

Birding from my Balcony.

Fred goes solo to Bird from his Balcony. 9th – 28th March 2014.

At the end of our trip to Uganda last year we felt the pace had been perhaps too hectic so we developed a Tour formula for minimal haste and more leisure time at fewer venues. We called it “Whiteknuckles Lite” for our trip to Tanzania in 2013 and it worked well. As a perfectionist I wanted to take the concept further and I wanted to get back to Uganda to try it. Good enough reason? Team members had other commitments so I had to travel alone. Sobs and wipes away tears. I badly wanted to see first hand what Emmy had done with his Broadbill Forest Camp so the concept was to pick five places with balconies in birdy areas and see what we could see from the Lodge grounds and nearby without the hassle of long drives and Park Fees etc. South West Uganda seemed ideal and Whiteknuckles Ultra Lite was born. Or “Birding from your Balcony”.

KLM obliged with decent flights via AMS, a couple of Emails to my friends at Churchill to book lodges, another to ensure my good friend Emmy Gongo the Albertine Rift Specialist was on hand to guide me and we were good to go and so we did.

I am not going to bore anyone with a bird by bird, day by day account of the whole trip. Lodges will be mentioned with a URL as appropriate.

After an overnight at Claytons at Manchester Airport I arrived at EBB, got my Visa and was taken to the comfortable Airport Guest House for the night <http://www.naturelodges.biz/airport-guesthouse/> Next morning after an excellent breakfast we drove to Lake Mburo to stay at Eagles Nest Lodge.

<http://www.naturelodges.biz/eagles-nest/> This is just outside the Sanga Gate so no fee is paid although we did have one full day on a standard drive into Lake Mburo National Park as it would be a shame not to. However the Lodge had the desired Balcony and a supply of Nile Special so most of



the time I sat and admired the view and totted up a nice total of birds including a very friendly Kestrel who was keen to share my tent.



Tip. You cannot bird watch and read a book.

I found it impossible to hold binoculars and a beer whilst trying to turn the pages. I only have one pair of hands. Something had to go and it was Dick Francis. Sorry Dick. That book lasted the whole trip and actually came home with me.

After three nights we moved on to a lovely new lodge. Broadbill Forest Camp high in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. Lovely grounds and of course a Balcony from which to study the local Fauna of which there was plenty.



Monkeys and Squirrels in the trees and the grounds positively rang with bird song. In particular Chubb's Cisticola and **Doherty's Bush-Shrike** were very vocal. Emmy had planted many bird and mammal friendly shrubs

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and flowers and these proved very popular with Butterflies too. Uganda has some very impressive butterflies in her forests. Breaking from the Balcony routine from time to time, tough call, I wandered along the track to the main road and saw many other birds there too. Various forest Greenbuls, Shrikes and Black-billed Touraco to name but three. Views from the Lodge grounds reached as far as Lake Edward and the Rwenzoris to the north and the Congo Blue Mountains to the west. But it is the proximity of the Forest just yards from my balcony that was the main attraction to me. Just about everything

possible to see either hopped or flew by. I had four comfortable and interesting nights here and then it was time to move on to Balcony Number 3.



A short drive back to the Kabale road and then just after Lake Bunyoni at Muko we swung right towards Rubuguri. When we reached our next lodge, Gorilla Valley <http://www.naturelodges.biz/gorilla-valley-lodge/> we were only 12 km from where we started but those are tough kilometres to walk. I know as we had walked them when last in Uganda. **See Report. Dec 2012: Uganda Tour - 2012.** Bwindi Impenetrable did not get its name on a whim.

Again, Gorilla Valley's balcony faced directly into the forest where many birds and beasts live. Three nights here, not my favourite lodge but fruitful to my quest nevertheless, with star birds being Great



Sparrowhawk, Bocage's Bush-Shrike, White-headed Forest Hoopoe and Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher among others. Elephant too were around. A car excursion took us to Rushaga Centre where we were quite willing to pay the NP entry fee of \$40 but not willing to fork out another US\$30 just to carry binoculars. That has to be a really stupid idea. Why would we enter a NP if not to look at things? We don't pay extra if



in a car at other National Parks and yet we can see just as many birds. This matter needs addressing. Now!

So we stayed outside and Ugandan Wildlife authority lost \$40 entrance fee for the sake of greedily asking for another \$30 to allow us to look at birds.

After the self-inflicted problem with UWA at Rushaga (not the local staff's fault at all) we walked the Forest elsewhere. It is quite simple to do this. UWA's loss although I do not condone breaking Park rules. I got some great sightings of Monkeys, **Ruwenzori Hill Babbler** and **Mountain Greenbul** and others.



Birding from my Balcony.

Then we left Gorilla Valley and took the 'back road' over to Lake Mutanda, fork right at Rubugiri.



This road was fun after overnight rain and quite dodgy in parts. However on cresting the summit the view over Lake Mutanda with the Virunga peaks as a backcloth has to be one of the finest in Africa. I never tire of it and it always brings to mind “King Solomon's Mines “and the “breasts of Sheba”. Truly a classic view. We dropped down to the 'new' road that skirts Mutanda and services both the quirky Chameleon Hill Lodge and the renamed Mutanda Lake Resort (Ex Mgahinga and /or Nkuringo Safari Lodge where I have stayed twice before.) on its peninsular. Emmy suggested a comfort stop at

Chameleon Hill where we met Patrick and had a coffee too. A lovely place inside once you have absorbed the garish colours and architecture. A cross between Lilliput and Legoland describes it best



I think. But we are not here to review Lodges. On down to Kisoro where after a brief stop at the Golden Monkey Guest House we left on the tar road to DRC and then doubled back down a dirt road to

Mutande-Ecocentre, also known as “Sheba's” where I had long wanted to stay. We ticked off a few birds as we drove by the shore and found the Lodge literally at the end of the road. A pleasantly rustic place and of course my Cabin had the

requisite balcony overlooking swamp and lake. I could see Spot-necked Otters fishing a little off shore. Sadly no photos suitable. A pause on my balcony got more birds, several new for the trip, including



Paradise Flycatchers and Slender-billed Weavers. A walk in the afternoon cool also brought more Otters,

various Reed Warblers and a lovely Spitting Cobra fresh and shiny black from its swim in the lake. (Tip! Use the viewfinder not the screen. That way if it does spit, mine did not, the venom will go on the camera not your face. But better not to get too close anyway.)



Sheba's is a lovely place in a lovely setting even though the facilities were the most basic of the trip.

The woods and lake shore bustled with wildlife, so did the Cabin at times, and I enjoyed my stay immensely. It was everything I imagined it would be and more. Not only birds but lots of butterflies and flowers too. Otters every day and a Grey Crowned Crane roosted just outside my balcony. And served as a great wake-up call in the mornings.



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The local people were gathering papyrus stems to use as “Bean Poles” for their Shamba. Lots of coming and going each day to keep me amused in the event that the birding went quiet. Makoros to go out on the lake too. Sadly only two nights here and very sorry to leave. A place to which I will return. Sadly no URL available for Balcony number 4.

Now into Kisoro and the new tar road back towards Kabale. This traverses the Echuya Forest Reserve which it was pleasing to see had been preserved by the local people and not used as a source of fuel and timber. As an exception to my Balcony birding we walked the road through the forest and promptly added several Forest specials including Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo, Red-headed BlueBill and Red-throated Alethe. A massive migration of Raptors was going on overhead and I counted over 100 Buzzards and almost as many Eagles all in one thermal.

Then it was down the further 15km to my next Balcony. Number 5.

This time on the shores of Lake Bunyoni at Muko Campsite. A very nice place and 'infested' with various Herons, Black-headed, **Purple** (left) and two sorts of Egret. And the crowning glory? A pair of Spot-necked Otters fishing as we took lunch. Can you tell I am really a Mammal person who does



birds on the side? I settled into my cabin which exceeded my expectations and was the roomiest of the trip (but still no shelves or hanging space!!)

I ordered Dinner

(Crayfish Masala) and sat back with my book, no harm in

trying, and my binoculars. All too soon I am afraid. The best laid plans of mice and men were about to gan agley.

After overhearing some much agitated telephone conversations and other 'noises off' a sheepish manager approached with his story. Somebody had over-booked the limited accommodation. How DO you overbook three Cabins? I can understand multiple roomed Hotels and even planes but three tents??? The guests due to arrive needed two twin rooms and despite needing to be gorilla tracking many miles away in the morning were insisting they slept here rather than accept an offer much closer. So would Ssebo Fred consider moving to Ha'buhara Island at the other end of the lake? This was a place I had checked out of early on a previous visit and vowed never to return to.

OK. I am a reasonable chap and open to persuasion so a deal was struck. We would all go to Ha'buhara, the Island of birdsong. All, meaning driver and guide too as one of the reasons I left early last time was that they would not feed or accommodate Emmy. This time both Emmy and Vincent got to go



too. So a quick re-pack and we set off for the 30km drive via Kabale to Rutinda and the 'tourist end' of Lake Bunyoni where our launch awaited. We had a 30 minute trip in the dark out to the Island and arrived around 19.45. I chose my tent, Balcony number 6. I had had the cottage last time, and was told my dinner would be ready in 15 minutes as my order of Crayfish had been telephoned ahead. So not all bad news. And there was a complimentary bottle of wine too. I drive a hard bargain when 'open to persuasion!' After dinner I found the tent and its fittings were very good. Even a hanging space with coat hangers! A good night's sleep ensued and in the morning we

had a decent breakfast before taking the waiting launch back to Rutinda and our car. And of course we saw a few more Waterbirds.

Birding from my Balcony.

So after a good night's sleep here on the Island of Birdsong I woke up in the wrong bed. No big deal. Breakfast was ordered so that we could make an early start to get back to our original booking at Muko which we did. On docking at Rutinda it started to rain whilst we waited for Emmy to fetch the car from the secure parking. Vincent said it would rain a lot today and boy was he right! No sooner were we on the road than the heavens opened in a real Ugandan downpour. Thunder and Lightning rattled around the mountains in a very impressive display and it was almost as black as night again. After the tar road was regained in Kabale, progress was better but any birding was not going to be easy. My much looked forward trip to Ruvuma Swamp was not going to happen as the road up there would be impassable. Heck, we had a swamp right where we stood. So a steady drive got us back to Muko where we awaited drier conditions in the Visitors lounge before heading for our tents. This took time but as it eased we again were entertained by Otters in the lake and a nice view of a Purple Heron and Red-chested Sunbirds that seemed quite waterproof. Eventually it eased and we could gain the tent and unpack and freshen up. But it seemed birding was "off" for the morning at least.



But after lunch it cleared quickly and we birded the grounds before setting off back up to Echuya Forest for a second visit.

We stopped first at the point where the river ran under the road and formed a small swamp and lake. We counted ducks and swamp birds as well as a very precocious Mountain Masked Apalis. It was the forest specials we had come to find and pretty soon they obliged. A very nice second viewing of a Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo started the proceedings followed by Regal Sunbirds (left), Strange Weavers (right) and a White-starred Robin feeding her just fledged chick.(centre)



We were enjoying a very good view of an obliging Red throated Alethe (sort of thrush) when it just escaped with its life as an African Goshawk dashed in from nowhere and tried to grab it. It missed. We continued our walk and added several other good sightings to the list plus many lovely flowering plants. By now the sun was shining hard even though it was due to set in another hour. The light was lovely and we enjoyed excellent views over the forest canopy and a last look at Muhavura, "the Guide" or signpost, showing clearly in the distance.

Back to Camp and a delicious dinner of Stirfry Beef and noodles and a lovely dessert washed down with Nile special. Then to bed for my last evening in this area.

After a good night's sleep we were served what had to be one of the nicest breakfasts of the trip. I even complimented the chef on the quality of the fried eggs. He laughed and said coming from Zimbabwe he knew how to cook eggs.

We then packed up, settled our minimal bar bill, and set off on the penultimate leg of my trip. We dropped Vincent in Kabale to return to Broadbill Forest Camp and Emmy drove me to Kampala. But not after finding time for some more rewarding birding at Kaku Swamp where we found four species of Duck, Black Crake, Moorhens and Purple Swampheas as well as two more species of Stork. In all I think we added 15 more species to the list here.

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Arriving late back in Kampala we had to resort to my Garmin to find my next bed for the night as Emmy lacked directions to this new part of town. I had marked the spot on my last visit and Gladys Garmin took us to the right gate. And so ended the official part of my trip. I had dinner with my friends Ether and Henry and family and a good night's sleep. Tomorrow I was to be taken to the delights of Hoima for a private visit to see Churchill's new venture and no birds. Well all right, a few were noted by the roadside and once in Hoima I had two more species, Greater Blue-eared Starling and the oddly named Piapiac to add to the list.



Dinner and a comfortable bed in a new Lodge not yet opened, saw in dawn on my final day in Uganda. Morris collected us at noon and we drove the four hours back to Kampala on good tar and lost count of the wretched speed humps. We stopped to buy fresh fruit and veg at a road side stall and arrived back in Kampala for another excellent dinner with my extended Ugandan Family.



Then it was to the airport, check in and board the plane. Easier said than done. "We are migrating to a new system and it is not working efficiently!" said KLM. But we persevered and made it through to Emigration and our plane in the end.

The plane left about 30 minutes late but we arrived in AMS on time and a leisurely stroll got me to my connection(s) home without fuss.

So that is all about the trip and my Balconies.

For those interested (still awake) the species list totalled 280, about 50 more than I estimated. Everything worked out as planned and I cannot wait to go back.

Photos are on here. <https://whiteknucklesgallery.shutterfly.com/pictures/8>

Not my best efforts but those forest birds are darn tricky.