

IT IS SUSPECTED THAT THE BIRDS ARE DYING OF POISONING OR AN INFECTIOUS DISEASE

BY GERALD TENYWA

THE ugly hand of death has touched Lutembe bay on Lake Victoria, which is the largest global bird sanctuary for the white winged black terns. Hundreds of birds have been found dead in the last two weeks.

"We suspect the birds are dying of poisoning," Robert Aruho, the wildlife veterinarian at the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) said, adding that it is also feared that the birds could have been attacked by a highly infectious disease.

The death of the birds is still shrouded in mystery, but this may not last long as samples have been collected over the last two weeks for testing at laboratories within Uganda. The samples will be analysed and a report is expected next week.

"We have collected samples for testing, but the reports are not yet out," Aruho, who is part of a multi-sectoral team comprising of officials from ministries of health and agriculture, as well as Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC) and UWA, said.

On Thursday, the team returned to Lutembe and collected more samples for testing. The team warned residents against eating the birds because the cause of the deaths is yet to be established.

GLOBAL POPULATION OF MIGRATORY BIRDS ENDANGERED

According to Achilles Byaruhanga, the executive director of Nature Uganda, a partner of BirdLife International, the white winged black terns are migratory birds that escape the chilly winter conditions in Europe starting October and return to Europe in March, leaving behind thousands of indigenous birds, including the shoebill. The bay also plays host to the gulls, which are also migratory species. Lutembe is the only known winter roosting ground for the white winged black terns.

A team of experts has been to Lutembe and recorded a total of 150 dead birds, but the fishermen staying at Lutembe landing site say they have encountered more than 500 carcasses in the last two weeks.

"We cannot go by the numbers encountered by the local people, but also the 150 carcasses that were recorded is considered a large number and causes concern," Aruho said, adding that they have collected samples for analysis in Uganda's laboratories.

WHAT THE FISHERMEN SAY

According to Hajji Munyagwa, a fisherman at Dewe landing site at Lutembe, the birds started dying in November, but the fishermen thought the migratory birds were stressed because of their long flights from Europe.

"We were not so concerned in the beginning, but when we continued getting reports of death, we decided to report to Government authorities," Munyagwa said.



Sekamatte (left) inspecting a dead white winged black tern in the hands of Munyagwa at Lake Victoria in Wakiso. Photo by Gerald Tenywa

Birds dying at Lutembe bay

He added: "The persistent death of the birds has scared us. What if the disease spreads to human beings? It is good the Government has responded in time and they have taken the samples, we hope that they establish what has gone wrong and we take appropriate measures." Munyagwa's team of fishermen accompanied the Government team into the marshlands of Lutembe bay, which are also referred to as 'mud

pads' or roosting grounds for the birds, including the white winged black terns. They encountered remains of some carcasses and the took samples. The team also took samples of the water.

"The predators have eaten most of the carcasses on the marshlands and you cannot see much," he said, adding that the team had encountered some cases of death outside the lake."

"It is better to check in the morning since many birds die at night," Munyagwa said.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

The team left Lutembe with more questions than answers. While Lutembe is an investment area with flower farmers in the catchment of the lake, Dr Moses Mwanja, a senior veterinary officer in the agriculture ministry, wondered why it was only the white winged black terns that were dying. In addition, the carcasses were being eaten by scavenging birds, but they were not dying. Is it only the white winged black terns that are susceptible to the poisoning or the infectious disease?

"We should undertake the tests and this will help us to answer some of these questions," Musa Sekamatte, the team leader at the Zoonotic Disease Co-ordination office in the Ministry of Health, Kampala, said.