-fronted canary.



Red-chested Sunbird

## Tuesday, Oct 30

Rose 5.30 for some early morning birding. Bjorn had a *Spotted Eagle Owl* on the hotel roof early in the morning. We slowly walked off in the beautiful African sunrise. Saw the *White browed robin-chat* again, this time we saw it better. Shy bird, a skulker.

Several new species during the early morning walk:

*Compact Weaver*, *Cardinal Quela*, *Blue throated Roller*, *Marsh Tchagra* and *Redheaded Bluebill*.

After a while the driver, Gideon, came with the jeep and we took off on dirty mud roads. Alfred called out *Cardinal Quela* just when the jeep passed a mudhole and the jeep got seriously stuck in the mud. We were basically fucked until some strong locals came by and helped us to push the jeep out of the mud hole. Close shave.

We drove a short distance to a beautiful bridge that crossed a river. There we saw an old friend from home, the *Grey wagtail* and a nice view of the *Black necked weaver*

Drove off on small muddy roads to a late breakfast at Hoima.

Bjorn, Marten and Robban couldn't concentrate on the food due to the abundance of birds in the garden where we were lunching. Several interesting raptors flying by and *Baglafechts weaver* in the trees.

Drove fast to Fort Portal in heavy rain worrying about the supposedly treacherous road down to Semliki on the other side of the Rwenzori Mountains. Had a quick lunch in Fort Portal and set off towards the Semliki lowland jungle. Stopped a couple of kilometers ahead of the fairly low-budget Camp Sempaja where we birded our way towards the camp.

Saw not much except our first *White thighed hornbill*. Had dinner with kerosene lamps and sent the driver Gideon to the next village to buy beer. Went to bed at 10. Not much birding this day, mostly boring driving.



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Compact Weaver, spotted along the road from the car.

Common Fiscal, everywhere around Fort Portal.

Greybacked shrike. Seen all through the week.

### Wednesday, Oct 31

Rose early as usual and did some birding around the camp before breakfast. Had a *Velvet mantled Drongo*, *Piping Hornbill* a group of chattering *Leaflove*, *Little Sparrowhawk*, *Grossbeak weaver*, and a *Mariko Sunbird*

After the initial, very good, morning birding we had a superbly prepared breakfast. Coffee, Spanish omelet and tasty local sausages.

Set off onto a trail leading straight into the Semliki jungle. Marvellous jungle path.

Birding in the jungle is hard and time consuming. Alfred heard a lot of birds, whistled them or we played them on the Ipod but never got to see them. In order to pick all, or at least many, species in Semliki one will have to stay there for several days. Species we Ipodded, and then also heard, but never got to see were: *Cappucinio Babbler*, *Red-tailed Bristlebill* which called out loud all day. We also missed the *Yellow throated Nicator*, *Olive backed Cameroptera*, *Gray's Malimbe* and *Black bellied Seedcracker*. Exciting but goddamn irritating. Close but no shave.

Nevertheless, we did see an enormous amount of birds on that fantastic trail. We could easily have spent more time there, we got the feeling that there were many more species lurking in the background. Now to the highlights of the trail. We saw: *African Piculet*, *Fiery Breasted bushshrike* (New tick for Alfred, got him all worked up), *Yellow throated cuckoo*, *Black bee-eater*, *Scaly breasted Illadopsis*, *Chestnut breasted Negrofinch*, *Redbilled dwarf hornbill*, *Greyheaded Sunbird* and *Crested Malimbe*

Followed our own tracks back on the same muddy path in the light rain back to the really poor village where the trail started. Apparently the disgusting organization World vision was sponsoring the people living here. This is one of those fucked-up groups that operate according to the old school "if-you-believe-in-our-god-we-give-you-food" tactic. Sickening. Don't understand why they are allowed to operate in a country like Uganda which after all is fairly developed.

Went straight to the Hot Springs which are two beautiful seismic springs. The first is called the female spring and the second, the larger, is called the male spring. At the female spring we saw a *Three banded plover* and at the second, the male spring we had some excellent birding. Large flocks of Olive doves with the occasional *White naped dove* mixed in.

While visiting the Semliki NF, we had a local ranger, Moses who accompanied us all day. I really don't know but it was procedure. When I pothole-jumped myself out to the female spring, Moses tagged along and told me this weird story how the locals considered the springs holy. The story went something along the lines of that every second full moon, the men went to the male spring with a goat and the women went to the female spring with another goat and then chopped their goats in honor of the holy sulphur spring - or something like that. Equally confused as our celebration of for example Santa Lucia.

At the male spring we saw several friends from home such as *Green sandpiper*, *Wood sandpiper* and *Marsh sandpiper*

We also saw the trips first *Sacred Ibis*. The highlight of the hot springs were two magnificent *Black casced hornbills*



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Went in the car to Vanilla lodge some 30 kilometers away from Semliki for an excellent dinner and beers. Doing the daily tick off list we count a total of 64 species which was a bit of a disappointment. Going to bed with African disco music in the background.



Northern doublecollared sunbird. Seen along the road at the camp.



Shikra, similar to Lizard buzzard and to the Littel Sparrowhawk.



Black bee-eater. High in the trees in Semliki.

### Thursday, Nov 1

Rose in the dark from the semi-luxury Vanilla Lodge and drove back towards where we came from. Made a short stop in the surroundings where we spent the previous night and spotted a *White crested hornbill*. I saw one the earlier day but was unjustly accused of hallucination. Drove on towards the second escarpment between Semliki and Fort Portal. The escarpment turned out to be excellent and there were birds everywhere. We slowly walked the gravel road and saw *Crested Francolin*, *Grey Bush shrike*, *Green backed Ermemolela*, *Penduline Tit* and *Rock Martin*

Everybody also got a very good view of the *White browed robin-chat*. The car overheated in the uphill but that was easily fixed with some water from a nearby creek. From the beautiful hills overlooking the Semliki jungle we drove to Queen Elisabeth National park for a lunch at a \$250/night tent camp called Hippo Camp". Excellent birding there and very good chicken lunch. Again, almost impossible to concentrate on the food when the birding is so good. During lunch we saw *Red billed Quela*, *African Hawk eagle*, *Stilt* and *Red chested Sunbird*

Alfred was hurrying us up, eager to depart to Bwindi which is where he had his house and family.

The drive from Queen Elisabeth NP to Bwindi was hellish. The driver drove like a maniac at 70 km/h through villages crawling with kids on a barely visible road. Driver had a death wish but we eventually arrived to the camp in Bwindi in the dark. It was an absolutely excellent camp called Buhome Community Rest Camp. Very good place. They have no electricity but it is the best place we have been to so far.

On the road from Queen Elisabeth to Bwindi we had some good roadside spottings with the White headed barbet being the top bird. Alfred was pushing for time but when even he stopped the car and shouted "OUT", we knew there was something special coming up, namely the *White headed barbet*. We also saw the *Arrow marked babbler* and a couple of *Fan tailed widowbirds* on the road.

The *Red necked quail* and the Sooty chat were extremely common on the road during the day.

### Friday, Nov 2

Woke up from the best sleep so far in Uganda. The higher altitude of Bwindi brings cold nights and good fresh air. I didn't sleep to well in the lowlands, but here in Bwindi I slept like a log and needed it.

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We had a great breakfast with eggs and sausages in the tent camp. Set off on what is called the "main trail" for the best birding day so far. We had packed lunch and spent almost 10 hours in the jungle.



My brain is on overload from the amount of new species we saw today. It was a complete whirlwind with everybody calling out amazing observations all the time. It is Alfred's backyard and he knows all the birds here by heart. If he was sometimes a bit hesitant, or even erroneous on raptors and waders, in this highland rain forest he was brilliant. Especially the sounds, he was able to whistle the most obscure calls. Impressive.

Highlights on the Bwindi Trail were: *Emerald Cuckoo*, *Wilcox Honeyguide*, *Bartailed Trogon*, *Handsome Francolin*, *Blackfaced rufous warbler*, *Redfaced woodland warbler*, *Rwenzori Batis*, *Many coloured bushshrike*, *Luhders bushshrike* and *Cabanis Greenbul*

Came back to the tent camp just when it started to rain heavily. Thunderstorm, a beer and a smoke together with Martin in a wall-less hut - tranquil.

Great birding day, best so far. Also the dinner was best so far, fried fish, mashed potatoes and a cabbage casserole.



Emerald Cuckoo

Rwenzori Batis

Narina Trogon

## Saturday, Nov 3, Gorilla tracking day

As usual we rose early in the morning before sunrise. Breakfast was fried eggs and sausages. Gathered at 8.00 at the Gorilla tracking post where we were briefed about the procedures and the rules.

There were all together 3 parties consisting of 8 tourists in each group. The procedure is that they have trackers that first go to the spot where the great apes were last seen the previous day. Then they follow the track to where the apes spent the night and finally they follow the track from there.

This time the tracks were confusing and it took some time until we picked up the right fresh trail. We followed the tracks for a couple of hours

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Beginning of the uphill struggle towards the gorillas



Björn and his luckystar alias his bought porter



In the djungle with the obligatory armed guard



The happy author waiting the trackers to pick up the trail.

and finally found the group of 8 Gorillas. One large silver back and several females where one had a baby clinging to her.

We spent maybe an hour watching the apes feeding and farting. Especially the load farting was memorable - powerful.



Left the apes and had our packed lunch on the way down on a beautiful green patch overlooking the lush Bwindi valley.

The birding during the day was obviously poor. It was way too straining to walk in the thickly vegetated jungle in order to be able to concentrate on the birds. Nevertheless we saw our first *Chestnut breasted bee-eater* and a *Pink footed puffback*. When we came back, we decided to drive out and head for Ruhidja where they have a great guesthouse with an open fire. Now I sit resting in front of the fire, drinking beer and getting glimpses of the Angola swallows swarming around the house. They even nest under the house roof. Life is good.

## Sunday, Nov 4

Last day, basically a boring travel day with 3 or 4 stops for birding.

The first stop was on top of the mountain after Ruhidja. Unfortunately we had a slow rain falling with lots of giant worms on the road and the bird activity was low. The area looked superb and we had the feeling that if the sun would break out, the forest would explode with bird activity. This was at high altitude, almost 3000 meters and we could expect several so far unseen species.

In the rain we saw: *Stripe breasted tit*, *Mountain Greenbul*, *Rwenzori Batis*, *Black headed waxbill* and *Chubbs Cisticola*

We drove off down the mountain in continuous rain had a quick luxury lunch

Saturday, Nov 3, Gorilla tracking day

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The next stop was a Kalu swamp which was a very good spot. Here Bjorn finally got to see the *Lesser Jacana* which pleased him a lot. Great spot, unfortunately we spent less than an hour there. We saw our first *Yellow bishop*, *Stone chat*, *Blue headed coucal*, *Golden backed weaver*, *Papyrus Canary* and *Dark Capped Yellow warbler*

In all the open-water clearings, otters were swimming around - cool.

Took off hectically heading for the last stop where we would make a try for the enigmatic shoebill

Arrived late to the Mabamba wetlands which is a sure spot for the ancient looking bird. A long canoe was awaiting us and we set off out into the huge papyrus swamp. Lots of birds everywhere, for example we saw our first *Saddle billed stork* on the trip. *Grey rumped swallows* flying around everywhere. Finally at the very last moment we got a very good view of the *Shoebill* just when it took off for roosting. Had we arrived just 10 minutes later we would have missed the Ugandan iconic bird

A perfect ending on a marvellous birding trip.

The grand total was 405 observed species during the week which must be considered good.

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A HTML version of the report with more pictures, as well as a HD movie of the trip can be found at <http://www.hyber.org/Uganda>



African goldenbreasted bunting.



Black and white casqued hornbill, seen everywhere.



Copper sunbird, common throughout.



Croaking Cisticola



Grey Kestrel.



Greyheaded kingfisher

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Heuglins francolin



Redbilled Firefinch



Southern red bishop



Western green tinkerbird.



Scarlet chested sunbird



Wiretailed swallow



Lesser striped swallow.



Striped Kingfisher



Black-throated apalis.