

Lutembe bay bird population declines

By Gerald Tenywa

Sometimes silence speaks louder than words. At Lutembe bay on the shores of Lake Victoria in Wakiso district, the inviting melodies of birds are no more. This has left experts in environmental health wondering what has gone wrong. They also fear that the largest global sanctuary of the white-winged black terns could be in trouble, together with the residents at Lutembe.

According to a recent report entitled *"The State of Uganda's birds: Indicators of Our Changing Environment"*, the population of the white-winged black terns has reduced from two million birds to less than 100,000 within less than two decades.

Two weeks ago, the white-winged black terns were reported to be dying in hundreds, which has caused worry among scientists within and outside the Government, as well as the residents of Lutembe.

"It is unusual to encounter few birds at Lutembe bay at this time of the year," said Achilles Byaruhanga, the executive director of Nature Uganda, adding that the drop in the population of the white-winged black terns is a big indicator of wider environmental change.

"What is killing the birds could also hurt other species,



Dalaus Katende (left), a fisherman, handing over a carcass of the white-winged black tern to Martin Esau from the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries for analysis to establish the cause of death. Photo by Gerald Tenywa

including the humans," he said.

He was speaking during an expedition at Lutembe bay on Saturday, organised by Nature Uganda, a partner of BirdLife International in Uganda. The environmental NGO has been monitoring Lutembe, which has been an important bird area for the last two decades.

He also said Uganda is dependent on nature and that we have a responsibility to protect it.

"Nature feeds us and supports our economy," said Byaruhanga, adding, "We have been reaping from bird-watching. Tourism is an engine of growth for the

economy."

Uganda mandated to protect birds

Byaruhanga said the white-winged black terns are migratory birds that cross from Siberia in Russia, through Eastern Europe into Egypt, Sudan and South Sudan to Uganda.

"It is something we should be proud of and take the responsibility to protect," he said, adding that Uganda is party to many agreements concerning conservation of biological diversity and migratory species.

The white-winged black terns,

which fly in many acrobatic styles and patterns, migrate to Uganda around October every year and return to Europe in March of the following year for breeding.

Apart from the eye-catching white-winged black terns that constitute 70% of the population at Lutembe bay, the bay also hosts other migratory species, such as the gulls. There are also indigenous species such as the grey crowned cranes and the shoebills.

Cause of the decline

Is it because of the environmental changes at

POISONING SUSPECTED

Dalaus Katende, a fisherman at Dewe landing site at Lutembe, who reported about the mass death of birds to the government authorities, said they suspect that the birds are dying from poisoning.

"The cage fish farmers wanted to relocate their cages in the bay, but fisheries officials tested and discovered that the water was polluted," he said.

"They decided to relocate the fish cages outside the bay."

A team of scientists from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Animal

Industry, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), Uganda Wildlife Education Centre and Uganda Virus Research Institute has not ruled out an infectious disease in the Lutembe deaths.

"We are going to test and establish what has gone wrong," said Robert Aruho, a veterinarian at UWA, adding that the report will be released this week.

The residents of Lutembe got scared when they saw Aruho's team last Thursday dressed in white medical suits. But they have continued fishing and fetching water in the bay.

Lutembe, which is also an investment area in the growing of flowers and settlements? Is it pollution at the bay? Is it something that is affecting their habitats in Europe or along the way through Eastern Europe, Egypt, Sudan and South Sudan?

"We have been asking ourselves all these questions and we do not know," said Byaruhanga, adding that the Government has collected samples for analysis and that the results will give some

answers.

He also said a study was conducted in 2005 by Makerere University on the water quality in Lutembe bay at the time flower farming was expanding into it. At the moment, about 25% of the marshlands have been converted to pave the way for flower farms and settlement.

"The results of the tests on the samples collected within the last two weeks will be compared with the report of the 2005 water analysis," he said.