

tourism

NUMBERS **Shs2.6m**

Lucrative: It is estimated that every birder spends up to Shs 2.6m in Uganda. If only Uganda attracted 10, 000 birders, we would be able to raise \$70m from birding. Birds have the capacity to raise more revenue than even the Mountain Gorilla.

BIRDING EXPO. Uganda Tourism Board is organising the Pearl of Africa Birding Expo, scheduled to take place from December 6th to 8th 2019. The expo will create awareness among local and international birders and more than 120 bird species, including the shoebill, African fish eagle, hammerkops will be showcased.



Potent

Profitable: In the last 20 years, Uganda has presented the best birding itineraries in the East African region, thanks to keen bird guides who take the initiative to undertake research, finding spots for birding excursions and putting together attractive packages.

Birding can rake in more revenue than mountain gorillas

Birdwatching. At least every Ugandan has seen different species of colourful birds flapping around and singing, especially in the morning. But not many people believe tourists can actually come just to watch birds. In fact, when the word tourism is mentioned, many think of animals. Did you know that birding is a great way to connect with nature but also has the potential to generate revenue for Uganda? **Edgar R. Batte** explains why you need to attend the Pearl of Africa Birding Expo.

In 2018, tour operator and birder Benedict Ntale, embarked on a search to find the fox's weaver along Lake Bisina, a satellite lake of Lake Kyoga, in eastern Uganda and he was successful.

In August this year, a team from Nature Uganda, a conservation organisation, led by its director and birder Achilles Byaruhanga, went on a survey for the weaver.

A total of seven fox's weavers were sighted along the transect. There were five males and two females. Thirty two fox's weaver nests were recorded along the transect. Twenty eight of these were active, while six were deemed inactive.

Majority of these nests were built on whistling-thorn acacia trees. It was also noted that the nests were situated near water pools.

According to 'Fox's Weaver Expedition Report', compiled by Nature Uganda, during the course of the expedition, the team was able to identify 30 bird species, including the fox's weaver and the Karamoja Apalis that is classified as vulnerable under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) red-list.

Capacity to raise more revenue

"We have more than 10 locations where you can record the fox's weaver. It is no longer a rare and endangered species. Birds have capacity to raise more revenue than even the Mountain Gorilla. It is estimated that every birder spends up to Shs2.6m. If we attracted 10, 000 birders in our country, we would be able to raise \$70m (Shs257b) from birding," Achilles Byaruhanga observes.

On average, birders spend 17 to 25 days during which they see the country's prized tourist attractions, including mountain gorillas, chimpanzees but more days tracking and watching birds.

"That is money we cannot get from sugarcane or even tea. We need to realise that birding is a key growing element of tourism that will promote Uganda's GDP," James Lutalo, the officer in-charge of the tourism docket at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife & Antiquities, observes.

He adds: "Tourism contributed \$1.6b last year. I do not think there is any other export which is invisible that is as lucrative as tourism. We attracted 1.5m visitors. If we can attract an additional 10 birders, we will collect \$1m (Shs3.6b)."

1, 080 bird species in Uganda

Uganda is unquestionably a birders' paradise. It is home to 1, 080 bird species. More than 10 million migrant birds are estimated to fly into Uganda every year, thanks to its central location on the East African plateau and the varied vegetation patterns.

Uganda is home to 10 per cent of global population of birds. Despite the small size of the Pearl of Africa, it has about 50 per cent of the total species of birds found on the African continent.

With diversity, one bird is endemic to Uganda - the fox's weaver, which is at the forefront of this year's Pearl of Africa Birding Expo, slated for 6 to 8 December.

Pearl of Africa Birding Expo

Lilly Ajarova, the chief executive officer of Uganda Tourism Board



A fox's weaver taken in a tree around Pian Upe, in the Karamoja region in north-eastern Uganda, one of the popular birding destinations in Uganda. PHOTO BY HERBERT BYARUHANGA.

(UTB), says birding is a phenomenal tourism product and the Pearl of Africa Birding Expo will create awareness among local and international birders.

The expo will be held at Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC), and tourists have been assured to see more than 120 bird species, including the shoebill, African fish eagle, hammerkops and more.

"We shall be hosting local and foreign travel trade partners, who will create awareness and promote Uganda as a birding destination. We need to diversify the tourism products in our country. There is more to tourism in Uganda than just wildlife and primates. This is the time to showcase the tourism products and market them," Ajarova explains.

The third edition of the expo was held in Mabira forest, a home to some 300 species of birds. "Mabira forest is one of the favourite birding des-

tinations. And over the years, it has remained intact. Birding is one of the leading outdoor activities for tourists all over the world.

Bird watching spots

If you go to any destination, you will find birds. In Uganda, you will find a bird in every square kilometre," explains Herbert Byaruhanga of Uganda Birding Safaris.

The executive director of National Forestry Authority, Tom Obong Okello, says there are many bird watching spots in the forest, as well as Mpanga and Budongo forests.

Budongo Central Forest Reserve, covering approximately 825 square kilometres, is Uganda's biggest forest. It has more than 360 birds. It is also one of Uganda's key chimpanzee tracking destinations.

Karinzu Central Forest Reserve is another birding haven with some 378 recorded species of birds.

Mabamba Swamp is another Important Bird Area (IBA) with more than 300 birds.

Bird guides

In the last 20 years, Uganda has presented the best birding itineraries in the East African region, thanks to keen bird guides who take the initiative to undertake research, finding spots for birding excursions and putting together attractive packages.

"Now that we have many bird species, we need to invest resources in training more guides at every site. I am sure we still have the best network of site guides on the African continent," Byaruhanga explains.

He adds: "If someone wants to travel to a destination for bird watching, they will be seeing the birds with the guidance of professional bird guides."

"We have about 200 bird guides, since 2001. We are working to in-



Prossy Nanyombi, (2nd L) a freelance bird guide orients visitors on how to use telescopes during the launch of the Pearl of Africa Birding Expo in Mabira Central forest Reserve. Uganda has a number of female bird guides. PHOTO BY EDGAR R. BATTE

crease the number of bird guides. Uganda has more women birders compared to any other country on the African continent," he noted.

Training more bird guides

Byaruhanga adds that under a partnership with UTB, they are embarking on training more bird guides who will be graded in levels, as part of efforts to provide more birders and enhancing the birding tourism experience.

With almost the same size of land, Britain has 620 bird species and earns millions.

James Lutalo, the director of tourism at the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife & Antiquities, says fox's weavers are some of the birds worth celebrating, adding that birds play a key role in pollination and dispersing of seeds that account for the forests Uganda has today.

Genesis of two passionate birders

The story of birding is one that brought together two birders. Herbert Byaruhanga and Achilles Byaruhanga, (not related by blood) were drawn to each other by a common hobby - birding, that has since become their passion.

"In 1993, birding was introduced in Uganda. Herbert will tell you that at least each one of us was arrested severally for carrying binoculars. It was not easy to explain to security operatives and the natives that I was birding at that time. Many thought we were mapping their land. Even when we laboured to explain to them, they advised us to find better things to do, noting that we were a bunch of time wasters," Achilles recalls.

In 2002, the duo conceptualised an idea of creating awareness intended to attract birders to destination Uganda.

"Unless you naturally like birds, it is very unlikely that you will invite others to see them. That is why we started the 'Big Birding Day'."

Achilles adds: "However, we are still losing a lot of bird habitats and the species are increasingly getting fewer. In 1970, the population of the grey-crowned crane was about 100,000. Currently, there are about between 9,000 and 10,000 cranes. As we promote tourism and birding, let us remember to conserve the environment."

Commonly sought after bird species in Uganda include long-crested eagle, marabou stork, African fish eagle, shoebill Stork, green-breasted pitta, great blue Turaco, shelly's crimsonwing, short-tailed warbler, standard-winged nightjar, doherty's bush shrike, bar-tailed trogon, black-breasted barbet and common squacco heron.

IF I HAD TO WATCH BIRDS IN UGANDA ...

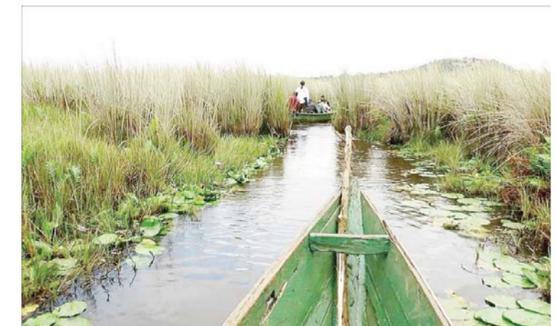
I would definitely go to...



Semliki National Park

BUNDIBUGYO

Uganda has many unique birding locations. Each location has different bird species. For example, Semliki National Park is home to countless birds. It has hornbills, among other forest species of the Congo Ituri forest. Bwindi Impenetrable Forest also has some special highland and swampy birds. **[Musiime Muramura-UWA]**



Mabamba swamp

ENTEBBE. Mabamba wetland is nearer and harbours many bird species, including papyrus gonolek, goliath heron, lesser jacana, black egret, black-faced rufous wabler, not forgetting the site guides availability who will take you on an educational excursion. **[Farouk Busuulwa, Uganda]**



Bwindi Forest National Park

KANUNGU. "Birds have very beautiful colours. Birding has now become my job and hobby. If I had to recommend one birding spot, it would be Bwindi forest, and particularly Ruhija, where birds are easy to see and there are Albertine rift endemics, for example the handsome franklin. **[Prossy Nanyombi- Freelance bird guide Uganda]**

WHAT THEY SAY



"We are losing many bird habitats and bird species are increasingly getting fewer. In 1970, the population of the grey-crowned crane was about 100, 000. Currently, there are about between 9, 000 and 10, 000 cranes. As we promote birding, let us remember to conserve the environment." -ACHILLES BYARUHANGA- ED NATURE UGANDA.

"Now that we have many bird species, we ought to invest in training more bird guides at every site. Uganda has more than 200 bird guides, since 2001 and we are working to increase the number of bird guides. We have partnered with UTB to train for guides as part of the efforts to promote tourism." HERBERT BYARUHANGA- UGANDA BIRDING SAFARIS

"We will be hosting local and foreign travel partners to promote Uganda as a birding destination. We need to diversify the tourism products that we have in the country. There is more to tourism in Uganda than just wildlife and primates. This is the time to showcase the tourism products," LILLY AJAROVA, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER- UTB