

A bird song worth \$11 billion



Lesser flamingo also known as the *phoeniconaias minor* is a popular bird especially around water areas.
PHOTOS BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA

POTENTIAL: The birding industry, if well exploited, has the potential to earn Uganda more than Shs40 trillion, according to Uganda Tourism Board, writes **Matthias Mugisha**.

A new day starts with a song, one that is worth more than \$11b, according to Stephen Asiimwe, the executive director of Uganda Tourism Board.

And the pricey beat is a song of a bird. Camouflaged high up in the thick foliage of a tropical forest, at Serenada Eco Resort, the blue turaco's melody is a signature for day break.

The blue turaco is one of Uganda's top five birds, according to National Geographic.

As other birds join the forest orchestra, the trans-night soprano spiced music from the small creatures gets muted.

3000

THE NUMBER OF BIRDERS THAT VISIT UGANDA ANNUALLY EARNING THE COUNTRY MORE THAN SHS1.2 TRILLION IN FOREIGN EXCHANGE, ACCORDING TO UGANDA TOURISM BOARD.

And the birds take over the morning breakfast show of tunes. Hit after hit.

Sitting in his office at Lugogo House, Asiimwe is optimistic that birding is the feature of tourism given the fact that Uganda is also gifted when it comes to birds.

"Birding is one of the top tourism products Uganda has. We have 1,067 birds, which is 50 per cent of the birds in Africa and 10 per cent of the global population. People who love birds are affluent, passionate, have deep pockets mostly retired and stay

longer," he says.

Back at Serenada, as the rays from the young sun warm up the jungle and sublime the mist, butterflies, moths and dragonflies commence their hectic routine.

Some look for lovers, males guard their territories while females lay eggs to ensure the survival of their species.

On the western side of the resort, at the banks of Lake Victoria a fight evolves.

An angry and fiercely territorial female Egyptian goose engages a rival in aerial combat as a visiting Lesser Flamingo watches, unimpressed.

A pair of resident Egyptian geese is one of the 220 bird species so far counted at the 28-acre resort inside a natural forest that can be best described as nature in the city.

Home to butterflies

Just 45 minutes by boat from Ggaba, the Serenada Eco Resort featuring high-end cottages, bandas and tents is home to a variety of butterflies, insects, red-tailed monkeys and monitor lizards, apart from birds.

Birding is done both on land and water. Forest trails make it an ideal place for sighting forest birds while boat rides and canoeing offer great opportunities for watching water birds.

For an ardent birder, birding starts at the lake and the surrounding forest. For the physically fit, there is a hiking trail to a mountain top with panoramic view of the lake below.

It was here that I captured the black-throated apalis, grosbeak canary, crowned hornbill, and the yellow-rumped tinker bird.

"Birding is developing fast in Uganda. Uganda Tourism Board is strategically growing the birding segment. To do that, we have been at the forefront of the annual Birding Expo and Birding Week. We are big participants in the British Birding Fair," says Asiimwe. And there is big money to be made.

"Uganda gets 3,000 birding visi-

BUTTERFLY TOURISM

Species of butterflies: Uganda houses about 33 per cent of all Afro tropical vegetation species with almost 1,235 shining species of butterflies that have been affirmed in Uganda.

Most of these butterflies are found in national parks and out of the estimated number of butterflies recorded in the country, 31 of them are endemic to Uganda.

Existence of butterflies in various areas in Uganda has helped the country to be one of the best tourist destinations for different travelers interested in having memorable encounters with the butterflies in their natural habitat.

The different butterflies are categorised in various groups such as Papilionidae, Lycaenidae, Pieridae and Nymphalidae.





Birding at Serenada is done by a boat ride through the papyrus swamp.

POPULAR SITES

The most alluring tourist site in terms of localised bird species is Semliki Wildlife Reserve, closely rivalled by Budongo Forest, Kibale National Park and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park. However, in practical terms, you will probably find Kibale Forest as the single best birding destination for viewing forest birds in Uganda.

tors paying \$7,000 (Shs25.1m) and staying an average of 16 days earning the country \$336m (Shs1.2 trillion)," he adds.

Birders spend more money because they stay longer as you cannot make an appointment with the winged creatures.

It is only in Uganda that one can see about 100 different species of birds from one locality in a day.

With varied habitats including big water bodies found nowhere else on the continent, savannahs, forests, swamps and snow-capped peaks, Uganda is a birders paradise.

Birding at Serenada for water birds is best by a boat ride through a papyrus swamp, the Lake and manmade canals. The water birds including but not limited to, both Greater and long tailed Cormorant, pied kingfisher, malachite kingfisher, didrick cuckoo, Egyptian goose, common squacco, little egret, long-toed plover, purple heron and African jacana.

The most common shore birds include Black-winged stilt, Sandpiper and Ruff. An occasional African fish Eagle snatching a snack from the

water is breathtaking.

Inside the forest, it is easy to see and snap the Greater Blue Turaco, Black and white Casqued hornbill, Woodland Kingfisher, Variable Sunbird Ruppell's, long-tailed Staling, African Emerald Cuckoo and many others.

According to Asiimwe, the \$336m (Shs1.2 trillion) that Uganda currently gets from birding is nothing compared to potential the country has.

"If Uganda had 100,000 birding visitors per year paying \$7,000 (Shs25.1m) and staying for 16 days we would earn \$11.2b (Shs40 trillion). Currently we get \$1.4b (Shs5b) from Tourism." He concludes as he gets to work.

Targeted revenue

Uganda Tourism Board has a target of \$11.2b (Shs40 trillion) and this will, with time become a reality because tourism is the world's largest and fastest growing industry.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), travel and tourism generated \$7.6 trillion representing 10 per cent of global GDP and 277 million jobs (one in 11 jobs) for the global economy in 2014.

Available data from Uganda Bureau of Statistics shows that the country recorded 1.7 million arrivals in 2015 against an international tourist arrival that surged to nearly 1.14 billion.

By 2025, according to WTTC, visitor exports would generate Shs7.1 trillion and attract investment worth Shs1.5 trillion while domestic travel spending is expected to grow to Shs1.9 trillion.

And all these figures start with a song in the tree.



The Egyptian goose also known as *Alopechen Aegyptiaca*.



The Little Egret is one of the birds at the Serenada Eco Resort.

If I had to be somewhere in Uganda right now, it would definitely be...



RWENZORI MOUNTAINS. The snow-capped peaks provide a stunning backdrop located on Uganda's western border. In the centre of the range, some of the peaks are permanently covered in snow and glaciers, while the lower slopes are covered with dense forests. Wildlife such as chimpanzees, the blue monkey, hyrax, and unique birds are also found around the mountains. **MARVIN ZZIWA, ARCHITECT**



MGAHINGA GORILLA NATIONAL PARK: It is a haven for the endangered mountain gorilla. Located on the slopes of Virunga Mountains, in the extreme southwest corner of Uganda, the park has been set aside to provide a secure habitat for the gorillas. Other wildlife such as leopard, giant forest hog, bushbuck, buffalo, and golden monkey can also be viewed. **ANNET NSUBUGA, HOUSE WIFE.**



NDERE CENTRE: It is a nice place to experience the country's traditional dance and music. The name is from the word flute, which symbolises the troupe because of its diverse and beautiful sound, but also as it is one of the only musical instruments found across all cultures; a metaphor for unity. The dancers and performance rekindle a sense of pride for Ugandan culture while promoting it to the world. They research and respectfully present parts of all the Uganda cultures. **ALLAN MUJUZU, STUDENT**



EQUATOR: It is one of the most famous landmarks in Uganda that receives more sunlight than any other. It is a picturesque landmark and a major stopover for people travelling to the western part of Uganda. It has a souvenir market, internet facilities as well as relaxing points that serve coffee. **SOFIA NALUKENGE, SHOP ATTENDANT**

Compiled by Godfrey Lugajju