



PEARL OF AFRICA



A team of bird watchers enjoying an excursion at a swamp

IT IS THE SEASON TO GO BIRD WATCHING

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It is always bird watching time in Uganda. Thanks to our perfect weather and vegetation that sustains over 1,061 species of birds all year round. However, what birding experts know is that this season is ideal for bird watching.

Uganda's rich biodiversity in avian species is boosted by migrant birds that fly in by the thousands from the Northern Hemisphere, to escape the cold winters.

According to seasoned birder, Herbert Byaruhanga, the species of birds one is able to see varies depending on the vegetation, the season and the altitude.

"Uganda is endowed with a variety of altitudes, ranging from the snow-capped Mount Rwenzori to the plains in humid Moroto. One can expect to see more than 1,000 different birds," said Byaruhanga, adding that the known number of birds keeps increasing as more are spotted.

"If you are in central Uganda, go to Lutembe Beach to see migrant birds refueling (feeding) before proceeding to South Africa," Byaruhanga adds.

Lutembe receives 20,000 to 50,000 water-birds from the northern hemisphere around this time annually. Many of them come to roost here, before returning home three to four months later. The birds plan their flight

BIRDING TIPS

BODA BODA TOURS

When on a birding expedition, it is advisable to wear comfortable shoes, as you will do a lot of walking. Carry along some water and snacks for refreshment.

BIRD GUIDE HELP

Get a birding guide if you can. The list of accredited guides is available at Uganda Tourist Board offices in Kololo. The service costs a fee.

DOCUMENT IT

With a guide book, you can note and write down the details of the birds you see and identify. This makes the experience memorable and will leave you yearning for the next birding experience.

depending on the strength of the winds. They need a good draught to carry them so that they use less energy on the flight. With a good wind, there is less flapping of the wings, and they glide towards their destination easily.

This is, therefore, the right time to get those binoculars, sneakers, baseball cap and a bird check list. This nature-based hobby can be enjoyed alone or with family or friends. One can also join other birders on an excursion to document the number of birds in a given area.

BEST BIRDING SITES

It may be in the comfort of your backyard, a public garden, national park, hill or in the swamps. For rewarding birding expeditions, Byaruhanga recommends Mahamba swamp, Kasenge Forest in Mukono, Entebbe lake shores generally and Kalangala islands.

"When watching birds, make sure you log down every bird seen or heard," Byaruhanga says.

He adds that there are more than 200 registered bird guides who can help individuals and groups to maximise and enjoy the experience. These guides know where to look and can help you distinguish a bird camouflaged among similar-coloured leaves. Some guides can make sounds or use sophisticated equipment to call the shy birds out of hiding.

« UGANDA HAS ONE OF THE MOST DIVERSE POPULATIONS OF BIRDS IN THE WORLD »



The cinnamon-chested bee-eater is a beauty



Top: A woodland kingfisher perched on an acacia branch
Right: A game ranger scouting the sky for birds



A group of yellow-billed ducks in a wetland. Many migrant bird species make Uganda their home between October to March every year

Nature Uganda's executive director and author, Achilles Byaruhanga, says interested bird watchers are spoilt for choice for places where to feast one's eyes on birds for hours.

"Mabira Forest, the shores of Lake Kyoga, Mount Elgon and Kibimba swamp. These places have hundreds of birds waiting to be seen," Byaruhanga stresses. "While enjoying seeing them court, sing and nest, a birder is also treated to a bonus comprising wild animals, plants, butterflies or primates. It all depends on where you scout for them."

UGANDANS AND BIRDING ARE INSEPARABLE

Uganda is regarded as Africa's best birding destination for birders and other nature enthusiasts. It has more bird species per square kilometer than any other country in Africa.

Ugandan birders have become the proud flag-bearers of this tourism activity. Bird guide Hassan Mutebi says birds cannot be ignored in a Ugandan society where the crested crane is emblazoned on the national flag. Indeed, birds are part of our culture.

"In the local language, most birds are called names that are similar to the sounds they make," says Mutebi. "There is *ngali* (the crested crane), *kasuku* (parrot) and *ekiwugulu* (owl). Our folk tales have birds featuring as witty characters."

Mutebi adds that there are places like Wandegaya which were allegedly named after weaverbirds and Lake Bunyonyi.

"This is because before development, weaver birds

used to make lots of noise in the area which was full of trees. Locals named it Wandegaya meaning home of weaver birds (*ndegeya*). Likewise Lake Bunyonyi (birds) in Western Uganda is called so because of the large number of birds seen there."

Zakariah Logwe, a ranger in Kidepo Valley National Park, boasts that in his lifetime he has seen more than 400 of the 470 species there.

"There is some excitement that one gets on seeing a lifer," Logwe says. "I have had clients coming all the way from Europe to see a Clapton Francolin which is endemic to Kidepo. Oblivious to the herds of buffaloes, elephants and lions in the park, one packed his bags and returned home on seeing this bird at Losigitan Plains!"

Logwe named the Abyssinian ground hornbill which announces rainfall, the pretty Eurasian roller, grey heron and the saddle-billed stork as some of this favourite species he has spotted in Kidepo.

BIRD-WATCHING COMMUNITY

Birding is a fast growing sport with groups like Young Birders and Women Birders whom Uganda Wildlife Authority avails binoculars and literature whenever they need them.

Tom Kiggundu, a young birder, says he has realised there is more to birds than eating them.

"The demand for chicken and turkey goes up in the festive season. It implies that Christmas without a bird feast is incomplete. But being a birder, I will go birding instead of feasting on them," he says.

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