

## Strictly for the Birds – Uganda. February 2005

Bill's telephone call in November 2004 came as a surprise as we had not met since Kafunta in 1999 long before setting up "Whiteknuckles Safaris and Tours" to fill a perceived niche in the market for connoisseurs of African Travel at its best. He had heard of our reputation for value added satisfaction combined with quibble free money back guarantee and wanted to visit Uganda. He was not interested in any scientific research into rare and unknown species and simply required a reliable trouble free package. Had he come to the right place? I doubt it but business is business as my Aunt Golda used to say!

As none of the Davids were available I agreed to accompany him to assist with the local arrangements. Two ticks later the itinerary was set up and flights booked. No going back now! The route was to be the usual well researched clockwise circuit known as Plan A. Overnight from Heathrow to arrive Entebbe 08.30, pick up bags, into vehicle and drive to Lake Mburo via various hotspots for a two night stopover. Then on to Bwindi, QE Park and N'Dali Lodge. So simple I could do it blindfold. (Maybe this would have been a good idea!)

About two weeks before departure we were told our chosen Lodge in Bwindi was not available and a substitute offered and promptly rejected. Terse Exchange of Emails resulted in Plan B, The anti clockwise route. This meant missing the hotspots on Day one for a longer five hour drive to N'Dali.

After leaving home on **Day 1, Day 2 (in which your hero is left standing at the gate)** dawned over Africa and after swift processing of Visa and Luggage we left the building expecting to be met by our Driver and Vehicle. No one around. We wait, and then we wait some more. We telephone Kampala to learn the surprising news that we were not expected until the following day. A verbal exchange ensues which was not for those of a sensitive disposition resulting in a car being despatched poste haste. It arrives and we now have to go into Kampala to join driver and have breakfast whilst vehicle prepared. We meet 'Management' who remain adamant that we are not expected for 24 hours, this despite there being no inbound flight tomorrow and the dates on the Itinerary contained in the "Welcome" Pack now handed to us are for TODAY! We are treated to Breakfast until driver (Fred Bagonza) arrives and we finally exit Kampala around noon. Fred agrees that he knew we were due today but had been sent home when he turned up for work. We learn the Swahili for several versions of Incompetent twits etc.,

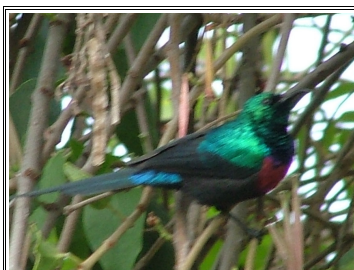
We get to N'Dali around 17.00 having ticked a few birds including Ross's Turaco etc., and are made welcome by Aubrey Price and shown our chalets. I get the Honeymoon Suite which is a bit of a waste.

**Day 3** (during which your Hero outruns a Green Mamba) is heralded by a monumental Electric Storm which happily clears by daylight. To Bigodi for the Community Swamp Walk. This is not a local dance but a guided tour through wetlands where we should see Papyrus Gonalek etc., and many other birds. We are well pleased with Black Crowned Waxbills, Grey Headed NegroFinches and Red Headed Bluebills among other colour coded avians. We see lots of Monkeys etc., and we investigate some serious rustling in the herbage expecting some ground mammal or Snowy Headed Robin. Two things happen simultaneously if not at the same time. The Guide legs it and at least two metres of Green Mamba comes out of the bush. There was probably more of it but I did not stick around to measure it. Two metres will do! We finish the walk fitter than when we set off.

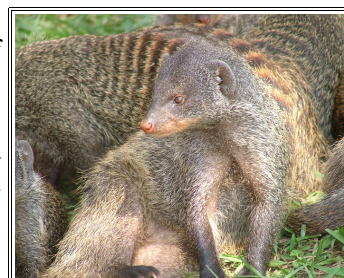


After a lunch at the Community run Banda we visit Lake Nkuruba, another local initiative and see both sort of Colobus and Red Collared Malimbe, plus various squirrels etc., A well run place worth a second look.. The rest of the day is spent ticking the many birds in N'Dali grounds followed by another excellent dinner.

**Day 4.** To Queen Elizabeth NP. An easy enough run over good roads gets us to the Mweya Lodge during which we get more birds, cross the Equator, and are made welcome by Cousin Richard in his usual inimitable way! We get two excellent bungalows overlooking the grounds with Elephants and Buffalo



drinking in the Kazinga channel below. Again the grounds are alive with Sunbirds and of course the resident Banded Mongoose family. Swamp Flycatchers and Weavers (various) infest the bar. Outside the lawns are tended by a team of Warthog. I did photograph these but when you have seen one Warthog you have seen them all. The Afternoon was spent cruising the Kazinga channel which as expected boosted the



growing tick list with many shorebirds etc., A Scops Owl was spotted in the trees near the landing stage. An excellent dinner followed by a good nights sleep punctuated by the nocturnal visits of Hippo etc., to the lawns outside.

**Day 5.** (Our driver excels himself) An early start for Chambura Gorge for one of Bill's target species, the Black BeeEater. Another pleasant run across savannah gets us to the Gorge and having convinced the Park Ranger that we would not look at his Chimps even if they danced the CanCan in front of us he lets us walk the Gorge road free of charge. We find many species of birds including BeeEaters but no black ones. Lots of Kob, Buffalo and Waterbuck etc., but no Black BeeEaters. We leave the gorge and head for Jacana Lodge in the Maramagambo forest. We add both Blue Breasted and Shining Blue Kingfishers to our Star list. They frequent the Lodge swimming pool regularly as does African Finfoot. On the way back more birds are added and we dispute the right of way with a herd of thirsty Elephants. The Afternoon trip was to a Volcanic Lake with many Lapwings, Waders etc., including both Caspian and Kitlitz Plovers, the latter with chicks the size of a fivepenny piece.



Back at the Lodge we also see a very lazy Giant Forest Hog enjoying a siesta and meet Maria again for an Elephant Moment extraordinaire. She was orphaned and reared by the Park Staff until eight years old when she went off with the wild herds. Now eighteen she keeps coming back when the Marulas are fruiting. Sometimes she comes alone and sometimes she brings her friends. We also visit a Salt Lake to see how the Salt is extracted and prepared for



sale.

**Day 6.** (In which our driver gets lost and found!) We set off for Bwindi via the dirt road through the Park that crosses the Ishasa sector. This is in better condition due a, It is dry, and b, A Bridge is down and this stops Heavy Trucks using it. A pleasant run through gorgeous scenery along the shores of Lake Edward, ticking as we go including a solitary Woolly Necked Stork in a burned landscape. A nice Cassins Hawk Eagle is the highlight of the morning. We arrive Ishasa Camp surrounded by wallowing Buffalo. We miss out on the riverside with its views of Congo on the opposite bank and head inland. After passing the same termite mound four times I ask Fred if he wants to "phone a friend or ask the Audience" as it is obvious to me he has been lost for over fifteen minutes. Using the sun and the river bank we point south and pick up the correct track for Bwindi just by a friendly Martial Eagle so that is alright! He is silent for a while after this. We get to Bwindi and Gorilla Forest Camp and check in. A short evening walk in the company of guide Alfred T rounds off the eventful day with several sightings of Target 1, the Black BeeEater. Plus Many Coloured and Bocage's Bushshrikes and some of the endemics we have come to find.

**Day 7.** (We penetrate the Impenetrable) We take a long walk into the forest for its birds etc., and have a very pleasant, if hot, three hours or so seeing many birds and not seeing many others. A Bar Tailed Trogon calls madly but refuses point blank to be seen. Happily both Dusky and Olive Long Tailed Cuckoos do co-operate fully as do Tuhlberg's Woodpecker, Mountain Oriole, Petite's Cuckoo Shrike and many others. We pass our target of 250 species for the trip. The afternoon trip is to "the neck" for more forest birds, including more Black BeeEaters, Cape Wagtail etc., But this is getting boring. Everything is going to Plan! We even get a Bottle of Wine at dinner courtesy of the Management! Very nice too!

**Day 8.** We leave Bwindi after too short a stay and head east through the hills. Driver Fred tells us this road is better than the usual route via Kibale. Really? It takes a long time and covers many road works etc., perhaps they should finish it first? We arrive at Lake Mburo NP where he seems to want to drop us for lunch at Camp. Why have we brought packed lunches? "In case we were late". We have a picnic in the Park! We check in to Mantana Luxury Tented Camp in late afternoon before a drive in the cool of the evening. We head south for the lake and arrange a private boat trip on the morrow. Another Whiteknuckles exclusive.

We note some blood on the track and having met up with some French people they tell us the blood was from an Eland just killed by a Leopard. They watched it being dragged under the bushes nearby. We return poste haste and sure enough find the body well hidden. We attempt to peer under the bush but the Leopard is not happy about this despite telling him we are from Whiteknuckles. He throws a bit of a paddy and indicates he would be happier if we left him to enjoy his supper. No pleasing some folks! So we do just that. We get a few more ticks including Crowned Crane, the Ugandan national bird, which had until now



eluded us. The dinner at night was fine if a little odd. We place order for breakfast, Bill, Bacon and Eggs, Fred Scrambled Egg and Sausage. After a few beers/wine we turn in. We are the sole guests at what was once a very well run place.

**Day 9.** (In which we enjoy a breakfast surprise and another magical mystery tour.) After a walk at dawn breakfast is finally served. Cereal etc., Hand picked by Innocent. Then the surprise bit. Bills Fried Eggs arrive with a rolled up slice of Luncheon Meat! "Where is my Bacon?" "Sorry sir the Bacon it is finished!" then the Scrambled Eggs, again with Luncheon Meat. "The Sausage it is finished!" Not good.(Well it had got a little boring earlier!)

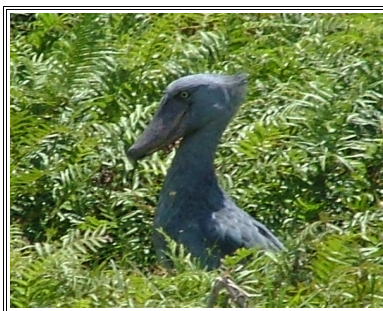
We decamp to the lake for our boat which was on time and well done. Finfeet oblige, I won't bore you with the Finfeet, but how about a nice Great Snipe? More Fish Eagles and Pied Kingfishers than we can handle. Hippo and Crocs abound. No Gonoleks or Warblers. We do spot a couple of Otters and some Bushbuck etc., and the list grows nicely. A drive around a new loop provides some excellent scenery in mature woodland with a mystery cuckoo and a Red Headed Lovebird. We never did identify the Cuckoo successfully despite it being quite obliging. We must get more proficient. After a very nice drive we are joined at Lunch by the New Manager on a troubleshooting mission! Has he got his hands full! His first act was to drop the word "Luxury" from the title. They are doing a lot of refurbishment work and we listen to his plans politely. I do hope they make it through but it is 50/50!



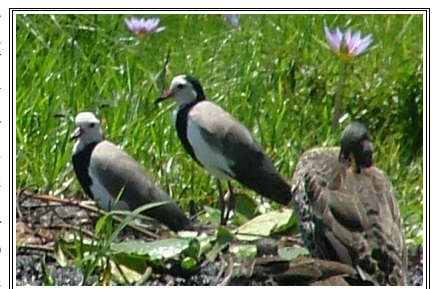
After Lunch we are to try the Ruroko Track as this was fruitful last year for Barbets etc., We do a new track first of all not on the map which is extremely pleasant and full of Game including three grumpy Buffalo who had their snooze disturbed and were not happy about it. We then leave the Park, deliberately as Fred wants to show us Brown chested Lapwings. We get Francolins, Striped Kingfisher and Nubian Woodpecker but the only Lapwings were Senegal. Back into the Park and onto Ruroko Track. A nice Blue Duiker asleep by the road! We stop for a sighting and notice Cattle. We then pass a stockade which Fred says is for Eland! Oh Yeah? We then find more Ankole Cattle and then more. Then fixed Bomas and acerbic comments are made about incursion in the Park. Fred blames the drought! When we see houses with tin roofs and Banana shambas I tell him he is lost and we are outside the Park! We have half an hour to sunset! He has problems picking up our track so needs Whiteknuckles to the rescue once more. "Head for the setting sun!" He does and after casting about I get his tyre tracks in the grass and we confirm our position with the "Eland Stockade"! Not much daylight left so Ruroko abandoned so we retrace tracks to main trail and tick Nightjars and Owls on the way back to Camp. All part of the Whiteknuckles experience! Dinner was good as was the wine! It cannot last! Breakfast Order, Scrambled Eggs and Sausage for me, Two Boiled Eggs for Bill.

**Day 10.** (In which targets are missed and achieved and we meet a man with a gun.)

Excitement mounts as breakfast is served. I get my Scrambled Eggs and sausage. Bill gets his two Boiled Eggs and a Sausage as well! Oh well they did try! Packed and away and we head east for Entebbe and Lake Victoria. Several bumpy miles and we board a dugout. We then set off in search of Charlie Allnut and Rosie who were last sighted around 1915. Many winding channels and we run aground with fine views of Marsh



Harriers and Herons. Target 2 obliges. A nice Shoe for Bill and Mission accomplished. Two nice Otters, Long-toed Lapwings etc., and the tick list passes 300. It is very hot and we head for our Hotel. In the coolth we make a long walk to try the adjacent Botanical gardens. Rather than return the same way we find a hole in the fence and a man with a gun. He says it is ok to crawl through and I hold his gun while



he helps Bill escape. I follow and thank him and give him his gun back. A photo would have been nice but you do not push your luck. Do you? Back for dinner at 8 with Ether and pack for the return flight.

**Day 11.** (Our hero completes the mission!) Relatively uneventful departure and flight. Home to bosom of family 21.30. Birdlist 305 but disallow two.

There it is, Whiteknuckles third successful trip to Uganda, told as it was, Warts and all. There were many birds not ticked that should have been, Raptors, ducks etc., but not a bad effort for two old men.

The Mamba was a nice touch!



*Rosie Allnut I presume?*