ALBERT FRONEMAN

SAFE IN THE SWAMPS?

The Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex*, listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN, has no close relatives and is confined to large, well-vegetated wetlands in tropical Africa. Zambia's 600 000-hectare Bangweulu Swamps are home to approximately 1 300 Shoebills, one of the largest populations of this species in the world.

Huge and outlandish in appearance, the Shoebill is one of the birds most sought after by avitourists in Africa. A swamp that may contain as many as 1 300 of these birds (and a local community adept at finding them) is likely to prove a magnet for birders in the future.

Although the birds are highly prized by tourists, the swamps are under mounting pressure from the local community, and fishing, disturbance, persecution and fire are likely to cause increasing problems for their avian inhabitants. In view of the importance of both the species and its wetland home, Shoebill conservation has moved onto the Fitztitute's agenda in 2011. The last time a Fitztitute researcher studied the species was in the mid-1970s, and that was in the swamps of southern Sudan.

Understanding the Shoebill's habitat needs and its responses to pressures from humans is vital if it is to be effectively conserved. This new project, designed to do exactly this, is timely in that it is concurrent with the establishment of the 290 000-hectare Chikuni Community Partnership Park within the Bangweulu Swamps. This will have the status of a national park but will be owned by the community, not the state. The Shoebill is the flagship species for the area and is considered essential for the long-term conservation sustainability of the new park, but we do not know whether it is effectively protected within it. The community's involvement in both conservation and research is expected to increase its sense of ownership, thus engendering greater support for protection of the wetland in general and Shoebills in particular. Tourism in the area is expected to increase significantly and it is thus important to identify appropriate birding activities in the park that will safeguard its role as a key money-spinner. The primary researcher will be Fitztitute-based PhD student David Ngwenyama, a Zambian who already has extensive knowledge of the swamps.

The project will be supervised by Dr Arjun Amar, a senior lecturer at the Fitztitute, and will be jointly funded by the Fitztitute's Centre of Excellence and WWF-Netherlands. Key collaborators and partners include the African Parks Network (Ian Stevenson), the Kasanka Trust (Frank Willems), WWF-Zambia, Zambia Wildlife Authority and the Zambian Ornithological Society. The project will also involve students from the University of Zambia, thus contributing to the development of ecological and conservation skills in that country.

The over-arching goal of the study is to formulate strategies for the optimal conservation of the Bangweulu Shoebills. Key research foci include determining the current population size and seasonal distribution of Shoebills in the swamps; the birds' ecological requirements for feeding and breeding; and how conservation activities could both reduce threats to the Shoebills and contribute to broader strategies for protecting wetlands.

The Fitztitute has had projects running in Zambia for some years, but this is undoubtedly the most challenging to date. The swamps are huge and the terrain is tough – this is not an outing to the reedbeds at the local settlement ponds! Extensive satellite tracking of Shoebills' whereabouts in the swamps will enable us to document their seasonal movements and help us find nests, but there are many hard, wet months of field work ahead of us in the next three years, as we get up close and personal with a species that many birders would give their eye teeth just to see.

If you would like to be part of our bursary and research fund-raising drives, please contact the Institute's Director, Prof. Phil Hockey, Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa 7701.
E-mail ***phil.hockey@uct.ac.za***, fax +27 (0)21 650 3295, tel. +27 (0)21 650 3290/1 or visit ***www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za***