Full Detailed Itinerary - Uganda and Rwanda: Shoebill and Albertine Rift Endemics

Day 1: Arrival in Entebbe

We arrive in Entebbe. While the capital Kampala is a manic city, Entebbe is some 40 km away, on the shores of Lake Victoria and is much more relaxed. It's also incredibly "birdy", with wonderful species like Gray Parrot, Ross's Turaco, and Woodland Kingfisher all over the landscape. If time allows, we will make an afternoon visit to the beautifully landscaped Entebbe botanical gardens right on the shores of the lake. Along with a bounty of more common species, our first birds here could include Orange Weaver and Red-chested Sunbird, and is a perfect introduction to the trip with easy birding in an open environment.

Day 2: Entebbe to Lake Mburo NP

Our first major mission of the trip is locating Uganda's most famous bird: the Shoebill. We drive to the edge of a swamp where we board small boats that allow access to its shallow channels. With a bit of luck, we will catch sight of this primordial-looking beast standing in the swamp or soaring overhead. It is generally assumed that the Shoebill is confined to the papyrus, but this is not the case, and the bird is usually found in the low vegetation between papyrus groves. In these open areas we expect prize sightings of Lesser Jacana and Yellow-billed Duck. We will also bird the thick papyrus stands where we watch for Blue-breasted Bee-eater, Swamp Flycatcher, Papyrus Gonolek, and Greater Swamp Warblers crossing the small channels between papyrus stands. We'll spend the rest of the day driving to Lake Mburo NP, birding some productive wetlands along the way.

Day 3: Lake Mburo NP to Ruhija sector of Bwindi NP

The morning will be spent exploring the open savanna and wetland habitats of Mburo NP, which resembles the stereotypical savanna environments of Kenya's Masai Mara, but with many more thorny acacia thickets. There are quite a few species that are very localized in Uganda, and which only occur here. Our top avian target will be the Red-faced Barbet, which has a small range in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania, to the west of Lake Victoria. Other targets will include Tabora Cisticola, Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove, Green-capped Eremomela, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Spot-flanked Barbet, and African Penduline-Tit. Lake Mburo is also an excellent park for mammals, including classic safari fare like Warthog, Eland, "Grant's" Plains Zebra, and Impala. It is not all safari vehicle birding; we will take a boat to search for the African cousin of the neotropical Sungrebe, the rare and elusive African Finfoot, and we may even find a White-backed Night-Heron. In the afternoon, we drive up into the misty mountains of Bwindi NP, whose dense cloud forest provides a complete change of scene from Mburo's savanna.

Day 4: Gorilla tracking (optional – extra cost) in Bwindi NP

Those who opt for gorilla tracking this morning are in for one of the world's great natural history experiences. You don't just watch these soulful animals; they watch you too. We work it so we have our group assigned to a family of Gorilla that we spend the day with, and the wildlife authority limits the experience to one group with each gorilla family, so the experience is personal. Although the tracking permits are expensive, very few people are disappointed by this experience, and the vast majority is so glad they did it and wants to do it

again. It is hard to stress just how good this is, so unless you are absolutely opposed to a moderate walk from ½ an hour to 4 hours, you really need to do this. They even have porters to help carry all your gear for only $20 a day, so this within the physical capabilities of the vast majority of our clients. People who decide not to track gorillas will spend this morning birding. The group will be reunited in the afternoon, and make an easy walk along a broad path, looking for Black-billed Turaco, Grauer's Warbler, Gray Cuckooshrike, and many other montane species.

Day 5: Full day of birding in Bwindi NP

We have a full day to search out the avian wonders of Bwindi, which often ranks as the top favorite place on the whole tour. A lot is often said of Albertine Rift species without explaining what this is. This area is so interesting because the western branch of the geologically very recent Great East African Rift System, the Albertine Rift, has the higher plateau of the Tanzanian Craton with Lake Victoria to the east, and the west is separated from the vast Congo basin by a mountain chain including the Ruwenzoris; this has resulted in a swath of endemic and restricted range bird, mammal, and reptile species. In these mountains there are large mixed species flocks, the habitat is beautiful, and the climate is wonderfully comfortable. In the morning, we'll make our way downhill to the swampy habitat favored by the enigmatic Grauer's Broadbill, though finding this little gem will take some luck. Working forest roadsides and trails, we expect to find endemics such as Ruwenzori (Collared) Apalis, skulking Red-throated Alethe, and Archer's Robin-Chat. The spectacular but skulking Doherty's Bushshrike may be coaxed out of a thicket, or we may encounter a flock of babbling White-headed Woodhoopoes. The comical echoes of Great Blue Turacos resound across the valleys, and honking calls may alert us to the presence of Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills nearby. Some of the more common species in Bwindi include Albertine Boubou, Yellow-eyed Black-Flycatcher, Ruwenzori Hill Babbler, Red-faced Woodland, Neumann's, and Grauer's Warblers, Black-faced Apalis, White-tailed Blue-Flycatcher, Purple-breasted, Blue-headed, and Regal Sunbirds, Stripe-breasted Tit, Dusky Crimsonwing, and Strange Weaver. Rare gems we'll hope to see include "Kivu" Abyssinian Ground-Thrush, White-bellied Robin-Chat, and Dusky Twinspot. Many primates roam the canopy including Chimpanzee, Mantled Guerza, Blue Monkey and L'Hoests Monkey.

Day 6: Ruhija to Buhoma, Bwindi NP

After breakfast, we head west to the lower-lying Buhoma sector of Bwindi NP. Along the way, we'll pass through "The Neck", a narrow strip of forest that connects the southern and northern portions of the national park. This forest system is the eastern extension of the vast Congo forests combined with a series of restricted range species of the Albertine Rift. This forest which extends into the DR Congo, is far more accessible and very safe to visit, making this the perfect area for birders to see a range of species that are otherwise logistically very difficult to see. Here we have our first chance to find some specialties of lower elevation rainforest, which include Cassin's Flycatcher, Black Bee-eater, Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Petit's Cuckooshrike, Tiny Sunbird, and a bounty of difficult-to-identify greenbuls. By the afternoon, we will arrive at Buhoma for a two-night stay.

Day 7: Full day of birding in Buhoma, Bwindi NP

This mid-elevation sector of the national park has a very different flavor from the higher Ruhija section. Some of our targets during our full day of birding the park's trail system include Bar-tailed Trogon, White-bellied Crested Flycatcher, Willcock's Honeyguide, Black-billed Weaver, Sooty Flycatcher, and many species of starlings, sunbirds, and greenbuls. This is one of the best sites for the recently described Willard's Sooty Boubou, which has beautiful pale blue eyes.

Day 8: Buhoma to Queen Elizabeth NP

As we head north, the habitat quickly transforms from montane forest to more open savanna, though of a different variety from that in Mburo NP, having a similar appearance to the flat-topped tree savannas familiar in Kenya and Tanzania, as well as having savannas dominated by Candaleras, which are euphorbias that look similar to cacti. It is a strange sight to see cactus looking trees surrounded by lush grasslands. We will pass through the Ishasha section of Queen Elizabeth, which is famous for its tree-climbing lions. It's also rich in birds including Blue-throated Roller, Sooty Chat, Red-necked Francolin, Black-and-white Shrike Flycatcher, and many others. By the late afternoon, we will arrive at our luxurious lodge on a peninsula between Lake Edward and the Kazinga Channel. The lodge gardens are full of birds like Northern Black Flycatcher, Black-headed Gonolek, Red-chested Sunbird, and Slender-billed Weaver.

Day 9: Full day in Queen Elizabeth NP

Queen Elizabeth NP is both a mammal and bird haven. While it offers an opportunity to view typical African megafauna such as Hippos and Elephants, it also has Buffalo, Kopi (which replaces Impala), and many Waterbuck and Bushbuck; it is also a waterbird magnet, a wide diversity of which can be seen in a short time. We will spend the morning doing an extended "game drive" through the park's euphorbia-studded savanna, seeking out birds like Wattled Lapwing, Temminck's Courser, Martial Eagle, African Crake, Flappet Lark, and Moustached Grass-Warbler. In the afternoon, we'll take a boat trip on the Kazinga Channel. This trip ranks among the most astounding birding and photographic experiences in Africa. There are usually masses of big mammals and waterbirds in close proximity. We normally see the regal Gray Crowned-Crane, the strange Hamerkop, and dainty African Jacanas trotting over lily pads next to the boat. Sometimes there are large flocks of birds including African Skimmer, Gull-billed Tern, and Gray-hooded, and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Day 10: Queen Elizabeth NP to Kibale NP

After breakfast we take the long road to Kibale, where we overnight. The open country and waterbird birding on route is excellent. If time allows, we will make an afternoon visit to the community run Bigodi Swamp, an excellent place to search for primates like Gray-cheeked Mangabey and Central African Red Colobus, and birds like Speckled Tinkerbird, Speckle-breasted Woodpecker, White-spotted Flufftail, Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat, Gray-green Bushshrike, and Western Nicator. Patches of papyrus support the incredibly shy White-winged Swamp Warbler.

Day 11: Full day in Kibale NP; Chimp Tracking (optional) and Birding

We awake well before sunrise on a quest for one of Africa's ultimate avian prizes, Green-breasted Pitta. This "mega" has recently become available, though finding it still takes a good measure of luck. Kibale is also famous for its Chimpanzees, and those who opt for this activity will join an official park chimp tracking session a bit later in the morning. The chimp tracking is on flatter ground than the Gorilla tracking, though we go off trail following the chimps as they move along much more gracefully than we will be, trying to swerve around vines and over logs. It is fun though, and when we finally find the chimp group resting or feeding in the trees, we will get a sense of accomplishment. Even those who don't track chimps are certain to hear their haunting wails and screams in the forest. Bird flocks hold the dainty Yellow-breasted Forest Robin among scores of illadopses and alethes. Black-bellied Seedcracker inhabits the forest edge, while the canopy holds various vermilion and black malimbes as well as the crisp Black-collared Apalis. Gray-throated, Yellow-spotted, and Eastern Yellow-billed Barbets build nests in dead snags, while fruiting figs attract the massive Great Blue Turaco, a cartoon-like bird.

Day 12: Kibale to Masindi

This is the longest driving day of the trip, all the way to Masindi, which is the gateway to Budongo. We will be birding along the way at multiple locations, and many clients really enjoy this drive as it is not along main roads, and passes through rural Ugnada, where you get a real sense of what life is like here. If we arrive in time, we may have time to work the woodlands south of town for White-crested Turaco and Gray-headed Oliveback.

Day 13: Budongo Forest

We have a full day to explore the delights of the impressive Budongo Forest, a massive block of lowland rainforest and the most readily accessible Congo rainforest anywhere in the world. We spend time at the amazing Royal Mile, which is a public, but very lightly used road, where the forest authorities have cleared the shrub growth for 20 feet either side of the road, leading to superb views of both undergrowth bird species as well as making canopy views better than most lowland rainforests; canopy species that are normally obscured by undergrowth and mid-canopy trees are visible and scopeable. This forest is the best place in Uganda for Nahan's Partridge, Cassin's Spinetail, and Chestnut-capped Flycatcher. We'll also search for the stunning Chocolate-backed and African Dwarf Kingfishers. The forest is full of illadopses and alethes, and the diversity of greenbuls here is simply amazing. But for those who don't fancy cryptic birds, there are plenty of more colorful species like White-thighed Hornbill and Black Bee-eater.

Day 14: Masindi to Murchison Falls NP

En route to Murchison Falls NP, we stop at the Butiaba escarpment. Although it's not far from the Budongo rainforest, it holds completely different arid savanna landscapes, and species like Mocking Cliff-Chat, Foxy Cisticola, and Brown Babbler. We will pass through lots of wild country with an open palm savanna, unlike any other in East Africa, and along the way we may find birds like Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, Senegal Lapwing, White-rumped Seedeater, and the weird Piapiac. We reach the edge of the Nile in the late afternoon. The lodge is on the White (or Albert) Nile, which goes from Lake Albert to Khartoum where it joins the Blue Nile and flows to the Mediterranean. The other stretch of the Nile in the park is the Victoria Nile which joins Lake Victoria, plunges spectacularly over Murchison Falls and flows into the northern edge of Lake Albert. We spend two nights in Murchison Falls NP.

Days 15-16: Murchison Falls NP

We spend a full day exploring Murchison Falls NP, where we search for Silverbird, Buff-bellied Warbler, Western Black-headed Batis, Black-headed Gonolek, and the very local White-rumped Seedeater. The riverine thickets hold White-crested Turaco, Double-toothed Barbet, Heuglin's Spurfowl, and many others. In the afternoon we take a boat to the base of the Murchison Falls where the Victoria Nile narrows and plunges spectacularly over the escarpment with unfathomable might. As well as being visually spectacular, it is also really good for birding, and we expect to get close to the normally very difficult Rock Pratincole. The next day we do a separate boat trip downstream to where the Victoria Nile enters Lake Albert and actually makes a delta with tributaries and papyrus marshes. This array of habitats is great for Shoebill in case we missed it earlier, as well as many other waterbirds and arboreal species like Red-throated and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters.

Day 17: Murchison Falls NP to Kampala

This morning we may make an early stop at Kaniyo Pabidi, where we can track (optional) Chimps if we failed to find them elsewhere on our trip. This is also the best place in East Africa to look for the local Puvel's Illadopsis. After lunch in Masindi, we return to Kampala where we spend the final night.

Day 18: Lake Victoria

Depending on departure flight schedules, we may try to squeeze in some final forest birding just a little east of Kampala. It is unlikely that we will add many more species this day, but it will be a great opportunity to get better looks at some of the skulkers that may have been trouble earlier in the trip. The tour concludes with international departures in the late afternoon or evening from Entebbe International Airport.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: Entebbe to Kigali to Nyungwe FR (Rwanda)

We catch a short morning flight from Uganda to its southwestern neighbor of Uganda. After arriving in Kigali, we transfer to Nyungwe Forest for a three-night stay.

Days 2-3: Nyungwe Forest

Our top priority will be locating the rare and enigmatic Red-collared Mountain-Babbler. But we have plenty of other birds to look for along the way. Several species are much easier to find here than in Uganda. These include Ruwenzori Turaco, Handsome Spurfowl, and Grauer's Swamp Warbler. The primates in Nyungwe are even better than those in Bwindi, and the Mantled Guerza of farther north is replaced by the beautiful Angola Colobus. Adding some birding in Nyungwe to what we have already done in Bwindi NP should allow us to virtually clean up on the Albertine Rift endemics of Uganda and Rwanda, save for near-mythical species like Albertine Owlet and Shelley's Crimsonwing.

Day 4: Nyungwe – Kigali

After spending a final morning in magical Nyungwe we exit the part and drive a few hours back to Kigali.

Day 5: Kigali to Entebbe, Uganda and then Departure

Today we fly back to Entebbe to connect with our outbound international flights.

Toll free from the USA & Canada: (800) 348-5941

International number: +1-409-515-9110

Toll free from the UK: +0800-046-5654

Email: info@tropicalbirding.com