

BIRD PARADISE. Kasenge Forest Resort Beach is a popular destination for bird lovers. More than 150 bird species have been recorded there.

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Kasenge's dating island is a sanctuary to rare bird species

A combination of birding, nature walks and canoeing in a mysterious lake culminates in the courage to get down on one knee at the "Dating Island" and ask: "Will you marry me?" Under the setting sun, with magical reflections of a tropical jungle dancing in the water, amid protesting swans, the answer will be: "Yes."

The Dating Island, measuring a few metres, is part of the wider mysterious lake at the Forest Resort Beach Kasenge in Lama Sub-county, Mukono District, a few kilometres off Mbalala Trading Centre along Kampala - Jinja highway.

Mysterious water body

The origin of this small lake, complete with islands is a mystery according to the director of Forest Resort Beach, Prisca Mbaguta Sezi. "Natural water was tamed into a lake," she says.

Some of the water has been diverted to make beautiful waterways with cascading miniature waterfalls in the compound of the resort. Activities such as sport fishing, canoeing and boat rides can be done on the lake. For lovers, "The Dating Island" which is usually guarded by highly territorial geese conjures romance.

Birding haven

The neighbouring forest is a popular destination for skilled birders as it hosts one of Uganda's most sought-after birds - The Green Hylia. Being a forest bird, the Green Hylia (Hylia Prasina) is not easy to see. It has not been easy either for scientists to place it in a particular scientific family.

My guide Stephen and I spent half a day looking for it in vain. It was not until we played its song that it came peeping through the foliage, giving me a few seconds to snap a grainy picture. Apart from the elusive Green Hylia, Kasenge hosts a variety of other bird species such as the Shining Blue Kingfisher, Grey Parrot and Western Nicator. According to Mbaguta Sezi, renowned birding expert Hebert Byaruhanga, has so far counted more than 150 species.

Money mine

According to Uganda Tourism Board Executive (UTB) Director Stephen Asiimwe, birding is the future of tourism in Uganda. He revealed that birding is one of Uganda's top tourism products. 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, are mostly retired and stay longer. UTB 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," he said, adding that Uganda gets 3000 birding visitors paying \$7000 (Shs25.5m) and staying an average of 16 days earning the country



Visitors sit on the lawn at Kasenge Forest Resort Beach in Mbalala, Mukono District. PHOTO BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA

3,000

NUMBER OF BIRDING VISITORS THAT UGANDA GETS PER ANNUM, EARNING THE COUNTRY SHS1.4B.

US\$336m per annum.

According to the UTB boss, the \$336 million that Uganda currently gets from birding is nothing compared to the potential the country has. "If Uganda had 100,000 birding visitors per year paying \$7000 (Shs25.5m) and staying for 16 days, we would earn \$11.2 billion. Currently we get Shs1.4 billion," he concluded.

Forest Walks

Apart from birding, a walk in the forest yields a lot of tropical forest creatures such as butterflies and delicately weaved spider webs. The nature walks include hiking with trails going as far as Ssezibwa falls, about 7 km away.

The vast compound around the lake is used for camping among other functions. You can carry your tent or hire one from the resort. The high-end accommodation is in form of cottages/bandas at the edge of the mysterious lake. One isolated cottage is reserved for those who want to go deeper into meditation.

BIRDS OF KASENGE FOREST

Birds to be found within Kasenge Forest Beach Resort include; the Cattle egret, Hadada Ibis, Lizard Buzzard, Woodland Kingfisher, Black-headed Weaver, Bronze Manikin, Tambourine Dove, Shining blue Kingfisher, Grey Parrot, Western Nicator, Egyptian Geeze, Pin-tailed Whydah, Willow Warbler, Yellow Wagtail, White-headed sawswing, Hamerkop, Little bee-eater, Marsh Sandpiper, Brown-throated Wattle Eye, Jameson's Wattle Eye, Black and white casqued hornbill, Red-tailed Greenbul, Bronze Sunbird, Palmnut vulture, Green capped Eremomela, Red-fronted Tinkerbird, Crowned Hornbill, Red-chested Cuckoo, Tawny Eagle, White-spotted Flaftail, Speckled mouse bird, Vieillots black Weaver, African blue Flycatcher, Dusky Flycatcher, Pied Kingfisher, Fork-tailed Drongo, African Thrush, Lesser blue-eared Starling, Grey Heron and Blue T-raco.



Clockwise from top: The African Dusky Flycatcher, Black and white Casqued Hornbill (NET PHOTOS) and the Green Hylia (PHOTO BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA)