

Rwanda Birding tour Trip Report February 22nd – March 8th 2015 (14 days)

1. Organisation

1.1 Four people travelled to Rwanda using KLM from Aberdeen- Schiphol – Kigali. Our in country agent was Mugisha Davidson of Wildlife Tours Rwanda <http://wildlifetours-rwanda.com>

1.2 The company arranged all the food, accommodation and logistics and provided a Toyota safari truck, a driver, Emmanuel Sibomann and a birding guide, James Muhizi. The company is highly experienced in wildlife tours and is actively developing its birdwatching capacity.

2. Area travelled

2.1 We started in Kigali and travelled to a variety of habitats throughout the country. The key components were Akagera National Park, a dry area of savannah and swamps in the East, close to the border with Tanzania; the Nyabarongo swamps and Bugasera farmlands in the South; Nyungwe National Park in the South West; the Volcanoes National Park in the North and Gisenyi on Lake Kivu in the North West. A variety of smaller sites were visited en-route and within these key areas. This report sets them out and highlights some of the key finds. A full bird list is attached.

3. Day 1 22.2.15 arrived Kigali

4. Day 2: 23.2.15 Kigali, Nyabarongo River and swamps, Bugasera

4.1 We stayed at the Sinai Suites off Kimironko roundabout. The garden produced our first birds including breeding Paradise Flycatcher and Variable Sunbird. An early walk around the local area opened up unused, scrubby land one block downhill and we had a good introduction to lots of common species including our first of many White-browed Robin Chats and Red Bishops.

4.2 The Nyabarongo River is a tributary of the Akagera River and the Nile. It cuts through the country and is worth a stop at any bridging point. We stopped at the Papyrus swamps on the Bugasera Road from Kigali. We had a chance of Papyrus Gonolek here but it was only heard. Highlights were African Fish Eagle, White-browed Coucal, African and Great Reed Warblers, a sunbird fest and a huge flock of Little Swift screaming in the sky. They were breeding under the bridge.

Bugasera

4.3 We visited Gashora village in Bugasera District for a media event and presentation of RSPB donated binoculars to the Gashora Bird Club, a village initiative under the auspices of the Bugasera branch of the Rwanda Bird Association. Here we met Emmanuel Ndaruhutse, the local community guide and an enthusiastic bird guide. The objective is to encourage

birding tourists into an area of scrub, small farms, swamp and lakes, presently under-watched but with a rich bird life. We stopped at a small uncultivated patch we saw a good variety of small birds such as Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu, Red Bishop, Common Waxbills, Black and White Mannikin, several Weavers and Firefinches. This was our first indication of the value of looking closely at rough areas near cultivation where lots of birds could be found.

4.4 The Palis Hotel garden and Lake Rumira shore were good, including Black-headed Gonolek, our only woodpecker of the trip, a Cardinal, Spotted and Dusky Flycatchers, Malachite and Pied Kingfisher, Little Bittern and Black Crake.

5. Day 3 24.2.15 Nyabarongo River, Bugasera farm land, Kamatama Dam at Nyamata

5.1 We returned South and returned to the Nyabarongo River. White-browed and Blue-headed Coucal, Long-crested Eagle, Bronze Sunbird, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Greater Honeyguide and Tropical Boubou stood out. We had an interesting opportunity to separate African and Great Reed Warbler at close hand. A Wahlberg's Eagle flew over and both African and Western Marsh Harriers coursed the area. We met Emmanuel Ndaruhutse at Mbyo town on the Bugasera road. He led us through the town where we attracted the attention of many children and saw a large Black-headed Heron colony, Red-headed and Holub's Golden Weavers and excellent hirundines including Lesser Striped, Red-rumped, Wire-tailed and Angolan Swallows. Later, we drove on along a track to Mbuganzeri, a good swamp known to Emmanuel, for Papyrus Gonoleks. They didn't appear but we had great views of Grey-crowned Crane, Woodland Kingfisher, Fan-tailed Widowbird and a Grosbeak Weaver skulking in the Papyrus. A Yellow-crested Longclaw appeared on the high ground as we drove away. On higher scrubby ground en-route we saw Purple-crested Turaco, then noticed a flock of Yellow Wagtail *flava* feeding on the ground. An unscheduled stop then produced, amongst others, 5 Temminck's Courser, Western Marsh Harrier, Red-backed Shrike, Grey-backed Fiscal, Bare-faced Go Away Bird and Laughing Dove.

Nyamata

5.2 We visited the Genocide Memorial site at Nyamata. As well as trying to absorb the horror of what happened, the area produced a very good view of Ross's Turaco and Common Kestrel. Emmanuel then took us about 1km off the main road to a cracking site at Kamatana dam. This small lake holds a good range of birds including grebes, cormorants, herons, ibis, Purple Swamp Hen, Black Crake, Red-knobbed Coot and as there are no crocodiles, duck and geese, including White-backed, Comb and Yellow-billed Duck, Hottentot Teal, Egyptian and African Pygmy Goose. In the fields behind were Copper and Blue-headed Brown Sunbirds, Whinchat and African Stonechat and overhead a good assortment of swallows.

6. Day 4 25.2.15 To Akagera National Park and Lake Ilema

6.1 Sites at the National Parks are better known and more fully recorded so are less detailed here, where I restrict comment to the birding highlights. At Akagera we stayed at the Lodge,

a good base for all habitat types. A boat ride on Lake Ilema is great for Hippos and Nile Crocodiles but also circles an island which must rank as one of the gems of Rwandan birding, giving close views of breeding Anhinga, Long-tailed Cormorant, Great Cormorant, Black-crowned Night Heron, Squacco Heron, Striated Heron, Purple Heron, Grey Heron, all the Egrets and African Openbill. There were also close views of perched Pied Kingfisher, African Fish Eagle, Black Crake and Swamp Flycatcher. James led us in both directions along the lake shore near the landings. There was a good colony of Little Bee-eater and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater as well as Spotted and resident Flycatchers, Green-winged Pytilia, Black Saw-wing, nesting Little Swift and Black-headed Gonolek.

7. Day 5 26.2.15 to Day 6 27.02.15 Akagera National Park

7.1 We followed savannah circuit for the plains grazers such as Giraffe, Zebra and Cape Buffalo and the lakes circuit for Hippo, Crocodiles and Elephants. Bird sightings and beautiful landscapes of great variety are everywhere but the risk from Buffalo prevents birding on foot. Walking would be ideal, but is only possible inside camp grounds. The best strategy is to drive slowly and keep looking or stop in a good lakeside or scrub spot and wait for the birds to come out.

7.2 The Lodge grounds produced an excellent range of birds in the trees around the buildings including Spot-flanked Barbet, Crested Barbet, Brubru, Red-faced Crombec, Green-capped Eremomela, Olive-green Camaroptera and the only Mosque Swallow of the trip. The Sunbirds continued to challenge but prepared us well for a sunbird fest at Nyungwe. On arrival we witnessed a lengthy fly past by migrating Honey Buzzards passing up the Eastern Rift flyway and following the lakes in the Park. They numbered at least 100 with the addition of an African Fish Eagle and smaller passing hawks.

7.3 Lake Hago produced a distant Shoebill viewed through heat haze from the opposite shore. A hide-boat would allow closer access without disturbing the birds. A small pool on the savannah area varies in depth and produced a few migrant waders including our first Wood Sandpipers and Wattled Lapwing. Close by Flappet Larks were active and the Buffalo and Zebras played host to a good number of both Red and Yellow-billed Oxpecker. Other challenges included distinguishing between Chubb's, Trilling and Winding Cisticolas on calls and the wide variety of weavers on the lake sides and around the Lodge. Northern Wheatears, a surprising number of African Stonechats and Whinchats, Zebra Waxbills and Banded Martins stood out on the open savannah, whilst in the more wooded areas Grey Hornbill, African Golden Oriole, Broad-billed and Lilac-breasted Roller, Brown Parrot, Striped Kingfisher and Western Brown Snake Eagle stand out. Also of interest were two Forest Wart Hogs that appeared briefly out of the bush. These are usually nocturnal. Hildebrant's Francolins were everywhere and Thick-knees showed well. Papyrus Gonolek was a sought after species but was only heard, despite excellent habitat.

7.4 Akagera covers a huge area and much of the North end is under-watched and invites exploration. Access is only possible from the South, with an exit (only) and a camp ground available in the North, at Kirala Plain.

8. Day 7 28.02.15 To Nyungwe via Huye (Butare)

8.1 Day 6 was wet and proved a good day for our transfer from Akagera to Nyungwe National Park, via Kigali and Butare. A visit to the National Ethnological Museum at Butare was both very interesting and beautifully presented and gave access to nice grounds with Mariqua Sunbirds (the last of the trip after seeing them daily), Paradise Flycatcher and African Yellow White-eye.

9. Day 8 1.3.15 to Day 10 3.3.15 Nyungwe National Park, Cyamudongo Forest

9.1 We stayed for four days in the Gisakura Guest House, a traditional small hostel style accommodation with a productive garden for birds. Nyungwe is spectacular for birding, especially for the Albertine Rift species of the montane rain forest. The density of the vegetation and high dependency on bird songs requires a good local bird guide and Claver Ntoyinkima proved an ace, of world class (ntoyclaver@yahoo.fr). This report confines itself to listing the various good trails followed and some of the birding highlights.

9.2 Starting at the Visitor Centre at **Umwinka Overlook**, a walk along the road, going West, gave good canopy views and our first sight of Rwenzori Turaco, Great Blue Turaco, Mountain Oriole, Eastern Mountain Greenbul, Mountain Masked Apalis, Regal Sunbird and Olive Pigeon.

9.3 **Umoyove Trail** from the Visitor Centre took us steeply downhill into dense primary forest to the North of the Canopy Walkway and produced the highest hit rate for endemics, many in response to recorded songs. Highlights were Red-faced Woodland Warbler, Equatorial Akalat, Red-throated Alethe, African Hill Babbler, Black-throated Apalis, Kungwe Apalis, Stripe-breasted Tit, Northern Double-collared Sunbird, Blue-headed Sunbird, Purple-breasted Sunbird, (most sunbirds were seen again on different trails), Banded Prinia, White-browed Crombec, , Dark-backed Weaver, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, a Black Saw-wing nest, Grey Cuckoo Shrike, Black-billed Turaco and African Crowned Eagle and Doherty's Bush Shrike were heard. A long list, but it gives a sense of the richness of this and other forest trails.

9.4 **Karamba Trail**, is accessible to the South of the main road towards Gisakura, to the west of the Kamiranzovu trailhead, it originally gave access to gold mines. It has open areas and good views of the canopy. It produced Rwenzori Nightjar in the evening and during the day, Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher, Kandt's Waxbills, Thick-billed Seedeater, Waller's Starling, Blue-headed Sunbird, Grey-headed Negrofinch and Black-throated Apalis. Mountain Black Bou Bou and Grey-chested Illadopsis were heard.

9.5 **Umugote Trail**, over the main road from the Visitor Centre is known for Handsome Francolin. They didn't show on an evening visit but a roosting Rwenzori Turaco was well seen.

9.6 **Kamiranzovu Swamp Trail** (meaning "Elephant Eater") was a true highlight with a steep walk-in downhill through dense jungle, to a volcanic basin and untouched swamp cut off from the outside world. This gave a sense of a "Jurassic Park" full of surprises. It produced our only snake of the trip, a small Western Rex Viper (id?) and a Flat-backed Toad. We also

easily saw the endemic Grauer's Rush Warbler from the observation platform and the boardwalk. A fly past by a pair of Great Blue Turaco completed the scene. Other stand out birds were Neumann's Warbler, Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, White-bellied Crested flycatcher, Archer's Robin Chat, Dusky Crimson-wing, Dusky Twinspot and Strange Weaver. Three Cassin's Hawk Eagles soared overhead. Mountain Black Boubou and Kivu Ground Thrush were heard. An impromptu stop on the road side near the Trail produced Doherty's Bush Shrike, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, White-bellied Crested Flycatcher, Olive Sunbird and more Kandt's Waxbills.

9.7 **Igishigshishigi Trail** to the new Canopy Walkway is a strong tourist attraction, clearly named to be eye catching! It is well worth the walk down through the forest. The walkway is high, narrow, bouncy and impressive but it is a well-protected and a very safe adventure. It gives wonderful views of the near and distant canopy. There were good views of Vervet Monkeys and the walkway can produce some good birds. A variety of sunbirds glinted in the sun and could be clearly seen feeding on the canopy flowers.

9.9 **Isumo Trail** back at the Gisakura Guesthouse, departs from the rear of the Park offices and passes through woodland and tea plantations, into the Park itself. It gives fabulous views of the forest fringe and tea plantations and carried a good range of farmland and woodland birds, largely un-visited. A Brown-throated Wattle-eye on territory was a great find, as were a number of African Stonechats, Cinnamon-chested and European Bee-eaters and Trilling Cisticolas.

9.10 On a visit to the **Gisakura Tea Plantation factory**, we happened upon some weedy field margins adjacent to the yard and road. They held a very active and varied bird population, following rain. The road to the factory also gave access to a woodland walk, off west of the small roundabout and shown to us by our guide, Claver. Kungwe Apalis and 5 Mountain Illadopsis were seen and Lagden's Bush Shrike heard. Both of these locations were unexpected "finds", that add greatly to the enjoyment of the trip.

9.11 **Cyamudongo Forest** is 16km South West of the main Nyungwe Forest and is an isolated remnant containing a habituated Chimpanzee community. These were fascinating but the forest was not the best for birds. The track outside the forest was well worth a walk and produced Stuhlmann's Starling, Luder's Bush-shrike, Levaillant's Cuckoo and a pair of Black and White-casked Hornbill.

There are many possibilities in Nyungwe National Park. These are just a few.

10. Day 11 4.3.15 to Huye (Butare) and Musanze (Ruhengiri)

10.1 A wet day but en-route to Musanze, we crossed the Nyabarongo River, south of Ngarorero. At this point the river is in a steep sided valley. Hooded Vultures and a heronry were highlights along with Hadada and Sacred Ibis, Pied and Malachite Kingfisher, White Stork and hirundine species including breeding Little Swift.

11. Day 12 5.3.15 to Day 13 6.3.15 Volcanoes National Park and Buhanga Forest

11.1 Whilst registering for trekking permits at the Reception Centre at Volcanoes National Park we watched a display of traditional drummers and dancers in the background but also found the vicinity of interest from a bird point of view. A pair of Bronze Mannakin breeding in the bushes caught our eye and then, very surprisingly, we all saw, briefly but clearly, a pair of Scarlet-tufted Malachite Sunbirds flying high over the carpark and disappear into the trees. We did not expect this high-altitude species, characteristic of the heath-country above the tree line. Cape Robin Chat and Olive Thrush were taking advantage of the short grass and cover to feed in the area. Bronzy Sunbird, Variable Sunbird and the hirundines and swifts were interesting. A Mackinnon's Shrike appeared in fields opposite.

11.2 On our way up through the little farms towards the forest and the Golden Monkeys we heard the raucous calls of cuckoos. We gazed fruitlessly into the trees until a small boy indicated them with a finger pointed aloft. Two male and a female Red-chested Cuckoos gave a good display. Further on a Mountain Buzzard swept past and a Yellow Bishop (one of only two on the trip) popped in and out of the field margins. On the way out, sharp eyes spotted a large fledged Klaas's Cuckoo juvenile being fed by a minute Variable Sunbird in trees close to the village.

11.3 At lunch time James took us to the river side and bridge over the Mukungwa River, on the Kigali Road, out of Muzanze. We also returned the next day to this excellent spot. We walked the river bank below the restaurant, its tributary to the south and the scrubby fields around. All were highly productive for both river and field birds. Hamerkop, Great Cormorant, Sacred Ibis, Little Rush Warbler, Eurasian Reed Warbler, Willow Warbler, Plain Martin, White-headed Saw-wing, Chubbs and Winding Cisticola, Grey-capped Warbler, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Swamp Flycatcher, White-tailed Blue flycatcher, Paradise flycatcher, African Stonechat and a variety of Weavers, all featured.

11.4 Our trek to the Titus Group of Mountain Gorillas was hugely enjoyable both for the animals, the country on the approach and some excellent birds. Our trekking guides and porters were helpful and patient as we frequently stopped to seek out some bird. The highlight was a good bright male Rwenzori Double-collared Sunbird in the lower forest, on the approach. A Northern Double-collared Sunbird also showed well, allowing a useful comparison. The Rwenzori had been missing from our endemics tally, as we noted that all Double-collared we saw at Nyungwe were Northern. Finding such a good one and getting good views gave a great moment. We added Alpine Swift on the way out.

11.5 We visited the approach to the forest at Buhanga in the afternoon (although it transpired that forest access involved a permit from the Reception Centre that we had left earlier) and found a Hooded Vulture on the nest. After a thunderstorm and in the calm of the dusk, the swifts and swallows above the track were an enjoyable challenge. We also added another Mackinnons Shrike. The rare migrant African Pitta are known in the forest but only in April, on passage.

11.6 One feature of Musanze and the villages around are House Sparrows, including those at the pleasant St Anne's Hotel, where we stayed. House Sparrow is not on the Rwanda list but are a clearly evident introduced species. It is not known how they got to East Africa. They differ from Northern European House Sparrows, with lighter undersides and a

generally smaller dark bib, recalling Italian House Sparrow. A Eurasian Hobby flew over as we ate lunch at the Murabura Hotel, famous for hosting Dian Fossey on many occasions.

12. Day 14 7.3.15 Giseyni and Lake Kivu via Gishwati Natural Reserve and Lake Nyirakigugu

12.1 On the way to Lake Kivu, we explored the hills of the Gishwati Natural Reserve in Bigogwe Sector. The road we took was steep and difficult but passed through newly settled areas and steep sided farm terraces. At the top, the land was divided into larger fields and dairy farming was evident. Parts of the Natural Reserve remain but this area has been given over to new settlement. This produced some interesting birds including Rock Martins and a stack of Vultures (sp. not confirmed) in a thermal. They were possibly attracted to the area by stock farming. There were flocks of both Yellow-bellied and Black-crowned Waxbills in the lower fields.

12.2 Nearby, James had identified Lake Nyirakigugu, to the north of the Giseyni Road, as a good prospect. Crocodile-free, it was good for both ducks and waders. Birds included a notable number of passage Wood Sandpiper and a few Common and Green Sandpipers, Three-banded Plover, Red-knobbed Coot, Little Grebe, Long-tailed and Great Cormorants, African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed Stork, a single Grey-Crowned Crane, Yellow-billed Duck, Egyptian Goose, Red-billed Teal and Hottentot Teal and Yellow Wagtail (*flava*), providing an interesting assemblage of birds. Both the lakes in this area and the Gishwati Hills would warrant further exploration.

12.3 The shores of Lake Kivu were productive and African Fish Eagle, African Harrier Hawk, African Hobby, Speckled Pigeon, Brimstone Canary, Lesser-striped and Red-rumped Swallows, Malachite and Pied Kingfishers, Green-headed, Bronzy, Red-chested and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds all stood out. The Weavers were Baglafaecht, Spectacled and Village, in some spectacular colonies. Traditional and elegant Isambaza fishing boats with threesome hulls, huge dipping nets and long telescopic poles plied the lake in graceful and apparently productive fashion. We were surprised to spot a single Grey-headed Gull over one. It was probably a passage bird.

13. Day 15 8.03.15 Lake Kivu and Kigali, The National Genocide Memorial and the Golf Course

13.1 An early morning walk along the Lake Kivu shore produced similar birds to the previous evening and showed the potential of some of the shore-line resort gardens.

13.2 We returned to Kigali. A visit to the National Genocide Memorial was a thought-provoking, if somber diversion from the birding whilst some explored the Kigali Golf Course and found a range of water birds including White-faced Whistling, Yellow-billed and Comb Duck. Palm-nut Vulture was the last new bird for the trip.

14. Conclusion

14.1 **The trip produced 319 species, including 20 Albertine Rift Endemics.** A complete bird list accompanies this report. The habitats and landscapes were constantly interesting, varied and beautiful and the birdwatching results, as well as much potential for further exploration, kept the group constantly focused for two weeks. A visit to Rwanda is adventurous and varied, interesting and highly productive for the birdwatcher and a strongly recommended destination.

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With inputs from Peter Osborn, Eric Melrose and Lesley Silcock

Bird List by Lesley Silcock with species and splits advice by Peter Osborn