

## **Zambia birding - Shoebill Camp [1]**

Written by Neil Gray

Thursday, 19 May 2011 08:48 - Last Updated Sunday, 30 September 2012 16:06

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**Due north some 70km from Kasanka lies Shoebill Island on the fringes of the vast Bangweulu Swamps. However, the road trip is some 145km and over 5 hours (yes the road, if it can be called that in places, is interesting!). Shoebill Camp is also run by the Kasanka Trust, so Webby the bird guide accompanied me to Shoebill. We dropped off his bicycle at the village of Chiundaponde and dropped Webby off there on our way out. He had a 94km bike ride ahead of him to get back to Kasanka - that's dedication!**

**Most of the drive to Shoebill is through secondary miombo, as most of the primary forest has been cleared through slash and burn agriculture or charcoal burning. Eventually we arrived at the edge of the seasonal wetland, a vast plain only recently dried out (almost - we came to grief where it hadn't) following the rains and where large herds of Black Lechwe roam. This sub-species of the lechwe is found only in the Bangweulu region. Crossing the plain is a 7km long causeway, the only way to get to the ZAWA (Zambia Wildlife Authority) camp at the entrance to the Bangweulu Wetlands National Park (where Shoebill lies) during the rainy season, for most of which Shoebill itself is inaccessible. At ZAWA we had to leave our vehicle and transfer to a boat for the final 2km to Shoebill Island camp. From July to November the swamp dries out sufficiently for vehicle access to Shoebill Camp, but May/June is the best time to go Shoebill hunting in what is one of Africa's most reliable spots - some 250 Shoebill are thought to live in Bangweulu region.**

**On short boat ride to the camp I was fortunate to see both Allen's Gallinule and Lesser**

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**Jacana, but only managed decent photos of the latter. I thought Squacco Heron were common in my "home patch" at Marievale east of Johannesburg, but here there are hundreds of them.**

**The camp itself comprises permanent tents, with solar power for the radio communications, gas for fridge and cooking and paraffin lamps and candles for light at night in the tents. Hot water for showers is put into a 20 litre container above the "bathroom" by the watchman at the agreed time.**

**At the southern edge of its distribution range here in the Bangweulu is the Swamp Flycatcher, which I saw first last September on the shores of Lake Victoria, at Kisumu in Kenya. It was a bit of a surprise to see weavers hopping from lily leaf to lily leaf like jacanas, but that's exactly what the Katanga Masked Weaver (lifer) does. It is the sub-species *katangae* of the Tanzania Masked Weaver, and may well be a good species in its own right.**

**After arrival at the camp I had time for a short walk around the 700m x 700m island with Webby. Surprisingly, even here I found Black-throated Wattle-Eye, Common Fiscal, White-browed Robin-Chat and both Wattled and Greater Blue-eared Starling.**

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**I was well and truly pampered as I was the only guest at Shoebill Camp, and after a good supper retired to bed wondering whether I'd have any success tomorrow on my hunt for a Shoebill - on my one and only full day in the swamps.**

**Neil**