



Activity Report for a 3-Day excursion to Semuliki National Park

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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 and ever-increasing pressure on natural landscapes from human activities causing 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, building a community that readily co-exists with birds and nature, in general, is now more important than ever. 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 Semuliki National Park, on the remote Western side of the Rwenzori Mountains - an area of about 220 km² between 670m and 760 m above sea level. The park is located in Bundibugyo district of Uganda near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. The National Park is dominated by a lowland forested area and flanked by a valley grassland in the Toro-Semuliki game reserve.

Status of bird habitat

Semuliki National Park is the only lowland tropical forest in East Africa sprawling across the Semuliki valley in the remote Western side of the Rwenzori. The Park lies in the Albertine Rift Valley bounded by the Lamia and Semuliki rivers. The Park is contiguous with the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwenzori forest reserve in Uganda. The Semuliki forest is cut off from the East African savannah lands by the Rwenzori massif for Semuliki to be more representative of forests in the Congo basin. Semuliki NP is an extension of the vast Ituri forest on the Democratic Republic of Congo side. Consequently, Semuliki forest has features more typical of the Central African Congo basin than the East African savannah lands. The forest hosts over 445 bird species including 38 Guinea-Congo biome species and 23 Albertine endemics. However, there is a data asymmetry on which particular species are present in Semuliki forest from Authoritative sources including Uganda Wildlife Authority and Birdlife International.

The site is surrounded by Bundibugyo farmers growing mainly cocoa, maize, plantain and other crops. The cocoa farms surrounding the forest attract a wide variety of birds mainly Piping hornbills, African Pied hornbills, and Black-casqued hornbills among others. There are some concerns of encroachment on the protected area by farmers however the Uganda Wildlife Authority works around the clock to eradicate encroachers on the park. The major threat to birdlife around the Semuliki National Park is reported to be poaching mainly of the African Green Pigeon which exists abundantly in the Park.

Excursion findings



Observed birds

1. 6 Rameron Pigeon
2. 5 Red-eyed Dove
3. 57 African Green-Pigeon
4. 2 Great Blue Turaco
5. 1 African Emerald Cuckoo
6. 1 Red-chested Cuckoo
7. 1 White-spotted Flufftail
8. 1 Spur-winged Lapwing
9. 1 African Openbill
10. 2 Striated Heron
11. 1 Palm-nut Vulture
12. 1 Lizard Buzzard
13. 1 Narina Trogon
14. 2 Crowned Hornbill
15. 3 African Pied Hornbill (Congo)
16. 2 Black-casqued Hornbill
17. 2 Black-and-white-casqued Hornbill
18. 4 Piping Hornbill (Eastern)
19. 2 Chocolate-backed Kingfisher
20. 1 Woodland Kingfisher
21. 1 Blue-breasted Kingfisher
22. 2 Black Bee-eater
23. 2 Yellow-billed Barbet (Eastern)
24. 1 Speckled Tinkerbird
25. 1 Yellow-throated Tinkerbird
26. 1 Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird
27. 1 Golden-crowned Woodpecker
28. 1 Jameson's Wattle-eye
29. 5 Rufous-bellied Helmetshrike
30. 1 Lowland Sooty Boubou
31. 1 Yellow-throated Nicator
32. 1 Green Crombec
33. 3 Green Hylia
34. 1 Olive-green Camaroptera

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| 35. 7 Buff-throated Apalis (Buff-throated) | 49. 3 Red-tailed Ant-Thrush |
| 36. 3 Winding Cisticola | 50. 1 African Thrush |
| 37. 5 Lesser Striped Swallow | 51. 1 Ashy Flycatcher |
| 38. 1 Red-tailed Greenbul | 52. 1 Fire-crested Alethe |
| 39. 1 Gray Greenbul | 53. 1 Forest Scrub-Robin |
| 40. 1 Yellow-whiskered Greenbul | 54. 1 Blue-shouldered Robin-Chat |
| 41. 1 Little Greenbul | 55. 1 Gray-headed Sunbird |
| 42. 1 Xavier's Greenbul | 56. 1 Collared Sunbird |
| 43. 1 Common Bulbul (Dark-capped) | 57. 1 Olive Sunbird |
| 44. 4 Chestnut-capped Flycatcher | 58. 1 Blue-billed Malimbe |
| 45. 1 Green White-eye | 59. 1 Crested Malimbe |
| 46. 1 Brown Illadopsis | 60. 1 Grosbeak Weaver |
| 47. 1 Purple-headed Starling | 61. 1 Orange-cheeked Waxbill |
| 48. 3 Rufous Flycatcher-Thrush | |

Identification of focal species

- **Congo Serpent Eagle:** No individuals were sighted. Local Wildlife Personnel have reported several sightings of the bird.

Major threat to birds in the area.

- Uganda Wildlife Authority officials in the area cited poaching as the major threat to birdlife in the area. Officials particularly stated the hunting of the African Green Pigeon in the hundreds for trade to nearby communities where it is a common source of food

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), Ramsar sites and protected areas. In pursuit of its objectives, ACUS must employ data-driven approaches to inform conservation strategies, policies and actions. 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
- Assessing ecosystem services and their effect on bird life in the locality
- 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 Ntandi community around the Semuliki National Park. ACUS coordinated with Uganda Wildlife Authority to sensitize the Ntandi community in the Semuliki National Park about bird conservation. The conversation was aimed at emphasizing the ecological, cultural and economic value of birds to the community and the environment as a whole. The community expressed concerns about their interaction with birds citing a number of benefits brought and challenges faced by the presence of birds in their community. The community expressed the following concerns about birds in their community;

- The locals were concerned that they play a vital role in the conservation of the birds but do not benefit economically from the birds.

- Some birds are pests to their crop and affect their yield especially rice and maize

The community also shared the benefits they realize from birds in their area;

- The community noted it benefits from revenues earned from avi-tourism activities in the area. They also noted that the government earns tourism revenues from these activities which in turn leads to national development.
- They are environmental indicators and the community relies on them to predict weather and time patterns. The Local Council chairperson personally attested to using bird sounds for an early rise in the morning.
- The Ntandi community is aware that birds have significant cultural value. The locals iterated their cultural belief systems to emphasize the beauty of birds as a testimony to divine blessings from God. Birds are also totems of a number of cultures in the area.

The community members highlighted the biggest challenge they face in their interaction with birds in the community is the disruptive pesting 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. Despite this, the Ntandi community is 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 thriving bird life in Semuliki National Park citing tourism as a viable alternative source of income which can promote the mutual development of natural ecosystems and economic empowerment of the community

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 Semuliki National Park 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 Congo Serpent Eagle. Additionally, there is limited publicly accessible data on the 35 Guinea-Congo biome species in Semuliki National Park.
- 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.
- Limited information of birds and their benefit to society and the environment among the local population. ACUS findings during the community engagement indicated the local population has a narrow view of the importance of birds to the environment as well as the economy and society. This has limited their interaction with birds despite being in an area with unique species of birds in Uganda and attracting a significant number of tourists in the area for birdwatching. The Ntandi community in question has not been able to take advantage of the rich biodiversity of Semuliki National Park to benefit economically from tourism.

Recommendations and action points



- Build and support a community bird club in the Ntandi community to carry out regular monitoring of birds and their habitat: The community plays a significant role in the conservation of birds in the area. However, further sensitization of the community about the benefits of avian conservation and public education on how avi-tourism can provide alternative sources of income and uplift local communities economically needs to be undertaken on a much more meaningful scale. Avi-tourism will go a long way in encouraging the community to participate in 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 organizations 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 Semuliki National Park was successful with 15 participants who were part of 3-day activities including; birdwatching, community sensitization, habitat monitoring and knowledge sharing.

At ACUS, growing the bird-friendly community is a top priority and conducting a sensitization workshop with 34 members of the general public is a huge success. The community was closely coordinated and mobilized with the help of Uganda Wildlife Authority personnel especially Mbabazi Harriet and Turyashemererwa Alex and local authorities. The ACUS team spoke at length about the benefits of preserving the unique birds around the Ntandi 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 ecological value of birds to society. Following lessons learnt in

the Semuliki National Park, ACUS embarked on a community campaign to emphasize the necessity for bird conservation among the local population of the Ntandi community.