



**BIRDING TOUR UGANDA: SHELLEY'S CRIMSONWING
EXPEDITION**

22 - 29 AUGUST 2020



Shelley's Crimsonwing is our target on this trip. (Photo courtesy www.gorilla.org)

Searching for Africa's most elusive bird

When asked the question “What is Africa’s most elusive bird species?”, most birders would answer that it must be any of the flufftails, which are, of course, notorious. Or perhaps they might answer that it could be one of the two pitta species lurking on this continent. But, given a systematic approach, it is actually quite possible to find and even photograph every single flufftail species, given a few weeks of travel across Africa and Madagascar. Even the critically endangered Slender-billed Flufftail can be reliably seen with a bit of effort. As for the pittas, they certainly aren’t in any way easy, but we usually do find both species annually; our success rate for African Pitta in Mozambique and Green-breasted Pitta in Uganda must be about four in five attempts. At the start of the breeding season we have exact stakeouts for these jewel-like species, and so we’ve kind of “mastered” them, and they no longer escape us.

Fewer birders would guess that the bird that we simply can’t find is a splendidly-colored finch occurring at extremely low densities in a tiny part of central Africa. While local birding guides in Uganda report the species every couple of years, there are only two known photos of it. And we have never found one on any of our tours yet (despite the fact that we do marvelously well on all the other rare and localized species in the region). The finch we are talking about is **Shelley’s Crimsonwing** (*Cryptospiza shelleyi*), an Albertine Rift Valley endemic with a total world population estimated at anything between 2500 and 10000 mature individuals.

The Albertine Rift is a westward branch of the famous Great Rift Valley, and it boasts a large number of endemic bird species occurring only in a tiny part of Africa where four countries meet: Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The beautiful and spectacularly bio-diverse, forested mountains of the Albertine Rift straddle the border regions of these four countries. **Shelley’s Crimsonwing** is one of these Albertine Rift endemics, skulking in the undergrowth of the mountain forests here. The DRC is a dangerous place to visit, and most birders focus on either Rwanda or Uganda when they want to find this rare finch. (But find the bird they don’t...!)

Classified as Vulnerable by BirdLife International, **Shelley’s Crimsonwing** is so poorly known that scientists do not even have much of an understanding why it is so rare, and why it is apparently declining (also with very fluctuating numbers from year to year). The guess is that habitat destruction by humans is the main culprit, but it has also often been said that the species might be declining due to natural causes, albeit mysterious and puzzling ones!

Where to look for it:

- We wish we knew!
- However, it is known (among other places) from the following legendary birding forests (all of which are also famous for Mountain Gorilla trekking):
 - o Nyungwe Forest National Park in Rwanda
 - o Mgahinga Gorilla National Park, straddling the border between Uganda, Rwanda, and the DRC – this is often considered a top site within Uganda for **Shelley’s Crimsonwing**, but the reserve is often inexplicably ignored by many birding tour operators. But we do visit this site annually, partly because it is one of the most

accessible sites for the incomparable **Rwenzori Turaco** (which we reliably do find, unlike the crimsonwing). With the spectacular Virunga volcanoes as a backdrop, Mgahinga is certainly not an unpleasant place to spend a couple of days...!

- Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda – this is where several sightings over the last few years have been, including a nesting pair that gave a good number of birders a look (practically “twitchable”) – but one also has to understand that the story might have been exaggerated like a fishing tale (no photos were taken). The long walk down to Mubwindi Swamp at the Ruhija section of Bwindi – compulsory for seeing another of Africa’s most desirable birds, **African Green Broadbill** – is probably best. The good news about Bwindi is that there are no less than 43 finch species that can be seen in this tropical rainforest.

Why not join us in August 2020 to look for it?

Itinerary (8 days/7 nights)

Day 1. Arrival at Kigali, Rwanda

After arrival at Kigali International Airport in Rwanda we will drive to Kisoro in Uganda.

Overnight: Travellers Rest Hotel, Kisoro

Day 2. Birding Mgahinga Gorilla National Park

This is one of the classic sites for **Shelley’s Crimsonwing**, but even though we’re spending three full days here and more than two full days at its other classic site, we guess that the chances of actually finding this species is perhaps one in four. Hopefully the spectacular **Rwenzori Turaco** and the great scenery (ancient volcanoes) will entertain us regardless. And, with lots of luck, who knows we might even encounter **Mountain Gorillas**, which freely cross the nearby borders into the DRC and Rwanda, as this reserve straddles three countries! Please note that the main aim of this expedition is to try finding and photographing **Shelley’s Crimsonwing**, so we’ll very much spend the bulk of our time looking for this mega-elusive species – this means driving to the reserve each morning and walking a lot, sometimes uphill quite a lot (at both sites, Mgahinga and also Bwindi).

Overnight: Travellers Rest Hotel, Kisoro

Day 3. Birding Mgahinga Gorilla National Park

Overnight: Travellers Rest Hotel, Kisoro

Day 4. Birding Mgahinga Gorilla National Park

Overnight: Travellers Rest Hotel, Kisoro

Day 5. Transfer to Ruhija, birding Ruhija

The Ruhija section of the famed Bwindi Impenetrable National Park boasts over 20 Albertine Rift endemics, including **African Green Broadbill** – and of course good old **Shelley’s Crimsonwing**. If we don’t find the latter, there are three other crimsonwings in this forest. This is also one of the world’s best-known sites for **Mountain Gorilla**, but if you want to see that

then we suggest you join the August 1 – 19 birding and primate trip – as the current trip is a “hardcore” **Shelley’s Crimsonwing** trip.

Overnight: Trekkers Tavern Cottages, Ruhija

Day 6. Birding Ruhija

Overnight: Trekkers Tavern Cottages, Ruhija

Day 7. Birding Ruhija

Overnight: Trekkers Tavern Cottages, Ruhija

Day 8. Departure

Today we will transfer to Kigali in Rwanda for our international departure.

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Duration: 8 days
Limit: 4 – 7
Date: 22 – 29 August 2020
Start: Kigali, Rwanda
End: Kigali, Rwanda

Price: US\$4641 per person sharing, assuming 6 – 7 participants
 US\$5371 per person sharing, assuming 4 – 5 participants
 A separate price can be quoted if a gorilla trek needs to be included.

Single supplement: There will be a small single supplement for those preferring a single room or if we can't find someone to share a room with you.

Price includes:

Meals
 Basic but clean accommodation
 Guiding fees
 Basic Land Cruiser vehicle with driver and fuel
 Airport transfers
 Park entrance fees
 Bottled water in the car

Price excludes:

International flights
 Airport taxes
 Visa fees
 Items of a personal nature, e.g. laundry, gifts
 Drinks other than bottled water
 Personal insurance

Gratuities

Objective

We would like to try and get photos and sound recordings of **Shelley's Crimsonwing**, one of Africa's rarest finches. We plan to be as close as possible to the sites we feel are best for the species. We'd like to try and get publicity for this rare species (which will hopefully help its conservation). The trip will naturally also look at other bird and finch species in the area, but our main focus will be to try to find and see the Vulnerable and elusive **Shelley's Crimsonwing**.

More about the Birding Ecotours option linked to the exciting Shelley's Crimsonwing Expedition

You can join a birding and primate tour of Uganda from August 1 – 19 before the Shelley's Crimsonwing expedition starts. Details of this trip are at [Birding Tour Uganda: 19-day Shoebill and Albertine Rift Endemics 2020](#).