

**Activity report on the
Shoebill rescue mission
conducted by ACUS with
support from UWA through
UWEC CA**

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Date of Activity: 31st December, 2024

Location: Kumi District, Uganda

Organizing Entity: Avian Conservation Uganda Society (ACUS)

Supporting Organizations: Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and Uganda Wildlife Education Centre Conservation Area.

BACKGROUND

The shoebill (*Balaeniceps rex*), a globally vulnerable species according to the IUCN Red List, is one of Uganda's most iconic and rare birds. Found primarily in wetlands, the shoebill faces significant threats from habitat loss, poaching, and illegal wildlife trade. On 29th December, one of the ACUS members by the names of Stephen Akileng received reports from local fishermen about a stranded shoebill chick that had been without a mother bird for four days and was in the care of the family of one of the fishermen for fear of it being harmed. Recognizing the urgent need for intervention, ACUS, with support from UWA through UWEC, embarked on a mission to rescue and secure the future of this shoebill chick in Akolitorom village, Kumi district; an area surrounding the biodiversity-rich Lake Opeta-an Important Bird Area and Ramsar site 1636. However our quest to rescue the shoebill chick culminated into other reports of a mature shoebill which had been kept in captivity for over 5 months under the care of another local fisherman in Kabwangasi village, Kumi district. The team expeditiously reached out to this location and successfully rescued the second shoebill. This report details the rescue mission, its outcomes, and recommendations for future actions.

OBJECTIVES

1. To rescue the shoebill chick reported to be in distress in Akolitorom village.
2. To ensure the rescued birds are relocated to a safe environment conducive to their survival.
3. To raise awareness among the local community about shoebill conservation and the importance of protecting wetland habitats.
4. To document and share lessons learned for future conservation efforts.



Figure 1: Rescued chick and mature shoebill

PLANNING AND PREPARATIONS

The rescue mission was organized following reports from local community members about the distressed shoebill in Akolitorom village, Kumi District. A multidisciplinary team comprising conservationists, professional animal handlers and staff of ACUS was assembled. Necessary permissions were obtained from UWA, and logistical support, including transport and rescue equipment, was secured with assistance from UWEC.



Figure 2: Team from ACUS and UWEC posing with the locals before the shoebill chick

EXECUTION OF THE MISSION

1. Community Involvement:

- Community members were engaged prior to the operation to gain their support and cooperation.
- Sensitization sessions highlighted the biology of shoebills, the role of wetlands in biodiversity conservation and why they should be left in their natural habitat.



Figure 3: Community sensitization to the family that had the shoebill chick in their care

2. Rescue Operations:

- The team located the chick in a local fisherman's homestead led by a grassroots team leader of ACUS in Lake Opeta region, where it was under stress due to the unfamiliar environment and human interference.
- The mature shoebill was found was found in the custody of another local fisherman in Kabwangasi village, Kumi district where it was tied on a rope at the back of his house, also showing signs of stress and discomfort.
- Both birds were carefully extracted by the help of the Professional animal handler from UWEC, ensuring minimal stress and injury.



Figure 4 The local fishermen who reported the shoebill chick to Mr. Akileng Stephen

3. Immediate Care:

- The rescued birds had their heads covered with a towel to minimize stress and were carefully placed in crates lined with dry grass to offer them a conducive environment for transportation



Figure 5: Shoebill chick placed in the transportation crate for safe movement

4. Relocation:

- The birds were transported to UWEC, where they will receive specialized care and rehabilitation.
- Long-term plans include reintroducing them to a secure wetland area once they are deemed fit for release.



Figure 6: Arrival and receiving of the two rescued shoebills by the UWEC staff

OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Successful rescue of two shoebills (one chick and one mature bird) from unfavorable situations.
- Strengthened collaboration between ACUS, UWA, UWEC and local communities surrounding L. Opeta showcasing the effectiveness of a coordinated conservation effort.
- Increased awareness among Kumi community members about the value of conserving shoebills within their natural wetland habitats.
- Documentation of the rescue process to inform future interventions.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

1. Delayed access to the transportation vehicle from UWA which also delayed our presumed schedule.
2. Gross lack of awareness from community members especially the fishermen who often misinterpret the solitary nature of the shoebill as a call for help from them.
3. Some community members had resistant gestures due to misconceptions about shoebills and these conservation efforts.
4. Limited time and resources which did not allow us to comprehensively engage the communities in sensitization efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhanced Community Engagement:

Massive and regular awareness and sensitization campaigns should be carried out in this region to address misconceptions and build local support for conservation.

Promote alternative livelihoods to reduce reliance on wetland resources.

2. Capacity Building:

Local conservation volunteers should be trained in basic bird identification, reporting and rescue techniques to facilitate community-led monitoring of the birds of Lake Opeta.

3. Partnerships and Resource Mobilization:

UWA and ACUS should forge a partnership to secure funding and equipment to improve the efficiency of bird conservation and monitoring initiatives as well as future rescue missions.

CONCLUSION

The shoebill rescue mission in Kumi District was a landmark achievement for ACUS, UWA, and UWEC, demonstrating the impact of collaborative conservation efforts. While challenges remain, this operation has set the stage for scaling up efforts to protect Uganda's vulnerable bird species and their habitats. By addressing the outlined recommendations together, we can ensure a brighter future for the shoebill and other threatened species in Uganda.

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