

Thorndon Birdlife

October 2023

I have just returned to the UK after spending some time in Uganda, one of my target birds was the **Shoebill (*Balaeniceps rex*)** It derives its name from its enormous shoe-shaped bill. Genetic evidence places it with pelicans and herons in the Pelecaniformes. The adult is mainly grey while the juveniles are more brownish. It lives in tropical East Africa in large swamps. The bird below was located in the swamps of Lake Victoria and was born last year.



The shoebill is a tall bird, with a typical height range of 110 to 140 cm and some specimens reaching as much as 152 cm (5ft). Length from tail to beak can range from 100 to 140 cm and wingspan is 230 to 260 cm. A male will weigh on average around 5.6 kg and is larger than a typical female of 4.9 kg. The signature feature of the species is its huge, bulbous bill, which is straw-coloured with erratic greyish markings. The exposed culmen (or the measurement along the top of the upper mandible) is 18.8 to 24 cm, the third longest bill among extant birds after pelicans and large storks, and can outrival the pelicans in bill circumference, especially if the bill is considered as the hard, bony keratin portion. As in the pelicans, the upper mandible is strongly keeled, ending in a sharp nail. The dark coloured legs are fairly long, with a tarsus (lower leg) length of 21.7 to 25.5 cm. The shoebill's feet are exceptionally large, with the middle toe reaching 16.8 to 18.5 cm in length, likely assisting the species in its ability to stand on aquatic vegetation while hunting. The neck is relatively shorter and thicker than other long-legged wading birds such as herons and cranes. The wings are broad, with a wing chord length of 58.8 to 78 cm, and well-adapted to soaring and they are good flyers.

The plumage of adult birds is blue-grey with darker slaty-grey flight feathers. The breast presents some elongated feathers, which have dark shafts. The juvenile has a similar plumage colour, but is a darker grey with a brown tinge. When they are first born, shoebills have a more modestly-sized bill, which is initially silvery-grey. The bill becomes more noticeably large when the chicks are 23 days old and becomes well developed by 43 days.

The pictures opposite show the bird as darker than described as it was raining at the time and the bird was rather wet.

The shoebill is normally silent, but they perform bill-clattering displays at the nest. When engaging in these displays, adult birds have also been noted to utter a cow-like *moo* as well as high-pitched whines. Both nestlings and adults engage in bill-clattering during the nesting season as a means of communication. When young are begging for food, they call out with a sound like human hiccups. We did hear a flying adult bird uttering hoarse croaks, apparently as a sign of aggression at a nearby marabou stork. Long flights of the shoebill are rare, and only a few flights beyond its minimum foraging distance of 20 m (66 ft) have been recorded. The shoebill is noted for its slow movements and tendency to stay still for long periods, resulting in descriptions of the species as "statue-like". They are quite sensitive to human disturbance and may abandon their nests if flushed by humans. However, while foraging, if dense vegetation stands between it and humans, this wader can be fairly tame. The shoebill is attracted to poorly oxygenated waters such as swamps, marshes and bogs where fish frequently surface to breathe.

Shoebills are largely fish eaters but are assured predators of a considerable range of wetland vertebrates. Preferred prey species have reportedly included marbled lungfish, Senegal bichir, various Tilapia species and catfish. Other prey eaten by this species has included frogs, water snakes, Nile monitors and baby crocodiles.

This species is considered to be one of the most desirable birds in Africa by birdwatchers.

Sorry, no garden sightings this month as we have been away.

Chris McIntyre 07704 437662 mcintyrechris@btinternet.com