



# Bridging the Rift

BIRDINGRWANDA

Despite being one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, Rwanda is a worthwhile and exciting birding destination, with Nyungwe National Park the undoubted star attraction. The largest montane forest in Africa, Nyungwe has more Albertine Rift endemic birds than any other site outside the Democratic Republic of Congo. On the other side of this small but vibrant country, Akagera National Park offers a wide diversity of savanna and wetland birds, including Shoebill and several species confined to the Lake Victoria Basin.

**Peter Ryan** and **Callan Cohen** report on a recent visit.

## Photographs by Peter Ryan

**t**he forests of the western (or Albertine) Rift support more endemic birds than any other endemic bird area in Africa, making them the hottest of hotspots for birders. Adding to their allure, some of Africa's least known and most enigmatic birds are found here: Congo Bay Owl, Prigogine's Nightjar and Schouteden's Swift are collectively known from fewer than 10 specimens. Extending patchily through the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), western Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, the Albertine Rift forests support at least 37 endemic bird species. Many of the forests are being cleared for agriculture and are thus under threat, while the status of the forests in the DRC, which support the greatest diversity of endemic species, is poorly known. In recent years, most birders chasing the Albertine Rift endemics have visited Uganda's Bwindi Forest, but that offers only a subset of the region's endemics. As we discovered, Rwanda's Nyungwe forest offers a greater diversity of species in a magnificent setting.

But before tackling Rwanda's birds, we have to touch on the proverbial elephant in the room. It's inescapable: mention Rwanda and the first thing that springs to mind is the 1994 genocide. As South Africa celebrated the

end of apartheid, Rwanda was plunged into chaos. Ethnic violence, resulting in large part from a century of colonial meddling, caused the deaths of almost a million people. The genocide was the culmination of 25 years of sporadic violence between Hutus and Tutsis and led to ongoing instability in the region. Yet today Rwanda is one of the most organised countries in Africa, with a strong determination to move on from the events of the past. Witnessing this turnaround at first hand and learning about the country's history were among the highlights of our visit to Rwanda.

**C**oming in to land at Kigali brought home two abiding truths that were frequently reinforced during our travels around the country. Firstly, Rwanda is appropriately called the Land of a Thousand Hills. Everywhere is hilly, to the extent that one wonders how there is enough flat ground for the airport. And secondly, Rwanda is crowded. With some nine million people in a country smaller than Lesotho, the pressure for land is intense. Outside national parks, the countryside is a patchwork of small fields and eucalypt stands with scant natural vegetation. Yet it still manages to support reasonable numbers of birds, thanks in part to a culture of not hunting them. Marshes, rice paddies and fish ponds line many of the valley floors, providing feeding opportunities for



RAY TIPPER

**Above** Probably the most sought-after species for most birders visiting Nyungwe National Park is the Red-collared Mountain-Babbler, because the park is the only site outside the DRC where it occurs. The fact that it's a stunning bird doesn't hurt either! Small parties glean insects from epiphyte-covered trunks, but are easily overlooked when not calling.

**Opposite** Grauer's Swamp-Warbler is a scarce, localised Albertine Rift endemic confined to high-elevation swamps in Rwanda, Burundi, south-western Uganda and the eastern DRC. It is listed as Endangered, but is common in Nyungwe.



**Above** Ntoyinkima Claver, the top bird guide in Nyungwe National Park, on one of the park's trails.

**Top** Western Citrils are common throughout Rwanda, especially around the swampy valley bottoms.

herons, ibises, egrets and storks. We encountered two large breeding colonies in eucalypt trees lining the main roads. In one, on the road east of Kigali, Pink-backed Pelicans, Yellow-billed Storks, Black-headed Herons and African Sacred Ibises were breeding next to a busy commercial centre, with music blaring throughout the day.

Kigali has expanded rapidly since it became the capital of Rwanda after independence in 1962, and it sprawls over several hills and valleys. Although bustling with activity, it is more organised than many other African cities, and its most remarkable feature is a virtual absence of litter. Following a major clean-up in 2005, plastic bags were banned from the country and since then regular community efforts ensure that the city remains litter-free. This community spirit is symptomatic of the positive attitude of most Rwandans.

If you're spending time in Kigali, there are several birding options, perhaps the best of which is Nyaburongo Swamp on the southern outskirts. The large papyrus beds flanking the main road to Butare are home to at least two Lake Victoria Basin endemics: Carruthers's Cisticola and Red-chested Sunbird. Other interesting species include Blue-headed Coucal, White-headed Saw-wing, Grey-capped Warbler and Western Citril.

### Nyungwe National Park

If you're visiting Rwanda for birds, you'll want to make a bee-line for Nyungwe National Park. Lying in the south-west

of the country on the border with Burundi, it straddles the divide between the Congo and Nile watersheds. Indeed, the most remote source of the Nile arises on the slopes of Mount Bigugu, the park's highest point. Protected as a forest reserve since 1933, it has been impacted by gold-mining and limited agriculture, but its future became more secure after it was proclaimed a national park in 2004. It encompasses approximately 1 000 square kilometres of montane forest and heathland, ranging from 1 600 to 2 950 metres in elevation. Given the small size of Rwanda, it only takes about four hours to reach Nyungwe on mostly good tar roads from Kigali.

The park is readily accessible, with the main road between Butare and Cyangugu running through it for 55 kilometres. Birding from the road is excellent and there is a wonderful network of trails through the forest, centred on the park headquarters at Uwinka. This area is famous for its large troop of some 400 Angolan colobus monkeys. The undulating terrain makes for spectacular scenery, with unbroken forest stretching into the hazy distance. It also facilitates birding and on the steeper slopes there are abundant opportunities to observe canopy species at eye level. Birding will be further enhanced with the construction of a canopy walkway at Uwinka, due to be completed this year, and plans are afoot to erect canopy towers at other strategic sites.

Although the best birding is in the western half of the park, where the soils

## A quick stop for Mountain Buzzards ended up lasting more than an hour as we notched up a host of the more common Albertine Rift endemics

are richer and the rainfall is higher, there are excellent birds throughout. A brief stop within a few hundred metres of entering the eastern edge of the forest produced a pair of Dusky Crimsonwings as well as several Red-faced Woodland-Warblers. The following morning we had planned to walk the Bigugu track as it is a good site for Red-collared Mountain-Babbler, probably the most sought-after bird in Nyungwe. But as we entered from Gisakura at the western edge of the park, it proved impossible to drive past so many good birds. A quick stop for a pair of Mountain Buzzards ended up lasting more than an hour as we notched up a host of the more common Albertine Rift endemics: Mountain Masked Apalis, Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher, Rwenzori Batis, Chubb's Cisticola and a trio of stunning sunbirds – Blue-headed, Regal and the incredibly iridescent Purple-breasted. The final target sunbird, the Rwenzori Double-collared, proved to be



more elusive. It is largely confined to heathlands at higher elevations. Don't be misled by the smaller Northern Double-collared Sunbirds, which are found throughout much of the park and are especially common around the Office Rwandais du Tourisme et des Parcs Nationaux (ORTPN) guesthouse at Gisakura. Other good species included Stuhlmann's and Sharpe's starlings, Equatorial Akalat and Grey-winged Robin-Chat. The roadside is also the best place to spend time with the attractive l'Hoest's monkey.



When we finally reached the Bigugu trail, the endemics continued to stream in: Archer's Robin-Chat, Mountain Illadopsis, Stripe-breasted Tit and Rwenzori Apalis. An ant swarm provided great views of Red-throated Alethe, Handsome Spurfowl were calling throughout the forest, and a Cassin's Hawk-Eagle soared overhead, but the mountain-babblers were worryingly quiet. A single Kungwe Apalis showed briefly in a bird party, but subsequent efforts to connect with this localised endemic were frustrated. Chestnut-throated, Grey and Black-throated round out the diverse community of apalises that occur in the park.

Nyungwe teems with turacos. Great Blues are commonly seen from the road, and the forest resounds to the raucous calls of the Black-billed, but pride of place goes to the bizarre Rwenzori Turaco. Sporting a deep, keeled bill like a Great Blue Turaco and with an atypical ringing call, it rightly deserves its own genus. The fact that it's also a handsome species, even by turaco standards, >

**Left** Recent genetic studies suggest that the Rwenzori Apalis is probably not an apalis at all, and it also has fewer tail feathers. It is yet another Albertine endemic.



A network of well-maintained trails allows access to the heart of Nyungwe forest.

just adds to its appeal. Nyungwe is, in addition, great for bush-shrikes: Mountain Sooty Boubous and Doherty's Bush-Shrikes are abundant throughout, while Lühder's Bush-Shrikes occur at the lower elevations. Lagden's Bush-Shrike is a large, scarce species that is more often heard than seen, but we were fortunate to find an adult with a fledged chick that spent 10 minutes tackling a large katydid or cicada. We also called up a buff-breasted Many-coloured Bush-Shrike, a colour morph confined to the southern Albertine Rift.

The following morning we hiked down to Kamiranzovu Marsh, 'the place that swallows elephants'. Sadly, the elephants have disappeared from Nyungwe, but the marsh remains a spectacular site that supports a large population of the localised and threatened Grauer's Swamp-Warbler. Covering 13 square kilometres at the base of an ancient block fault, it is surrounded by picturesque forest that literally drips with epiphytes. There have been several sightings of the rare Albertine Owlet in these forests, but we had to satisfy ourselves with Grey-chested Illadopsis, Strange Weaver and an incredibly obliging pair of Short-tailed

Warblers. The warbler came close to being the bird of the trip, certainly beating the region's other monotypic genus of warbler, Grauer's Warbler. This rather dull grey bird of dense tangles and creepers is best located by its soft trilling call, remarkably similar to that of a Scaly-throated Honeyguide. Our experience at Kamiranzovu was nicely rounded out when we were serenaded by a troop of chimpanzees.

We finally caught up with a party of Red-collared Mountain-Babblers on our second visit to the Bigugu trail. Nyungwe is the only forest outside the DRC where this gorgeous species occurs, so we couldn't afford to leave without seeing it and it didn't disappoint. Like the exquisite White-throated Mountain-Babbler of south-western Cameroon, it roves through the forest in small family groups, gleaning insects from among epiphytes on large branches. With the babbler finally under our belts, we were free to explore the remnants of lower elevation forest, adding Elliot's and Tullberg's woodpeckers, Kakamega Greenbul, and one of the few records of Yellow-bellied Hyliota from Nyungwe. Much of the lower elevation forest



When birding in Nyungwe, one has a sense of exploration, that anything could appear over the next hill



Clockwise from top left Bare-faced Go-away-bird; The papyrus swamps around Lake Beringero are home to Papyrus Gonolek and White-winged Warblers, and are often visited by Shoebills; Woodpeckers are surprisingly scarce in Nyungwe forest, but we encountered a few Tullberg's Woodpeckers at lower elevations in the forest; Nyungwe forms the watershed between Africa's two greatest catchments, the Nile and Congo rivers; Grey Crowned Crane; Doherty's Bush-Shrike; I'Hoest's monkeys are easily seen along the main road through Nyungwe forest.

## Know before you go

Most tourists visit during the main dry season (June–September), although the shorter dry season (December–January) may also be worth exploring. In July the climate is pleasantly cool in the highlands, and not too hot in the eastern lowlands. Malaria is widespread, so travellers should take the usual precautions. We experienced very few problems with insects, although pepper ticks were common locally in Akagera National Park.

For a former Francophone country, English is widely spoken and this is set to increase as it recently became the main medium for education. Despite a rapidly developing broadband network, most transactions remain cash based. Change US dollars (only notes dated after 2000 will be accepted) or euros in Kigali and not at the airport, which offers lower rates than in town. If you want to see the mountain gorillas in Volcanoes National Park, be sure to arrange a permit (currently US\$500, but due to increase) well in advance, especially if you are there in the dry season.

Kigali offers a wide range of accommodation. In Nyungwe National Park, you can camp at Uwinka, but you would need to take all your camping gear, food and water. Otherwise, the best place to stay is at Gisakura, where you need to reserve a room in advance at one of the two guesthouses (ORTPN preferred). Akagera Game Lodge ([akagelodge@rwanda1.com](mailto:akagelodge@rwanda1.com), [www.akageralodge.co.rw](http://www.akageralodge.co.rw)) offers up-market accommodation in Akagera National Park.

Marcell Claassen ([marcell@elegantafrica.com](mailto:marcell@elegantafrica.com)) can assist with advice for independent birders. Ntoyinkima Claver ([ntoyclaver@yahoo.fr](mailto:ntoyclaver@yahoo.fr)) is an extremely knowledgeable guide in Nyungwe National Park, and Muhizi James is the best guide for birders at Akagera.

There are direct flights to Kigali from many major centres, as well as regular connections via Nairobi or Kampala. The small size of the country, limited number of key birding sites, and generally good road infrastructure make getting around relatively simple. Nyungwe can be accessed using public transport, but you need a vehicle to explore Akagera National Park. Like all East African parks, entry fees are quite steep, and you are also required to hire a local guide.

*A giant lobelia stands sentinel over the seemingly endless rolling forest of Nyungwe National Park.*



has been lost to tea plantations, but some remains below Uwinka in the Bururi River valley.

In four days we recorded 120 bird species in Nyungwe; it wasn't the greatest diversity but, importantly, the tally included 20 of the Albertine Rift endemics. Compared to Bwindi in Uganda, only the African Green Broadbill has not been recorded from Nyungwe and, given the broadbill's unobtrusive nature, it may well occur there. When birding in Nyungwe, one has a sense of exploration, that anything could appear over the next hill. For example, the rare owl-faced monkey was only discovered in Nyungwe in 1989. Rockefeller's Sunbird and Chapin's Flycatcher have been claimed from Nyungwe, but their occurrence requires confirmation. Other species that might well occur include Grauer's Cuckooshrike and perhaps even Congo Bay Owl.



### Akagera National Park

Reluctantly leaving Nyungwe, we headed to Akagera National Park on Rwanda's eastern border with Tanzania. It's a three-hour drive from Kigali, and the final section of dirt road before the park offers some good birds. Probably the most interesting is the so-called Ruaha Chat (the local form of Arnott's Chat), which, unlike the more widespread southern form, is much more common in scrubby farmland outside the park; it is largely replaced by Sooty Chat in the park's pristine woodlands. The female has more white on the face than Arnott's Chat, and genetic evidence apparently supports its recognition as a distinct species.

With some 525 species, Akagera National Park boasts one of the largest bird lists of any African protected area.



You could see more species in Uganda, Kenya or Tanzania, but Rwanda offers its birds in a small, manageable package

This reflects its diversity of habitats, ranging from vast swamps and lakes on the Akagera floodplain, through riparian thickets, dry forest and woodland to grassy plains and rocky hills. In three days we recorded about 160 species, but it was the middle of winter and the area was unusually dry. We also only explored a small part of the park. Although more than half of it was deproclaimed in 1997 to accommodate returning refugees, the remaining protected area is close to 1 100 square kilometres. Given the relatively rough tracks through much of the reserve, it requires several days to explore its more remote northern parts.

The avifauna is dominated by widespread savanna birds, but there are a few more localised species. Black-lored Babblers are common in the arid woodland and Red-faced Barbets occur at low densities along the ridges. The rocky ridges also support small numbers of the scarce and reclusive Ring-necked Francolin, which is best distinguished from the more widespread Shelley's, Red-winged, Coqui and Red-necked francolins by its peculiar, woodwind call.

For most visitors, Shoebill is a key target. The park has a small resident population, but access to the swamps the birds favour is restricted to a few vantage points and it is a matter of luck whether any Shoebills are visible. More reliable are Papyrus Gonolek and White-winged Swamp-Warbler, which are present in the large swamps. Papyrus Canary also occurs, but the Papyrus Yellow Warbler is surprisingly absent from the park list. It is, however, found at other wetlands in Rwanda, including Rugezi Marsh in the north and at least two marshes south of Kigali.

Overall we recorded just more than 300 species in 10 days in Rwanda, less than half the country's total list of close to 700. You could see more species in Uganda, Kenya or Tanzania, but Rwanda offers its birds in a small, manageable package and is ideal for a short trip. The sites are close together, the people are extremely hospitable, and one has the reassuring sense that this is a country where things work. Rwanda is an ideal introduction to Albertine Rift birding. □

**Above** *Great Blue Turaco is commonly seen in Nyungwe.*

**Opposite** *In addition to having white cheeks in the female, the Ruaha Chat differs from Arnott's Chat in its choice of habitat. Whereas Arnott's Chat largely avoids transformed habitats, this female Ruaha Chat was nesting in the roof of a hut in an agricultural landscape. The species is replaced by Sooty Chat inside Akagera National Park.*

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Join Africa – Birds & Birding as we explore the wonders of Rwanda. See page 57 for further details.