

Zambia birding - Shoebill Camp [2]

Written by Neil Gray

Thursday, 19 May 2011 08:57 - Last Updated Sunday, 30 September 2012 16:05

Would I see a Shoebill? My whole trip was planned with this as the crowning moment, so it was with some trepidation that I set out in the boat after breakfast, me, Webby the bird guide, and Paul and Emmanuel the boatmen.

You just can't miss the extremely common Blue-breasted (White-cheeked) Bee-Eater (lifer) in the swamps. As well as the bee-eaters and weavers in the vast reed and papyrus beds, there were occasional glimpses and the continual calling of both Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warbler, and the old favourite Reed Cormorant. On the slightly larger areas of dry grassland Wattled Crane can be seen in groups of 2 or 3 at a time.

It is a constant battle to decide whether to concentrate on the birds at water level or look skywards, as the air is just full of birds.

Common Moorhen, African Swamphen, the odd Red-knobbed Coot (but this one not too common), Little Bittern, Western Cattle Egret, Western Great Egret, Little Egret,

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Yellow-billed Egret, Black Heron, Grey Heron, Black-headed Heron, Purple Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, African Spoonbill, African Openbill, Yellow-billed Stork, Bateleur and African Marsh Harrier, Black and African Crake, White-faced Duck, Yellow-billed Duck, Hottentot Teal, Spurwinged Goose, African Pygmy Goose, Glossy Ibis by the hundred, the odd Hadedda, Malachite Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher - but when would I see a Shoebill? We arrive at the usually reliable spot some 2km from the camp. We can see nothing. The local fishermen in the area all give the thumbs down. Oh dear! Plan B. We back-track to another channel in the reeds and went right to the dead-end where the fishermen had built a fish trap - a low wall acting as a dam.

The boatmen got out and wandered along the criss-crossing low dam walls in the otherwise wet and soggy swamp, enquiring of the fishermen whether they had seen a Shoebill. Then Webby and I saw Paul and Emmanuel gesticulating wildly that we should come. Could it be, well it could only be a Shoebill. I teetered along the narrow walls hoping that all this expensive Canon equipment doesn't get a soaking. My first glimpse of what was now the ex-No 1 on my "birding bucket list", was at a distance of about 100m.

However, this was not at all what I wanted, the top of the head and glimpses of the face through the grass. Could I get closer? Webby decided that if we went right in a long arc we could approach to 20-30m and open up the view somewhat. What, that way? He means through the swamp! Knowing that the trusty walking boots had 3 more days of birding and I definitely didn't want to squelch my way through them, I decided that the only way was to take off boots and socks and roll up the trouser legs and follow Webby who was sensibly wearing gumboots!

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I managed a sequence of shots taken progressively closer as I stopped to take photos just in case the Shoebill flew off. You will find the photos in the gallery in either STOP PRESS!, Newest additions or Zambia as they move to their permanent home.

Wow! Wow! Wow! One of those birding moments that really give you great satisfaction. Even the fact that I had to remove leeches from my feet and the sudden realisation that I might have exposed myself to bilharzia, not to mention malaria, couldn't detract from a very memorable moment. That final walk through the swamp only added to the sense of achievement.

We got back in time for a late lunch and I broke the habit of a lifetime by lying down for an after-lunch nap. It didn't pan out though as the adrenalin was still pumping! We set out for a late afternoon boat ride to another island to look for Fulleborn's Longclaw (lifer), but at that stage I wasn't too worried if we dipped on it or not. Dip we didn't though, and though it tested my manual focus to the limit with a hand-held 600mm, and I had to take a straight 640x480 crop from the 21mb image. No more than 50m to his right, but infinitely more co-operative was a male Rosy-throated Longclaw, and just to round the day off nicely a Coppery-tailed Coucal posed obligingly. Again check the gallery for photos.

Neil