



## Activity Report for a 3-Day survey excursion to Pian Upe Game Reserve

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### **Introduction**

Avian Conservation Uganda Society (ACUS) is a non-profit organization founded in 2022 dedicated to conserving the precious birds of Uganda and their habitat. This is achieved through engaging in activities related to raising awareness of the contribution of birds to sustaining natural ecosystems as well as cultural & economic development, restoring degraded and vulnerable habitats and growing a bird-friendly community. The ACUS vision is a thriving AVIAN LIFE FOR GENERATIONS. At ACUS, we believe in finding the right balance for a harmonious co-existence of birds and people.

Conservation work continues to become ever more critical in the face of threats of climate change, destruction and degradation of key bird habitats such as wetlands and forests in Uganda. Human activities such as agriculture, mining and urban construction continue to alter and cause the loss of vital bird habitat putting their fragile lives in danger.

With Uganda's growing population expected to double by 2030, it is now more important than ever to build a community that readily co-exists with birds and nature in general. ACUS commits to undertaking community engagement projects that target Important Bird Areas to mitigate threats to bird life caused by human activity.

### **Study Area**

The study area was Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve, north of Mt Elgon - an area of about 2,275 km<sup>2</sup> between 1000m and 3068 m above sea level with Mt. Kadam as its highest point. The reserve is a high plateau of rolling plains drained by intermittent watercourses flowing Westwards into L. Kyoga. The reserve is covered by wooded grassland with small areas of riverine woodland and kopjes dominated by red acacia and desert date flanked by thatching grass and bristle species.



### **Status of bird habitat**

The habitat is a protected area dominated by wooded grassland. This makes the site extremely rich in avian life including Uganda's only endangered Fox's Weaver, the Karamoja Apalis and other vulnerable species. Unfortunately, Pian Upe Game Reserve has no published checklist of birds present in the area therefore it is difficult to determine the recorded birds at the site.

The site is historically under conflict with local pastoralists and farmers continue to use the reserve as grazing land for their cattle and farming. The farmers and pastoralists pose a threat to birdlife as their activities take a toll on bird habitat in and around the protected area.

### **Excursion findings**



## Observed birds

1. Helmeted Guineafowl
2. African Green-Pigeon
3. African Gray hornbill
4. African thrush
5. Spotted Eagle-Owl
6. Blue-naped Mousebird
7. Striped Kingfisher
8. Spot-flanked Barbet
9. White-headed Barbet
10. Fox Kestrel
11. Meyer's Parrot
12. Western Black-headed Batis
13. Black-crowned Tchagra
14. Gray-backed Fiscal
15. Pied Crow
16. Flappet Lark
17. Northern Crombec
18. Karamoja Apalis
19. Tawny-flanked Prinia
20. Winding Cisticola
21. Croaking Cisticola
22. Common Bulbul (Dark-capped)
23. Red-headed weaver
24. Greater Blue-eared Starling
25. African Thrush
26. African Gray Flycatcher
27. Pale Flycatcher
28. Silverbird
29. Grey-crowned crane
30. Mariqua Sunbird
31. Purple-banded Sunbird
32. Copper Sunbird
33. Baglafetch Weaver
34. Fox's Weaver
35. Village Weaver
36. Cardinal Quelea
37. Red-billed Quelea
38. Northern Red Bishop
39. Bronze Mannikin
40. Common Waxbill
41. Red-cheeked Cordonbleu
42. Green-winged Pytilia
43. Pin-tailed Whydah
44. Northern Gray-headed Sparrow
45. Brimstone Canary
46. Ruppel's Starling
47. Splendid Starling
48. Yellow-throated Longclaw
49. Black-winged Red Bishop
50. Black Bishop
51. Chestnut-Crowned Sparrow Weaver
52. White-browed Sparrow Weaver
53. Compact Weaver
54. Grosbeak Weaver
55. Northern Brown-Throated Weaver
56. Spectacled Weaver
57. Black-bellied Bustard

## Identification of focal species

- **Fox's Weaver:** 7 individuals were sighted and concentrated along the study track among the whistling acacia in the area. Of the 7, there were 2 nesting pairs active among the acacia. The species appears to be present within its range at the site. However, very limited data about the species in Uganda calls for more monitoring projects to bridge the data gap on the species's population and behaviour. However, we learnt that the species in Pian Upe is highly habitat-specific preferring to only nest and perch among the whistling acacia in the area.
- **Karamoja Apalis:** A pair of the species was sighted among the whistling acacia on the study track. The species is vulnerable due to loss of habitat caused by modification of the habitat to support cultivation and farming activities. The species is highly also habitat-specific, preferring thorn scrub which continues to be cut down for construction and fencing material around the Pian Upe community. The species is endemic to the East Africa region mainly Uganda, Tanzania and

to a lesser extent Kenya. In Uganda, the species mainly occurs in the Karamoja sub-region of Northern Uganda.

### Threatened species and Data Deficient birds

	Species	IUCN Global Status	IUCN National status
1	Fox's Weaver	Near Threatened	Near Threatened
2	Karamoja Apalis	Vulnerable	Vulnerable



## Conservation and impact



It is the aim of ACUS to acquire data on the status of habitats and how they affect bird populations, especially in Important Bird Areas (IBAs) and Ramsar sites. In order to carry out its objectives, ACUS seeks to employ a data-driven approach to conservation efforts. Therefore, monitoring excursions must be aimed at;

- identifying present bird species and changes in their populations at specific sites
- assessing changes to the state and function of specific habitats of vulnerable species
- assessing the distribution of species of vulnerable species within the site and the causes of changes if any
- determining whether there are any human-related activities posing a significant threat to bird habitat around and within the site

To achieve these monitoring aims, it is necessary to conduct regular data collection excursions to determine changes in the state of habitat, presence, populations and distribution of species at the site. This data collected is critical in informing conservation approaches and decisions for the organization and other conservation efforts.

The Avian Conservation Uganda Society's approach to excursions, however, is twofold and goes beyond scientific data collection purposes. The excursions are also aimed at sparking public interest in birdlife so as to grow a bird-friendly community. This is achieved by targeting and encouraging members of the general public to participate in excursions as a strategy for raising awareness about the necessity of bird conservation.

Excursion activities aim at bringing to light the holistic contributions of birds to the environment including;

- emphasizing the aesthetics and colour birds add to the environment
- appreciating bird songs and calls that augment the melodic experience of nature since birds are nature's musicians
- learning about the cultural value of birds
- emphasizing the benefits of birds to the economy
- learning about the contribution of birds to natural ecosystems

### **Community Engagement**



To enhance raising awareness of avian conservation, ACUS conducted an interactive sensitization campaign about bird conservation in the Kuddutti community. The organisation engaged the community on the cultural and economic value of birds as well as their role in the sustenance of natural ecosystems. During the engagement, the community responded with their interaction with birds citing a number of benefits birds have in their community including;

- They are tourist attractions which bring in vital tourism revenues to the community
- The community uses bird songs as inspiration for melodies of local music compositions
- They are environmental indicators and the community relies on them to predict weather patterns
- Birds are pollination agents
- Birds help to control pests especially in animals
- Birds especially vultures are nature's clean up crew
- Birds assist in protecting the community against



The community members highlighted some of the challenges they face in their interaction with birds in the community with the major challenge presented by birds in the community is disruptive interaction of some bird species with farmers' crops. Farmers expressed disappointment that some bird species are pests which attack their crop fields and farmers lose a considerable part of their yield. They urged the ACUS team to assist in finding solutions to the problem, mainly requesting to be compensated by the Uganda Wildlife Authority for the yield lost to wildlife and birds. The community's trust in authorities to intervene in cases of wildlife disturbance in the community appeared to be low and this may present a challenge to conservation efforts. Fortunately, the Kuddutti community appeared keen on conservation and the ACUS team proposed a number of ways they may participate in conservation in their daily lives individually and collectively including;

- Sensitizing fellow community members on the benefits of birds and their consequent conservation
- Preserving tree cover and wetlands which are important habitat necessary for a thriving birdlife
- Participating in habitat restoration activities such as tree planting and sustainable use of wetlands
- ACUS shared the economic opportunities available in the event of a thriving bird life in Pian Upe game reserve citing tourism as a viable alternative source of income which can promote mutual development of natural ecosystems and economic empowerment of the community

Furthermore, ACUS learnt that the community prefers to use the whistling acacia for their construction and fencing material needs yet the whistling acacia is exactly the preferred habitat for the Fox's Weaver and the Karamoja Apalis which are highly habitat-specific. ACUS informed the community how special the Fox's Weaver is as Uganda's only endemic bird and urged the community to seek alternatives for their construction and fencing material needs. Local leaders vowed to participate in sensitization of their community about this development. However, further community interaction and more practical solutions are needed to ensure adherence to this narrative for meaningful conservation-driven outcomes to be realized.



## Challenges

- Inadequate current data on birds: Data deficiency continues to be a significant challenge to conservation efforts. There is limited data on the birds of the Pian Upe game reserve such as a checklist of recorded birds in the area, bird populations and distributions as well as their behaviour. For instance, there isn't reliable data on the target species of the excursion; the Fox's Weaver about the bird's population, distribution and general behaviour. This presents a challenge to conservation efforts as it causes difficulty in determining approaches for intervention.
- Inadequate data collection technique. ACUS has been able to acquire a tool; Toolkit for Ecosystem Service Site-based Assessment (TESSA) to assist in understanding the impacts of natural capital and ecosystem services of actual and potential changes in state at study sites so as to promote better planning decisions, support biodiversity conservation and ecosystem service delivery. However, ACUS monitoring teams are yet to be trained in best practices and proper use of the tool to collect data. Therefore, data collection and management still present a challenge to executing data-driven conservation approaches.
- Inadequate knowledge resources on birds: Knowledge resources on birds of Uganda and their conservation status cripple conservation efforts. There are limited resources available at the site and most important bird areas for monitoring teams to access for reference purposes.
- High costs incurred to undertake the activity: The organization incurred high park entrance fees and activity charges for monitoring teams to carry out the activity. These costs take a heavy toll on team morale and pose a threat to conservation efforts.

## Recommendations and action points



- Build and support a community bird club in the Kuddutti community to carry out regular monitoring of birds and their habitat: The Kuddutti community in the Pian Upe game reserve is can be a significant conservation resource, especially involving the conservation of Uganda's only endemic bird; the Fox's Weaver which is threatened by encroachment on bird habitat from cultivation and farming activities. Building a club to actively sensitize community members on the vitality of avian conservation can have a meaningful impact on attitudes towards bird conservation.
- Build the capacity of monitoring teams with skills training and monitoring tools: There is a need to train and equip monitoring teams with tools and knowledge to adequately carry out the process with skills such as bird identification techniques and using monitoring tools such as TESSA, eBird and other tools. Monitoring teams play a critical role in bridging the existing data gap and empowering these teams with tools and knowledge will have a meaningful impact on conservation-driven monitoring.
- Build strategic partnerships with stakeholders: It is imperative to build a relationship with public and private organisations to augment the delivery of desired outcomes in avian conservation. To effectively promote conservation, ACUS seeks collaborative approaches to pool resources, knowledge and skills for objective-driven partnerships with public and private sector organisations of shared interest. For instance, Uganda Wildlife Authority personnel played a significant role in mobilizing and coordinating the community engagement ACUS had during the excursion. Further interaction with stakeholders will have a purposeful impact on conservation efforts.

## Conclusions



ACUS conducts excursions to collect field data about birds and their habitat, assess local community interaction with birds, enhance knowledge about birds of Uganda and raise awareness about avian conservation. In this regard, the ACUS excursion to the Pian Upe game reserve was a success with 13 participants who were part of 3-day activities including; birdwatching, community engagement, habitat monitoring and knowledge sharing.

At ACUS, growing the bird-friendly community is a top priority and conducting a sensitization workshop with over 30 members of the general public is a huge success. The community was closely coordinated and mobilised with the help of Uganda Wildlife Authority personnel and local authorities. The ACUS team spoke at length about the benefits of preserving the unique birds around the Kuddutti community. It may be more influential to ascertain the impact of the sensitization campaign by conducting a proper evaluation and survey of the results of the campaign. However, the community expressed a keen interest in participating in conservation activities and presented the challenges they face with birds in their community.

To enhance public education, ACUS seeks to augment local community engagement to promote the appreciation of the cultural, economic and environmental value of birds to society. Following lessons learnt in the Pian Upe game reserve, ACUS excursions shall include community sensitization campaigns.

