

# PEARL OF AFRICA

*A Birding Safari Through Uganda - March 2026*



<b>Country</b>	Uganda
<b>Organiser</b>	Cornell Lab of Ornithology
<b>Operator</b>	Victor Emanuel Nature Tours
<b>Tour Leader</b>	Ian Owen
<b>Field Leader</b>	Barry Lyon
<b>Local Handler</b>	Herbert Byaruhanga, Bird Uganda Safaris
<b>Participants</b>	13 International Birders

**Volunteer Guide:** Patricia Kansiime  
**Drivers:** Michael & Jan

**March 8-24, 2026**



*Barry Pointing out Birds*



*Ian Owen, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, May Leader-holds a Conversations with the Uganda eBird Reviewers*

## A Birding Expedition Across Uganda

Uganda offers an incredible variety of birdlife in a small, easy-to-explore landscape that leaves a lasting impression as soon as you step off the plane. Winston Churchill called it the Pearl of Africa. After seventeen days in the field with thirteen enthusiastic birders, it is clear that Uganda still lives up to its name, the Pearl of Africa, just as Winston Churchill once observed.

This is the story of our March 2026 expedition, organised by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, operated on the ground by Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, with our own Bird Uganda Safaris team looking after the local logistics. It was a trip packed with extraordinary moments-some expected, many not. We saw three Shoebills. We sat with Mountain Gorillas. We watched a Hyena take down a Warthog before breakfast. And we witnessed something so jaw-dropping at Murchison Falls that even the guides were speechless.

This report isn't just a list of what we saw, it's an account of what the trip felt like - the good bits, the surprises, the laughs, and the quiet moments of wonder that make a trip like this genuinely life-changing. We hope it gives you a real sense of what a Uganda birding safari is all about, and perhaps inspires you to come and see it for yourself.



*It was a good Start.*

# The Cornell Lab of Ornithology: Why Uganda?

For serious birders and luxury wildlife travellers, Uganda is not just another destination; it's a place where every day in the field feels purposeful, rewarding, and surprisingly effortless. With over 1,060 recorded bird species, including 24 found only in the Albertine Rift, the country offers a richness that few places on earth can rival. What makes it even more compelling is how accessible that diversity is: within a single journey, you can move from open savanna to dense rainforest, encountering species that usually require separate expeditions across continents.

But the real story of Uganda goes beyond numbers. It is about experience. One morning, you might find yourself gliding through the wetlands of Mabamba, watching the prehistoric silhouette of the **Shoebill** emerge from the papyrus. Another day, you are deep in a montane forest, listening for elusive endemics, only to later track Mountain Gorilla or chimpanzees in the same landscape. This rare combination of primate encounters and world-class birding creates a rhythm of exploration that feels both seamless and extraordinary.

*We recorded three individual Shoebills on this trip. Three. Even our most experienced birders were lost for words.*

The most unexpected dimension of Uganda's appeal reveals itself after the binoculars are set down for the evening. During our journey, evenings became moments of discovery in their own right, thanks to conversations led by **Ian Owen from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology**. What began as casual talks turned into something far more engaging—stories of science, conservation, and the growing role of ordinary people in shaping global bird knowledge.

Through platforms like eBird, birders are no longer just observers; they are contributors to a living, global database. And in this space, Uganda is quietly becoming a leader. Local birders are embracing citizen science with remarkable energy, generating data that is actively expanding scientific understanding of African birdlife. This is not just participation—it is impact.

*"We come to Uganda because of its birds, yes - but also because of its people. The growth of citizen science here is extraordinary, and it is helping build a data-rich picture of one of Africa's most important ornithological nations."*

— Ian Owen, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

In Uganda, birding is not just about ticking species off a list. It is about being part of something larger: a country where biodiversity, accessibility, and human passion come together to create one of Africa's most compelling wildlife experiences.



# The Expedition: Day-by-Day Account

## Days 1-3: Getting Everyone Together - Entebbe

The journey began in Entebbe, where thirteen dedicated birders from across the globe converged for what would become an unforgettable expedition in Uganda. Arrivals were staggered over several days, shaped by the realities of long-haul travel and, for some, unexpected disruptions linked to ongoing instability in the Middle East. Yet, from the moment each participant touched down at Entebbe International Airport, the tone of the journey was set—calm, organised, and quietly efficient.

The ground team from Bird Uganda Safaris, under the leadership of **Herbert Byaruhanga**, handled every logistical detail with precision. Transfers were seamless, arrivals carefully tracked, and despite the early challenges, every member of the group was received, assisted, and settled without stress. It was the kind of behind-the-scenes professionalism that allows an expedition to begin not with worry, but with confidence.



*The group at Entebbe Botanical Gardens*

The base for these opening days was the Protea Hotel by Marriott Entebbe, located just minutes from the airport. More than just a convenient stopover, it offered exactly what the group needed at this stage: comfort, space, and time to reset. After long international journeys, participants found relief in cool rooms, good food, and the simple luxury of rest.

The hotel's lush lakeside gardens quickly became a gathering point, not just for conversation, but for the first glimpses of Uganda's remarkable birdlife. The first 3 days unfolded at a gentle pace. Mornings were for light birding in the gardens, afternoons for rest, and evenings for introductions and quiet anticipation.

### Day 3: The Shoebill at Mabamba: The Moment Everyone Came For

By the third day, the expedition shifted from anticipation to fulfilment. From the shores of Entebbe, the group set out across the calm waters of Lake Victoria toward one of Africa's most celebrated birding sites: **Mabamba Wetland**. It is not just another wetland; it is a place with a quiet reputation among birders worldwide. This is where people come for one bird. **The Shoebill**. The journey into the swamp was slow and deliberate.

Narrow wooden boats, guided by skilled local community members, slipped silently through channels carved into towering papyrus. There was no engine noise, no rush—just the soft rhythm of paddles and the feeling of entering a landscape that seemed untouched by time. These guides, deeply familiar with every corner of the wetland, read the environment with quiet precision.

*“There are birds you read about, birds you travel for, and then there are birds that make you question why you ever wasted time anywhere else. **The Shoebill is the third kind.**”*

Bird Uganda Safaris – Uganda Birding Expedition, March 2026

Standing at the edge of the reeds was the bird everyone had crossed continents to see. Motionless. Imposing. Unmistakable.

The Shoebill, with its massive, clog-shaped bill and piercing amber eyes, looked less like a bird and more like something carried forward from another age. It did not move. It did not flinch. It simply watched.



*The Prehistoric Shoebill emerge from the papyrus.*

## The Great Mabamba-ShoeBill Watch

Three Shoebills in a single excursion—an exceptional outcome by any standard. Even the most seasoned birders in the group, individuals who had spent decades in the field, found themselves momentarily speechless.

Cameras lowered. Conversations paused. It was one of those rare wildlife encounters that goes beyond documentation and becomes something deeply felt.

*“You don’t just see a Shoebill—you experience it. It’s like stepping into a different era, where everything slows down and **the wild reminds you who’s really in charge.**”*

Bird Uganda Safaris – Uganda Birding Expedition, March 2026



### ***The Mabamba Expedition***

Mabamba offered far more than its star attraction. The wetland came alive with movement and sound:

- Shoebill
- *Purple Heron*
- *Blue-breasted Kingfisher*
- *Yellow-billed Duck*
- *African Openbill Stork*
- *African Fish Eagle*
- *Common Sandpiper*
- *African Jacana, African Pygmy Goose, and numerous herons and egrets*

By the time the boats turned back toward Entebbe, there was a quiet sense of satisfaction across the group. The “target” had been found, but more importantly, the experience had delivered something deeper.

*“We came for one bird, but left with a story that will outlast any checklist.”*

***Day three had not just met expectations. It had defined the journey.***

Bird Uganda Safaris – Uganda Birding Expedition, March 2026

## Lake Mburo National Park (Days 4-5)

Travelling westward across Uganda's rolling green interior, the group arrived at Igongo Cultural Centre & Country Hotel, a beautifully appointed property that blends architectural elegance with cultural immersion, providing a gateway to the wildlife-rich landscapes of western Uganda.

The following morning, the focus shifted fully to Lake Mburo National Park, Uganda's smallest national park, yet one that consistently proves size means very little when it comes to wildlife experience.

At dawn, the savanna came alive. Golden light stretched across open acacia woodland as herds of Burchell's Zebra grazed quietly, their stripes glowing in the early sun. Impala moved in graceful groups, while Topi and Waterbuck stood watchful in the distance. Olive Baboon troops stirred along the tracks, and Warthog wandered through the grasslands with their usual comic confidence. It was a classic African scene, intimate, uncrowded, and quietly spectacular.

*"Lake Mburo reminds you that the best wildlife experiences aren't always the biggest or the loudest—they're the ones you almost miss, **until suddenly, you don't.**"*

Bird Uganda Safaris — Uganda Birding Expedition, March 2026



***Wildlife Encounter at Lake Mburo National Park***

## Lake Mburo National Park.

By midday, the perspective shifted from land to water. A boat excursion on Lake Mburo revealed a different world altogether. **Hippopotamus surfaced in slow, deliberate movements, while Nile Crocodile** lay motionless along the banks, perfectly adapted to the stillness of the lake. It was a close, immersive encounter, one that a game drive alone could never fully offer.

Along the shaded edges of the water, beneath overhanging vegetation, a quiet ripple of movement revealed the presence of the elusive **African Finfoot bird**. Brief, subtle, and almost ghost-like, it glided into view and disappeared just as quickly. For many, it was a long-awaited sighting, a species that rarely reveals itself, and never for long.

The reaction was immediate. Excitement, disbelief, and quiet celebration. Even among seasoned birders, this was a moment that mattered.

*“Lake Mburo reminds you that the best wildlife experiences aren’t always the biggest or the loudest—they’re the ones you almost miss, **until suddenly, you don’t.**”*

Bird Uganda Safaris — Uganda Birding Expedition, March 2026



*Birding Outside Lake Mburo National Park*

## Days 6–8: Bwindi-Gorillas, Forest Birds, and a Night on the Mountain

From the fleeting, almost ghost-like glimpse of the African Finfoot at Lake Mburo, the expedition moved into something deeper, quieter, and far more profound: the ancient forests of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. Driving into Bwindi is an experience in itself. The air cools, the light softens, and the dense rainforest begins to close in around you. This is no ordinary forest, but it is a living, breathing ecosystem, layered with mist, birdsong, and the quiet weight of time. Home to nearly half of the world's remaining Mountain Gorilla population, Bwindi carries a presence that is immediately felt.

The group settled at Mahogany Springs Lodge, a boutique lodge perched right at the forest's edge. Here, the boundary between comfort and wilderness all but disappears. Mornings begin with birds calling from the canopy, and nights unfold to the steady rhythm of the forest. It is, quite literally, living alongside the wild.



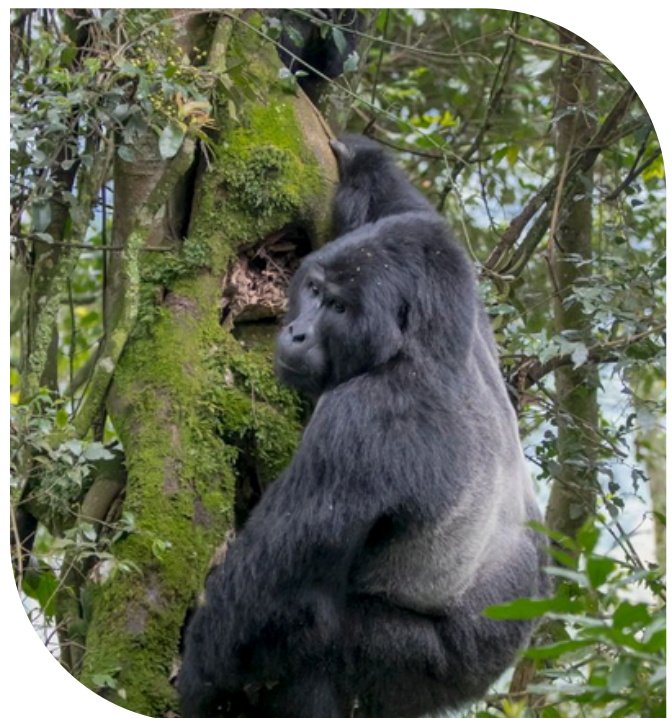
*Mahogany Springs Lodge at Bwindi.*

Gorilla tracking day arrived with a sense of quiet anticipation. The group split into two teams, each heading into different sections of the forest.

Conditions were in their favour: the gorilla families had moved to lower elevations, making the trek more accessible.

Still, the journey required patience, focus, and a willingness to move at the forest's pace.

*"Bwindi doesn't overwhelm you-it draws you in, layer by layer, until you realise you've experienced something rare and deeply human."*



## Bwindi-Forest Birds.

With the intensity of gorilla tracking behind them, the following day offered a different, yet equally rewarding focus: forest birding. Bwindi sits within the Albertine Rift, one of Africa's richest biodiversity hotspots, and its trails deliver an exceptional array of species. Moving slowly beneath the forest canopy, the group encountered highlights such as the:

- *Black-tailed Oriole*
- *Verreaux's Eagle-Owl*
- *White-tailed Blue Flycatcher & African Blue Flycatcher*
- *Luhder's Bush-Shrike*
- *Northern Double-collared Sunbird & Bronze Sunbird*
- *Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat*
- *Pale-throated Greenbul and numerous other Albertine Rift endemics*

By the end of Day 8, the expedition had reached an emotional high point. From elusive wetland birds to intimate encounters with great apes, Bwindi has delivered something few places on earth can offer: a connection not just to wildlife, but to something far more enduring.



*In Bwindi \_Bird are Everywhere.*

## Days 9–11: Queen Elizabeth National Park at A Lodge with History and a Hunt Before Breakfast

From the misty highlands of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the expedition descended into the sweeping savannas of Queen Elizabeth National Park, a landscape that feels instantly iconic. Wide open plains, vast skies, and the winding waters of the Kazinga Channel define this part of Uganda, offering a classic safari atmosphere with remarkable density of wildlife.

The group's base was the historic Mweya Safari Lodge, a property woven into the very fabric of Uganda's tourism story. Built in the 1950s as the park's first lodge, it famously hosted Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, in 1954. Set on a peninsula surrounded by water, the lodge offers uninterrupted views across Lake Edward toward distant horizons—an outlook that invites you to simply sit and watch Africa unfold.

One morning, just as the group gathered on the terrace with coffee in hand, a Spotted Hyena appeared on the plains below. What followed happened with astonishing speed.

Within moments, it launched a hunt, taking down a full-grown Warthog in a display that was as efficient as it was raw. The group watched in complete silence. It was not staged, not softened—just nature, direct and uncompromising.



*Africa's Largest Mammal at Queen Elizabeth National Park*

*"I will bring my family here. Uganda has given me the best experience I have ever had in the tropics."*

— Barry Lyon, Field Leader • Uganda Birding Expedition, March 2026

## Queen Elizabeth National Park Experience

If that encounter captured the intensity of the savanna, the afternoon boat cruise along the Kazinga Channel revealed its abundance. Drifting slowly along the water, the group found themselves surrounded by life. Hippopotamus surfaced just metres from the boat, while herds of African Buffalo lined the banks. Elephants moved steadily toward the water, and Nile crocodiles lay in wait along the shoreline.



*WildLife at Kazinga Channel*

Above and around them, the birdlife was just as impressive. Great White Pelican drifted in formation, African Spoonbill swept through the shallows, and a constant presence of herons and kingfishers animated the channel's edge. It was a scene of richness and scale, one of Africa's great wildlife spectacles, experienced at an unhurried pace.



*African Skimmers on Kazinga Channel*

## Days 12–13: Kibale Forest-Chimps, Colobus, and Coffee on the Balcony

From the open savannas of Queen Elizabeth National Park, the expedition moved north into a very different world, the dense, ancient rainforest of Kibale National Park. Here, the air feels heavier, the trees rise higher, and the forest seems to hum with life. This is Uganda's primate capital, and from the moment you step beneath the canopy, one thing becomes clear: you are entering their world.

The group settled at Chimpundu Lodge, a beautifully positioned lodge right at the forest edge. What made this stay special was how immediate the experience felt. You didn't need to venture far—birding began right from the terrace, the balconies, even the pathways between rooms. Overhead, troops of Uganda Red Colobus Monkey moved through the trees, while Guereza Black-and-white Colobus Monkey crashed noisily through the canopy, their long tails trailing behind them like banners.



*After a successful Chimpanzee Tracking*

For birders, it was a constant reward. Species appeared almost effortlessly: Calls echoed from the forest, and it was the kind of place where even a quiet cup of coffee came with a checklist. Highlights of the Kibale birding included:

- *Blue Malkoha*
- *Olive-bellied Sunbird*
- *Red-capped Robin-Chat*
- *Red-chested Cuckoo*
- *Green Crombec*
- *Jackson's Wattle-eye*
- *Red-headed Malimbe*
- *Uganda Red Colobus Monkey & Guereza Black-and-white Colobus Monkey (mammals)*

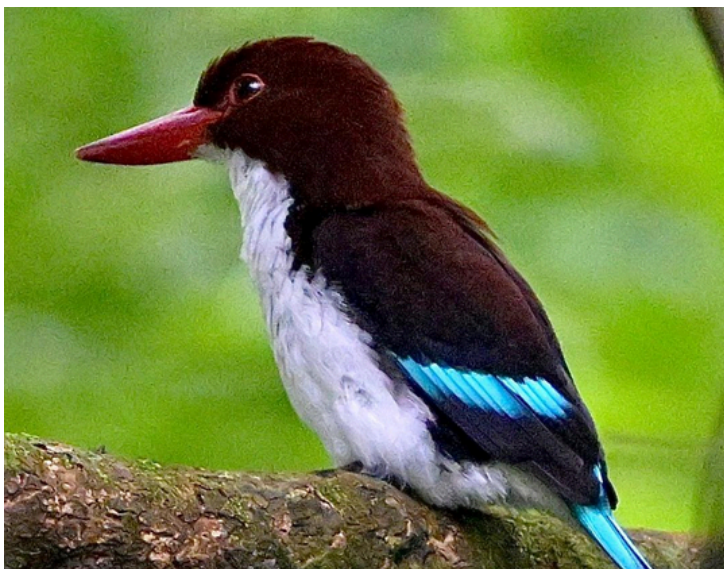
## Budongo Forest & The Royal Mile-Masindi Hotel (Days 14–15)

The expedition continued northward to Masindi, the historical gateway to northern Uganda's wilderness, and took up residence at the storied Masindi Hotel, a colonial-era landmark that oozes character and historical significance. Built in 1923 by the East African Railways and Harbours Company, Masindi Hotel was originally constructed to provide essential accommodation for passengers and traders moving between the railway terminus at Namasagali, Lake Albert, the Belgian Congo, and Sudan. Today, lovingly preserved and sensitively modernised, it stands as a living piece of African history, a perfect complement to an expedition that celebrates Uganda's extraordinary heritage.

The primary ornithological objective was the Royal Mile of Budongo Forest, justifiably regarded as one of the most productive single birding transects in Africa. An overnight rain had rendered the forest track temporarily impassable; however, rather than abandon the session, the team adapted seamlessly, conducting a highly productive birding walk along the main road corridor. This pragmatic decision proved inspired: nearly all target species were secured, complemented by a memorable encounter with a troop of Blue Monkey.

The remarkable Budongo forest specialities recorded on this session included:

- *Chocolate-backed Kingfisher*
- *African Dwarf Kingfisher*
- *Blue-breasted Kingfisher*
- *White-thighed Hornbill*
- *Lemon-bellied Crombec*
- *Spotted Greenbul*
- *Forest Flycatcher, Red-capped & Chestnut-capped Flycatcher*
- *Chestnut-crowned Eremomela*
- *Crowned Eagle*
- *Dusky Long-tailed Cuckoo*
- *Marsh Tchagra*
- *Scaly Francolin*



## Murchison Falls National Park-A Grand Finale (Days 16-17)

Uganda's largest national park provided a fittingly spectacular conclusion to an exceptional expedition. Murchison Falls National Park, named for the extraordinary point at which the entire force of the Nile is compressed through a seven-metre cleft in the ancient rock, creating one of Africa's most powerful and dramatic natural phenomena, delivered wildlife spectacle on a panoramic scale.

Three nights were spent at Paraa Safari Lodge, occupying a truly magical position above the River Nile's broad northern bank. Game drives through vast open plains and woodlands yielded outstanding wildlife encounters, including Lion, Spotted Hyena, Rothschild's Giraffe, Lelwel Hartebeest, Uganda Kob, Oribi, and Common Genet. The skies above were alive with raptors, and the expedition secured the remarkable privilege of witnessing millions of migrating Abdim's Storks, a natural phenomenon of breath-taking scale that few travellers are fortunate enough to witness.

Vulture diversity at Murchison was outstanding, with four species recorded:

- *White-backed Vulture*
- *Ruppell's Griffon Vulture*
- *Hooded Vulture*
- *Lappet-faced Vulture*

The boat trip to the base of Murchison Falls was unanimously voted among the trip's most exhilarating experiences: the raw power of the waterfall at close quarters, combined with dense concentrations of hippos, crocs, Nile crocodiles, and waterbirds lining the banks, created a sensory experience of unmatched intensity. Views from the top of the falls, reached by a short trail, offered a contrasting sense of serene, elevated grandeur.



*Nile Crocodile*

## Expedition Highlights at a Glance

### Iconic Wildlife Encounters

- *Three Shoebills observed at close range, Mabamba Wetland*
- *Mountain Gorilla tracking: two separate group sessions, both fully successful*
- *Chimpanzee tracking, Kibale Forest, full hour with habituated community*
- *Dramatic Spotted Hyena hunt witnessed from Mweya Lodge terrace*
- *Millions of migrating Abdim's Storks, Murchison Falls*
- *Rothschild's Giraffe, Lion, Elephant, Buffalo, Hippo, Crocodile, and more*

### Selected Bird Highlights

- *Shoebill -3 individuals at Mabamba Wetland*
- *African Finfoot - Lake Mburo*
- *White-backed Night Heron - Lake Mburo*
- *African Dwarf Kingfisher - Budongo Forest*
- *Chocolate-backed Kingfisher - Budongo Forest*
- *White-thighed Hornbill - Budongo Forest*
- *Verreaux's Eagle-Owl - Bwindi*
- *Black-tailed Oriole - Bwindi*
- *Luhder's Bush-Shrike - Bwindi*
- *Snowy-crowned Robin-Chat - Bwindi*
- *Red-headed Malimbe - Kibale*
- *Jackson's Wattle-eye - Kibale*
- *Blue Malkoha - Kibale*
- *Crowned Eagle - Budongo*
- *Giant Kingfisher - Entebbe*
- *African Fish Eagle - Mabamba and Lake Mburo*
- *Abdim's Stork-millions on migration, Murchison Falls*
- *White-backed, Ruppell's Griffon, Hooded and Lappet-faced Vulture - Murchison Falls*

***"Uganda has given me the best experience I have ever had in the tropics."***

– Barry Lyon, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours



# Thinking of Coming to Uganda?

## Honestly, You Should!

Uganda often gets overlooked in favour of its neighbours - Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda. It shouldn't. With over 1,060 recorded bird species, the world's most reliable Shoebill population, the only place on earth where you can track gorillas in the morning and bird for Albertine Rift endemics in the afternoon, and a growing range of genuinely excellent luxury lodges, Uganda is quietly becoming Africa's finest all-round wildlife destination.

Barry Lyon - one of the most widely travelled professional birding guides in the world - said it after his very first visit: ***“Uganda gave him the best tropical experience of his career”***. Ian Owen at the Cornell Lab chose Uganda not just for its birds, but because ***the passion and energy of its local birding community is something genuinely special and worth being part of.***

## Where We Stayed

- *Protea Hotel by Marriott, Entebbe - a comfortable international hotel.*
- *Igongo Cultural Centre & Country Hotel - culturally rich & welcoming.*
- *Mahogany Springs Lodge, Bwindi*
- *Mweya Safari Lodge, QENP - colonial charm, built in the 1950s.*
- *Chimpundu Lodge, Kibale-birding from the balcony.*
- *Masindi Hotel - colonial landmark built in 1923, full of history and character*
- *Paraa Safari Lodge, Murchison Falls, on the River Nile.*
- *The Boma Hotel, Entebbe - Entebbe's finest farewell hotel*



## The Team

The quality of any trip depends on the people leading it. We were fortunate to have a wonderful team on this expedition.

<b>Ian Owen, <i>Tour Leader</i></b> Cornell Lab of Ornithology	<i>Scientist and a genuinely inspiring speaker.</i>
<b>Barry Lyon, <i>Field Leader</i></b> Victor Emanuel Nature Tours	<i>Decades of global guiding experience, and now a devoted Uganda convert.</i>
<b>Herbert Byaruhanga, <i>Senior Guide</i></b> Bird Uganda Safaris	<i>Encyclopaedic knowledge of Uganda's birds and deep roots across the country.</i>
<b>Patricia Kansiime, <i>Volunteer Guide</i></b>	<i>Brilliant in the field.</i>
<b>Michael &amp; Jan, <i>Drivers</i></b>	<i>Patient, expert drivers who got us everywhere safely and comfortably.</i>

### BIRD UGANDA SAFARIS

*Uganda's Premier Luxury Birding & Wildlife Safaris*

*To find out more about booking a Uganda birding safari with Bird Uganda Safaris, or to ask about future Cornell Lab of Ornithology departures operated by Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, please get in touch directly.*

**Spaces are limited and fill up well in advance.**

**Herbert Byaruhanga, *Senior Guide & Founder***  
director@birduganda.com  
www.birduganda.com

*In Partnership with Victor Emanuel Nature Tours & Cornell Lab of Ornithology*

***"In seventeen days, Uganda gave us three Shoebills, a sky full of storks, gorillas at arm's length, and chimpanzees in ancient forest. It gave us a hyena hunt before breakfast and the full force of the Nile through a seven-metre gap. No other country packs this much life, this much wildness, and this much wonder into a single journey."***

**Bird Uganda Safaris — Pearl of Africa Expedition, March 2026**