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worked with elephants, rhinos and lions as well as a variety of other creatures. His first book was *Wrestling With Rhinos* (ECW 2002). *The Trouble with Lions* followed (UAP 2007). Then came *Of Moose and Men* (ECW 2012). A new book titled *From Porcupines to Polar Bears* will be published in early 2016. Visit him at www.jerryhaigh.com

BIRDING IN UGANDA

An avian paradise remembered

For seven years Jerry Haigh took Canadian veterinary students to Uganda and took advantage of the opportunity to enjoy the country's birds. He shares his recollections here.



There are many small birds I cannot identify, even with my Stevenson and Fanshawe guide book in hand. There are so many almost lookalike brown-coloured females that I am quickly defeated as they do not hang around long enough to identify with certainty.



the world championships for the most ugly bird, standing like statues in the trees or scavenging roadside piles of uncollected garbage.

Naturally the vet students will concentrate on the mammalian fauna. They have seen only TV images and so for them chimps, elephants, lions and leopards are the real stars of the show.

For me, the birds are just as enthralling. The images of them over those years meld as I recall them:

In Kibale National Park, where we stay for three nights, Christine sets up mist nets and tells us of her research work in the forest. We band twenty-one birds in the first two years. We take a single drop of blood from each to check for avian malaria. Five are positive. In Christine's gentle hands a tiny male Black-throated Wattle-eye gets ready to return to nature.

I see a Scarlet-chested Sunbird working its way among the blossoms of a bottle brush tree. As he leaves, a female Bronze Sunbird arrives to try her luck. An African Grey Hornbill obligingly turns his head to look at me from his thorn tree perch at the edge of the compound. I make sure that his eye is in focus. He takes no notice of the camera's click. A Black Bee-eater perches above me.

From Kibale we move to Queen Elizabeth National Park for nine days. In the hostel compound at Mweya's park headquarters, Marico and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds flit among the Erythrina blossoms. At the Tembo canteen where we go for meals, a Yellow White-eye twists his neck to get at an aloe flower. I snap a picture of a Black-headed Gonolek as he perches. His gleaming red breast almost lights up the bush.

While we carry out disease research on Uganda Kob a student asks "What is that huge raptor". I turn to see a majestic Martial Eagle above us.

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It is February 2002. From the plane window my wife Jo and I see the distant horizon of Lake Victoria away to the south. As we leave the airport the heat envelops us. We are instantly sweating, as are the Canadian veterinary students who are joining me as part of their studies. The contrast between Saskatoon's early morning minus 21C temperature and the twenty-plus of Entebbe means that we have undergone a change of over forty degrees in thirty-six hours.

Our smiling hostess, Dr. Christine Dranzoa, guides us through the arrivals hall.

On the 40km drive to Kampala we see a few of the enormous number of bird species, over a thousand, that Uganda has to offer the serious twitcher. I am not one. Just an enthusiastic amateur with a decent camera.

The three most obvious species are the Pied Crows, in their tuxedo-like plumage; Black Kites wheeling in the sky and using their forked tails as rudders to change direction in their search for food; Marabou Storks, the easy winner in

FIRST PAGE: A Black Bee-eater with a snack.

TOP: Dr. Christine Dranzoa releases a Black-throated Wattle-eye after banding.

BELOW: A Scarlet-chested Sunbird among the Erythrina blossoms.

in hand. There are so many almost lookalike brown-coloured females that I am quickly defeated as they do not hang around long enough to identify with certainty.

Near the hostel at Mweya a glossy green Klaas's Cuckoo lands nearby. It ignores me as it pecks through the leaves in search of some tasty morsel. In short order I click off 15 photos.

A Long-crested Eagle atop the dead branches of a thorn tree gives us the eye. His top knot waves gently in the breeze.

A Red Bishop looks straight at me with the bright red feathers on his crown puffed up. A moment later a pale brown bird, with darker striped wings, approaches and gently pecks at his breast feathers. Surely a courtship moment.

The big treat, on a day off from research, is the afternoon boat ride along the Kasinga channel. Fish Eagles at regular intervals rocking back their heads and screaming their cries across the sky; a Great White Pelican takes off with a backdrop of terns, gulls, and a single African Skimmer behind wallowing Cape Buffalo and a small group of Hippo. One pelican briefly confuses me because it has spiralled its head and neck upside down to have a good scratch.

We watch as a Hammerkop creeps ever closer to an eagle. The big bird is tearing a fish apart with its beak held in its powerful talons. The brown bird is hoping to engage in some kleptoparasitism, but is wisely being extra cautious.

A male Pied Kingfisher uses a hippo's back for a lookout post. Then a real gathering of like-minded souls, a female Saddle-billed Stork stands in front of a grazing hippo while buffalos rest and Great Cormorants in breeding plumage hold a meeting, all seeming to talk at once as



PHOTOS BY JERRY HAIGH

TOP: A Saddle-billed Stork female and friends on the bank of the Kasinga Channel.

BELOW: A Hammerkop and its lunch. Can it swallow the toad on one gulp?



their throats vibrate (properly known as gular fluttering, a cooling mechanism). The interests of the students and we older admirers are satisfied at one sighting.

This is surely the crown jewel of our birding experience.

Next stop Lake Mburo, where we stay for four nights.

On this park's boat ride, limited to only eight passengers per trip, we are guided by ranger Moses, a birder himself. More eagles; a brief glimpse of an African Finfoot; the single nest of a Read-headed Weaver, the male obligingly poses as he works away at the side of the structure.

For me, a special sighting, something I have only ever read about or seen pictures of. A Little Bittern glares at an unseen object while it stands rock-still among the papyrus at the water's edge.

As the tour boat enters a small bay we see a chase that I have never heard of or even imagined. A Goliath Heron stands frozen in the hope of spearing a meal. Two Fish Eagles zoom in like fighter jets. The statue quickly transforms into an ungainly sprinter and heads for a nearby papyrus stand. Discretion is definitely the better part of valour.

At the canteen, a few of us, sitting there with a Primus beer or a tasty Tangawizi (the best-tasting ginger beer ever) in hand, have the privilege of seeing the flashing jewel of a Malachite Kingfisher dive off a papyrus stem, swoop low and briefly vanish before arcing up to the next low-hanging branch over the water.

Thence to the Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary where we see Piapiac perching on a rhino's back. The students are more interested in the rhino than his passenger.

SPOTLIGHT



PHOTOS BY: JERRY HAUGH



After a night back at the vet school in Kampala we head out to the Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (zoo) at Entebbe. As everywhere else in the country, indeed anywhere Jo and I have been in Africa, indeed anywhere Jo and I have been in Africa, weaver colonies are attached pendulously to trees, mainly one or another species of thorn.

A colony of Vieillot's Black Weavers has taken up residence among some papyrus.

A Shoebill Stork stands, like a da Vinci marble, while I digitally capture its portrait.

As I wander among the beautiful trees I see an amazing sight. A Hammerkop, unfettered by any enclosure, stands next to a small pond. In its beak is an enormous amphibian (perhaps a square-mouthed toad). I immediately think of the saying that one's eyes may be bigger than one's stomach. I cannot imagine that the bird will swallow the creature in one gulp.

A while later a two-hour boat ride in a long canoe takes us out to the chimp sanctuary on Ngamba Island. Even in the small area where visitors are permitted, there are interesting birds. A Water Thick-knee, its yellow eyes seeming way too large, stands by the shore; a thorn tree near

TOP LEFT: Fish-eagles on the attack. A Goliath Heron gets a scary surprise.

TOP RIGHT : A Cattle Egret eyes a weaver's nest before a raid.

BOTTOM LEFT: A Black-headed Gonolek on the look-out.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Is this Shoebill Stork actually a marble statue?

the water bears so many Lesser Masked Weaver's nests that the branches are almost obscured. By 2008 the nests have gained the unwelcome attention of some Cattle Egrets. A single member of the attack squadron looks up with only one thing on its mind. Fifteen seconds later one sees why. He (or she) spurts forward and raids a nest. A desperate male weaver flaps alongside, trying, with no chance of success, to distract or drive off the predator. The weavers will have to deal, no doubt yet again, with an 'empty nest syndrome'.

Jo and I, on later trips to other sites, see more birds. Rock Pratincoles near the falls in Murchison. Flocks of both Abdim's and Open-billed Storks on the banks of the Nile.

After all the wear and tear on the several visits, and passage through many hands, the bird book is now a tad the worse for wear. The spine is held together with duck tape. Many pages, especially the index of common names, are much thumbled. Unlike those on my shelves at home this is not a pristine collector's volume.