

Ugandan End of Year Holiday tour. Fred & Elizabeth Hodgson.

December 15th 2008 – January 10th 2009

Preliminary information etc.

This was Fred's 5th visit to Uganda and Elizabeth's 2nd. It came about when Elizabeth requested we have Christmas at one of her favourite Lodges. Mweya Lodge in Queen Elizabeth National Park. The rest just fell into place. We started the journey in Kenya at the Ithumba Camp in Tsavo East NP on which we have already reported. (See Orphans of Tsavo.)

Uganda is three hours ahead of GMT. The usual African twelve hours of daylight and twelve of night time is slightly distorted by being so far west so sunrise and sunset run about an hour later than the norm. There is not much seasonal change but rain is heaviest in April. The mountainous west can be wet at any time but it does not last. Our visit was fixed by the calendar so we just took it as it came. We had no rain at all until the last two days.

Entry requirements: - Visas are readily available at all points of entry. Entebbe is much quicker than it used to be.

Local currency is the Shilling (UgSh) Import/Export not allowed but £ & US\$ readily exchangeable. I will give prices where appropriate in US\$. Exchange Rate whilst we were there was around 1900 UgSh/US\$. Most Tourist Lodges quote in \$ anyway. We carried folding money with only a small reserve in T/Chqs.

Getting there, back and around. Lots of carriers fly into the main airport of Entebbe. We broke with our normal use of BA in favour of a joint KLM/Kenyan trip mainly because of good connections through Manchester and Amsterdam rather than the trek to Heathrow. This also facilitated an Open Jaw ticket to Nairobi first then EBB and straight back to AMS. The Capital City Kampala is about 45 km away. As usual we got our own tickets and asked Ether and the girls at Churchill to book the car and Lodges of our choice. They did a fair job as always. We had arranged for **Emmy Gongo** to drive and guide us as he is a proficient Birder and we always get on well. I knew Elizabeth would too.

Food & Drink. Beer is produced in Uganda, the main brewery being in Jinja on the Nile. There are some South African brands available plus the ubiquitous Kenyan "Tusker". The local brands are Bells, Nile Special and Club. My favourite was the Nile Special but I restricted my intake to one at lunch time. Evening pre prandial was the local Gin called "Waragi" made from Sugar Cane or Bananas. A reasonable bottle of Red wine was between \$15 & \$25 depending on the establishment. We were Full board but actually rarely took lunch. Bottled Water is readily available and was part of our 'package' with Churchill and often provided in the Lodge rooms free of charge. The car carried a cool box.

Bugs, n Bowels. Peel it, boil it or forget it is the golden rule here. We had absolutely no problems in that department. Hygiene standards appeared acceptable in the main Lodges but do not drop your guard. Tap water, when available is definitely a "No No!" Not even for tooth brushing. Malaria is a problem so Prophylactics are mandatory as is the use of a net if the room/tent is not screened. Mossies were not a problem and the only Tsetse encountered was up in Murchison. The only snakes seen were a harmless Bush snake and a Spitting Cobra.

Accommodations. We handpicked some these from previous visits and chose others on recommendations. All were most enjoyable and described in the following text.

Daily Routine. We are not lovers of one night stands and a minimum of two nights was taken in each place with one notable exception. We feel this gives us more time actually looking at the area instead of simply driving there and back. When re-locating we aimed to get there for lunch, settle in and go out at 15.30 until dark. I had organised the Lodges to be within reasonable distance of each other. It worked well enough. Well almost.

Kit carried. We both had our Minox 10x42 binoculars and our faithful Fuji S5000 & 3 spare sets of

re-chargeable batteries. I took the battery charger but no converter as Uganda is on 'British' Square sockets. Most lodges had reliable power sources but I remained wary of Generator spikes. Everything came through unscathed. There was no power in Gorilla Resort Tents but a Battery charging point was available in the Bar.

Books? Uganda is East Africa so my library consisted of the invaluable Bradt Guide plus "Birds of Africa, south of the Sahara" by Sinclair and Ryan as I knew Emmy would have Stevenson & Fanshawe. I dispensed with maps as we knew where we were going and those in Bradt guide would serve well. Now to the trip itself: -

15th December. We arrived at Entebbe on time at 9.40 am after a brief flight from Nairobi, cleared Immigration and collected luggage and were met by Emmy as arranged. We got under way in Churchill's Land Cruiser. Not new but nice and roomy for the two of us. After negotiating the lunacy of Kampala traffic we headed north with a short lunch stop to tick some birds including Short-toed Eagle, Marsh Harrier and the first of many Bee-eaters. We stopped off at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary for a couple of hours and saw more birds as well as giving Elizabeth a "Rhino Moment". Ziwa now has overnight accommodation so this will encourage us to linger next time as it really is a delightful place even without the Rhino. Then we moved on over a very nice new tar road, ticking Common Snipe, African Oriole, Black Crane, BW Stilts and Comb Duck to the Masindi Hotel where we were to stay two nights. This is quite an acceptable little place with clean rooms and good food.



16th December. Off to the famous "Royal Mile" in Budongo forest about 30km west of Bwindi. We picked up our guide at his house and entered the Forest. We very rapidly started ticking off the specials that live here such as Blue Breasted and Dwarf Kingfisher, Chestnut-capped Flycatcher and various Greenbills. The highlight for me was a nice view of a Crowned Eagle. We even came across some Chimps feeding on figs. After a few neck-stretching hours we moved out and went to Buhiso Camp hoping for Brown Twinspots and Chocolate-backed Kingfisher but never made contact. Then back to Masindi for dinner and bed.

17th December. We left Masindi on the Murram road through Murchison with a brief stop at Kanyo Pabidi. This was more a social call for Emmy but we ticked Paradise Fly-catcher and Lesser Honeyguide among others. On the road north I had just said we might see Tufted Guinea fowl when four appeared at the side of the road. We also found Abyssinian Ground Hornbills up a tree by the side of the road. Then we went on to the Top of Murchison falls for a look at the enormous rapids as they hurtle down into the chasm. The noise and spray are awesome. On to Paraa Ferry with nesting Wire-tailed Swallows on the boat. Checked into our room at Paraa Safari Lodge and true to form Emmy then dragged Fred out to "work" while Elizabeth stayed back somewhat exhausted. Lots of Antelope etc. and very nice views of Heuglin's Francolin and Red-winged Pytilia. We got back in the dark and saw a very nice Small-spotted Genet.



18th -19th December. Two more days around the north side of the Nile. One morning we went up the river on a small speedboat. This was disappointing as he went too fast and seemed more intent on getting there and back than sightseeing. He definitely did not care for birds. Always take the UWA launch from now on. Our trips to the Delta area only yielded a couple of Jumbos chomping reeds and no Shoebill. We did have a guide with us so were allowed to walk around freely which we enjoyed. We even found Lions by watching the 'stares' of some Kob and seeing what they saw. A family coming back from a drink. Murchison is suffering from Oil exploration and the litter is dreadful. So much for the Oil companies 'Green' credentials. We like Paraa Lodge despite its strange PoW Camp appearance. The food is good and rooms excellent.

20th - 21st December. We now crossed the river for the final time, ticking African Skimmers on the shore, and made our way to Nile Safari Lodge for two nights. This is a smaller more intimate place with s/c Cabins overlooking the river. There is a pool and a nice sitting area. I have seen

Shoebill from the bar here but not this time. Plenty of Ellies though. One minor 'grouse' is that there is no hot water in the Cabins. A sweetie on the Pillow is all very well but at \$230 per night one would think the water could be hot! One morning we did a launch trip down river which yielded some very nice birds and some ginormous Crocs. Try as we might we could not get a Papyrus Gonalek to show to Emmy's calling. Another benefit for this place is that you can walk outside without a ranger so we got some excellent birding including Red-winged Grey Warblers.

22nd- 24th December. Now for something completely different. A day to remember. We got under way about 8.30. There are now four of us as we are giving a lift to another "Emmy" who came up to fix a small problem with the car (No Speedo cable). We were to drop him in Hoima to catch a bus to Kampala. The day's drive was to Lake Albert Safari Lodge in Kabwoya Reserve which, you will have guessed, is on the shores of Lake Albert. As this was a short trip we dawdled and watched birds including some nice views of Black-billed Barbets. We filled up with Diesel and the whole trip was quite relaxing. We stopped on the cliffs of the Rift valley to find more birds including a clear sighting of a strange long-tailed Sunbird. This had us reaching for the books and the consensus was a Malachite which the book says does not occur up here. No sign of the expected Cliff-Chats though. Then as we crested the rift there was a bang and the Exhaust manifold let go. The



'mechanic' at the next village was not around so we pushed on making a fine din when the throttle was used. The 'mechanic' at the next village was home but he had no welding Gas. But he knew a man that had. The local bike repair shop. He could not do this alone but we did have Emmy 2 along. So off came the broken manifold to be laid expertly on the ground and the broken sections accurately mated back up. Then the torch was lit and an excellent repair made. Working conditions hardly matched H&S standards but the job got done. While this was going on Fred wandered off

to buy some fruit and cold drinks and Elizabeth watched the local Fundis turn bolts of cloth into fashionable garments to order using the age old treadle Singers. We were now late so pressed on to Hoima where we visited a Bank for some cash and put Emmy 2 on the bus to Kampala. (Well to be accurate we left him in town with his fare and a tip and hoped a bus would come by.) We met him again in Kampala so he made it. Then on to Lake Albert Safari Lodge through open country full of migrant Cattle herders taking their charges to market. Not such a fun Christmas for the Cattle! We made the Safari Lodge, which was new and very nice, having dropped back into the Rift Valley. Chalets are very well appointed and set in nice lawns kept trim by Hippo. We did a mix of walks and drives on our three days here. This area was on the main elephant migratory route up the rift. Before poaching wiped them out aerial photographs showed the place black with them. Numbers are returning although they are very shy. The Lodge has a resident birder who maintains a check list to which we were pleased to add several species including Red-headed Weaver, Yellow-fronted Apalis and Greenshank. The Lodge also specialises in 'bush dinners' and we had a special version on Christmas Eve when we drove out to a remote area where the staff were all waiting with fires going, tables set and we dined out under the African stars.



25th December. What a Christmas day this was. Bad route planning had put us down to move this day to make Elizabeth's wish come true. So we set off early and by arrangement joined convoy with two cars for the bad road south from Hoima. The first part through Bugoma Forest was fine with Afep Pigeon and Honey-Buzzard added to the list. Emmy and I made a promise to return here for full exploration on our next visit. Then we joined the 'main road' south to Fort Portal. This road is without doubt in the worst condition of any road I have travelled on in Africa. It barely looked like a road in parts, just two deep ruts bordered by grass. The trick was to keep your wheels on the high bits and not in the ruts. Progress was painfully slow and at times just painful. It seemed to go on for ever. What a way to spend Christmas Day! We could have been home asleep in front of the

TV. Like all good and bad things it came to an end at the Tar road from Kampala to Fort Portal. By now it was 3 o'clock so we shunned a meal, filled up with fuel and units for Emmy's phone and pushed on. The tar was nice after our punishing ride and even road bumps were taken in our stride. Even some thundery rain around Kasese did not deter us. We entered Queen Elizabeth National Park by the main gate at 4.30 and met first a Lion up a Euphorbia Cactus and then an Elephant. No! He was on the ground not up the Cactus silly! Our room was ready and having been warmly greeted again by Susan and Solomon in Reception we settled in and unpacked for our four night stay. Even 'Cousin' Richard was back in charge so everything was as it should be.

26th – 28th December. We always fit some walks in around here with good results. We find lots of birds and animals are quite relaxed and simply keep to their comfort zone. On 26th afternoon we even had lots of Elephant come by us. Much more fun on foot. We went up to Katwe another day and found some Phalarope and Lesser Flamingo on the salt pans. More lions and a Hyena were found on Kasenyi Flats area. This area is being spoiled by illegal selfish people going off track. I photo'd two cars and showed the pix to the Rangers. I later heard two cars had been fined \$500 and thrown out the Park. Good riddance. We took the usual Launch down the channel, where we had walked that same morning for more birds and saw lots of Gull-billed Terns as well the usual hosts of 'shore birds.' There is always a lot to do around here and there was never a dull moment. Even 'cousin' Richard bought us both a drink.



29th – 30th December. We now moved down to Maramagambo forest and another of Elizabeth's favourites, Jacana Lodge. We got one of the 'new' chalets and were slightly disappointed to find them not as good as we recalled the others had been. Next day Emmy resolved the problem in his own way and we were back in the older version. I suppose if we had not known of the better ones we would have been content in the newer version. They were quite nice, just not as good. Our two days here were spent birding on foot and we picked up Shining Blue Kingfisher (Blue-breasted occur here too) as well as Black Bee-eater. We even got closer views of the mythical Black Paradise Flycatcher which I am sure is a melanistic morph of the normal version and not a new species. Interesting nevertheless. Always a great place to go birding although Canopy staring can be a pain in the neck. However there were also many birds feeding on the roadside grasses.

31st December – 1st January. After another abortive attempt to lure out the Papyrus Gonalek to our



cameras, we did get a glimpse, we set off for Ishasha. A mysterious pair of Raptors had us scratching our heads for a while until Emmy 'encouraged' them to fly for us. Such dedication deserved better than Common Buzzards and much laughter! We also picked up Bare-faced Go-Away Bird well out of their normal range. The road to Ishasha was better than remembered, although the Bridge is still down. We made good progress with a couple of stops for birds until almost at Ishasha gate we found two young male lions. They commenced 'calling' and a third joined them for a while. We checked into the new, to us, Ishasha Wilderness Camp which was very nice. Set by the river in a small wooded area the place bounced with birds and I swiftly ticked and photo'd Narina Trogon, Cassin's Grey Flycatcher and Red-chested Cuckoo. The camp comprises the usual 'Mess Tent' and about ten very roomy Tents with the usual offices out back all well spaced for privacy. We did several game drives and had a great New Year's Eve Elephant moment with four big Bulls no doubt heading for a party close by. One morning we headed up to Edward Flats and had a big moment with finding four Pacific Golden Plover which we discovered later is only the 2nd record for Uganda. Feathers in cap for Emmy and me as it was my call! On the way back we did our usual 'lets get stuck in the mud' routine much to Elizabeth's dismay. We got to see three Lion up a small Acacia too. Most odd. The only incident of note was being woken at 1.30 by insects crawling on my face. Light on! *Siafu!!!* Army ants everywhere. Use Alarm Whistle to summon help. Nothing! So got dressed, jumping around to stop ants climbing and getting into the Industrial Zone. Not easy! Picture it! Then out of tent through many, many more of the bighters to find 'Security' fast asleep

in the very comfortable Lounge chairs. Rude words spoken and they got to work clearing the ants out. The body count ran to millions. Photos are suppressed on grounds of Public decency! Apart from that obvious failing (why escort you back to your tents each evening if no one comes to your aid later?) we found this camp quite enjoyable although I missed my little Banda of last time.

2nd-4th January 2009. We reluctantly left Ishasha and drove south to commence our climb into the beautiful hills and eventually the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest around Buhoma where we settled in to Gorilla Resort. Buhoma now has at least ten Lodges/camps and one does wonder how they hope to fill them all. Our Lodge was truly beautiful and rustic with great views over the valley to the main forest with its Great Apes. They even cleaned our hiking boots that we had left out to dry. Lots of bird life in the garden including the incredibly beautiful White-tailed Blue Flycatcher feeding young ones. Two Albertine Endemics too. This was Emmy's home territory and during our walks we got to meet sisters and brothers who run local businesses in town.

Other friends met were Johnnie Kamugisha, who shocked his clients by giving Elizabeth a somewhat effusive hug, (Took her aback too!) Hassan Mutibe, Fred Bagonza and young Fred T who was to be our assistant guide during Emmy's time off. During the three day stay we hiked up to the Waterfalls and successfully saw many of the Endemic birds of the area. We even managed to find Gorillas on two occasions despite not being on an official trek. On our last evening we were joined by Emmy's Father of 74 who was great company at Dinner with his tales of the early days of getting Bwindi on the tourist map. This was a fitting conclusion to our most enjoyable stay in Buhoma but it was not to be the end of our visit to Bwindi forest.



5th – 6th January. We left Buhoma but not before getting an excellent photograph of a pair of Ross's Turacos in the garden below our cottage. We slowly climbed towards 'the neck' an area of forest linking two larger portions of the Bwindi. We failed in our quest for Red-throated Wrynecks but saw lots of other birds during the journey which was part driving and part walking. We arrived at our new home which is quaintly called "Trekkers Tavern" to be welcomed by Moses and Julius whom I knew from Mantana Camp, Lake Mburo. The Tavern is set well back from the road up the track that accesses the Research Institute where I had stayed previously. Four detached self contained bungalows furnished in a homely style. Again, Hot Water bottles are provided at turn down. Food by Julius is served in an open sided Restaurant where you can bird watch between courses. The views from up here at 9,000 feet are superb. Julius made the nicest Potato crisps we have ever eaten. Moses was so considerate that when the time came to settle up he brought our Bar bill to the bungalow rather than present it in front of other diners. We birded the local area by car and on foot. We picked up quite a few specials including Handsome Francolin, Golden-breasted Bunting, Blue-headed Brown Sunbird (or was it Brown-headed Blue Sunbird?) Archer's Chat and the stunning White-starred Robin. We agreed to forgo the trek down to the Mubwindi Swamp as I had seen Green Broadbill and Grauer's Rush Warbler last time around and settled for both Bocage's and Doherty's Bushshrikes. This is definitely a place to return to and we will.

7th January. We now headed off down the valley to the Kisoro-Kabale main road which is undergoing much needed improvement. The Thunderstorm that we hit at the same time made the drive interesting to say the least. We used Emmy's phone to advise the next Lodge, Heritage on Ha'buhara Island, of our ETA so they could meet us with their launch. Simple enough? When we got there, there was no sign of any launch. We eventually hi-jacked another one and after a 30 minute cruise tied up at an empty jetty. No launch there either and our arrival caused a bit of a stir as apparently nobody had told the staff of our impending arrival. The place had no other guests so we picked the nicest bungalow instead of the expected Tent on Stilts. This was a blessing as during the ensuing thunderstorm we at least had a roomy lounge to sit in. We ordered a beer and Omelette which we were told would arrive in 15 minutes. The Beer came at once but the omelette took 50 not 15. Emmy had to return to the mainland as the driver accommodation was fully booked. The place was empty for Pete's sake! Management arrived later from the other end of the lake where they had

been troubleshooting. They would have done well to stay here. The reason they had not passed on the warning of our arrival was they had the only phone! No explanation was offered as to why they could not have told US this at the time. I did manage to get some birding in despite the noisy staff shouting and splashing but of the resident Otters there was no sign. Not surprising really. Due to the ongoing inclement weather we decided to leave next day to close the gap to the airport so, when Emmy arrived on...

8th January. We turned him around and made for the shore. We made good time through Kabale and stopped off for lunch in Mbarara while we phoned ahead for a bed in Lake Mburo NP at Mihingo Lodge. This was a great move despite setting me back \$60 in Park Fees and \$200 for the Lodge. We did a game drive on our way to the Lodge and saw lots of Zebra, Topi, Impala and Buffalo etc., as well as birds. The Lodge was excellent, being set upon a high Kopje away from the main tourist routes. We had almost given up on Lake Mburo and Mantana Tented Camp due to previous problems but are glad we came. These must be some of the roomiest "Tents" around with



excellent facilities. We made good use of the bathrooms as we shed the dust of the last few weeks and changed from Bushmen to being presentable enough not to risk getting thrown off the plane. The bathing area is open to the bush and we wonder what the resident Bush babies made of the sight. They are probably still undergoing trauma counselling! However they seem to need comfort food as they turned up just before dinner for a handout. A further bonus was meeting Petra and Mathias over dinner who we had last seen on Christmas Eve at Lake Albert. Over a glass of wine we heard all

about their 14 hour trek to see the Gorillas at Nukuringo.

9th January. It was now time to head for Entebbe but not before we had bagged some more avian ticks such as White-winged Black Tit, Dabchick and Red-knobbed Coot. A brief stop was made in Masaka to attend to On-line Check-in for the flights home before we plunged into the madness of Kampala traffic for a brief stop to thank the Churchill team for their part in making this a great trip. Then it was on to Entebbe where we took dinner at the now very poor Windsor Lake Victoria after having sadly said our goodbyes and sincere thanks to Emmy (full name Emmanuel) for his unstinting efforts on our behalf over the last four weeks. Other weaker souls would have wilted under the strain. He never showed any signs of being tired and was ever willing to head out for walks or drives whenever we wished. Thank you Emmy, you helped make this a great trip. Asante sana Rafiki!



A true hero and friend! What good memories we have of you. We will be back!

The plane was delayed by Ice (it was +30 at the time) but we awoke on

10th January over Libya and made Amsterdam more or less on time where a smooth connection saw us on our way to Manchester. Then after a few hours on Manchester we boarded our final plane for the short 35 minute hop home where our Taxi waited for the last leg of all.

Final bird count was 471 including 39 'new' ones for me from Uganda and 12 new species altogether. If anyone still not terminally bored would like the species list just ask.