

Uganda's Golden Jubilee Independence Celebrations coincide with efforts to save the charismatic 'king of the marshes'.

Title

It is the morning of Tuesday 9th October 2012 and Ugandan streets and buildings are full of colour, with pictures of the Grey Crowned-crane, the national symbol proudly displayed everywhere as the nation prepares to celebrate 50 years of independence. In a hotel room on the shores of Lake Victoria, a small team of people drawn from governments and civil society in eight countries join hands and sing the first verse of Uganda's national anthem. They have been drawn together by one interest: to draw a plan for saving the Shoebill (*Balaeniceps rex*), a unique massive-billed bird that is restricted to Uganda and five other African countries. Participants take time to join the Ugandan colleagues to celebrate this big day, before moving ahead with the business of the week.

The Shoebill is now listed as "Vulnerable" in the global list of threatened plants and animals, having been pushed this far by various threatening factors. Destruction and reduction in quality of its preferred flooded marsh habitat, illegal capture for trade, disturbance and destruction of nests and young, among others have been blamed. However, not all hope is lost. Two days later, the team visit Mabamba Bay and meet the Mabamba Wetland Ecotourism Association, a Site Support Group working with Nature Uganda (BirdLife partner in Uganda). The main occupation of the Group is to save the Shoebill, while drawing benefits from guiding tourists who come from near and far to see this unique species. Within 15 minutes of setting off in canoes into the vegetated bay, members of the Group successfully guide this visiting team to a most imposing individual shoebill. "We protect the shoebills. We patrol the area and would not let anyone harm or capture the birds for sale. They are our source of livelihood" says Ida Katende, the chair of the Group.

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<http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/groupShoeb-2-300x213.jpg>



Team prepares to search for Shoebill at
Mabamba Bay (Photo by Kariuki
Ndang'ang'a)

At the end of the four-day action planning workshop, after thoroughly analyzing the problems facing the Shoebill, the team came up with detailed actions that focus on five areas of work: maintaining the ban on trade of live birds until a proper review is done; doing all that is possible to stop illegal trade on the species; taking measures to improve the quality of the species preferred habitat; reducing disturbance of breeding birds through site-based management measures; and above all engaging local communities in ways that are beneficial to people and the shoebill. They also recognise that there is so much that still needs to be studied to unravel the needs of the shoebill, thus prioritising some research work. The workshop was held under the auspices of the Africa-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) was organized by Nature Uganda, hosted by Uganda's Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities. Financial support was provided by the Federal Office for Environment in Switzerland.