UGANDA AND RWANDA (Self driving)
June 25th – August 14th 2010
Alex Schouten and Angeline Peters, The Netherlands

INTRODUCTION
After reading the trip report of Richard Wilson (self-drive trip Uganda, sept-oct 2008) and after having e-mail conversation with him we decided to go birding in Uganda (and Rwanda) in the adventurous way: rent a car and drive the car around both countries ourselves. After a wonderful trip in Uganda and Rwanda in July and August 2010 we can only say: it is not necessary to go on an organized birding tour or rent a car with a driver. We didn’t have any problems while driving and travelling in Uganda and Rwanda on our own, we didn’t get lost and only have met friendly and helpful people!! So it was an great trip with lots of birds!

The reason that we don’t want to go on an organized trip are obvious: it gives much more satisfaction to find and identify the birds by yourself. As we are no keen birders and don’t use tapes, going on an organized birding trip would mean that we only have to confirm the sightings of a birdguide. Nowadays most bird guides (i.e. Avian Watch Uganda) use lights to show where the birds are. So the birds are being served and you only have to follow the light...... not really our way of birding.

In the forested national parks it is impossible to bird on your own because a guide is obligatory and you are not allowed to enter the forest on your own. We must admit that having a guide in the forest is necessary if you are not familiar with the sounds. But especially in the rural areas and in savanna national parks (like Queen Elisabeth and Murchison in Uganda) it’s a real pleasure to drive around on your own pace and do the birding yourself.

We realize that our trip list is not as impressive as those of other birders, but we are very happy and proud of our bird list of exactly 500 species. Keep in mind that it was not a 100 % birding holiday and for instance we spent some time relaxing in Kigali with friends. We traveled at a relaxed pace, far off the tight schedule most birders have because of their limited time. Because we had plenty of time, we didn’t rush from park to park.

The main aim of writing this trip report is to show birders an alternative to the organized birding tours and give information about the guides in the parks, accommodation, rental cars, driving tips etc.

SEASON
But before we start talking about our trip we would like to discuss the best period for visiting Uganda. Despite the high number of bird species we saw in Uganda and Rwanda, we think there are quite a few reasons NOT to visit Uganda in the holiday peak season of July-August, which is supposed to be the dry season:
1. there are fewer birds because there are no paleartic winter visitors (waders, shrikes) or palearctic migrants;
2. the bird activity was low, especially in some forests (Mpanga. Mabira) because it is not the mating/breeding season for most of the birds;
3. strong winds in the mountains (Mghinga, Bwindi, Nyungwe);
4. the dry season is not dry. In Kabale and Semiliki the rain disturbed the birding;
5. Tsetse flies in Murchinson and Kidepo in the wooded areas. They are only there after heavy rains. Summer is the rainy season in the northern and eastern part of the country, so we had a lot of these nasty flies…..;
6. touristic season, busy in some national parks (i.e. Murchinsons);
7. lots of young birds, which are more difficult to identify;
8. airline tickets are more expensive.

After reading various trip reports and talking to the birdguides in the national parks, our advice would be to go in March/April. Our trip to Uganda and Rwanda was part of a longer sabbatical (we also visited South Africa and Cameroon) and with our schedule it was impossible to visit Uganda in that period.

TRANSPORT, MAPS AND DRIVING
There are a few car rental companies who rent you a car without a driver. One of those is Alpha Car Rental in Kampala. We had a lot of questions about the car rental in advance, but every question was answered within 24 hours by the director of the rental company, Douglas. We rented a Toyota Landcruiser and paid USD 56 per day, which is an very good deal. I agree with Richard Wilson that it is absolutely necessary to rent a 4WD. Not only because of the potholes (you need a sturdy car), the mud after rain (see pictures later on in this report), but also because size matters. In cities and bigger villages we still don’t know the traffic rules who has the right of way, but one thing is
clear: a big car has more rights of way then a small car! But we would like to say that driving in the countries visited, Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya is not as stressful as it might look after reading the trip report of Richard Wilson.

When announced in advance, it is possible to drive the car from Alpha Car Rentals to other East-African Countries, i.e. Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda without any problems. We drove the car into Rwanda and delivered the car in Nairobi in Kenya (the Kenya part of our trip is not in this report because we traveled with 2 non-birders). We didn’t have any serious problems with the car during our trip (only 1 flat tire and a leakage of diesel) and were very happy with our Toyota Landcruiser. The car had 2 fuel tanks (180 liters of diesel), which is handy if you are visiting Kidepo NP in the extreme northeast corner of Uganda. Elsewhere, there are plenty of petrol stations.

We found driving in Uganda easy (with the exception of the chaos in Kampala), even without a GPS or navigation system. The reason: the main roads are paved, the other roads are unsealed. So actually it is difficult to get lost if you travel from city to city!. Besides that there are (some) road signs, everybody speaks English (in Uganda) or French (Rwanda) so asking for directions is no problem. Our map turned out to be pretty accurate (especially by African standards). We used the Bradt Travel Guide (which is very good) and the Reise-know-how map (1:600,000, World Mapping Project). Off course sometimes the locals drive like crazy, there are a lot of sleeping policemen (speed bumps) and sometimes the roads are very bad, but that’s Africa. In 7 weeks we only had to stop at 1 police checkpoint. With all the other checkpoints the strategy is: slow down until 20 or 30 km/hr, stick your arm out of your open window, wave and say goodbye! Most of the times the policemen wave back at you and that’s all. So no worries about police checkpoints!

The border crossings took some time (about 1 hour), but in general went smooth. In Rwanda you have to drive on the right side of the road (like on the mainland of Europe). But driving on the right side of the road in a right steer 4WD is a bit confusing….

The only ‘problem’ is Kampala. We decided to ask the car rental company to drop us on the east side of Kampala, at the shopping malls. There a few big, modern supermarkets close to each other, which are situated on the main road heading east. The seems to be a good decision because driving in the city centre of Kampala is no fun at all! A few days later we had to go from the east side to the west side of Kampala, but nowadays there is a northern bypass. The bypass is a very efficient way to pass Kampala (good asphalt, no potholes, hardly any other traffic).

MONEY
There are ATM's (especially Stanbic Bank) in every bigger city and they accept cards with a cirrus-logo. So getting Uganda shillings should not be a problem.

In the national parks you can pay in US dollars or in Uganda Shillings. The exchange rate they have is normal and updated every month. So in contrast to other trip reports it is possible to pay the entrance fee in Uganda shillings with a normal exchange rate.

HEALTH, SAFETY AND PEOPLE
Uganda is a safe country to travel. We were just with the two us and when we visited a bigger town, Angeline went shopping and Alex went to the internet cafe. Most of the times we parked the car near a bank and ask a security person to take eye on the car and they were happy to do it (don’t try this in Kampala….). During our entire trip we didn’t meet any unfriendly people. On top of that, the people of Uganda will not approach you when you walk on a market. They are shy, friendly and always willing to help you. And the kidz are always laughing at you!

In 7 weeks in the area we didn’t have any problems with our health at all!

ACCOMMODATION, FOOD, DRINKS
On the east side of Kampala there are 2 modern shopping malls with big supermarkets (Uchumi, Shoprite). In the smaller cities and towns outside Kampala there are small supermarkets, nearly always owned by Asian people. The shops are small, but they have everything you need! So we didn’t have any problems buying food, snacks and drinks. We both like to eat bread, but …in Uganda it just doesn’t taste good. On the other hand, Rwanda with its French history, has very cheap and excellent bread, croissants etc!!!

We had camping equipment with us and camped most of the times. When there was no campground, we stayed in cheap hotels or backpackers. There is no shortage in accommodation (from cheap to very expensive) in Uganda and Rwanda and with the exception of the first night in Kampala we didn’t make any bookings in advance. There is no list of accommodations in this trip report. When we think our accommodation might be useful to other (budget) birders, the accommodation is mentioned in the text.
AREAS VISITED.

Botanical Gardens Entebbe (25 June)
After a 5 hour flight from South Africa (the Uganda trip was part of a longer trip through Africa), we arrived at Entebbe Airport early in the evening. We had arranged to be picked up by somebody from Entebbe Backpackers. The accommodation was OK. We paid 50 USD for 2 nights in a double room with private bathroom, 1 dinner and some snacks and drinks. On our first day, we walked from our hotel to the Botanical Gardens. The BG offer a good introduction to Ugandan birds. After a leisurely morning or birding we had 40 species. Most of the species were seen in or near the reed beds at the edge of Lake Victoria. The Black-and-white Casqued Hornbill was the most impressive bird of the day and Red-chested Sunbird, Northern Brown-throated Weaver, Baglafecht Weaver, Yellow-backed Weaver, Ruppell’s Long-tailed Starling, Angola Swallow and Eastern Grey Plaintaineater were new for our world list. We couldn’t find see the Verreaux’s Eagle Owl and the Orange Weaver, but we saw those birds later on in the trip.

Mabira Forest and Jinja area (26-28 June)
About 1.5 hours drive along a very busy road east of Kampala. We stayed at Little Kingston (www.littlekingston.com) at the edge of the Mbira Forest. When coming from Kampala, turn right just before the market in Najembe Village (situated on the west site of the forest) and the small guesthouse is on your left after 200 meters along this small dirt road. To go to the entrance of the park, simply walk back to the main road, cross it ad continue for a few hundred meters. There is some confusion about the entrance fees. The official tariff states that foreign visitors pay US 15/25/35 entrance fee to the reserve for 1/2/3 days, but we only paid Ush 10,000 (about 4,5 USD) per person. The first day, we walked some tracks on the north side of the road. It is not necessary to go with a guide, so we had the opportunity to do the forest birding ourselves. Although the birding was slow, we could add 30 species to our trip list, like Lesser Honeyguide, Jameson’s, Chestnut and Brown-throated Wattle-eye, Red-tailed and Green-tailed Bristlebill, Forest Robin, Grey-headed Negrosfinch and White-headed Sawwing (just outside the forest). The second morning we headed into the forest on the south side of the main road. Walking in this part is more strenuous (steep valleys), but we liked it more than the northern part. There was a bit more bird activity and we could add another 10 species on our trip list, which was now on 75 species. The best species were Red-headed Malimbe, Velvet Drongo, Buff-throated Apalis and Forest Wood-hoopoe. In the afternoon we drove north of Jinja to the Bujagali Falls and camped along the river (Explorers Campsite). We added about 10 birds to our list. Black-headed Gonolek was the only new bird for our world list. The scenery along this part of the Nile is nice, but no special birds could be found.

Mpanga Forest Reserve (29 June)
This forest reserve is situated about 30 km west of Kampala. Don’t miss the sign along the main road: it is small……. It is a beautiful, very peaceful place and we pitched our tent on the grass near the visitor centre. During our first afternoon walk, we heard just a few birds but didn’t see any!!! The forest seems empty! The next morning it was raining and at 10 am the rain stopped and we went into the forest. It went slightly better than the previous afternoon, but we saw most of the species on the second half of our walk through agricultural fields (Magpie Mannikin, Village Indigobird, Plain-breasted Pipit etc.). We couldn’t find the localized Weyn’s Weaver neither the hide at the western end of the Mpanga forest. Probably the hide is not there any more. Because of the water levels in the swamp it was difficult to get a good view on the swamp. The highlights were 2 otters! Although the forest was beautiful, the birding was very slow and the trees are very high……
Mabamba Swamp (30 June)
We had made a phone-call to Avain Watch Uganda a few days before and they arranged a guide to take us to the Mabamba Swamp in search of the famous Shoebill. En route we stopped at an obvious papyrus swamp and after 2 minutes it was there in full sight: a Papyrus Gonolek! After a drive of more then 1 hour we were at the launch area for the boat trip into the Mabamba Swamp. After half an hour a local fisherman was waiting at an open part of the swamp and it was obvious why: a Shoebill was standing about 100 meters away from him (and us). What a strange bird to see! After another the fisherman started canoeing again and the Shoebill flew away to a more remote part of the swamp. During the rest of the boat trip we saw many new aquatic species, Blue-breasted Bee-eaters, Blue-headed Coucal but no White-winged Warbler. On the way back we stopped at lake Victoria and found Orange Weaver and Golden-backed Weaver in the nearby vegetation.

Vicinity of Lake Mburo (1 July)
We decided not to visit Lake Mburo because we wanted to be in Rwanda as soon possible to avoid oncoming elections. It’s never a good idea to visit an African country when there are elections.
But we had some time left to bird one of the entrance roads to Lake Mburo, which was our first dry savanna area in Uganda. We stopped near a drinking pool for the cattle and made a short walk. Brown Parrot, Bataleur, Hooded Vulture, Bare-faced Go Away bird, Arrow-marked Babbler and Grey Backed Fiscal are a few birds we saw in this area.
Then we headed for Rwanda and we took the less traveled border crossing at Katigumba. In Uganda, the road is unsealed and very bad and in Rwanda the road is sealed but there is no traffic……

Akagera National Park (Rwanda) 3-4 July
In Rwanda we visited 2 national parks: Akagera and Nyungwe. The first one because we were just curious how the park looks like. We had no information about good birding sites or specialties in the park. At the entrance we had a pretty unpleasant surprise: the prices for sleeping in the park. Staying in a modest hotel room was 100 USD and primitive camping (no water, pit toilet) was 60 USD!!!! We like camping and that evening we realized we were on the most expensive camping spot of all our travels around the world in one of the least developed countries in the world! We had mixed feelings….By the way, the roads in the park are bad (corrugated, extremely dusty and in part sandy) and you really need a 4WD to explore the park.
It is not allowed to drive in the park without a guide. We asked for a birdguide but we were told none of the resident guides was specialized in birds. Our guide insisted in going to a barren area where we saw Giraffe and
Nyungwe National Park (Rwanda) 8-10 July

After visiting friends in Kigali (a compact, relaxed African capital!) we drove to the mountainous southwestern part of the country. To avoid the high prices for accommodation in the park, we decided to stay at an educational school (Kitabo Guesthouse) near the east entrance of the park. We liked this place. It was cheap, clean, nice view and the staff was friendly. The food is very basic, but that is no problem for us. The only drawback is that you have to drive about 45 minutes to the ranger station at Uwinka every morning and again in the late afternoon. At Nyungwe we were a bit unlucky that the best birdguide (Claver Ntoyinkima) was only available for 1 day. The other 2 days we had another guide (Verdes), which was not half as good as Claver. We also made a few walks together with other non-birding visitors, so not all the time in the park was spent on birdwatching, but that was no problem.

Nyungwe is situated in the mountains of the Albertine Rift and has a lot of endemics! The birding in the park was excellent and we had a great time. The trail along the Kamiranzovu marsh (about 5 km down the ridge to the west by car) was the best and most scenic walk we made. During our stay in Nyungwe we had 50 (!) new species for our trip list, which was now at 237 species. For example we have seen Cinnamon-bracken Warber, Red-throated Alethe, Mountain Greenbull, Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher, Black-billed Turaco, White-headed Wood-hoopoe, Cinnamon-breasted Bee-eater, Red-faced Woodland Warbler, Collared Apalis, Strange Weaver, Stuhlmann’s Starling, Mountain Masked Apalis, Evergreen Forest Warbler, Purple-beasted Sunbird, Archer’s Robin-Chat, Many-coloured Bush-shrike, Ruwenzori Double-coloured Sunbird, Brown-capped Weaver, Grey-chested Illadopsis, Ruwenzorig Batis, Tullberg’s Woodpecker, Black-throated Apalis, White-browed Crombec, African Hill-Babbler, Mountain Black Boubou, Yellow-streaked Greenbull, Dusky Crimsonwing and Blue-headed Sunbird. And we also saw the Kungwe Apalis (which doesn’t live in Uganda) very well. Most of the species are endemic to the Albertine rift Mountains or have a limited range outside this area. We were very happy with the birds seen in this park. Birding in Nyungwe is not as difficult as
in other forests because there is no dense undergrowth, there are more open areas in the forest and there is height difference in the park which gives you a good view of the forest. The canopy tower and walkway were not finished when we were there. Although we missed some specialties (i.e. Red-collared Mountain Babbler) we would recommend every birder to visit the park as we were very impressed by the birds, the bird guide Claver (he also teaches a lot of school children about the forest) and the scenery!!!

Mgahinga Gorilla NP (13 July)
The entrance road to the park entrance from Kisoro takes about 45 minutes, but is very bad in places. A high clearance is essential to get to the park entrance. We camped right beside the park entrance at a campground (7 USD pppn) and a wonderful meal was cooked for us. The dinner is ‘expensive’ (8 USD pp for a three course meal), but we agreed for a vegetarian dinner (only main course) for 4 USD pp.

In the park we made a day walk with guide Levi (the smallest bird guide we have ever seen!). He is a bird guide, but we were not really impressed by his birding skills, although he knew a sight for the Ruwenzori Nightjar! We saw some good birds like the Dusky Turtle-Dove, Mountain Yellow Warbler, Little Green Sunbird and White-tailed Crested Flycatcher. In the late morning it became very windy and according to the guide it is always windy at this time of year. The wind disturbed the birding, but in one of the upper valleys we were able to see the main target species, the Ruwenzori Turaco. In the afternoon we walked through a birdless bamboo forest. Despite the windy conditions we were happy with 10 new species (now at 247) and the nice scenery.

Lake Bunyoni (14 July)
After Mgahinga NP we decided not to drive straight to Bwindi, but take a relaxed afternoon at the shores of the beautiful lake Bunyoni. We camped for 1 night at the Bunyoni Overlanders camp, which is a great place to stay (6 USD pppn). There were no overland trucks, so it was peaceful and quiet. En route from Kisoro to Lake Bunyoni we made a short roadside stop at Echuya forest. You can park the car on the side of the road. We didn’t want to lose the car out of sight and didn’t go far into the forest. We did not see anything special in the forest.

The road from Kabale to Kisoro is tarred for half of the distance (they started in Kabale) and the job will be finished in 2011. The will mean a great improvement because the first 10 km from Kisoro uphill are steep and extremely dusty, at some places there is 10 cm of very fine sand on the road.....

At lake Bunyoni we saw a few new species like Grey-capped Warbler and White-tailed Blue Flycatcher.
Bwindi Impenetrable NP (16-19 July)

Ruhija section
Although some saloon cars make it from Kabale to Ruhija, we think that a high clearance car is necessary on this wonderful access route. It took us more than 2 hours to reach Ruhija from Kabale (supermarkets, petrol, internet, delicious bakery). We stayed in a covered tent (great views!!!) at the Gorilla Friends and payed 15 USD pppn (breakfast not included, otherwise 20 USD pppn). The IFTC guesthouse is closed because other accommodation is available now. Gorilla Friends was one of the best value for money accommodations of our trip with a beautiful view across a (once wooded…) valley.

In the afternoon we birded the School track (this is outside the park and no guide is necessary) and saw Chestnut-throated Apalis (the telephone bird) and a nice Stripe-Breasted Tit! The next morning we drove the short distance to the ranger station where it took some time to arrange a walk. We left the ranger station at 8 am for the trail to the Mubwindi Swamp. Our guide was Meddie and he knows the birds and the sounds. It was quiet on the upper part of the swamp trail, but more birds were in the valley near the swamp. We arrived at the swamp pretty late in the morning and although we heard the Grauers Swamp Warbler we couldn’t locate it. We also didn’t see the Carruthers Cisticola and the Green Broadbill. If you want to see the Green Broadbill you must visit the park earlier in the year. In July we looked at an empty abandoned nest. Outside the breeding season (March-May) this bird is hard to find. Despite missing the target species, we saw other nice birds. like Grey-throated Barbet, Yellow-billed Barbet, Slender-billed Greenbull, Dusky Tit and Grauer’s Warbler. In the afternoon we birded the School track again.

The next morning we drove to the bamboo zone (about 7 km west of the Ranger station), where we saw 2 Handsome Francolins along the road. We were just in time, because 1 minute later a motorbike passed, the francolins run into the bushes and didn’t show themselves again for the next half hour. No park fees are charged for birding along the main road.

The Neck
In the middle of a hot day it was very quit with birds in this part of Bwindi. But the Cassins Grey Flycatcher was sitting on his vine above the river!

Buhoma
This is the most touristic part of the park. Most of the lodges in Buhoma are outrageous expensive. We stayed in the friendly Bwindi View, on the right just after the park entrance. We paid 80 USD for 3 nights in a covered tent (light, towels, good beds, communal ((hot!) showers and toilets) and did the cooking ourselves. In the village there are some food stalls where you can buy the basic stuff. We liked this place and the people were helpful when we had a problem with our car (leakage of diesel, see further).
In the late afternoon we birded the entrance road (no guide necessary until a sign) and saw some nice birds around an open area about halfway. Ludens Bush-shrike, Pink-footed Puffback, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Green-headed Sunbird and Speckled Tinkerbird. Without paying a fee it is possible to walk the entrance road (many good birds) until the second sign which tells you that you need a ranger. From there you can turn left and walk the river trail, which ends at the shelters where people pick up their guide for the gorilla tracking. Unfortunately the river trail was closed on the first 2 days because gorilla’s were close to the entrance (we saw them in the garden of one of the lodges...). On our last morning, we were allowed to walk the River trail without a guide and without paying entrance fees.

In the evening we discovered that our Toyota Landcruiser was leaking diesel and we put a bowl under the leakage. So no early start the next morning because first we had to solve the problem with the diesel leakage. Alex, a communal birdguide, solved the problem, and we paid him some money for that. We decided not to go birding with him because he charged 50 USD for being a birdguide for one day. Because you also have to pay the entrance fee for Bwindi NP (30 USD pppd) and the fee for the nature walk (15 USD pp) to the UWA it would be 140 USD for just making a walk in the park......

There are 2 resident UWA-guides who are birders (Steven and Sunday) and they don’t cost any extra money (apart from the tip). On the first day (late start because of the problems with the car) we had Steven as a guide and the second day we had Sunday as our guide. Both are friendly and helpful, but only Steven is a good birder and knows all the sounds in the forest. Sunday knows some sounds but is bad in finding the birds with his binoculars. He even doesn’t stop for mixed flocks! Both guides were happy to go birding with us. Most birders arrive on an organized tour with their own birdguide, so unfortunately Steven and Sunday doesn’t have many clients.....

On our first day in the park the best birds were Equatorial Akalat, Moutain Illadopsis, Black-faced Rufous Warbler, Bar-tailed Trogon, White-bellied Robin-Chat, Sooty Flycatcher and Buff-Spotted Woodpecker.

On the second day the best birds were Black Bee-eater, Black Cuckoo, Shelley’s Greenbull and Black-and-Whte Shrike-Flycatcher. The birding was slow, probably due to an overcast morning.

The UWA-guides are really afraid that you see the gorilla’s without having paid the 500 USD for the gorilla-tracking. We heard a male gorilla close to the main trail and the guide nearly started running away. He said it was a very dangerous situation, but we are sure it was because he didn’t want us to have a look at the gorillas since we didn’t have a gorilla-permit. In the afternoon we saw 1 male and 1 female gorilla in the garden of the Gorilla Forest Camp and they asked us no to look at the gorillas but look in the other direction because otherwise they would charge us 500 USD per person...... We started laughing and had a look at both gorilla’s, but decided not to take pictures because we didn’t want to have any troubles.

We left Bwindi with 300 species on our trip list. We saw most of the Albertine Rift endemics, but also missed a few like Short-tailed Warbler (heard many times, but without a tape it is not very easy to see them), Dwarf Honeyguide, Grauers Swamp Warbler and Kivu Ground Thrush.

**Queen Elisabeth National Park, Ishasha section (21 July)**

After 2 weeks in the forest, it was time for a change: open landscapes and game! The Ishasha section is the least visited area of the QENP, but famous for the tree climbing lions. Like many other people we didn’t see any tree climbing lions..... We stayed in simple, but clean bandas near the ranger station and cooked our own food. The price was 8 USD (camping is the same price). Big areas of this southern section were burned by poachers, who try to push the wildlife into one direction and shoot it....... Because of the different landscape we had different array or birds like Lapwings (Brown-chested and Crowned), Striped Kingfisher, Rufous-naped Lark, Brown Babbler, Blue-naped Mousebird, Violet-backed Starling and Holub’s Golden Weaver. We liked the Common Buttonquails which were walking on the unsealed roads at dusk (we saw more then 10 of these funny birds). But by far the best bird was a African Finfoot, which we saw at the abandoned campsite along the river. A couple of days later we spoke with a guide of Avian Watch Uganda, who told us it was maybe the first bird ever seen in the park. And QENP has already the longest bird list of all the national parks in Africa!
**Queen Elisabeth National Park, Northern sector (22-24 July)**

From the Ishasha section we drove north and decided to camp outside the QENP for 1 night. We found a lovely campground on the escarpment, about 14 km east of the bridge over the Kazinga Channel, called Queen Elisabeth Lodge. It is a community based lodge, close to the more expensive Katara Lodge and Kingfisher Kichwamba Lodge. There is a sign on the main road. After pitching in our tent, we drove back a few kilometers and birded the entrance road to the Maramagambo forest, but we didn’t enter the forest itself. Along the entrance road we noted Greater Honeyguide, Brimston Canary and Compact Weaver.

The next morning we drove into the the Kyambura Wildlife Reserve. It is part of the QENP, but you don’t need to pay an entrance fee. Keep left at a fork few kilometers after you have left the main road and you will enter grassy areas and a bit further on you will see the crater lake. We explored the area on foot (no idea if that is allowed, we survived…..). Unfortunately there were no Flamingo’s in the crater lake (wrong season). In the grassy area there we a lot of Red-billed Queleas and near the crater lake we had Croaking Cisticola. Because of a serious bushfire we couldn’t drive any further and returned. The Kyambura is a nice area, but we couldn’t find any special birds.

After the Kyambura section we drove to the Mweya lodge at the peninsula in Lake Edward. We stayed on the campground and were accompanied by warthogs. There were hardly any other parties camping, so we had the place to ourselves! During the drive towards the campground we had new birds like Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike and Green-winged Pytilia.

The next morning we decided to visit the saltworks outside the park near Katwe. Nowadays it is only possible to visit the saltworks with a guide (10 USD pp). There is also a viewpoint just outside the gate, from which we could scan the area. Again no flamingo’s, it really was the wrong season for these birds. Then we took the Crater drive towards the Equator gate. It’s a long, narrow, sometime steep and rocky road and takes a few hours to drive. It’s a very scenic road, but you need a good 4WD to make it all the way. In some areas with very high grass we had African Moustashed Warbler and Black Coucal and in the rocky part we some a few Cinnamon-breasted Buntings. The triplist is now on 337 species.

In the afternoon we made the famous boat trip along the Kazinga Channel. Although there we a lot of birds, there were no specialties. The most spectacular species were African Skimmers and Collared Pratincoles.

The last morning in the QENP was spent on the Kasenyi Plains, east of the main road. Finding your way is not so easy because there are many tracks and no good map. Since this is the most touristic part of the park, there are a lot of white Toyota minibuses driving around. When they all go to the same direction, just follow them....We saw some spectacular wildlife (tree climbing lions and no other minibuses around!!) and some nice birds: White-winged Widowbird, Black-bellied Bustard, Grey Kestrel, Black-bellied Firefinch, Grey-headed Kingfisher, Rüppels Griffon Vulture and many Wing-snapping Cisticola’s.

We liked the Queen Elizabeth National Park because of the nice mix of game (good numbers of elephants, Lions, Giant Warthog) and birds, although it’s better not to look too often in ‘where to watch guide’ with the long long long birdlist...... The park was rich in birds, but we were not able to see many specialties in the park. Despite this, we left the park with 353 species on our trip list.

**Kibale National Park (25-27 July)**

After the savanna of QENP it was time for forest again. We decided to take the shortcut between the QENP and Kibale to avoid the long detour by Fort Portal (see page 325 Bradt Travel Guide).From the main Kaese – Fort Portal Road we followed the signs to the Ndali Lodge. This road is very scenic, but we had to ask the way a few
times to get to the Fort Portal – Kibale road. We stayed for 1 night at the CVK Resort (18 USD for a room with hot showers and a flush toilet), which was OK, but not very special. Just in front of our room, we saw the only Giant Kingfisher of our trip! Two American birders had Blue Shining Kingfisher from the small jetty of the lodge, but we couldn't find it. In the morning it was raining, so we decided to relax on our veranda. When the rain stopped around midday, we went to Kibale NP and we decided not to enter the National Park, but do the birding around the ranger station and along the main road. The birding was slow, but we had some nice birds like Yellowbill, Red-headed Bluebill and Wahlberg's Honeybird. There was some traffic on the road (and they drive fast) which disturbed the birding a little bit. In the afternoon we birded along the road in the agricultural fields close to the CVK Resort and found it pretty busy with birds. We had nice birds like Copper Sunbird, Brown-backed Scrub-robin, Grey Parrot (flying) and White-throated Greenbul. The next morning we went to the Bidogi Wetland Reserve from 07'30 until 12'30 to make walk around the reserve. In some other trip report people say it is a waste of time, but we disagree:
1. we saw 6 species of monkey along the trail: Red Colobus, Black-and-White Colobus, Vervet Monkey, Baboon, Red-tailed Monkey and Blue Monkey. We also heard chimpanzees!
2. by visiting the reserve you support the local community with the entrance fee (14 USD). They also have nice 'souvenirs', made by local women. Our guide was Owen, a reasonable birder and a very friendly and informative guy.
3. we saw some nice birds like Red-faced Cisticola, Brown-eared Woodpecker, Dusky-blue Flycatcher, Speckle-breasted Woodpecker and Marsh Tchagra.

To find the specialty of the swamp, the White-winged Warbler, you need a tape. We heard the White-spotted Flufftail a few time very close to the trail, saw some movements, but couldn't get a positive ID by eyesight. In the afternoon we birded the road through Kibale NP again and had nice birds like Green Crombec and Cassin's Honeybird! We like the area around the Kibale NP because it was nice to have a possibility to do some birding in a wetland and in cultivated areas. We had 23 new species for our trip list, which now was on 376 species. We had an easy afternoon and camped at the well organised Chimps Nest (Dutch owner), a very nice place to camp or stay in their bunkbeds. We heard chimpanzees a few times.
Semliki National Park (28-29 July)

Semliki NP is a must for every birder because it is located in the lowlands west of the Albertine Rift Mountains. Bird species which live in the sticky Congo basin have their eastern distribution limit in Semliki.

The drive from Fort Portal to Semliki is a spectacular unsealed mountain road for part of the way. The road is OK for saloon cars. Roadworks are going on and in 2012 the road will be sealed and will follow a longer and less scenic route. The improvement is part of a program of the Ugandan government to improve and pave all the roads to the border of Congo. We spent 2 days in Semliki and stayed in simple, small but clean bandas near the park entrance. They cost 15 USD per banda (the same price for camping) and we cooked our own food.

Our guide was Samson. He was very friendly and informative and we had talks about bushmeat, wildlife conservation, the Uganda Wildlife Authority etc. The talks didn't make us happy because corruption, illegal logging etc. are a common thing in this remote part of Uganda. He is a reasonable birder, but was not able to point the birds to us. Sometimes it took him so long to identify the that the bird had flown away......

The first morning we tried to bird the Kirumia Trail, which eventually goes as far as the Semliki River. But after 5 minutes it started pouring rain! We waited a long time and finally the rain eased a bit and we started birthing. But the forest was still very wet and the raindrops from the trees kept disturbing the birding for a long time. There were not many birds in the forest, but we had some nice ones like the Crested Malimbe, Grant's Bluebill, Western Nicator, Blue-throated Roller, Red-billed Dwarf Hornbill and 2 bigger hornbills: Piping and Black-casqued Wattled Hornbill. The next morning we returned to the same trail but despite the lack of rain the forest was fairly quiet. New birds were Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Rufous-sided Broadbill, Green-backed Twinspot, Red-eyed Puffback, Red-tailed Antthrush, White-thighed Hornbill, Blue-billed Malimbe and Grey-headed Sunbird. In the afternoon we visited the geothermal area near the park entrance, but we couldn't add any new birds. The geothermal area is very scenic.

The last morning we walked along the main road (without a guide) for about 2 hours and added 2 new species: African Dwarf Kingfisher and the local Swamp Palm Bulbul.

Although the birding was a bit slow, we liked the park: the road towards the park is scenic, there are no other tourists, the geothermal area is nice and the birding is exciting. We left the park with 392 species on our trip list, so the 400 is within easy reach.

There was one negative thing about the park. The man at the entrance of the park, who was organizing the guide and collecting the entrance fees etc, didn't want to give us tickets for the accommodation, entrance fees and the walks. We insisted on getting our tickets because otherwise the money goes straight into his pocket....And as he smelled a bit to alcohol.......
will be finished and furnished by the end of 2010. So it is not necessary to stay in Masindi any more. During our visit there we no other tourist and from the site manager we understood that unfortunately not many tourists visit site. The Busingoro Tourist site is a 25 minute drive from the Royal Mile.

Birding along the main road near Busingoro was actually quite good and we saw a few nice birds like the White-bellied Negrofinch and the Rufous-crowned Eremomela. But birding along the road was also a bit tricky as a car crashed just after it had passed us. Probably because the driver was looking at 2 white men looking into the trees with binoculars, he missed a slight curve in the road, crashed and wrecked his car......

Our guide at the Royal Mile was the resident bird guide: Vincent. He is an excellent birdwatcher and is based on the Busingoro Tourist Site. Together with Claver (Nyungwe NP in Rwanda) he is the best guide we had during our trip. He is very friendly, very sharp, good with sounds and able to point the birds to us!

We visited the Royal Mile 2 times (both time for half a day). Because of a flat tyre we had a late start (08'45) at the Royal Mile on our first visit. It was fairly quiet (maybe because of the overcast weather), but we saw a few good birds like Chocolate-backed Kingfisher, Blue-Shouldered Robin-Chat, African Crowned Eagle, Green Sunbird and Purple-headed Starling and the trip total was now about 400 species! We visited the site 1 week later again and we saw a different selection of birds. The bird activity was OK, but mainly with mixed flocks in the canopy, not our favorite part of the trees...... The best birds were a Little Grey Greenbul (which was only 5 meters high), Superb Sunbird, Beautiful Sunbird and a Scaly-breasted Illadopsis. We heard the Brown Illadopsis, but he didn’t want to show himself. Highlight of the day was a group of habituated chimpanzees, which were having a rest on the Royal Mile!!!!!!! In 2010 it was not possible to visit the chimpanzees because there were some problems with the habituated chimpanzees visiting agricultural areas outside the forest. Currently another group in the forest is being habituated and hopefully it is possible to visit these magnificent apes in the near future.

We also visited the escarpment, about a 20 minutes drive west of Busingoro. We had 2 new species: African Black Swift and White-crested Helmeted Shrike.

**Murchinson NP (3–6 August)**

After Budungo we drove to Masindi and then on to Murchison NP. First we visited the Kanyiyo Pabidi Forest. Be aware that the Kanyiyo Forest is now inside the Murchison NP and you must pay entrance fee. The is one of the few mistakes in the Bradt Travel Guide, which doesn't talk about paying the entrance fee for the National Park when visiting entering the Kanyiyo Forest. The first afternoon we did a chimpanzee-tracking in pouring rain. The chimpanzees were sitting high in the trees hopping for the rain to stop. But the rain didn't stop. We stayed just outside the National Park at the Boomu Women's Group. Cheap, good food and a very warm welcome.

The next morning we returned to the Kanyiyo Pabidi Forest for a bird walk. We only had Yellow longbill and Blue-throated Brown Sunbird as new birds. We heard the Puvel's Illadopsis, but couldn't get a clear view.

After the bird walk we drove to the top of the Murchison Falls. A must visit, they are spectacular. We saw a few Rock Pratincols at the rocks in the river. Along the side track
towards the falls the birding was difficult because of the tsetse flies, which were abundant. As a result we had to drive with the windows closed, which disturbed the birding.

After our visit to the top of the waterfalls we drove to the Red Chili Restcamp near the ferry. We stayed there for 3 nights. Every day we took the ferry to the north bank of the Nile river. Be there at least half a hour before the first scheduled ferry. It's a bit of a fight to get on board, but every day we made it to get on board of the first boat. Just a matter of adapting the African style of driving and attitude..... Although the UWA guides will tell you that you need a guide, this is not true. It's not difficult to find your way, the game and the birds without a guide. We liked it to drive around in our Landcruiser just with the two of us.

The scenery on the north side of the river is fine and there is lots of wildlife and lots of new birds for our trip list. We saw birds like Abyssinian Hornbill, Rufous Sparrow, Silverbird, Northern Carmine Bee-eater (what a beauty...), Red-throated Bee-eater, Spotted Morning-Thrush, Black-billed Barbet, Red-collared Widowbird, Black-rumped Waxbill, Black-headed Lapwing, Red-winged Grey Warbler, Denham's Bustard, Verraux's Eagle-Owl, Heuglin's Francolin and Yellow-mled Widowbird.

Although it is not officially allowed to drive around at night, we had a post-dusk and pre-dawn drive and had spectacular views of a few Pennant-winged Nightjars. Unfortunately this was the only species of Nightjar we saw in the park. We saw the nightjars a few kilometer from the Red Chili Restcamp on the road towards the top of the falls. We did a scenic boat trip to the base of the falls, but didn't see any new bird species. We left the park through the north Wankwar Gate in the northeastern part of the park with 440 species on our trip list. The is by far our longest trip list and we still had 2 national park to go!

**Kidepo NP (8-12 August)**

After years of civil war in the northern part of Uganda, in 2010 it was save to visit to Kidepo NP by road. And the good news it, that a new road was built to access the park from the Gulu-Kitgum access road. See the Bradt Travel Guide for more information. It's a long drive from Gulu, but we didn't have any difficulties finding the route and enjoyed every part of the trip towards the national park. Especially the last 50 km are very scenic. There is no information about the birds along this last stretch, but we saw a lot of bird activity. Unfortunately we didn't have time to make many stops because of the time needed to travel from or to Gulu.

In the park, we decided not to camp, but to stay if one of the many bandas at the main rest camp (25 USD per night for the banda with private bathroom and electricity). The camp is not fenced and the zebra’s are grazing around the bandas and the Patas Monkey (the fastest monkeys on the planet) are playing on the car. We even had a male Buffalo in the camp, not really an animal you would like to encounter at close range. We looked from the door opening, ready to close the door....

It is obligatory to take a guide/ranger in the park, but after the first day we were allowed to drive in the area between the national...
park bandas and the entrance without a guide. If you want to drive towards the Kananorok hot springs (which are very small and not worth a visit), you definitely need a ranger because the road is very close to the Sudan border. Our guide during our 4 night stay was Bernhard. He is not a good birder at all, but he is the only guide with some knowledge about the birds. The knowledge of the birds in the area is limited anyway. We understood from Bernhard, other birders and other trip reports that the distribution maps of the birds in the 'Birds of East Africa' are not always correct for the northeastern part of Uganda. For example, we saw Fawn-colored Larks in Kidepo, which are clearly outside their distribution range. Beware that in July/Aug there is not much game in the park as it migrates to Sudan. But we had a very close encounter with lion and saw nice herds of giraffes. Also be prepared for lots of tsetse flies in the wooded areas of the park. There are so many flies that you have to keep the windows closed, which prevents normal birdwatching.

Kidepo is a beautiful national park and we enjoyed it very much. Birdwise the park is very interesting, because there are many species that only live in this park within Uganda. We saw many new birds for our trip list in Kidepo, like Black-winged Bishop, Superb Starling, Red-winged Lark, Northern White-crowned Shrike, Clapperton's Francolin, Rufous Chatterer, Fox Kestrel, Fan-tailed Raven, Bruce's Green Pigeon, Cardinal Quelea, Black Bishop, Jackson's Hornbill, d'Arnoult's Barbet, White-crowned Turaco, Harlequin Quail, White-headed Buffalo-weaver, Nubian Woodpecker, Cut-throat Finch, White-bellied Go-away-bird, African Crake, White-tailed Lark, Yellow-spotted Petronia, African Grey Flycatcher, Foxy Cisticola, Red-winged Pytilia, Eastern Violet-backed Sunbird, Rose-ringed Parakeet and Vitelline Masked Weaver. We left the park with 493 species on our list and had a great time in the park. Unlike Queen Elizabeth NP and Murchison NP not many tourists make the effort to drive all the way to Kidepo, but it's really worth the long drive!!!

Mt. Elgon National Park
This was our last park in Uganda. A couple of non-birding friends was travelling with us, so there was less time to do serious birdwatching. We stayed 2 nights in the Crow's Nest in Sipi Village (20 USD for a log cabin with private bathroom and a beautiful view of the Sipi Falls). The was one of the best value for money accommodation on our trip in Uganda.

We visited Mout Elgon National Park (Kapkwai) and made a day walk. We had a very nice birdguide: a good looking young woman (we have forgotten her name), good sense of humor and very interested in birds. The walk was great with nice views of the surrounding mountains, beautiful forest, some monkeys and some nice birds. Although we were educating the bird guide more than she us, we were able to add 6 new species to our trip list, which was at 499 birdspecies. The best new birds were Hartlaub Turaco, Spotted Creeper and Black-collared Apalis. So we left the park with 499 birdspecies on our list. Not really a number with you want to end a birding trip...... On the way back to our guesthouse, we checked a mountain stream for the Mountain Wagtail. And yes, there it was: number 500!!!!

The next day we took the unsealed road on the northern and eastern side of Mout Elgon to go into Kenya (border crossing at Suam). It took us 8 hours to travel the 60 km and luckily we were together with a fully-equipped Landrover of 2 German brothers. The road is scenic, but very very very very bad after rain with a lot of mud, rivers to cross etc. Don't think about taking this route with one car, You need to have two 4WD's, have experience with 4x4 driving, and have the equipment to help each other when one car got stuck in to mud. You need towing equipment, spades etc. We had scary moments on this extremely muddy and slippery road and reached Suam just before dark.......But is was a trip we will never forget.
No comment needed 😊