

# Uncanny Uganda

Alexander Meyer



## Pre-trip:

It's late December 2020. I'm sitting at home, minding my own business when I notice an email from Mammalwatching.com. Tomeslice writes, "Last-minute opening for 1 person to join me in Late Jan-Early Feb in Uganda." Hmm, I had never thought about visiting Uganda before, but the promise of nightly thermal imaging and a very intriguing species list had me hooked! I shot over an email within minutes of the original post and awaited response. The next morning, I was in luck: Tomeslice aka Tomer Ben-Yehuda welcomed me aboard! I daydreamed about adding Madagascar, but due to Covid limitations settled on nine days in Kenya (separate trip report to follow). 2020 had featured two Covid-postponed trips (Java and Costa Rica), so I was itching to get back out in the world of mammal watching.

One positive of the quarantine malaise was that I discovered a new goal - to see a representative of every living mammal family. Totaling wild and captive stats, I had seen 128 of the possible 157 families with 29 to go. But excluding captive, a hefty 81 families still remained. Birders call a species seen for the first time a lifer. Accordingly, I would call these "Family Lifers." 2020's domestic attempts to conquer the Mountain Beaver and Beaked Whale families had already proved futile. This trip would be different. I aimed to nail down some Wild Family Lifers and at least one Total Family Lifer.

Traveling during Covid was interesting to say the least. The CDC's restrictions for travel to Uganda led me to believe any viral test would suffice. That was until the DAY BEFORE MY FLIGHT, when the doctor swabbing my rapid test advised I would need a PCR test instead. It was a federal holiday to boot. Would I still be able to go? Three failed attempts and a few hectic bike and car rides later I was in Queens at a sketchy cash-only test site that promised PCR results within 24 hours. Desperate, I forked over the \$250 and crossed my fingers. "Not detected" The two best words a traveler can see in 2021. Flights were predictably empty making for an enjoyable experience. Two calendar days later, after stops in Istanbul and Kigali, my feet finally touched Ugandan soil.

## Itinerary & Key Targets: (January 21 – February 3, 2021)

**Day 1:** Entebbe Airport to Entebbe Zoo (**Side-striped Jackal**) to Kavumba Recreation Center (**Uganda Mangabey**) to Entebbe Botanical Gardens

**Day 2:** Mbamba Swamp (**Shoebill**) to Murchison Falls NP (**Side-striped Jackal**)

**Day 3:** Murchison Falls NP

**Day 4:** Murchison Falls NP to Semliki Wildlife Reserve (**Pousargues's Mongoose**)

**Day 5:** Semliki NP (**Semliki Red Colobus, Johnston's Mangabey, Dent's Monkey, De Brazza's Monkey**)

**Day 6:** Semliki NP to Kibale NP (**Ashy Red Colobus, Uganda Mangabey, Eastern Chimpanzee**)

**Day 7:** Kibale NP

**Day 8:** Kibale NP to Queen Elizabeth NP (Mweya) (**Giant Forest Hog**)

**Day 9:** Queen Elizabeth NP (Mweya) to Maramabambo to Ishasha (**Topi**)

**Day 10:** Queen Elizabeth NP (Ishasha) to Bwindi NP (Buhoma) (**Mountain Gorilla**)

**Day 11:** Bwindi NP (Buhoma) to Ruhija (**African Golden Cat, Black-fronted Duiker, Yellow-backed Duiker**)

**Day 12:** Bwindi NP (Ruhija) (Covid Test Day)

**Day 13:** Bwindi NP (Ruhija)

**Day 14:** Bwindi NP (Ruhija) to Lake Mburu NP to CTC (**African Golden Cat**) to Entebbe Airport

## **Day 1: Entebbe Area**

With ten hours until Tomer's arrival, I hit the ground running. **Side-striped Jackal** and **Uganda Mangabey** were the captive targets respectively at Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre (Entebbe Zoo) and Kavumba Recreation Center. A driver named Farouk was arranged by Harriet, our lead guide, to pick me at the airport. Harriet, who runs Harrier Tours ([harriertours@gmail.com](mailto:harriertours@gmail.com)), was quite simply the perfect guide. I can't recommend her enough!

I was assured at the zoo's front gate that **Side-striped Jackals** (already a nemesis from my last African trip) could be seen inside. After some exploring (highlight being a **Nile Sitatunga** marsh exhibit), I came upon the Jackal exhibit: under construction. The Jackals were in quarantine, a word I had become all too familiar with in 2020. Dejected, I left the zoo and headed to Kavumba.

At Kavumba we were greeted by guards asking for both entry fee and a "photographer fee." The latter was completely unexpected and has never occurred at any of the 265 zoos I've visited across the globe. But we had come all this way, so I begrudgingly paid this opportunistic ransom. Once inside we had a wonderful experience, with multiple keepers assisting my photo endeavors. Some notable residents were two **Uganda Mangabeys**, along with **Rusty-spotted Genet, Uganda Kob, Bohor Reedbuck, Ratel, Servaline Serval**, and a free-ranging **Nile Sitatunga**. Next, we zipped over to the airport to meet Tomer.

Tomer and I had FaceTimed once and messaged a bit leading up to the trip, but only met in person at Entebbe Airport. Luckily, I couldn't have asked for a better trip companion. We became fast friends, whose mammal-watching skills each perfectly complemented the other's. I know I could've never had such a successful trip in Uganda without Tomer's detailed planning and eagle-eye spotting. I look forward to future adventures together!





Nile Sitatunga



Uganda Mangabey

Following a pitstop at our lackluster Airbnb we reached Entebbe Botanical Gardens. Our first two mammals of the trip were impossible to miss: **Vervet Monkey** and **Mantled Guereza**. A birding guide leeches onto us with promises of bats and otters only to show us swallows and an empty lake. He hallucinated a family of otters while Tomer and I looked at each other in disbelief. At sunset, we stumbled into a gorgeous dinner overlooking Lake Victoria where I ordered fresh-caught whole-fish. For the first moments in a hectic day, I was able to catch my breath and take in these peaceful surroundings.

## Day 2: Mbamba Swamp to Murchison Falls NP

Harriett and our main driver, Joel picked us up in an open top safari Land Cruiser at 6am sharp. Our first stop was for “some bird” as I like to say—the admittedly bizarre looking *Shoebill Stork*. Birders flock to Mbamba Swamp due to the high probability of this prized target. Personally, I was hesitant whether this avian detour would spark joy, but the *Shoebill* did not disappoint.





**Vervet Monkey**



**Mantled Guereza**



**Shoebill Stork**

Peering through the early morning fog, we found this prehistoric beast hunting in some high reeds. Its movements were slow and deliberate, with a reptilian gait. I whispered to Tomer excitedly, "It looks like a freakin' dinosaur!" Back on dry land but not far from the water, Harriet was already finding us new mammals: a colony of likely **Ethiopian Epauletted Fruit Bats** in a vacant building.



**Ethiopian Epauletted Fruit Bats**



The drive to Murchison Falls National Park brought us over the famed Nile and featured **Olive Baboons** and **Tantulus Monkeys**. With an hour of daylight remaining, we entered the park greeted by **Ugandan Kob** and **Eastern Warthog** soon followed by **Rothchild's Giraffe**, **African Bush Elephant**, **Jackson's Hartebeest**, **Eastern Patas Monkey**, **Sudan Oribi**, **Banded Mongoose**, **Cape Buffalo** and **Defassa Waterbuck**. The Kob, Hartebeest and Oribi were ubiquitous in exceedingly large numbers.



African Bush Elephant



Olive Baboon



Eastern Warthog



Rothchild's Giraffe



Earlier, I had asked Harriet about our chances for wild **Side-striped Jackal**, after striking out at the zoo. She estimated they were 50-50 at Murchison, and less than 10% at any other part of the trip. That was a lot of pressure on Murch to finally lift the side-striped curse. Mercifully, with dusk came Jackals! Sweet relief! The first was too fast and too far for photographs, but the second blessed us with a seven-minute close encounter. A huge weight was lifted from my shoulders. Nemesis no more.



**Side-striped Jackal**



Under the cover of night, we saw **Bunyoro Rabbit**, **Cape Hare**, **White-tailed Mongoose**, **Rusty-spotted Genet** and **Spotted Hyena**. Once at Pakuba Safari Lodge, I spied a distinctive **Yellow-winged Bat** landing on the ceiling at reception. The lodge also featured a large resident male **Defassa Waterbuck** and several more **Bunyoro Rabbits**.





### Day 3: Murchison Falls NP

We began before sunrise, thermal scopes in hand. Bright heat signatures of sleeping antelope lit up the dark savannah. Tomer, well-practiced with his thermal, spotted activity in a tree of both **Senegal Bushbaby** and a rodent we later identified as **Noack's Dormouse**. The dormouse, a Wild Family Lifer, was a wonderful surprise uncovered post-trip (graciously cancelling out the Woodland dormouse I would later miss in Ruhija.)

I spent the rest of the morning perfecting my antelope photography. The herds were massive and sprawled as far as the eye could see. Circling carrion birds hinted to Harriet that a kill was nearby. Seconds later, Tomer expertly spotted two distant female **Southern Lions**. We also caught glimpses of **Striped Ground Squirrels** scampering off the dirt road into the brush.



Noack's Dormouse (Tomer)



Bunyoro Rabbit



Cape Hare





**Ugandan Kob & Jackson's Hartebeest**





Ugandan Kob



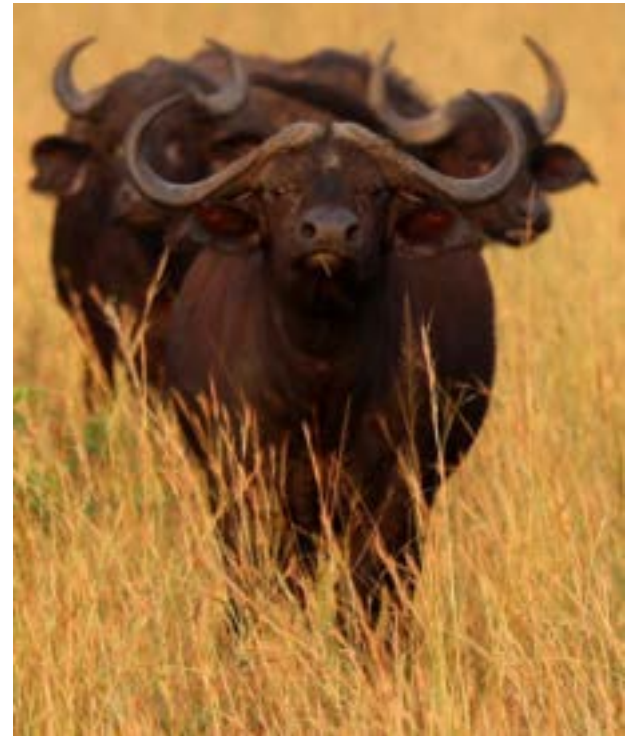


**Defassa Waterbuck**





**Jackson's Hartebeest**



**Cape Buffalo**



**Sudan Oribi**



It was high time to experience this park's namesake. Our two-hour Nile cruise, prearranged by Harriet, was well populated with animals and culminated in a fantastic view of the falls. We saw multiple elephants bathing in the river, a sizable herd of **Hippos** mostly submerged in the water, a monitor lizard sunning on a rock and a nice selection of birds including a large flock of *African Skimmers*. We even saw crocodiles eating from a hippo carcass. For the return trip, an ominous storm cloud crept up behind us. We barely made it to shore as the skies opened up.



**Hippopotamus**







**Nile Crocodile with Hippo carcass**



The storm kindly changed directions and gave way to great views of **East African Patas Monkeys**, more **Banded Mongoose** and a young **Jackson's Hartebeest**. Minutes away from our lodge we passed another Safari vehicle. They had just seen a leopard at Pakuba Ruins, the now destroyed personal safari lodge of former dictator Idi Amin. In general, we encountered very few tourists in these parks. Apparently, we were some of the only people brave enough (or stupid enough?) to tackle Uganda in the middle of Covid.

The **African Leopard** sat majestically atop the ruins overlooking a vast African landscape. Everything the light touches was his kingdom. Eventually this gorgeous cat quietly jumped down and disappeared behind the ruins. We attempted to follow, taking an overgrown road to the opposite side of the ruins, but to no avail. Here, we saw the ruins form man-made caves springing to life with reddish bats waking for the night- probably **Noack's Roundleaf Bats**. This location was one of many suggestions from Ugandan bat expert Sadic B. Waswa ([waswasadic@gmail.com](mailto:waswasadic@gmail.com)), whom Jon Hall put me in touch with via Kenyan bat expert Dr. Paul Webala ([pwebala@mmarau.ac.ke](mailto:pwebala@mmarau.ac.ke)).



Jackson's Hartebeest (young)



East African Patas Monkey



Noack's Roundleaf Bats



Banded Mongoose





African Leopard



In front of Pakuba Safari Lodge, a palm tree squeaked and rustled with **Mauritian Tomb Bats**, heads humorously pointed straight up like so many sac-winged bats I had seen in the Americas. After dinner we ventured out again, this time seeing a **Kemp's Gerbil** as well as a **White-tailed Mongoose** missing most of its tail, temporarily giving the false hope of a unique species.



**Kemp's Gerbil**



**White-tailed Mongoose (black-tail morph)**



**Mauritian Tomb Bat**



## Day 4: Murchison Falls NP to Semliki Wildlife Reserve

Harriet's never-ending resourcefulness saved us a five-hour detour. Unusually high water levels made the ferry off-limits, but her contact promised passage along a makeshift bridge used by the construction team in building the actual bridge. Early that morning we rushed past a thermal signature resembling a **Porcupine** to adhere to our strict 7am meeting time. We did manage to stop for another peculiar mongoose, resembling a **Cusimanse**. Upon review we determined it to be a black-tail morph of the unfortunately named **White-tailed Mongoose**.

At the makeshift bridge, closed to traffic, we waited in eerie emptiness. A lone figure with a rifle appeared far in the distance and methodically approached. It was hard not to feel unsettled as this armed stranger drew close. Thankfully he was merely the night watchman. We waited another 90 minutes before our tardy contact arrived to open the bridge. A small bribe later, we were on our way to Toro-Semliki Reserve.



The Semliki Safari Lodge was the most glamorous lodge we visited. The staff verified they often see **Pousargues's Mongoose** behind the kitchen in the early afternoon (including earlier that day). We checked, but came up empty handed. We then were whisked away to visit a bat roost under an old swimming pool, this time a colony of probable **Sundevall's Roundleaf Bats**.

Following a delightful dinner and the best dessert of the trip (Passionfruit Meringue) we continued our streak of night drives. The only animal of note was a colossal Rock Python plus more **White-tailed Mongoose** and **Rusty-spotted Genets**.





**Rusty-spotted Genet**

### **Day 5: Semliki NP**

Hands down my favorite day of the trip! 16 hours straight exploring Semliki National Park, an extension of the Congolese Ituri Rainforest. The enthusiasm and camaraderie among our team was unparalleled. Harriet outdid herself, linking us up with Sam (an apprentice guide), Alex and Moses (two local forest ranger guides) and Shem (a local porter). Each of whom was vital to our team success.

Our trek started at 7am, hiking a boardwalk at the Female Hot Spring. Within minutes we had already seen three new primates: a **Schmidt's Red-tailed Monkey** and **Stuhlmann's Blue Monkey** shared a branch, while the much sought-after **De Brazza's Monkeys** remained further in the distance. Unfortunately, Harriet twisted her ankle here so she stayed behind with Joel. Now we were six.

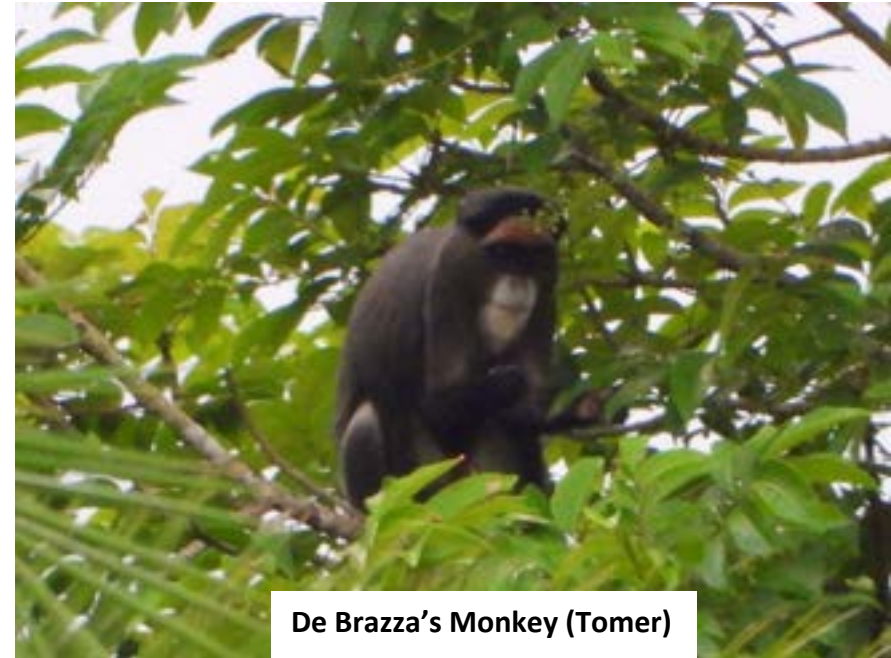


**Sundevall's Roundleaf Bat**





**Schmidt's Red-tailed Monkey & Stuhlmann's Blue Monkey (Tomer)**



**De Brazza's Monkey (Tomer)**



**Johnston's Mangabey (Tomer)**



**Semliki Red Colobus**



A fourth primate, **Johnston's Mangabey**, sat high in a tree en route to the Kurumia trailhead. After a few **Red-legged Sun Squirrels**, our primate luck continued when Moses spotted a lone **Semliki Red Colobus** among **Mantled Guereza**. I was thrilled to have the Red Colobus- a Genus Lifer, with none held in captivity since the 1970s.

**Dent's Monkey** was the final diurnal primate we needed. We were a well-oiled machine, splitting up to cover more ground while constantly searching the trees. Ranger-Alex had found some Dent's deep in the forest. We macheted our way through the dense brush only to come up Dent-less. Our first **Boehm's Bush Squirrel** was a nice consolation prize. Sam made the ID from our photos proclaiming "itsa... Boehm's" with a calm reticence only Sam could deliver. He noted the striping pattern differentiates it from **Alexander's Bush Squirrel** in that Boehm's initial side stripe is black while Alexander's is white. While we broke for lunch, Sam tirelessly continued the **Dent's Monkey** search. Before long, he had found some! And this time they hung around long enough for us to arrive. Primate #7. Really great work by Sam.



Boehm's Bush Squirrel (Tomer)



Alexander's Bush Squirrel



Dent's Monkey (Tomer)



Tomer's original vision had us journeying 14km (each way) to the Semliki River with hopes for an **Okapi** at the DRC border. We made it more than half way, reaching a campsite that resembled an abandoned village. But, between our exhaustion and timing logistics, we decided to explore no further. Instead, we settled for a well-deserved mid-day nap on top of a platform made from sticks and branches. While we slept our guides searched all of the huts at the campsite, discovering one with a lone **Benito Roundleaf Bat**. Waking from slumber, we hardly made it ten feet towards the hut before Sam spotted our only **Alexander's Bush Squirrel**. "It's... notta Boehm's." Mammal Lifer overload!

The entire day had a really great energy about it. We were able to rescue a turtle we found helplessly stuck on its back. I started a trend of picking up discarded plastic bottles which Shem eagerly aided. It felt like the forest was rewarding us with unique animals in return. Our luck even worked with birds, finding the rare Hartlaub's Duck and Nkulengu Rail. But the best was yet to come...

As nightfall approached, we readied our team for nocturnal mammal spotting. Between us we had four powerful flashlights, two headlamps and two thermal imagers. We took the trail slow and steady stopping to investigate any thermal glows. Our first thermal reward was a rather large bat- a probable **Franquet's Epauletted Fruit Bat**. The next couple stops would be for **Spectacled Bushbabies** leaping on branches in the distance- our eighth primate of the day!

Then Tomer thermaled a bushbaby in a tree directly above us. We watched this gray furry mass sit on a branch until it suddenly flew across multiple trees landing smack in the middle of a large trunk. This was no bushbaby- it was gliding through the air. "Is it an Anomalure!?" I gasped, stumbling to zoom into the photo I had just taken. Tomer, who had seen two Anomalure species in The Central African Republic, leaned over and verified "Yep, definitely Anomalure." A wave of joy washed over me. "FUCK YES!! Family Liferrr!!" Tomer had promised he'd find me an Anomalure, and he sure as hell did! **Lord Derby's Anomalure**: officially my first Total Family Lifer since undertaking the challenge- 28 families remained. This uniquely African flying squirrel was also an exciting first for our guides. A female **Hammer-headed Bat** rounded out the evening before we emerged from the forest triumphant, welcomed by a relieved Harriet after 11pm.



**Benito Roundleaf Bat**





**Franquet's Epauletted Fruit Bat**



**Hammer-headed Bat**



**Congo Forest Mouse**





Lord Derby's Anomalure





The Semliki Crew: Sam, Moses, Tomer, Myself, Shem & Ranger-Alex



## Day 6: Semliki NP to Kibale NP

We began at 5:30am, after staying at the Bumaga Campsite within the park. As we walked through a patch of forest that led to the Male Hot Springs, Tomer thermaled 3 different rodents including a **Congo Forest Mouse** aka **Link Rat**. The long scaly tail of a sleeping monitor lizard poked out of a hollow log. In the remaining morning hours, we searched new trails for **Duiker** or **Red River Hog** but found only trace evidence of each. At park headquarters we were treated to yet another bat- a wonderfully unobstructed view of a **Mauritian Tomb Bat**.

We arrived at the aptly named Kibale Primate Lodge where we were greeted by **Uganda Mangabey** and **Schmidt's Red-tailed Monkey**. Exploring the property, **Angolan Rousettes** and probable **Ethiopian Epauletted Fruit Bats** were found roosting mid-day on many of the Lodge's individual balconies.

Our afternoon was spent at Bigodi Wetland Sanctuary traversing a sometimes-treacherous boardwalk in search of new primates. **Tantulus Monkeys** were up first, obscured by vegetation. Later we enjoyed watching a troop of **Ashy Red Colobus** crashing through the trees at close distance. These monkeys, our second representative of the elusive *Ptilocolobus* genus, were epic leapers regaling us with death-defying jumps. The first of many **L'Hoest's Monkeys** would be the final addition of this hike.

In the opening minutes of our evening drive, Harriet spotted another Wild Family Lifer! An **African Palm Civet** that was gradually waking up. Such an impressive find, I joked that she must have placed it there earlier in the day. Under the guise of bird-watching we gained access to drive a seldom visited area. Thermaling generated a rodent, Genet and **Prince Demidoff's Bushbaby**, all too quick for photography. Back on the main road we had better luck with more **Spectacled Bushbabies**.

## Day 7: Kibale NP

The seventh day began before sunrise. We thermal-scoped our way through the forest and came upon a sleeping duiker. The animal promptly dove into the brush before we could see more than a heat signature. From size and locale **Weyn's Duiker** was the most likely candidate.



Mauritian Tomb Bat









Uganda Mangabey



Angolan Rousette



Ethiopian's Epauletted Fruit Bat



Spectacled Bushbaby

Ashy Red Colobus



African Palm Civet





A local guide led us deep into the forest looking for Chimps. We heard some manic screeching in the distance but couldn't find any. Apparently, one had been caught in a snare which dispersed the rest of the troop. We trudged on, and eventually came upon a large dark creature high in a tree: An **Eastern Chimpanzee**. In captivity I'm used to seeing them terrestrial, so I wasn't expecting to find our target so elevated. After a few minutes of feeding on leaves, the curious animal began its descent through a matrix of branches. We lost it for a few seconds, when it suddenly dropped down right next to us. Spending time this close to a Chimp was both electrifying and frightening.



Eastern Chimpanzee





We devoured packed breakfast, well before (luckily) Dung Beetles provided a show on the forest floor, rolling their namesake. We continued into the forest searching for *Green-breasted Pitta*. Harriet had her own recording of the rare bird which she broadcast into the trees, waiting for reply. This audio had chirps followed by a metallic “Burrdurp.” The latter we both assumed to be an error in recording equipment. Imagine our surprise when we heard the exact same noise repeated in the forest. It’s actually the wing noise the bird makes while hopping on a branch.

Attracting an animal with a recording was a fascinating glimpse into birding. On our return hike was another **Weyn’s Duiker** near-miss, which only Harriet witnessed streaking across the trail clearing. Strike two.







**Schmidt's Red-tailed Monkey**

Back at Kibale Primate Lodge, we got bonus views of **Ashy Red Colobus** and **Schmidt's Red-tailed Monkey** (often found socializing with other monkey species). hilariously, after all that effort searching the jungle, an **Eastern Chimpanzee** wound up in a tree right outside our cabin window! Yet another Tomer manifestation.

The pre-dinner plan was to wait at a nearby bridge overlooking a river until dusk. Here, we hoped to find **Otters** or, if we were really lucky, an **Otter Shrew**. In the meantime, Sam found us a drainage pipe with **Roundleaf Bats** (caffer/ruber complex) fluttering around inside. We sat patiently for over an hour. Out of nowhere a dark streak rounded a blind corner and came into view at the center of the river. It swam directly towards us, under the bridge. and out the other side as we rushed to follow from above. We watched in total elation as this **Spotted-necked Otter** climbed up onto a rock in full view, posed for a few photos, then jumped back into the water. It was 6:10pm, exactly when we had agreed to leave, what a close-call!

For the night drive Harriet brought us to a marshy area where she had recently photographed **Alexander's Cusimanse**. We instead, predictably found a **Marsh Mongoose**. Harriet then connected us with a local whose crops had been frequented by **Cane Rats**. We stalked the high grass, cameras in hand, until we came to an empty nest. They were out feeding in the field. We continued a fruitless search, but alas this Family Lifer would have to wait. In hindsight, it may be better to find the rats sleeping during the day in their nest (which our host did the following morning). The evening featured one more carnivore- a swift but definitive **Egyptian Mongoose** scurrying along the main road.



**Ashy Red Colobus**





Spotted-necked Otter



Prince Demidoff's Bushbaby (Tomer)



Marsh Mongoose



## Day 8: Kibale NP to Queen Elizabeth NP- Mweya

I can't remember the last time I was in a treehouse. Yet, here on our eighth morning we found ourselves atop this rickety wooden marvel. We overlooked a clearing with potential for **Forest Elephant** and **Sitatunga**, but nothing materialized. To and from the treehouse we kept a watchful eye for Duiker activity, but found only **Olive Baboons** rustling dead leaves at dawn.

Our next stop was the world-renowned Queen Elizabeth National Park, specifically the Mweya Sector. We arrived to a powerful scene at Bush Lodge: our sprawling view overlooked a river below teeming with Crocodiles, **Hippos**, and a family of over twenty **African Bush Elephants**. No rest for the weary, as a nap attempt abruptly shifted into a **Giant Forest Hog** quest. Until now, I had only glimpsed the species briefly at night in Ethiopia's Haremma Forest. I was keen to level up. Lodge staff had tracked down a small group that we hurriedly caught up to. The hogs were awfully skittish and never ventured far out of the thick bush. A definite improvement, but more opportunities would await in Kenya.

We combined the afternoon and night drives to maximize our time in the park. This plan paid off with our first **Nile Bushbuck** along with more **Uganda Kob** and **Cape Buffalo** in daylight and a carnivore heavy murderer's row at night- three **African Leopards**, three **Spotted Hyenas**, a **Rusty-spotted Genet** in a cactus, a *Verreaux's Eagle Owl* on a cactus, plus plentiful Elephants, Hippos and **African Savanna Hare**. We thermaled the first Leopard at a great distance and held our breath as it ambled closer and closer until only a few feet away. The gorgeous cat paused and sized up our vehicle, seemingly contemplating a leap into the open cab. We discouraged this horror with a turn of the engine key. It was past Covid curfew by the time we reached a roadside checkpoint. Joel covered up our Leopardian delay as "car trouble." I joked we should've simply told the soldiers in our nerdiest voice, "Don't you know we're here with Mammalwatching dot com!?" which really tickled Harriet.





**Giant Forest Hog**



**Nile Bushbuck**



**Uganda Kob**



**Hippopotamus**







Verreaux's Eagle Owl



Rusty-spotted Genet





**African Savanna Hare**



**Spotted Hyena**





African Leopard



## Day 9: Queen Elizabeth NP- Mweya to Ishasha

After so many frenzied days, we deservedly took the morning easy. We found several more bush-concealed **Giant Forest Hogs** and one cooperative **Tantulus Monkey**. Next up: Queen Elizabeth's Maramagambo Forest.

We hiked this new ecosystem in the heat of the day, likely limiting our mammal encounters. Ahead was Python Cave, overflowing with tens of thousands of **Egyptian Fruit Bats**. An ominous sign warned visitors to keep a safe distance from the cave as its inhabitants carry the deadly and incurable Marburg Virus. The bats were loud and endless. Even without the virus warning, seeing this many animals crammed together sent chills up my spine. We took extra precaution to wash up in a stream after the cave. Our local guide chased off delinquent school children noisily playing in the water (which had also been less than ideal for wildlife watching). Next up: Queen Elizabeth's Ishasha Sector.



Tantulus Monkey



Egyptian Fruit Bats

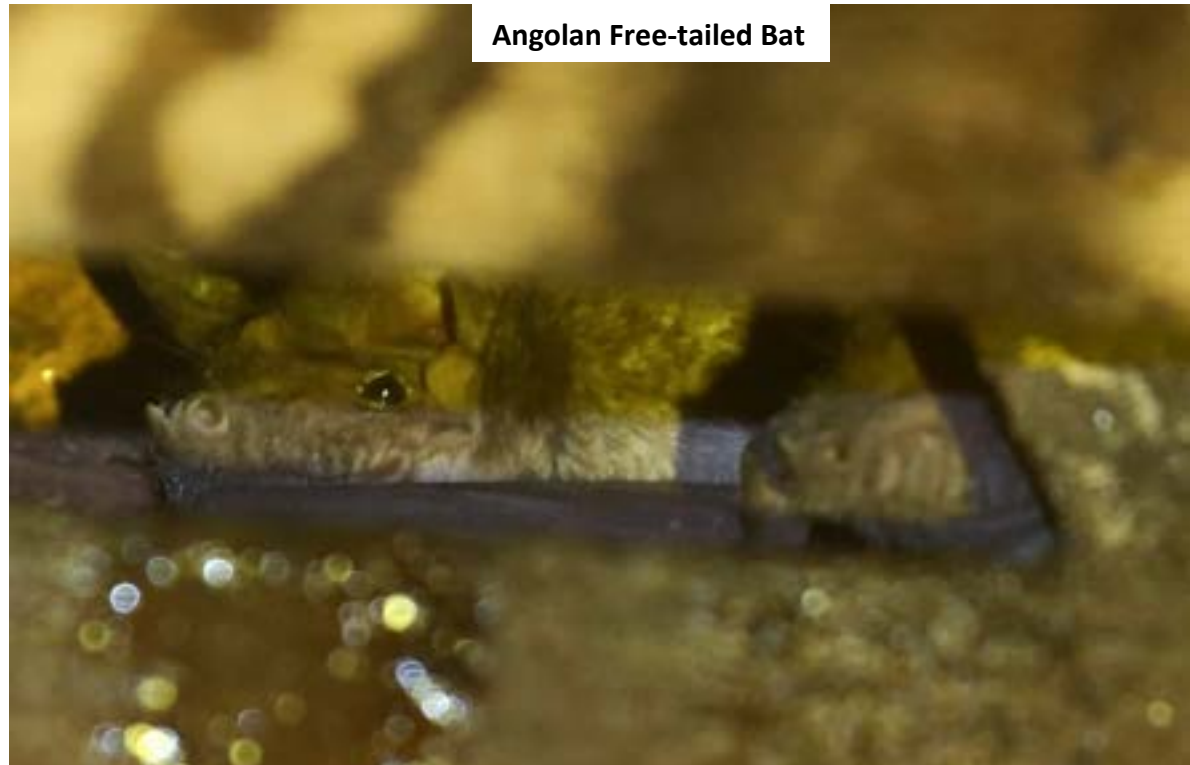


We arrived at the Ishasha headquarters just before dusk. Security is tight at this DRC border area, especially after an American tourist had been kidnapped in 2019. While Harriet cut through red tape, my ears perked up at the unmistakable screeching of Bats emanating from crevices in Ishasha's front gate. Our very batty holiday continued with **Angolan Free-tailed Bats**. We made a dinner stop at Topi Lodge where Tomer thermaled a probable **Gray Climbing Mouse** out on the deck next to the dining room.

Our night drive was limited by security concerns and hindered by tall grass but we still managed to see another **Yellow-winged Bat** hanging from a thorny tree. Next up: sleep!



Yellow-winged Bat



Angolan Free-tailed Bat



Gray Climbing Mouse (Tomer)



## Day 10: Queen Elizabeth NP- Ishasha to Bwindi NP- Buhoma

This morning's drive was dedicated to finding the rich-colored **Topi** antelope. Carnivores were predictably active at dawn, with three **Southern Lion** cubs pouncing around, followed closely by a watchful mother. Before long, an **Egyptian Mongoose** scooted across the grass translating to only a brown blur in my camera.

An anxious hour would pass before our top target was located. Distinctive from any other antelope we've seen, **Topi** have long been a favorite ungulate of mine. Even through the morning haze, their yellow legs were in striking contrast to their two-toned chocolate body. The group included a calf, which is notably all sand colored. Heading back, we caught a glimpse of a striped mouse- undoubtedly a *Lemniscomys* sp., with **Typical Striped Grass Mouse** being more likely. We then left Ishasha and drove to Buhoma.



Southern Lion





Topi





The grounds of Haven Lodge in Buhoma were a haven for beautiful birds and even a **Ruwenzori Sun Squirrel**. Over at the nearby Gorilla Tracking Center a rambunctious **Boehm's Bush Squirrel** delighted with a display of branch parkour. Still hopeful for **Otter Shrews**, Harriet knew of some trails alongside a stream that were near the main building. We accessed a few areas before settling on some large rocks adjacent to the water below a wooden bridge. We positioned Sam on the bridge with an upstream vantage point. We sat quietly for some time as the sun slowly descended. A **L'Hoest's Monkey** landed in a tree directly above us, seemingly oblivious to our presence.

Suddenly, there was a commotion on the bridge. With pained restraint Sam whispered, "DAI-KAH!" To an inexperienced lip-reader "Kah" looked a lot like "Cat." Oh my God, **African Golden Cat**? Turns out, he was saying Duiker (pronounced Dai-kr) which we also had yet to see. We hurried up the steep bank, but it was already forest bound. We pursued into the trees while Sam attempted to corral the animal in our direction, but we never saw it amid the dense vegetation. Sam described it as a bushbuck-colored duiker, almost certainly a **Weyn's Duiker**. A heartbreaking near-miss. Strike three on Weyn's. Now dark and past curfew, we returned to civilization.

A thermal session around our Lodge proved unfruitful and I would have to agree with Tomer's assessment to stay at one of the lodges inside the park if ever returning.

### Day 11: Bwindi NP- Buhoma to Ruhija

I always knew I wanted to sit amongst wild **Mountain Gorillas** one day, and today was the day. Since Tomer had planned all the logistics, I was shocked to find out how expensive one hour of Gorilla Trekking was. Until I learned it's usually double that pre-Covid and even more pricey in Rwanda. Needless to say, it was worth every penny!

A set of trackers goes out at daybreak to locate the Gorillas and relays their location to local guides who are assigned a group of eco-tourists. However, this position changes as the Gorillas meander and this morning



Boehm's Bush Squirrel





the apes were feeling particularly mountainous. What was expected to be an easy hike wound up being quite the vertical challenge, particularly for the elderly in our group. Tomer and I kept pace with the lead guide and enjoyed a bonus 15 minutes with the majestic creatures before the rest caught up.

The first **Mountain Gorilla** was an impressive and stoic silverback. The rest of the family joined soon thereafter and we were treated to their interactions for the next hour. Two siblings vied for the same branch, with the eldest tossing his brother to the ground. The annoyed, incredulous look on little one's face was priceless and so human. Without missing a beat, he climbed right back up the same branch with a new-found sense of determination. Nearby, two adult Gorillas had a startling and raucous battle obscured by trees. An awe-inspiring, once in a lifetime experience to be sure.



We skipped “Gorilla Graduation Ceremony” to return to last night’s Duiker stream, as Harriet kindly picked up our certificates. We saw more **L’Hoest’s Monkeys**, but Duikers remained absent.







A close-up photograph of an Angolan Rousette bat hanging upside down. The bat has brown fur, large brown eyes, and its wings are partially spread, showing a lighter brown membrane. It is positioned in front of a blurred background of dry, brown leaves.

**Angolan Rousette**

Harriet arranged two stops along the way to “The Neck” sector of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest. The first was Lake Kitandala Tented Camp, where a local brought us to some empty dwellings mid-downpour. Inside, we found more groups of likely **Ethiopian Epauletted Fruit Bats** and a few **Angolan Rousettes**. The second was in Kakuleju Village where local children had potentially caught a **Cane Rat** on their farm. Waiting for us instead we found a **Northeast African Mole-rat**. Having negotiated the burrower’s release, we were on our way.

Once at The Neck, Tomer and I settled down beside a river for another **Otter Shrew** stake out. After nightfall we stared at the river, glued to our thermal imagers. A long, thin heat signature moved from the shore into the water. But, at the sight of our flashlight beam, it immediately retreated to shore. The size was definitely smaller than an Otter and probably appropriate for Otter Shrew. As we continued waiting, another heat signature appeared from the same area, but this time it had an avian silhouette and swam like a duck. We’ll never know if both were the same animal, but I’ll always wonder if the first may have been our Otter Shrew.

A close-up photograph of an Ethiopian Epauletted Fruit Bat hanging upside down. The bat has a light brown face with large, prominent brown eyes. Its wings are spread, showing a dark brown membrane. The background is blurred, showing dry leaves.

**Ethiopian Epauletted Fruit Bat**





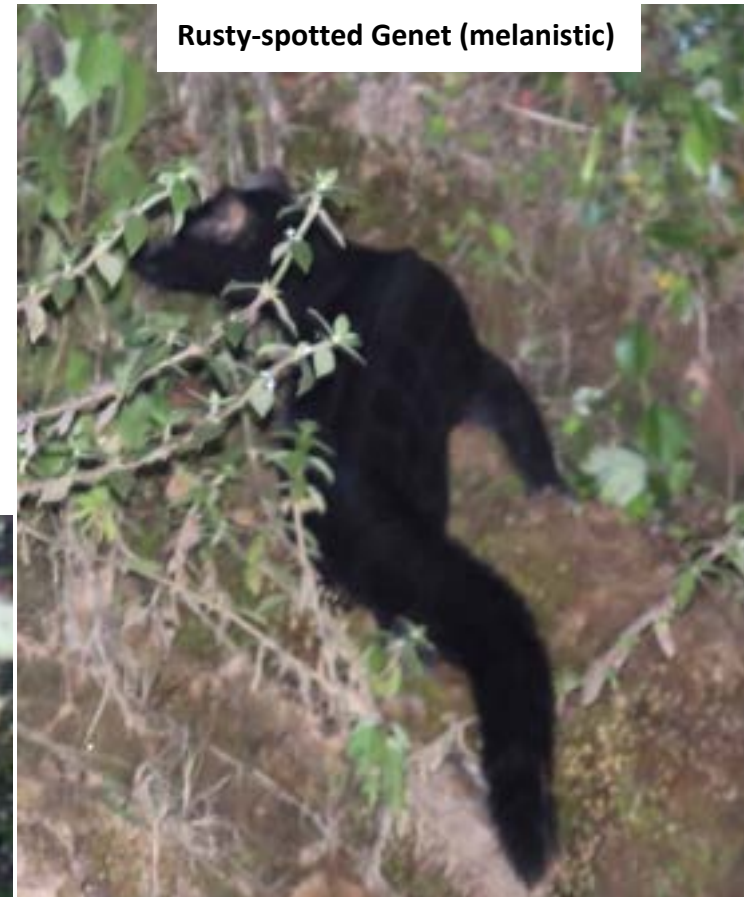
Northeast African Mole-rat





The road from The Neck to Bwinidi's Ruhija Sector led right through the forest. We relished the 4.5-hour trip, detecting a glut of nocturnal species by way of spotlighting and thermaling. The excellent variety included **Side-striped Jackal** (rarely seen here), **African Civet**, **Hammer-headed Bat**, **Thomas's Bushbaby**, and **Prince Demidoff's Bushbaby**. A dark Marten-like creature bounded on the road ahead. Tomer and I looked at each other in disbelief. Earlier that same day Tomer asked if anything Marten-like lived in Africa. I thought there wasn't, but Tomer's manifestation powers were getting scary. Upon closer inspection, spots were visible, making this a melanistic **Rusty-spotted Genet**. But damn if it didn't look like a Marten. Apparently melanistic phases of animals, including **African Golden Cats**, are more common in the highlands of Ruhija.

It was bitterly cold when Trackers Tavern Cottages welcomed us for a midnight dinner next to the fireplace. Hot water bags to heat our beds was also a nice touch.



**Rusty-spotted Genet (melanistic)**



**Thomas's Bushbaby**



**Hammer-headed Bat**





## Day 12: Bwindi NP- Ruhija

Our trip was winding down, and we remained Duiker-less. Harriet was confident we would see **Black-fronted Duiker** in Ruhija, with a slim chance for **Yellow-backed Duiker**. **L'Hoest's Monkeys** were a daily occurrence at this point and we saw one **Silver Monkey**, sometimes considered a subspecies of Blue Monkey. **Ruwenzori Sun Squirrels** danced on branches above the road. Again, our morning yielded zero Duikers. We rushed back to our lodge to meet a traveling doctor, who would administer pricey Covid tests.

By afternoon the Duiker drought finally ended! Driving along the main road in the forest we saw a **Black-fronted Duiker** feeding at the edge of the road. It stayed motionless for 20 seconds, only retreating when our vehicle drew close. Multiple guides shared the peculiar tip that Duikers are attracted to human urine. Regrettably, we never field tested this.

Harriet brought us to Hamwetololo Cave (in between Ruhija gate and Broadbill signpost). A dangerously steep drop made for a poor vantage point. I managed to wriggle a bit further into the cave while Sam held my ankle. The effort paid off with regionally endemic **Ruwenzori Horseshoe Bats**.

After sunset, the same two types of Bushbabies repeated along with a non-melanistic **Rusty-spotted Genet**, which scurried across the road.



Silver Monkey



L'Hoest's Monkey





**Black-fronted Duiker**



**Ruwenzori Horseshoe Bats**





### Day 13: Bwindi NP- Ruhija

Unlucky number 13 was a tough day for me. Exhausted from the trip's demanding hours, I could barely get out of bed. The fact that the morning's main target was just some bird (*Grauer's Broadbill*) wasn't helping. Nevertheless, I toughed out the challenging high-altitude hike. We kept an eye out for **Yellow-backed Duiker** and **African Golden Cat**, but saw only **Ruwenzori Sun Squirrels** and one **Red-legged Sun Squirrel**. Given how overgrown the trail was, any mammal views would be fleeting.

Which brings me to my next point – beware of machete-wielding guides. Walking the trail, with my camera hanging off my back, I suddenly heard a loud CLINK directly behind me. I turned to find our local guide, machete in hand, had gotten way too close. I inspected my camera lens and saw a small slash where the blade hit. Looking closer, I realized my hand usually supports the camera's weight at this exact spot. A wave of uneasiness rushed over me, as I imagined the horrid outcome if my fingers had been between the lens and machete at the time of impact. Some time passed before I shook that feeling, but at least the guide was profuse in his apologies.

In the afternoon we repeated the forest road drive knowing this to be our best remaining chance for Golden Cat or more Duikers. One final **Black-fronted Duiker** navigated a steep hill before darting across the road. Meanwhile I continued to feel unwell- now nauseous and warm. A fever the day before flying to Kenya was a Covid-fueled nightmare. Back at the lodge, I hurried to bed where I spent the next seven hours in a haze, slipping in and out of consciousness.

Unfortunately, this meant I missed the evening's drive where Tomer saw multiple **Bushbabies** and **African Civets**, a **Woodland Dormouse** and an **Eastern Potto**. I was extremely jealous, especially of the Potto. Nevertheless, the sleep worked miracles. Thankfully, it wasn't Covid. Best guess, I was suffering from altitude sickness.







Eastern Potto (Tomer)



Ruwenzori Sun Squirrel



Red-legged Sun Squirrel

## Day 14: The Return to Entebbe

Our final day began at the ungodly hour of 3am. We had a lot of ground to cover, and Harriet smartly built-in extra time. The abundance of moonlight and freezing temperatures resulted in zero animal activity along Ruhija's forest road.

By late morning, we were making such good time that Harriet suggested an impromptu visit to Lake Mburo National Park. **Common Impala** appeared before we even entered the park, with **Grant's Zebra** immediately inside. How ironic that two of Africa's most common animals showed up for the first time on our final day. A sizable herd of **East African Eland** rested under the shade of some large trees. A few **Vervet Monkeys** and a solitary male **Nile Bushbuck** were also spotted. A perfectly posed **Striped Ground Squirrel** proved to be the final wild mammal of the trip.



East African Eland



Grant's Zebra





Nile Bushbuck



Common Impala



Striped Ground Squirrel



After being treated to lunch and a water drainage demonstration at The Equator we linked up with Tom, the owner of the CTC Conservation Center. I had discovered this private facility via Facebook and knew they were attempting to breed **African Golden Cats**. At no cost, Tom gave us a personalized tour for the next two hours. **Kaffa Side-striped Jackal** were up first, making this the fourth time I had seen this former nemesis.



**Kaffa Side-striped Jackal**



Under Tom's supervision, we entered our top target's enclosure- **African Golden Cat**. Tomer casually walked around looking for any sign of the feline. BAM! A greyish form leapt over the dirt mound it had been hiding behind, landing five feet from him, both front paws spread wide. What a first impression! I could totally see the resemblance to **Caracal** (which we saw later) albeit with a puffier tail and no ear tufts. CTC had 10 Golden Cats including both red/golden and gray forms. Tom fed the cats a steady stream of raw meat while anxiously calling out for more. Luckily, we never found out what happens if he runs out. Some cats would drag their meat into a tree to eat, much like a leopard, while others ate on the ground. With this in mind, mid-canopy levels could be a good place to search for wild cats.

We met with **Servals**, **Bat-eared Fox** and **African Palm Civets** while keeping a safe distance from a man-eater *Nile Crocodile* the center had provided haven for. While had a fantastic time, the animals seemed well cared for, and the owner couldn't have been nicer, I have learned some additional information since our visit that gave me pause. I would recommend doing your own research before deciding to go.



**African Golden Cat**





From the car, we received much-anticipated emails with our “Not Detected” Covid results. Phew! A huge weight off our shoulders. Curiously mine was gendered as “Female” which thankfully didn’t cause any issues for my evening flight to Nairobi.

Saying goodbye was tough. I can honestly say never before did I have better company in guides and mammal watchers than with Harriet, Sam, Joel and Tomer. Such a successful trip! Brilliantly planned and even more brilliantly executed. It may have been goodbye tonight, but I knew I had made life-long friends.

Uganda had been good to us. This was my most species-rich trip yet! Nine days in Kenya lay ahead, so stay tuned for that report!



**Carruther's Mountain Squirrel (Tomer)**



### Stuff We Missed:

Fortunately, not much. The aforementioned **Pousargues's Mongoose** at Semliki Safari Lodge, **Red River Hogs** at Semliki NP, **Cane Rats** around Kibale, **Yellow-backed Duiker** and **African Golden Cats** in Ruhija. Of course the three near-misses of **Weyn's Duiker** in Buhoma hurt. **African Forest Elephants** can be seen on night drives in Kibale, at Primate Lodge's treehouse, and in Semliki NP- where we did see footprints. **Bush Pigs** are likely when staying overnight at Lake Mburo. The only report of any **Pangolins** we heard was of one struck by a vehicle. Interestingly, my companion for Kenya, Sandra Heldstab, visited Uganda afterwards and saw a captured **White-bellied Pangolin** (which was later released) just outside Buhoma's Gorilla Trekking office. The greenish **Carruther's Mountain Squirrel**, Tomer subsequently saw in Rwanda, appears to be rarer in Bwindi than is suggested by guides.

**White-bellied Pangolin (Sandra)**



**Acknowledgements:** Tomer said it best in his report but to reiterate:

**Harriet Kemigisha** (harriertours@gmail.com): A must-use lead guide for Ugandan mammal watching. She runs Harrier Tours superbly well. As evidenced by this report, her resourcefulness knows no bounds. Getting to hear her contagious laugh was always a bonus. She will forever be a fan of "Mammalwatching dot com."

**Sam (Niwamanya Rwenzel Samuel):** Always knows if itsa Boehms or not. He seriously knows his animals and has a great knack for spotting. And he never stopped searching for wildlife- even when we would all take a break, he'd still be looking. His calm, patient demeanor was ideal for this type of work.

**Joel:** A perfect driver who's powered by breakfast meats. Always able to put the vehicle in the best position for photography. Slogged through many long drives without any complaints.

**Tomer "Mr. CrossFit" Ben-Yahuda:** Incredible travel buddy with eyes like a hawk. His tireless research and unwavering motivation undoubtably helped make this trip so successful. I envision many future trips together. Did I mention he does CrossFit?

**Sadic B Waswa** (waswasadic@gmail.com): Our official Ugandan Bat-man, who shared invaluable advice on locating bat roosts and proficient species-level bat identification skills.







# List of Mammal Species Seen

(wild lifers in bold) :

	Common Name	Scientific name	Entebbe/ Mabamba	Murchison	Toro- Semliki	Semliki	Kibale	Queen Elizabeth	Buhoma	Ruhija	Lake Mburo
1	African Bush Elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>		X				X			
*2	Eastern Potto	<i>Perodicticus ibeanus</i>								T	
3	<b>Spectacled Bushbaby</b>	<b><i>Galago matschiei</i></b>				X	X			X	
4	Senegal Bushbaby (no photo)	<i>Galago senegalensis</i>		X							
5	<b>Thomas's Bushbaby</b>	<b><i>Galagoidese thomasi</i></b>								X	
6	<b>Prince Demidoff's Bushbaby</b>	<b><i>Galagoides demidovii</i></b>					X			X	
7	<b>Eastern Patas Monkey</b>	<b><i>Erythrocebus patas pyrrhonotus</i></b>		X							
8	Vervet Monkey	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>	X								X
9	Tantalus Monkey	<i>Chlorocebus tantalus</i>		X	X		X	X			
10	<b>Schmidt's Red-tailed Monkey</b>	<b><i>Cercopithecus ascanius schmidtii</i></b>				X	X		X		
11	<b>L'Hoest's Monkey</b>	<b><i>Cercopithecus lhoesti</i></b>					X		X	X	
12	<b>Silver Monkey</b>	<b><i>Cercopithecus doggettii</i></b>								X	
13	<b>Stuhlmann's Blue Monkey</b>	<b><i>Cercopithecus mitis stuhlmanni</i></b>				X	X				
14	<b>De Brazza's Monkey</b>	<b><i>Cercopithecus neglectus</i></b>				X					
15	<b>Dent's Monkey</b>	<b><i>Cercopithecus denti</i></b>				X					
16	<b>Johnston's Mangabey</b>	<b><i>Lophocebus johnstoni</i></b>				X					
17	<b>Uganda Mangabey</b>	<b><i>Lophocebus ugandae</i></b>					X				
18	Olive Baboon	<i>Papio anubis</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
19	Mantled Guereza	<i>Colobus guereza</i>	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
20	<b>Semliki Red Colobus</b>	<b><i>Piliocolobus semlikiensis</i></b>				X					
21	<b>Ashy Red Colobus</b>	<b><i>Piliocolobus tephrosceles</i></b>					X				
22	<b>Mountain Gorilla</b>	<b><i>Gorilla beringei beringei</i></b>							X		
23	<b>Eastern Chimpanzee</b>	<b><i>Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii</i></b>					X				
24	<b>Northeast African Mole-rat</b>	<b><i>Tachyoryctes splendens</i></b>							X		
25	<b>Lord Derby's Anomalure</b>	<b><i>Anomalurus derbianus</i></b>				X					
26	<b>Striped Ground Squirrel</b>	<b><i>Xerus erythropus</i></b>		X							X
27	<b>Red-legged Sun Squirrel</b>	<b><i>Heliosciurus rufobrachium</i></b>				X			?	X	
28	<b>Ruwenzori Sun Squirrel</b>	<b><i>Heliosciurus ruwenzorii</i></b>							X	X	
29	<b>Alexander's Bush Squirrel</b>	<b><i>Paraxerus alexandri</i></b>				X					
30	<b>Boehm's Bush Squirrel</b>	<b><i>Paraxerus boehmi</i></b>				X	X		X	X	



31	Noack's Dormouse	<i>Graphiurus microtis</i>		X							
*32	Woodland Dormouse (no photo)	<i>Graphiurus murinus</i>								T	
33	Gray Climbing Mouse?	<i>Dendromus melanotis</i>						X			
34	Link Rat	<i>Deomys ferrugineus</i>				X					
35	Kemp's Gerbil	<i>Tetera kempii</i>		X							
36	Typical Striped Grass Mouse?	<i>Lemniscomys striatus</i>						X			
37	Bunyoro Rabbit	<i>Poelagus marjorita</i>		X							
38	Cape Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>		X							
39	African Savanna Hare	<i>Lepus victoriae</i>						X			
40	Ethiopian Epauletted Fruit Bat	<i>Epomophorus labiatus</i>	X				X		X		
41	Franquet's Epauletted Fruit Bat	<i>Epomops franqueti</i>				X					
42	Hammer-headed Bat	<i>Hypsignathus monstrosus</i>				X				X	
43	Angolan Rousette	<i>Lyssonycteris angolensis</i>					X		X		
44	Egyptian Fruit Bat	<i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i>						X			
45	Angolan Free-tailed Bat	<i>Mops condylurus</i>						X			
46	Mauritian Tomb Bat	<i>Taphozous mauritanus</i>		X		X					
47	Yellow-winged Bat	<i>Lavia frons</i>		X				X			
48	Ruwenzori Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus ruwenzorii</i>								X	
49	Benito Roundleaf Bat	<i>Hipposideros beatus</i>				X					
50	Sundevall's Roundleaf Bat?	<i>Hipposideros caffer</i>			X		?				
51	Noack's Roundleaf Bat?	<i>Hipposideros ruber</i>		X			?				
52	Southern Lion	<i>Panthera leo melanochaita</i>		X				X			
53	African Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus pardus</i>		X				X			
54	African Civet (no photo)	<i>Civettictis civetta</i>								X	
55	Rusty-spotted Genet	<i>Genetta maculata</i>		X	X			X		X	
56	African Palm Civet	<i>Nandinia binotata</i>					X				
57	Marsh Mongoose	<i>Atilax paludinosus</i>					X				
58	Egyptian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>					X	X			
59	White-tailed Mongoose	<i>Ichneumia albicauda</i>		X	X						
60	Banded Mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>		X							
61	Spotted Hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>		X				X			
62	Side-striped Jackal	<i>Lupulella adusta</i>		X						X	
63	Spotted-necked Otter	<i>Hydrictris maculicollis</i>					X				
64	Grant's Zebra	<i>Equus quagga boehmi</i>									X
65	Eastern Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus massaicus</i>		X				X			
66	Giant Forest Hog	<i>Hylochoerus meinertzhageni</i>						X			



67	Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>		X				X			
68	Rothchild's Giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis rothschildi</i>		X							
69	<b>Jackson's Hartebeest</b>	<b><i>Alcelaphus buselaphus lelwel</i></b>		X							
70	<b>Topi</b>	<b><i>Damaliscus lunatus jimela</i></b>						X			
71	Sudan Oribi	<i>Ourebia ourebi montana</i>		X							
72	Cape Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer caffer</i>						X			
73	East African Eland	<i>Taurotragus oryx pattersonianus</i>									X
74	Nile Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus bor</i>						X			X
75	<b>Black-fronted Duiker</b>	<b><i>Cephalophus nigrifrons</i></b>								X	
**	Weyn's Duiker?	<i>Cephalophus weynsi</i>					Th/H		S		
76	Common Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus melampus</i>									X
77	Defassa Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus defassa</i>		X				X			X
78	<b>Ugandan Kob</b>	<b><i>Kobus kob thomasi</i></b>		X				X			

\* Tomer only

\*\* Thermal (possibly)/Harriet & Sam only