Birdwatching, or birding, is the observation as a recreational activity or as a science. Most pursue birdwatching as a hobby. Today, prominent organisations share information on equipment and technology, photography on the World Wide Web. Titus Kakembo is wellversed with birders and explains why Uganda is well placed to offer them a paradise to reckon with

ganda boasts a massive bird list, including more than 1,080 recorded bird species. This easily makes up 50% of Africa's bird species and 11% of the world species, thanks to the lakes, rivers and swamps, which make up 15% of the total 241,550sq.km area of the country.

There are up to 34 important bird areas, many of which have been developed for birdwatching and birding tours. The birding community in Uganda also continues to identify other new bird-rich spots across the country and establishing trails. They have also trained local site guides in bird identification.

So, for a good nature walk, tourists and nationals have to wiggle the hips, saunter about with the grace of a ballet dancer and halt several times to get the details of any spotted bird. This recreational activity can be done singularly, with a spouse, with the entire family or peers. Some participants use the naked eye, while others apply visual enhancement tools and listen keenly to the tweets.

Many enjoy birding with all their senses on full alert, some even with the use of technology. This enables one identify various species of birds. With the instant information available due to improved technology like smartphones, one can take a photo and have a given bird identified instantly using Google.

Birding in Uganda is a top safari activity. The all yearround conducive climate, abundant water sources and diverse vegetation cover make Uganda one of the best birding

WHAT MAKES UGANDA A

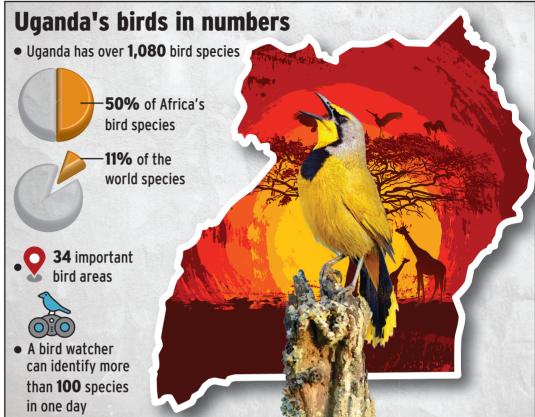
GRAPHIC BY BRIAN SSEKAMATTE

HE PEARL OF AFRICA IS ALSO HOME TO RARE BIRDS

The African green broadbill, which is officially recorded as an endangered species globally, lives mostly in tropical forests. They have a light green shade to their feathers, a blue throat with a small bill.

Doherty's bushshrike is extremely difficult to see but can be heard. They are green with a cheerful red throat and forehead, a light yellow and lemon-like middle with a black tail. The younger birds have a pale green coloured plumage and striped green and yellow underparts.

The most sought-after bird species in Uganda are the shoebill stork, African green broadbill, black bee-eater, brown-chested pullover, brown-chested lapwing and the green-breasted pitta. Others are the Jahan's francolin, Jameson's antpecker, Karamoja apalis and the Purcell's illadopsis. There are also the Puvel's illadopsis, Nahan's francolin, red-fronted antpecker and the Rwenzori turaco.





EXPLORE UGANDA THE PEARL OF AFRICA

destinations in Africa. A vast number of bird species also fly in from around the world throughout the year.

Some birds can only be found in some areas, however, Uganda is blessed with many birding spots. A skilled bird watcher can identify more than 100 species in just a day. It is in Uganda that visitors are rewarded with many bird sightings without having to travel great distances or deep into the countryside. You can see birds right from the airport in Entebbe, within the capital Kampala, outside your hotel room and as you move around.

The high density of bird species per square kilometre is attributed to the country's proximity to the Equator, the tropics and the Albertine Rift Valley. These features provide homes and breeding grounds for numerous bird species.

BIG BIRDING DAY

The Big Birding Day
has developed into a
competitive annual event in
many countries, including
Uganda. One seasoned
birder, Herbert Byaruhanga,

says this unites birders as

a family.

There is an annual Big Birding Day, where different groups across the country storm the wilderness and log every bird they see and hear in 24 hours. The day involves participants across the country, walking in the wood, swamps and gardens to take stock of birds seen. When one sees a Shoebill in Tisai, Kumi district, they share the photo and details for other birders to follow suit.

The results are submitted to a tallying centre. The winners are rewarded with cameras, binoculars, books, mobile phones, a fully-paid trip to a national park and a cocktail party.

BIRDING SPOTS

Uganda has a diversity of habitats; from the Great Lakes, rivers and rain forests to the great East African Rift Valley, mountains and semi-arid areas in the northern part of the country. These habitats provide breeding, feeding and gathering points for both local and migratory birds.



Nature Uganda members watching birds at Park Alexander in Akright City in Wakiso

SKILLED BIRD WATCHER CAN IDENTIFY MORE THAN 100 SPECIES IN JUST A DAY.

TOWN BIRDS

Starting with Kampala, a nature walk is ideal at Ndere Troupe Centre, Makerere hill, Mengo hill, Rubaga hill, the Bahai Temple and Speke Resort Munyonyo. As Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and property owners re-green the city, Marabou storks, cattle egrets, owls, crested cranes and grey African parrots are increasing in number.

Bird-watching town spots include Entebbe with Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC) and the Botanical Gardens. UWEC has birds salvaged from traffickers and others receiving medical rehabilitation. There are African grey parrots, peacocks, ostriches, vultures, cattle egrets, bowing shoebills and owls.

The Entebbe peninsula is actually a great place for birding. Lutembe bay wetland is home to millions of all kinds of Palearctic migrant and indigenous birds. Lutembe is a habitat for more than 200 bird species. Of these, 26 are migratory. They include the African pygmy kingfisher, Holub's golden weaver, white-winged black tern, African green pigeon, leadcoloured flycatcher sooty chat, tropical boubou and

brown-backed scrub robins. There is Nile River birding in Jinja, done with a boat cruise. Species here include the giant kingfisher, greenbacked herons, African open-billed storks, rock pratencols and great blue turacos.

OTHER WETLANDS, FORESTS

Makanaga wetland is another shoebill hotspot and a great wetland birding area. Lazarus Forest Luwero, Bethany Land Institute is another birding gem where someone wanting to see a variety of local birds can go birding. The Botanical Gardens is ideal for birding while in Entebbe.

Mabamba swamp is the custodian of Uganda's most sought-after bird, the shoebill. About 30km west of Kampala city, near

BIRDING PARADISE?

Mpanga forest, weaverbirds are guaranteed to give you a noisy reception. Kingfishers perch on papyrus reeds or hover in the air before nose-diving for mudfish. Boatmen can ferry you deeper into the swamp on oar-driven boat to get to the solitary shoebill habitat. It is rated the best spot to see the shoebill in Africa. A boat ride through Mabamba bay wetland is a great way to see the shoebill stork, malachite kingfisher, swamp flycatcher, pied kingfisher, papyrus gonolex, blackheaded heron, African open-billed stork, black kite and African marsh harrier, among many others.

Kasenge Forest Resort at Mbalala, a five-minute drive off the Kampala/Jinja highway in Mukono, has a mini water pool with ducks and swans. Hassan Mutebi, a resident birder, says he has logged more than 140 species of birds there.

"I have seen the Egyptian geese, the red-chested cuckoo, the tawny eagle, hamerkop, sandpiper and many other owls," Mutebi says.

Mabira Forest, located 51km along the Jinja-Kampala highway, is populated by forest birds. Besides birds, the location boasts of picnic spots, restaurants and roadside open oven *nyama choma* (roasted meat) and chicken thighs or wings. Lunch and accommodation at Forest Lodge treat nature walkers to a memorable experience.

Budongo forest has the Royal Mile, where birds like the Puvel's illadopsis, shining blue kingfisher, African dwarf kingfisher, Cassin's spinetail, chestnutcapped flycatcher, Ituri batis and Nahan's francolin can be spotted. It is home to more than 350 bird species.

Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, 540km away from Kampala, is another popular place for birding. Although it is more known for its gorilla-trekking safaris, birdwatching comes at a close second due to the abundance of rare species. About 350 bird species can be found in Bwindi and these include black-billed turaco, African green broadbill, Chapin's flycatcher, Fraser's eagle, handsome francolin, black-collared apalis and white-bellied robin chat. It is rated Africa's number one birding spot by the African



A flock of Adim's storks at Murchison Falls National Park in 2013. One can spot a variety of bird species during a game drive or on a boat cruise on the River Nile



The African fish eagle

Bird Club, a conservation charity. Kibale Forest, located

Kibale Forest, located 348km from Kampala city, is stocked with more than 335 different species of birds. Among them are the red-winged francolin, red-chested flufftails, whitenapped pigeon, African pita, joyful greenbul, greywinged pigeon, Abyssinian ground thrush, greythroated flycatcher masker, Uganda woodland warbler and chestnut-winged starling.

NATIONAL PARKS

Murchison Falls National Park has more than 300 different species of birds tweeting and flapping their wings along Baker's Trail. Among them are the iconic shoebill, bee-eater, giant kingfisher and shoebill stork.

The trail has break points with seats to sip on wine or water and continue. The

PARK IS THE OSTRICH CAPITAL OF UGANDA.

place is ideal for photos and videos in this social media era.

About 450 bird species have been recorded in Murchison Falls National Park and these can best be seen during a game drive through the park or on a boat ride to the bottom of the falls. Bird species at Murchison Falls National Park include Goliath heron, swamp flycatcher, Abyssinian ground hornbill, red-throated bee-eater, Northern red bishop, African quailfinch and giant kinglisher.

kingfisher.
Other national parks
where birding is prominent
include Mgahinga Gorilla
National Park, home to
about 180 bird species
like the Cape robin,
white-starred robin,
brown woodland warbler,
cinnamon bracken warbler,
Rwenzori batis, greater
double-collared sunbirds

and Archer's robin chat, among many others.

Kibale Forest National Park has over 375 species due to the dense vegetation. You get birds like the red-chested owlet, purple-breasted sunbird, blue-breasted kingfisher, crowned eagle, little greenbul, black bee-eater, dusky-blue flycatcher, greythroated flycatcher and white-naped pigeon, among many others.

Queen Elizabeth National Park has over 600 bird species, especially along the Kazinga Channel. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) tourism warden, Steven Nyadru, says they include the swamp flycatcher, African skimmer, malachite and pied kingfishers, greyheaded kingfisher, blackheaded gonolek, Verreaux's eagle-owl, sedge warbler, white-winged terns, grey-



Hornbills can be spotted in Murchison Falls National Park

GREAT STORIES REHIND THEM

Judith Mirembe, a bird guide, says the noisy weaverbird uses its architectural skills to attract a mate to itself.

"Good nest constructors are polygamous weavers. The females cannot resist their tweets, colourful feathers and skill at nesting. For a weaverbird to get a spouse, he has to intricately gather grass and stems, and knot the nest on a loose tree branch," Mirembe says.

She explains that the nest location on weak tree stems make it hard for predators like snakes and rats to access laid eggs or chicks.

"Before the female accepts the proposal, she first inspects the architecture of the nest, its location and if it has a room where the hatching is to be done. Once all the requirements are met – the couple are good to go!"

The crested cranes, which are the national birds, also have a unique story of monogamy. Uganda has the species that get one mate in their lifetime. When one dies, the widow or widower remains single.

John Logwe, a Uganda Wildlife Authority ranger and guide at Kidepo Valley National Park, says birds can alert you of any dangerous earthquake.

"Birds do not need a weather forecast to know drought or an earthquake is due. They just flee and humans who are edified, start planning their own safety," he says.

In the Bible, Job 38:36, God asked Job to tell him who tells the ibis when the Nile will flood, or who tells the rooster that rain will fall? In Egypt, whenever the ibis bird appears, people understand that River Nile is about to flood. God always warned people through the ibig bird

capped warbler, collared pratincole, martial eagle, several falcons and Gabon and slender-tailed nightjars. Birders can log more than 500 different bird species while there.

Lake Mburo National Park is home to about 351 bird species, with such species like the Nubian woodpecker, trilling cisticola, bee-eaters, cheeky bronze-tailed starling, crested francolin, emerald-spotted wood dove, brown parrot, African fish eagle and red-necked spurfowl, among others.

Semuliki National Park has about 441 bird species in its riverine forest. They include the Maxwell's black weaver, blue-billed malimbe, yellow-throated nicator, black dwarf hornbill, Nkulengu rail, piping hornbill, yellow-throated cuckoo, dwarf honeyguide, great blue turaco and purple-breasted sunbird.

Mgahinga National Park, which is popular for mountain gorilla tracking, is punctuated with Rwenzori turaco, Lagden's bush shrike and scarlet-tufted malachite sunbird.

In Kidepo Valley National Park, there are destinations

of migratory birds. John Logwe, a UWA guide, says birds flee the winter in Europe or South Africa to seek refuge in Kidepo, Lutembe beach, Lake Albert and Lake Victoria shores.

"These birds stop to refuel (eat) before continuing to South Africa or Europe. The old ones that cannot continue the journey retire and die here," Logwe says.

Kidepo is the ostrich capital of Uganda. Ostriches are some of the biggest birds in the world, famous for a feather length longer than a human arm and a kick that can kill a lion.

They are known for their dancing costume and fashion before mating. They lay eggs as big as coconuts. These eggs need an hour of boiling to get ready.

Lake Mburo National Park has more than 300 different species of birds living by the shores of 10 lakes. UWA guide Allen Kaba says many tourists catch them on telescopes mating, feeding and rearing their young.

Mburo is actually the only park in Uganda where nature walkers go birding without a ranger or guide.