

Uganda - In Search of the Shoebill (and Bwindi extension)

Naturetrek Tour Report

14th – 26th February 2026



Mountain Gorilla



Chimpanzee



Shoebill



Shoebill

Tour report & photos kindly provided by Rowan Hillson and John Neighbour



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Gerald Tumwekwase (leader) with four Naturetrek clients (two on Bwindi extension, with local leader David))

Summary

This tour was described as being focused 'primarily on birds, although mammals and other wildlife will be looked at'. The options during the main trip and the Bwindi extension provided many opportunities both for keen birders, and for people also interested in mammals and culture. Highlights were the early location of a magnificent Shoebill in the Mbamba swamp (plus one beside the road later that day), a walking safari with about thirty giraffes in Lake Mburo National Park, a family of African Finfoots during a boat ride on Lake Mburo, abundant wildlife in Queen Elizabeth National Park (including many Elephants, Lions and some Leopards, Great Blue Turaco and several monkeys in Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary, Chimpanzees and Green-breasted Pitta in Kibale Forest, many Albertine Rift and other range-restricted forest birds, and excellent views of Mountain Gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. In Buhoma, one participant also met some Batwa people and learnt about their culture, and visited a local school and the Pangolin Rescue Centre. We crossed the equator three times!

Main tour

Day 1

Saturday 14th February

Two of the group travelled from Heathrow, meeting a third person from Manchester in Addis Ababa, and the fourth from Belgium in Entebbe, where we also met Gerald, our local leader.

Day 2

Sunday 15th February

After landing at Entebbe Airport we were driven to the Two Friends Guesthouse by Gerald in a Toyota Landcruiser, with eight passenger seats and a pop-up roof, which would allow for good wildlife viewing. This was our transport for the rest of the trip, with a similar vehicle for the extension. Two Friends is on the shore of Lake Victoria, where our Belgian colleague had already enjoyed some great birding, including Great Blue Turaco.

That afternoon, we drove to Entebbe Botanical Gardens and immediately saw a very close and photogenic Lizard Buzzard. There were some large remnant forest trees in the garden, which held some cracking birds (Bat Hawk, Grey Parrot, Eastern Plantain-eater and Black-and-white-casqued Hornbills), albeit at the expense of a cricked neck. There were also several sunbird species and weavers in the smaller flowering trees. and assorted storks and egrets on the shoreline. Marabou Storks were patrolling the picnic areas and lake shore, where there was a tree full of nesting Golden-backed and Village Weavers (with the odd Slender-billed and Orange Weaver as an ID challenge). We watched as a Gabar Goshawk flew into the middle of the tree and tried to catch young weavers, but without success. There were thunderstorms about, but we stayed dry on our walk.

Day 3

Monday 16th February

We rose early to drive to the ferry, the quickest route to Mbamba Swamp. The ferry was crowded, but Gerald managed to negotiate a space and we boarded successfully. Both Western and African Marsh Harriers accompanied us.

At the swamp, we boarded a *mokoro* (wooden canoe) and travelled partly by engine and partly by punting along the channels between the massed papyrus and reeds. In more open areas there were purple water lilies. We saw White-faced Whistling Ducks, African Wattled Lapwings and African Jacana, and had cracking close views of a Shoebill, which our local guide told us was very lively for the species: quite often they spend most of the day completely motionless!

Then we drove towards Lake Mburo National Park. At Kayabawe, we crossed the equator (of course some of us got photos standing on the line) and stopped for a traditional lunch of *matoke*, Uganda's filling national dish comprising an enormous mound of boiled and mashed plantains with a bowl of ground nut or meat sauce.

Back on the road, Gerald stopped suddenly. A Shoebill was standing in a marshy area beside us! It caught a big catfish in a mass of weed, and the reason for the bizarre bill shape became obvious as the bird gradually manoeuvred the mass to separate the fish from the weed. Swallowing such a large fish required several attempts. We also saw two pairs of Grey Crowned Cranes paddling in the water to stir up food for their youngsters, which scampered at their feet, and a Rufous-bellied Heron, which was very adept at hiding even in the short, wet grasses and rushes. We stopped for the night at Kigarama Wilderness Lodge, overlooking a distant view of the National Park.

Day 4

Tuesday 17th February

We continued our journey to Lake Mburo National Park, where we were met by an armed ranger for a walking safari with Giraffes. There were few Giraffes in this National Park in the past: acacia trees were beginning to overdominate, so in 2018 fifteen Rothschild's Giraffes were translocated from Murchison Falls. There are now about a hundred Giraffes, and we were able to walk among a group (known as a tower) of about thirty of them. It was an amazing experience. Rothschild's Giraffes, a subspecies of Nubian Giraffes, are one of the most endangered Giraffe subspecies, and are the only Giraffes to be born with five ossicones ('horns'), of which only two are obvious. We also saw many Uganda Kobs and Impalas (similar, but the latter has a black 'M' on its backside). A Black-bellied Bustard performed a display flight right over our heads. Otherwise, it was a bit quiet for birds, although a group of Speckled Mousebirds and a White-browed Coucal had a vigorous altercation. That seemed to wake everything up. and we had great views of African Cuckoo, Greater Honeyguide, the prehistoric-looking Crested Barbet and a gang of White-backed Vultures.

The weather continued sunny and breezy. In the afternoon, we boarded a tourist boat on Lake Mburo. Initially, it did not look promising for wildlife sightings: most of the tourists there didn't seem that interested in wildlife. But then we had fantastic views of a family of African Finfoots, really close to the boat. Back at the jetty there were Warthogs grazing on the grass.

We spent the night at Igongo Country Hotel, Mbarara. To our delight, there was a tree full of Black-necked Herons roosting right outside the hotel; one pair was building a nest. In true Naturetrek tradition, we had to complete part of the checklist during a powercut!

Day 5

Wednesday 18th February

We set off on the long journey to Queen Elizabeth National Park, travelling up and down hills through tea plantations. We stopped to look at a Southern Red Bishop. Later we had some good birding by a papyrus swamp, with Papyrus Gonolek, White-winged Swamp Warbler, White-chinned Prinia and Greater Swamp Warbler. We stopped at some fruiting trees, where we saw Ross's Turaco, Double-toothed Barbets, Bare-faced Go-away-bird and various sunbirds and starlings. Near the end of our journey, we passed a lakeside fishing village and noted several Pink-backed Pelicans.

We arrived at Mweya Lodge in the heart of Queen Elizabeth National Park in time for lunch. We were delighted to find a pair of Swamp Flycatchers feeding their youngster in the lobby; they were perching on the lights and the sofas. There were some very colourful red and black birds in the grounds, with Black-headed Gonolek, Double-toothed Barbet and White-browed Robin-Chats vying for attention. We sat outside, looking at the magnificent view of the Kazinga Channel between Lakes Edward and George, and worked out that some distant black and white dots were roosting African Skimmers. Our rooms had this view too, and we later discovered that the grass outside was overrun by a large family of Banded Mongooses, competing with the firefinches, whydahs, weavers and wagtails to eat the insects emerging from the grass. A Woodland Kingfisher called repeatedly from a nearby tree, and at dawn small bats chased insects.

In the afternoon, we went on a game drive in the National Park. Among many animals, we saw a lot of Elephants with young, Cape Buffalo and two distant Lions. It got very windy, and a dust storm blew up, with thunder and rain later. The weather was not great for birding, but we managed our only Crested Francolins of the trip, plus great views of Red-necked Spurfowl and White-throated Bee-eater.

Day 6

Thursday 19th February

We drove to the Kasenye Plains for a savannah experience, passing cotton fields on the way. We found Uganda Kobs, the males guarding their territories on their mating grounds. Nearby, a 1.5m-long African Black Cobra slid into a hole. The birding was much better than yesterday, and we had great views of African Crake, Senegal Lapwing, Winding Cisticolas and Temminck's Coursers with young. However, the 'cute award' was won by a Kittlitz's Plover chick: it was like a ball of fluff on legs, and worryingly close to the cobra hole.

In front of us were the spectacular Rwenzori Mountains: 'The Mountains of the Moon'. Suddenly, a Leopard walked down a nearby track and climbed into a *Euphorbia* tree, where it took some time to get comfortable. We passed Lake Nyamumaka, a salt lake in a volcanic caldera, containing high levels of sulphur. Fortunately, the Lesser Flamingoes did not appear to mind the smell. Later that day, we saw another Leopard in a tree, as well as three Lions on the road.

While some of the party relaxed on their balconies, the keener birders explored the grounds. There were plenty of weavers (it slowly dawned on us that the 'Golden-backed Weavers' were actually Black-necked Weavers), African Mourning Doves, Arrow-marked Babblers, Green-headed Sunbirds, and African Blue and Swamp Flycatchers. We were reminded of home by the Yellow Wagtails, Sand Martins and Willow Warblers. One mystery bird turned out (rather disappointingly) to be a Reed Warbler!

In the afternoon, we went on an exciting boat ride along the Kazinga Channel. There were three Goliath Herons, close-up views of the African Skimmers, lots of sandpipers, terns, gulls, ibises, pelicans and African Spoonbills. We also saw a rare leucistic Red-throated Bee-Eater, which seemed to be paired with a normally-plumaged one. Multiple herds of Elephants grazed in the bushes along the shoreline, with tiny young. Hippos were everywhere, also with young, and there were some Nile Crocodiles.

Day 7

Friday 20th February

Today we left Queen Elizabeth National Park, stopping at the exit for great views of a Moustached Grass Warbler, and drove to Crater Lodge through miles of banana plantations. We met many motorbikes heading downhill, heavily-laden with green bananas. We paused at a view of the Crater Lakes to watch Cinnamon-breasted Bee-eaters, distant Great Blue Turacos, Long-crested Eagle, Brown-throated Wattle-eye, Mackinnon's Shrike and a Blue-headed Agama.

After lunch at the lodge, we went on the swamp walk at Bigodi. We walked along a track and some rather rickety walkways. Soon, we had a beautiful view of a striking Eastern Yellow-billed Barbet, and a male Black-and-white Shrike-flycatcher. We also saw several Great Blue Turacos much closer up: they were absolutely stunning birds. It was hot, humid and tiring, but we had excellent views of various monkeys: Ashy-red Colobus, Red-tailed Monkey, Mantled Guereza and Gray-cheeked Mangabey. We'd previously seen many Olive Baboons, and had had to discourage Vervet Monkeys trying to steal Gerald's banana. Overall, this was a great trip for seeing primates. We returned to dinner at Crater Lodge, and enjoyed its wonderful view of the lake.

Day 8

Saturday 21st February

Early in the morning, the birding group set out to try and find Green-breasted Pitta. Their arduous search led them uphill and down again, but they finally saw the bird displaying, which involved it jumping up and down on a branch like a demented manakin. It might have helped us to see it earlier had the guide told us that the bird, although usually hopping on the ground, displayed quite high up in a tree! However, we appreciated it even more for our efforts. Our Belgian colleague had to leave to go home after that, but not before a group of chimps came through the forest just as he was about to get in his car: what a fantastic end to the trip for him. It got quite hot later in the morning, so birding was hard, and the various barbets, flycatchers and bulbuls were not being that cooperative. A Narina Trogon popped into view, but right against the sun. A Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat eventually granted a brief glimpse from its thicket (thanks to a visiting group of Taiwanese birders for that). The most frustrating were the Jameson's Wattle-eyes, which never settled, but buzzed around in the forest like angry insects.

The Chimpanzee trek started at Kanyanchu in Kibale, in a small group with one other person, a ranger, two porters and two armed guards. We drove to the forest track and soon found three Chimpanzees, two grooming and one sitting. Thereafter, wearing our face masks, we had multiple views of at least a dozen Chimpanzees (young and old) in the trees, playing, chasing and grooming, and two further solitary Chimpanzees eating. A youngster carefully practised building a leafy nest in a tree. Gerald had spent a lot of time negotiating this wonderful experience. A long rest on the balcony afterwards was enlivened by visit from a Giant Kingfisher and, on another occasion, a Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill (they regularly displayed in the lodge grounds). Hadada Ibises called from the lake.

The birders headed off after lunch, but not before pinning down the repetitive call we had been hearing: it was a very smart Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird. We took a short drive and walked down the tarmac road near the National Park. The light wasn't great, and it was still hot and humid, but we eventually teased out Grey-throated Barbet, Black-billed Turaco, Little, Plain, White-throated and Toro Olive Greenbuls, African Shrike-flycatcher, Sooty Flycatchers, Olive-bellied Sunbird and the aptly named Narrow-tailed Starling. In the end, it had been a tiring, at times frustrating, but very worthwhile day. We certainly felt we deserved our cold beers while we did the checklist later that evening.

Bwindi extension

Day 9

Sunday 22nd February

One group member went with Gerald to Entebbe and thence home, and the remaining two of us set off on the seven-hour journey to Bwindi with David. On the way, we passed a field on a prison farm, where over fifty Grey Crowned Cranes and a solitary Abdim's Stork were feeding. We crossed the equator again and had lunch in a hotel in a busy little town.

The dirt track up to the Buhoma Haven Community Lodge was very steep; when we got there, we found small cabins with wonderful views of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. We were surrounded by birdsong and a sense of peace. The staff were very friendly and helpful.

The lodge grounds and nearby properties were full of birds: Black Saw-wings, African Blue and African Paradise Flycatchers, Mackinnon's Shrike, Northern Double-collared and Bronzy Sunbirds, Slender-billed Greenbuls and Western Citril. All provided a reward for the long and at times bumpy journey (the 'Ugandan massage!').

Day 10

Monday 23rd February

We were given packed lunches, and the birding half of the team went on a very successful all-day birdwatching expedition, walking along the Waterfall Trail in the nearby National Park. Despite its name, the forest birding was easier here than in Kigale. The trails were wider and the forest more structured, so you could see further and inspect more of the levels in the forest, including the canopy.

We started in the area around the park HQ, which is secondary forest, but is still full of good birds, such as Shelley's and the striking Red-tailed Greenbul, Lühder's Bushshrike, Grey Apalis and a very cute Dusky-blue Flycatcher building its nest right by the path.

In the forest proper, we started seeing lots of good, range-restricted, forest and Albertine rift endemics, such as Bocage's Bushshrike, Chestnut Wattle-eye, Black-throated Apalis, Fraser's Rufous Thrush, Equatorial Akalat, Dusky Tit, Stuhlman's Starling, Chapin's Flycatcher and Red-faced Woodland Warbler.

We also spent quite some time tracking down Neumann's Warbler, a virtually tailless skulker in the bush warbler family, the rest of which is found in Eurasia. It called very loudly and seemed to be close, but was very hard to see. Persistence paid off, and it finally hopped clearly into view, revealing a really bold supercilium. We also played tag with a pair of Black-faced Rufous Warblers while we walked along the track, and eventually managed good views.

Back at the Park HQ, a rather drab Olive-green Camaroptera was outshone by a cracking pair of Green-throated Sunbirds. The lodge also provided us with a White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher identification puzzle (the subspecies here doesn't have the prominent white eye-ring) and a small flock of Brown-headed Weavers hopping around the trunk of the tree right next to our table. What a day!

The mammal half of the team went with David to the busy Gorilla Tracking Visitor Centre, where we were sorted into groups. David was not happy with the initial grouping, and negotiated a move to another group. Thank goodness! That first group were sent up the longest, steepest hill. Our group, with our ranger and armed guards, was driven to a little village, where we met our porters. We followed the cows uphill into their pasture, contoured a tea plantation, and stopped in the edge of the forest. The ranger explained that the trackers had indicated that the Gorillas were moving down towards us. After a wait, we followed a tangled route through the forest and down a very steep slope.

There in a big sunny clearing, full of vivid green vegetation, were nine Mountain Gorillas, including a silverback and a tiny baby. We put on our face masks and were able, slowly, to walk all around the group, watching them peacefully stripping the leaves off the nettles to eat the stems. We'd been told our visit was limited to one hour, and after this precise time the alpha female led the other females off, signalling that the rest of the Gorillas should leave too. To see such rare and impressive animals, so close and living so peacefully, had been a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Day 11

Tuesday 24th February

There was another full day's birding for one of us, who enjoyed finding the great forest, range-restricted and Albertine Rift endemic birds. The birding walk today followed the same trail as yesterday, but a little more slowly. Any concerns that we would see all the same birds again were swiftly dispelled: a sign of a top quality forest. At the Park HQ area there were new birds such as Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Yellow-crested Woodpecker, Chinspot Batis, Many-coloured Bushshrike and Ansorge's Greenbul, as well as some old friends from yesterday.

The trail revealed cracking new birds such as Wilcocks's Honeyguide, Mountain Illadopsis, and Red-headed Malimbe. We also bumped into an ant swarm, followed by Red-tailed Alethe, Equatorial Akalat, White-tailed Antthrush and Red-tailed Bristlebill. At our lunch stop, we were joined by Petit's Cuckooshrike and White-browed Crombec.

On the way back, we kept up the pace with Fine-banded Woodpecker, an immature Bar-tailed Trogon, Green Crombec, Buff-throated Apalis, White-breasted and Grey-headed Negritas, Waller's and Slender-billed Starlings, and a very confiding pair of White-bellied Robin-Chats. The 'mammal client' would have cause for jealousy, as we also saw a Blue Monkey and a Red-tailed Monkey screeching and whooping as they managed to evade a Crowned Eagle.

The cultural programme began with a visit with an interpreter, to meet some of the Batwa people, previously known as pygmies. The Batwa are thought to be Africa's oldest tribe, and are known as 'the keepers of the forest'. They were evicted from their forest home when Bwindi became a National Park in 1991. The interpreter told me that he had spent time with the Batwa, after his grandfather gave them some land because they were homeless. The chief and his son and their group demonstrated some of the skills used to live in the forest. Their rapid fire-

making by rotating a stick in a hole in a special wood was very impressive. Afterwards, on a visit to a local school, the three-year-olds in preschool rushed out of their class to hug us!

In the afternoon, at the Pangolin Rescue Centre, there were three White-bellied Pangolins in residence. They stay in individual concrete-based huts (they are good diggers), and each afternoon they are taken by their volunteer carers for a walk in a tea plantation. There, we saw a pangolin enthusiastically digging up ants. They are easy to carry: they just curl up in their carers' hands. The carers use the tea plantation for walks to avoid escapes up trees (the animals are excellent climbers). When the pangolins have recovered, they are released into a safe and suitable habitat.

Day 12

Wednesday 25th February

To get home, we needed to take an Aerolink flight to Entebbe, from a local airstrip. It was repeatedly delayed, allowing time for a few hours of birdwatching in the morning around the Park HQ. Amazingly, this area still produced quality new birds, such as Elliott's Woodpecker, Pink-footed Puffback, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher, Grey-headed and Little Green Sunbirds, and Black-billed Weaver.

However, as time went on, it became apparent that we might miss our Ethiopian Airlines flight from Entebbe to Addis Ababa, which would connect with our Heathrow flight. We were met at Entebbe by a very helpful staff member, who took us rapidly all the way through the airport at arrive at departures at the right time. In fact, our Air Ethiopian flight had been delayed, so we were able to rest for a while. Phew!

Day 13

Thursday 26th February

We caught our Heathrow flight in Addis Ababa in the middle of the night, and arrived home safely.

We really enjoyed the trip, and every day was full of interest: it had been one of our best African tours. It least 335 birds were seen and identified. In Bwindi there were opportunities for intensive all-day birding to see some of the quality forest, range-restricted and Albertine Rift endemic birds (there are over forty of the latter). There were some superb mammal sightings, including Giraffes, Gorillas and Chimpanzees, and the cultural aspect had been very interesting too.



African Finfoots



Black-bellied Bustard



Rothschild's Northern Giraffes



White-bellied Robin-Chat

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek email list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers.

naturetrek.co.uk/e-newsletter-signup

Scan to
sign up!



Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Instagram, Facebook, Bluesky and X and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers, exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



[instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays](https://www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays)



[facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays](https://www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays)



naturetrek.bsky.social



x.com/naturetrektours (formerly Twitter)