Grant of £350 donated by Africa Bird Club Conservation Fund in February 2016

Purpose of fund:

To assist in the training of local Uganda Bird Guides, and to provide the ‘Birds of Uganda’ book by Sherry McKelvie and Quentin Meunier to the students to help their recognition skills and their interaction with foreign tourists, since the birds are named in 9 languages.

Two of the founders of the Uganda Bird Guides Club, Alfred Twinomujuni and Johnnie Kamugisha hold regular training sessions for would-be guides, and then go on to encourage them and nurture them into being Bird Guides competent to guide tourists of all nationalities.

The Benefit of the fund:

Better trained local Guides. Uganda is a poor country and depends on tourism for a large part of its income. Being able to show a picture of a bird, and its name, to French, Spanish, German, Italian, English, Japanese, Chinese and Russian clients is a huge ‘plus’.

The Book:

Birds of Uganda is a 412-page photographic book containing 290 of the more common species in full colour. It is not a scientific book, but rather a photo companion to the Sevenson and Fanshawe book ‘Birds of East Africa’.

Implementation:

The training sessions took place in and around Bwindi Impenetrable Forest – an area known not only for its Mountain Gorilla population, but also for its wonderful birdlife – in July 2016. Whilst the majority of Uganda National Parks boast reasonable Bird Guides, more were needed in the Bwindi area. Rampant destruction of habitat in the surrounding areas was also addressed, with awareness training which the local students could take back to share in their villages. Development of new Bird Trails was also undertaken.

The initial training of 10 participants took place in the Buhoma area by two trainers, Johnny Kamugisha and Alfred Twinomujuni. Alfred was later approached by elders from the southern area of the forest, which also has a rich but unexploited bird life, requesting him to train their local lads. A rise in the number of female Bird Guides has also been encouraging.

Training included general theory, bird recognition, habitat awareness and tourism skills. All participants have been enthusiastic, but sadly only a few of them have been able to afford second-hand binoculars. The earlier students were given secondhand binoculars donated to us by the RSPB.

All students were delighted to receive the Birds of Uganda books and wish to thank you from the bottom of their hearts!
Just a few of the lovely birds to be seen in Bwindi

Clockwise from top left: Bar-tailed Trogon *Apaloderma vittatum*; Yellow-bellied Waxbill *Coccopygia quartinia*; Black-throated Apalis *Apalis jacksoni*; Western Green Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus coryphaea*; Regal Sunbird *Cinnyris regius*; White-starred Robin *Pogonocichla stellata*; Mountain Oriole *Oriolus percivali*. 
Clockwise from top left: Regal Sunbird *Cinnyris regius*; Red-faced Woodland-warbler *Phylloscopus laetus*; White-tailed Blue-flycatcher *Elminia albicauda*; Handsome Francolin *Pternistis nobilis*; Grey Cuckooshrike *Ceblepyris caesius*; Augur Buzzard *Buteo augur*.

Some of your readers might also be interested in an article I wrote for Africa Geographic Magazine in 2013:
With a list of birds topping the 1,000 mark - handsome spur fowl, African green broadbill and Ituri batis to name just a few of the specials - Uganda is well known as a prime birding destination in Africa. It's not just visiting birders who know this though; some Ugandans are well aware of the fact and have the passion and commitment to pass their knowledge on to others, all in the cause of conservation. Sherry McKeelvie spoke to a few of them.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHERRY McKEELVIE
n African countries, a large proportion of the populace perceives conservation to be a luxury. A man with a starving family thinks only of finding food. What does he know of endangered species? It's a challenge faced by wildlife authorities throughout the continent: how should they deal with villagers who kill for meat and to protect their families and crops? Part of the answer lies in changing attitudes, and people who identify with the challenges, who speak the local language and who have earned the respect of their fellows are best placed to do so.

In 1999 a group of six young Ugandans with an appreciation for wildlife, and birds in particular, began meeting for bird walks around Kampala. They found that the inhabitants of the villages around the capital knew next to nothing about the birds in their environment and certainly had no interest in looking at them. In fact, when the friends were seen walking around with their binoculars and notebooks they were sometimes suspected of surveying the land with a view to stealing it and were chased away.

The six – Herbert Byaruhanga, Alfred Twinomujuni, Johnnie Kamugisha, Hassan Mutebe, Medi Luwere and Sam Bamwesige – decided to form the Uganda Bird Guide Club with the prime objective of making local communities aware of birds and the need to conserve them. At that time, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) was issuing permits for the capture of birds but no-one was consulted about which species were endangered or endemic. For example, the shoebill – an African endemic that brings birders from around the globe to Uganda – was not protected and its eggs were regularly being stolen from nests and sold.

The club fought the species’ corner and succeeded in making it illegal to trap the birds and trade in their eggs.

Unfortunately though, as with any lucrative activity, these practices continue – and it’s not only locals who carry them out. A foreigner posing as a researcher has been caught stealing shoebill eggs and smuggling them out of the country.

As the Uganda Bird Guide Club became better established and started to attract the interest of local people, the friends chose areas in...
which community members could be trained to follow in their footsteps. To date, they have had a hand in training virtually every bird guide in Uganda. The rest of the world began to take an interest, too, prompting the Uganda Tourism Board to call upon the services of Malcolm Wilson, who had set up the country’s first bird observatory in Queen Elizabeth National Park. With the help of European Union funding, the board hired Wilson to establish a training programme for bird guides.

Alfred Twinomujuni was selected to participate in the first course and thereafter assisted Wilson with training workshops in all the major wildlife sanctuaries in Uganda. He also caught the attention of Tasso Leventis, honorary vice-president of BirdLife International, who invited him and Herbert Byaruhanga to attend a two-week trainers’ course in South Africa, where they learned about identification methods, 

A male brown-throated wattle-eye (the female has the brown throat), one of the species that many international birders come to see. A gem of local information is that the species is sometimes known as the descending bird for its delightful call of four descending notes.

ABOVE: These five young students have recently completed bird-guide training with Alfred Twinomujuni and each was given a pair of binoculars.

OPPOSITE: Alfred Twinomujuni checks out a papyrus swamp on the outskirts of Uganda’s capital, Kampala.

PAGE 35: Birders from all parts of the world are visiting Uganda to experience the country’s avian wealth and an increasing number of expert local guides are on hand to help them make the most of their trip.
bird habitats, the use of equipment, field ethics and working with tourists.

Today, all six original members of the Uganda Bird Guide Club operate their own birding safari companies, with clients from Europe, the US and, more recently, the Far East. They also run regular training workshops for potential bird guides in the country. Some participants are sent by UWA and some by private tour companies, while others fund themselves.

Sadly, Twinomujuni estimates that for every 20 who begin training, only about four go on to become bird guides. ‘Why so few?’ I asked. ‘Some are distracted and become involved in other interests, or they find that the work is too hard and they don’t finish the course,’ he replied. ‘Sometimes, if they’re in the UWA, they are allocated other duties, such as patrolling for poachers, or they’re transferred to different sites where they no longer know the birds. And then there are those who become general guides for private tour companies; they tend to forget the specialised birding skills they have learned.’ Lack of equipment and no encouragement to improve their skills also result in many potential bird guides falling by the wayside.

In his free time Ntegeka goes into villages and gives talks about how to improve the local habitat instead of destroying it.

Some, however, embrace their career wholeheartedly in spite of the difficulties. I recently sat and talked to one such person, who was trained by Twinomujuni and Byaruhanga.

Robert Ntegeka is 30 years old, married and has a baby daughter, Amelia. A ranger with the UWA, he is passionate about wildlife and looking after it – and about birding. I asked what led him to become a ranger.

‘My dad was an agriculturalist and my brother-in-law was a manager at the UWA. They encouraged me to take up a career in conservation,’ he explained. ‘After finishing school I studied at Katwe Wildlife Institute and got a diploma in wildlife and allied natural resource management. Then I had a lucky break – I was chosen for an internship in the UWA industrial training programme, which combines theory with practical experience. I applied for a job as a ranger in 2008 and was allowed to train as a bird guide in March 2009.’

Ntegeka’s aim is to raise awareness about the need to protect wildlife and help to train students from schools and universities in Uganda, especially those studying conservation, community involvement and tourism. I questioned him about the difficulties he encounters in trying to carry out his duties effectively.

‘We don’t have equipment,’ he said, without even pausing to think. ‘Where he works, in Queen Elizabeth National Park, there are eight UWA ranger/guides and, being the only ones allowed to carry guns, they are responsible for guiding all tourists who want to go on nature walks. They have only one pair of binoculars between the eight of them.

Books, cameras and recording equipment are on Ntegeka’s wish list as well as binoculars – and finance to further his education. He likes to write and his articles have already appeared in the national newspapers. But his ambition is to specialise in birding and become an influential conservationist.

He expressed sadness and frustration at the destruction of so many wetlands and conservation areas in Uganda and dreams of becoming a leading figure in the battle to change the attitudes of local people. In his free time he goes into villages and gives talks about how to improve the local habitat instead of destroying it. His mother is among his converts to a more environmentally friendly way of life, and he himself has planted a small forest of musizi trees – 360 so far – which, he said, are carbon-friendly and will attract lots of birds, especially hornbills.

Joseph Mutebi, 35 and also married with a small daughter, is another of Alfred Twinomujuni’s protégés. He is a much younger brother of Hassan Mutebi, one of the original group of six. Asked how he became interested in birds, he explained, ‘My family grew millet and sorghum at home and that attracted a lot of birds. From about the age of seven, my siblings and I started to give the different birds our own made-up names. We used to make basket traps and catch the birds, then tag them with strips from the coloured Pavela’s (thin polythene bags) that my mum carries food home from the market in.

We...
pack your bags

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emptied to learn more about birding in Uganda and possibly arrange a visit with some of the guides mentioned? Then check out the following websites: www.ugandahandguides.org; www.avionwatchuganda.co.ug (Alfred Twinomujuni); www.birdinginuganda.com (Herbert Byaruhanga); www.birdinginparadise.com (Johnnie Kamugisha); www.wildfrontiers.co.uk; and www.ugandawildlife.org

each had their own colour. Then, on the long walk home from school, we used to compete to spot the highest number of “our” birds.

In his early teens, Joseph was too busy studying to worry about birds, but when he was older he used to visit his brother Hassan, who was already leading safaris. The younger Mutebi began trying to identify the bird species he saw, collecting any brochures or magazines he could lay his hands on. With Hassan’s encouragement and sponsorship, he learned to drive and then went on to study tourism, conservation and forestry. Instead of joining UWA, though, he teamed up with his brother as a driver and would often accompany Twinomujuni too when the latter took clients out on birding trips. It didn’t take him long to realise that although many guides knew about animals, far fewer knew much about birds and he absorbed all the birding knowledge he could from his mentor. The next step was to start his own list and in due course he was able to do guiding for his brother, who was delighted with his clients’ glowing reports of Joseph.

Although the young man had gained a good knowledge of the more common birds in Uganda, he knew little about the rare forest species, so he spent his free time at Bwindi, Kibale and Semliki. He would take interested friends with him and pass on to them what he knew. With an impressive 860 birds on his life list, Mutebi moved to Wild Frontiers, a safari company well known in Uganda, and has become one of its top guides, especially for birding, as he can not only identify species accurately, but mimic bird calls as well. ’Love it when I am hired as a guide for tourists who only want to see the Big Five but I ignite their interest in birds too,’ he told me. ’By the end of the trip we find ourselves stopping every couple of minutes to look at a new one!’

In recent times the eyes of the birding fraternity have turned towards Uganda; the country has been identified as one of the top birding destinations in the world, and deservedly so. It has much to offer and, even though there is still a long way to go, we should thank all those Ugandans who have had the vision and commitment to raise the awareness of the local communities to the value of conservation and the rewards of tourism.