



S I T E 4

# Bwindi Impenetrable National Park

**B**WINDI IMPENETRABLE NATIONAL PARK offers some of the finest montane forest birding in Africa and is a key destination for any birder visiting Uganda. Amongst the numerous possibilities are no fewer than 23 of Uganda's 24 Albertine Rift endemics, including spectacular, globally threatened species such as African Green Broadbill and Shelley's Crimsonwing, many known from no other site in East Africa. Bwindi Impenetrable Forest lies in the rugged Kigezi Highlands of southwestern Uganda, protecting a continuum of forest that ranges from montane to lowland areas. It is this altitudinal variation, combined with its location within the Albertine Rift that results in Bwindi Impenetrable being the richest forest in East Africa in terms of its trees, butterflies and birds. Once part of a much larger forest that included the Virunga Volcanoes, some 25km to the south, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park is now an ecological island within a sea of human cultivation and is therefore of immense conservation importance.

## **RUHIZHA: The Highlands**

**The ranger station at Ruhizha is situated at an altitude of 2300m, with breath-taking views over steep, forested valleys towards the distant Virunga Volcanoes.**

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## **BIRDING**

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Ruhizha is likely to be one of the highlights of any trip to Uganda with excellent birding in spectacular surroundings. Birds are both plentiful and easy to



<b>DISTRICTS</b>	Rukungiri, Kabale and Kisoro
<b>SIZE</b>	321km <sup>2</sup>
<b>ELEVATION</b>	1190-2607m a.s.l.
<b>STATUS</b>	National Park since 1991
<b>HABITAT</b>	Medium-altitude (moist ever-green) forest, montane forest with patches of bamboo ( <i>Arundinaria</i> ), and montane marshes.
<b>BIRDS RECORDED</b>	357 species
<b>TIMING</b>	Particularly March and September, but good year-round



Easy birding in one of the richest forests in Africa.

see, many species associating in mixed feeding flocks that are active throughout the day (but with a peak of activity in the mid-morning).

The road towards Kabale ascends gradually through fine montane forest, with micro-habitats in the form of second growth vegetation around landslides and dense herbage along streams. The Bamboo Zone (2525m a.s.l.) is reached about 5km from the guesthouse. An early start offers the best chance of finding the striking Handsome Francolin, which may be seen sunning itself or feeding on the track in the morning. Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters are common and can be observed entering their nest burrows in exposed banks along the road. Canopy and mid-storey flocks, at eye level in places owing to the terrain, should be scanned for Western

Green Tinkerbird, Mountain and Yellow-streaked Greenbuls, Mountain Masked and Chestnut-throated Apalises, Red-faced Woodland Warbler, the attractive White-browed Crombec, Rwenzori Batis and White-tailed Crested Flycatcher. African Hill Babbler (considered by some to be a separate species, the Rwenzori Hill Babbler), Collared Apalis, Banded Prinia and Montane Sooty Boubou favour tangles of creepers along forest edges, a habitat shared with the enigmatic Grauer's Warbler. Listen for the latter's unusual, rising trill, reminiscent of a high-pitched Scaly-throated Honeyguide. Check the rank vegetation along a small stream 5.5km from the guesthouse for the rare and beautiful Shelley's Crimsonwing and search the adjacent bamboo for Mountain Illadopsis, Red-throated Alethe, Archer's Robin-Chat, White-starred Robin, Northern Olive Thrush, Cinnamon Bracken and Mountain Yellow Warblers and Abyssinian Crimsonwing. Dusky Crimsonwing and Black-headed Waxbill may be seen feeding on seeding grasses at the roadside, whilst flowering creepers attract the spectacular Blue-headed and Regal Sunbirds. There have been a number of intriguing reports from the area including sightings of a small turaco that lacks red on the wings and may be an undescribed species. A lepidopterist who visited Ruhizha in the 1950s reported a flock of black birds with yellow crests whose description fitted the scarce Yellow-crested Helmet-Shrike (*Prionops alberti*) but they have not been seen since and the species remains unconfirmed in East Africa.

The "Short Trail" to Mubwindi Swamp (7km return) begins 300m south of the Ruhizha ranger gate, drops steeply off the ridge through dense montane forest, then winds through swampy forest along the valley floor to the edge of the extensive Mubwindi Swamp. Birds along the initial stretch of trail are similar to those found along the road but half way down the hill, different species may be encountered. Spend time in the forest clearing 50m above the stream at the bottom of the valley and scan the mid-storey and canopy carefully for movement. This is the most accessible site on Earth for the rare and localised African Green Broadbill, one of Africa's most sought-after birds. The species has been seen at this spot on numerous occasions, most recently in March 1998 when a pair was seen feeding recently fledged young. Other birds to look for





The large Mubwindi Swamp is home to Carruthers' Cisticola and the localised Grauer's Rush Warbler.

at fruiting trees in this area include Great Blue and Black-billed Turacos, the spectacular Yellow-billed Barbet, Montane Oriole and Waller's Starling. Search the forest along the muddy trail to the edge of the swamp for Bar-tailed Trogon, White-headed Woodhoopoe, the beautiful Grey-chested Illadopsis, Pink-footed Puffback and Lagden's Bush-Shrike. Carruthers' Cisticola and the localised Grauer's Rush Warbler are both common and conspicuous in Mubwindi Swamp, particularly when engaged in breeding displays. Red-chested Flufftail may also be heard calling from the swamp although seeing one requires a combination of luck, patience and a tape recorder.

The "Long Trail" to Mubwindi Swamp (10km return) begins 1.4km north of the Ruhizha Ranger Gate, drops steeply into the valley, crosses a stream and passes through pristine, level forest before crossing a second stream, climbing a ridge and finally descending to the Mubwindi Swamp. This excellent trail has produced all the species recorded along the shorter trail to Mubwindi Swamp, although African Green Broadbill is less reliable here. The dense undergrowth on the initial descent should be searched for Archer's Robin-Chat and Evergreen Forest Warbler (of the extensively cinnamon *barakae* race) whilst the level, park-like forest

after the first stream crossing supports Rufous-breasted Sparrowhawk, Dwarf Honey-guide, Grey-chested Illadopsis, Cabanis's Greenbul and Oriole-Finch. Flowering trees attract the incredible Purple-breasted Sunbird, whilst mixed flocks of Slender-billed, Waller's, Narrow-tailed and Stuhlmann's Starlings congregate when trees are in fruit. All four species of crimsonwing (Dusky, Red-faced, Abyssinian and Shelley's) have been reported from this trail.

The saddle 2km towards Buhoma from the Guesthouse is a good vantage point from which to scan for raptors such as African Goshawk (displaying at dawn), Mountain Buzzard, Ayres' Hawk-Eagle and African Cuckoo-Hawk. Olive and Western Bronze-naped Pigeons, Brown-necked Parrot and Slender-billed Starling also fly over this watershed in the mornings. Check the scrubby, overgrown cultivation north of the road for Brown-backed Scrub Robin, Chubb's Cisticola, the extremely localised Dusky Twinspot, Thick-billed and Streaky Seedeaters and African Citril.

A few birds are easier to see in the vicinity of the Guesthouse than elsewhere in the Ruhizha area, including Scaly Francolin (vocal in the evening and occasionally seen feeding on scraps below the rangers' kitchen), Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo (vocal-





*Narina Trogon is more often heard than seen.*



*Superb montane forest at Ruhizha.*

ising constantly from nearby pine trees during the breeding season) and Stripe-breasted Tit (nesting in boxes erected in trees along the road to the ITFC). The rare Fraser's Eagle-Owl and Red-chested Owlet may be heard at night although African Wood Owl is the only owl likely to be seen. Montane Nightjars (sometimes considered a separate species, Rwenzori Nightjar) vocalise at dawn and dusk and may be seen along the road towards Buhoma or occasionally in the Guesthouse clearing itself.

The School Trail is a short trail indicated by the signpost "Bitanwa Primary School". It passes through more open forest with creeper tangles favoured by Yellowbill (here well above its usual altitudinal range), White-eyed Slaty Flycatcher (of the race *toruensis*, which *lacks* a white eye-ring), the striking Lühder's and Doherty's Bush-Shrikes, Grauer's Warbler and Strange Weaver. The scarce Sharpe's Starling may also be seen vocalising from treetops in the morning.

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## OTHER WILDLIFE

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The attractive L'Hoest's and Blue Monkeys are readily seen around Ruhizha whilst both Mountain Gorilla and Chimpanzee are fairly common but rarely seen. Watch for Carruthers' Mountain Squirrel, the hyperactive Boehm's Squirrel and the unusual Rwenzori Sun Squirrel. Both Peter's and the striking Yellow-backed Duiker have been seen on the track at dawn. A night drive may reward you with Side-striped Jackal or African Civet.

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## FACILITIES

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The Institute for Tropical Forest Conservation (ITFC) guesthouse has bunk beds with bedding, a pit latrine, a rainwater tank for washing (it is recommended that you boil the water prior to drinking although we drank it without ill effect) and a kitchen with pots, cutlery and crockery (a charcoal stove can be arranged). Costs are \$15 per person per night, or camp on the lawn for \$5 per night. For reservations write to: ITFC, P.O. Box 44, Kabale, Uganda.

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The turnoff to Ruhizha lies north of the road to Kisoro from Kabale, 26km from the T-junction to Katuna (opposite the Sky Blue Motel) and 5.5km beyond the turnoff to Buhoma. Both turnoffs are signposted. A 4WD track (2WD with good clearance) climbs steeply up to the Ndeego Gate (14km) and continues to Ruhizha (a further 13.5km), taking 1½-2 hours from Kabale. Ruhizha is also accessible from Buhoma: return 16km to the T-junction and turn right, continuing past a left fork 5.5km further on. This road reaches the forest of "the Neck" 8km after the fork, crosses the Ihihizo River, passes Kitahurira Ranger Post and exits the forest after 4km. Turn right 1.5km further and continue uphill for 20km to Ruhizha.





At the bridge over the Ihihizo River, look for Long-tailed Wagtail and the uncommon Cassin's Grey Flycatcher.

## KITAHURIRA: 'The Neck'

**Kitahurira Ranger Station lies at an altitude of 1550m a.s.l. in the narrow "neck" of forest connecting the larger southern part of the park to the smaller northern sector. Access to this medium-altitude forest is via the road from Ruhizha to Buhoma which bisects "the Neck" for 4km, 21km below Ruhizha. Although camping is possible, "the Neck" is usually birded en route from Ruhizha to Buhoma or vice-versa.**

### BIRDING

Scan the canopy carefully from the roadside for Western Bronze-naped Pigeon sunning in the tree-tops, Black Bee-eater and Petit's Cuckoo-shrike on exposed snags, and Grey Apalis, Many-coloured Bush-Shrike and Brown-capped Weaver in mixed feeding flocks. The stunning Black-faced Rufous Warbler, White-chinned Prinia and the Lühder's Bush-Shrike favour rank vegetation at forest edge and along streams, a habitat shared with the elusive

Toro Olive Greenbul. Watch overhead for Cassin's Hawk-Eagle and search the Ihihizo River from the bridge for African Black Duck, the uncommon Cassin's Grey Flycatcher and Mountain Wagtail. The rare Chapin's Flycatcher has also been reported from the area near the river crossing and there have been unconfirmed sightings of Schouteden's Swift, a species known from the adjacent Congo but as yet unrecorded in East Africa.

<b>TIME REQUIRED</b>	1/2 day
<b>KEY SPECIES</b>	a.) Albertine Rift Endemics- Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher, Blue-headed Sunbird, Purple-breasted Sunbird, Regal Sunbird, Strange Weaver. b.) Other Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Montane (Rwenzori) Nightjar, Bar-tailed Trogon, Black Bee-eater, Willcock's Honeyguide, Black-faced Rufous Warbler, Chapin's Flycatcher, Lagden's Bush Shrike, Brown-capped Weaver.



## BUHOMA: 'The best of Bwindi'

The Bwindi Impenetrable NP headquarters at Buhoma lie in the valley of the Munyaga River at 1550m a.s.l., flanked to the south by steep, forested hills. Excellent forest birding, not least the prospect of numerous rare and localised Albertine Rift endemics, makes this a true birding Mecca.

### BIRDING

A wide, gently undulating track runs south of Buhoma through excellent forest towards Nteka, allowing views of the canopy and forest edge. Thicker vegetation along the first few hundred metres is home to Equatorial Akalat and Olive Long-tailed Cuckoo whilst a mixed, canopy flock containing Dusky Tit and the scarce Oriole-Finch



The lush rainforest at Buhoma is home to many Albertine Rift endemics.

**TIME REQUIRED** 2-3 days

**KEY SPECIES**

a.) Albertine Rift Endemics – Red-throated Alethe, Archer's Robin-Chat, Kivu Ground Thrush, Montane Masked Apalis, Collared Apalis, Grauer's Warbler, Short-tailed Warbler, Red-faced Woodland Warbler, Yellow-eyed Black Flycatcher, Rwenzori Batis and Strange Weaver.

b.) Other – Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Dusky and Olive Long-tailed Cuckoos, Fraser's Eagle-Owl, Montane (Rwenzori) Nightjar, Bar-tailed Trogon, Black Bee-eater, Willcock's Honeyguide, Fine-banded and Elliot's Woodpeckers, Grey-chested and Mountain Illadopses, White-bellied Robin-Chat, Forest Ground Thrush, Black-faced Rufous Warbler, Chapin's Flycatcher, Many-coloured Bush-Shrike, Brown-capped Weaver, White-collared Olive-back, Red-fronted Antpecker and Oriole-Finch.

is occasionally seen in this area. Handsome Francolin and White-tailed Ant Thrush may be found feeding on the track at dawn. High exposed perches in the open forest at the top of the first ascent are favoured by the dazzling Black Bee-eater, Yellow-eyed Black and African Sooty Flycatchers, and Petit's Cuckoo-shrike. The latter is easily overlooked amongst the numerous Waller's and Narrow-tailed Starlings. One of Bwindi's star avian attractions, the diminutive, pitta-like Short-tailed Warbler, may be heard calling in the undergrowth from this point onwards but is most easily seen in the level forest between the two entrances to the Waterfall Trail. Other understory birds more commonly heard than seen in this level area include Red-tailed Bristlebill and the handsome Black-faced Rufous Warbler. The mid-storey and canopy



here supports Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Elliot's and Fine-banded Woodpeckers, Cameroon Sombre, Shelley's and Red-tailed Greenbuls, Mountain Masked and Chestnut-throated Apalises, Olive-green Camaroptera, Grauer's Warbler, Red-faced Woodland Warbler and White-browed Crombec. The rare and elusive Red-fronted Antpecker has also been seen near the second turn-off to the Waterfall Trail, probing under moss on dead branches or gleaning warbler-like in the canopy. The track narrows past this turn-off and climbs to a low saddle, before descending steeply towards Nteko. The beautiful Red-throated Alethe, the scarce Kivu Ground Thrush and Grauer's Warbler may be heard vocalising from the moist, mossy forest in the vicinity of this saddle.

The Waterfall Trail (2km) winds through beautiful forest to a series of cascades along the Munyaga River. This is the best site in Uganda for the Kivu Ground Thrush, a few pairs of which may be seen feeding on the trail (especially between the second and third bridges) at dawn. White-bellied Robin-Chat (in appearance like an akalat with white lores and a bicoloured tail), Short-tailed Warbler and Grey-chested Illadopsis also favour undergrowth along the stream. Dusky Long-tailed

### ALBERTINE RIFT ENDEMISM

The mountains flanking the Albertine Rift Valley form an endemic bird area of considerable importance for they are home to 37 restricted-range species, the so-called "Albertine Rift Endemics". Most of these inhabit montane forest and moorland although 6 species are restricted to forest that is intermediate in character between true montane and lowland forest (transitional forest). No fewer than 10 of the Albertine Rift endemics are globally threatened.

Amongst these are some of Africa's most enigmatic and sought-after birds such as Congo Bay-Owl, African Green Broadbill and Yellow-crested Helmet-Shrike. Whilst a slightly higher proportion of endemics may be found in the Congolese mountains and in the extensive Nyungwe Forest of Rwanda and Burundi, current political instability in these neighbouring countries makes southwestern Uganda the best place to search for these special birds. Of the 26 Albertine Rift endemics occurring in Uganda, 24 may be found in the magnificent Bwindi-Impenetrable NP. Other productive sites include Rwenzori and Mgahinga Gorilla NPs, supporting 19 Albertine Rift endemics each.



*The wide trails around Buhoma offer some of the very best forest birding in Africa.*



Cuckoo and White-bellied Crested Flycatcher are common in this area and Slender-billed Starling may be seen in the vicinity of the waterfalls. The rare Fraser's Eagle-Owl has been seen during the day near the Munyaga River crossing closest to the park entrance.

The rank secondary vegetation along the track between the headquarters and the entrance to the forest supports Brown-backed Scrub Robin, Grey-capped Warbler, Banded and White-chinned Prinias, Dusky Blue and Black-and-white Flycatchers, Common Wattle-eye, Lühder's and Bocage's Bush-Shrikes, Black-necked Weaver and the scarce and secretive White-collared Olive-back.

The Muzabajiro River Trail is a 5.2km loop trail that begins just north of the main forest entrance and climbs over a ridge into the Muzabajiro valley. The steep terrain along this trail offers good views over the forest canopy where Western Bronze-naped Pigeon, Dusky Tit and Petit's Cuckoo-shrike may be seen. Species typical of the forest interior such as African Broadbill, Equatorial Akalat and Kivu Ground Thrush are also present but are more easily found along the main track.

The short Munyaga River Trail runs along the park boundary from the headquarters and may be walked without a guide. Look for African Black Duck and Cassin's Grey Flycatcher along the river and Dusky Blue Flycatcher and Mackinnon's Shrike at the forest edge.

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## OTHER WILDLIFE

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Buhoma is famous as the most accessible and reliable place for seeing Mountain Gorillas in Uganda, with eco-tourists visiting the two habituated gorilla groups year-round. Tracking permits cost \$150 per person and should be booked WELL IN ADVANCE. If you do not organise your permit in advance, it might still be possible to go gorilla tracking by putting your name on the stand-by list on your arrival at Buhoma and hoping for a cancellation. Guereza Colobus, L'Hoest's, Blue and Red-tailed Monkeys are frequently seen along the main track whilst Chimpanzees are commonly heard. Spectacular clouds of butterflies are a feature of open areas in the forest and impress even the most single-minded birders.

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Buhoma is reached from the south either from Ruhizha (see Ruhizha directions) or direct from Kabale via Kanungu (the recommended route from Kampala). From the Katuna junction in Kabale (opposite the Sky Blue Motel), the turnoff is sign-posted 21km towards Kisoro and it is 90km from this point to Buhoma, a journey taking 3-4 hours. Turn left at Burema, 15km north of Kanungu, and follow the signposts for 33km to Buhoma. From the north, Burema lies 40km south of the Ishasha entrance to Queen Elizabeth NP. It is also possible to approach from the Kasese road via Ishaka and Rukungiri but this road is periodically in very poor condition.

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## FACILITIES

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**Buhoma Gorilla Camp:** luxury tents, \$125 per person full board. For reservations: Abercrombie and Kent, P.O.Box 7799, Kampala. Tel. (256-41) 266700 and fax (256-41) 266703. E-mail: ank@imul.com

**Mantana Camp:** luxury tents, \$120 per person full board. For reservations: Mantana African Safaris, P.O.Box 10060, Kampala. Tel. (256-42) 20152 and fax (256-42) 20152. E-mail: mas10@calva.com

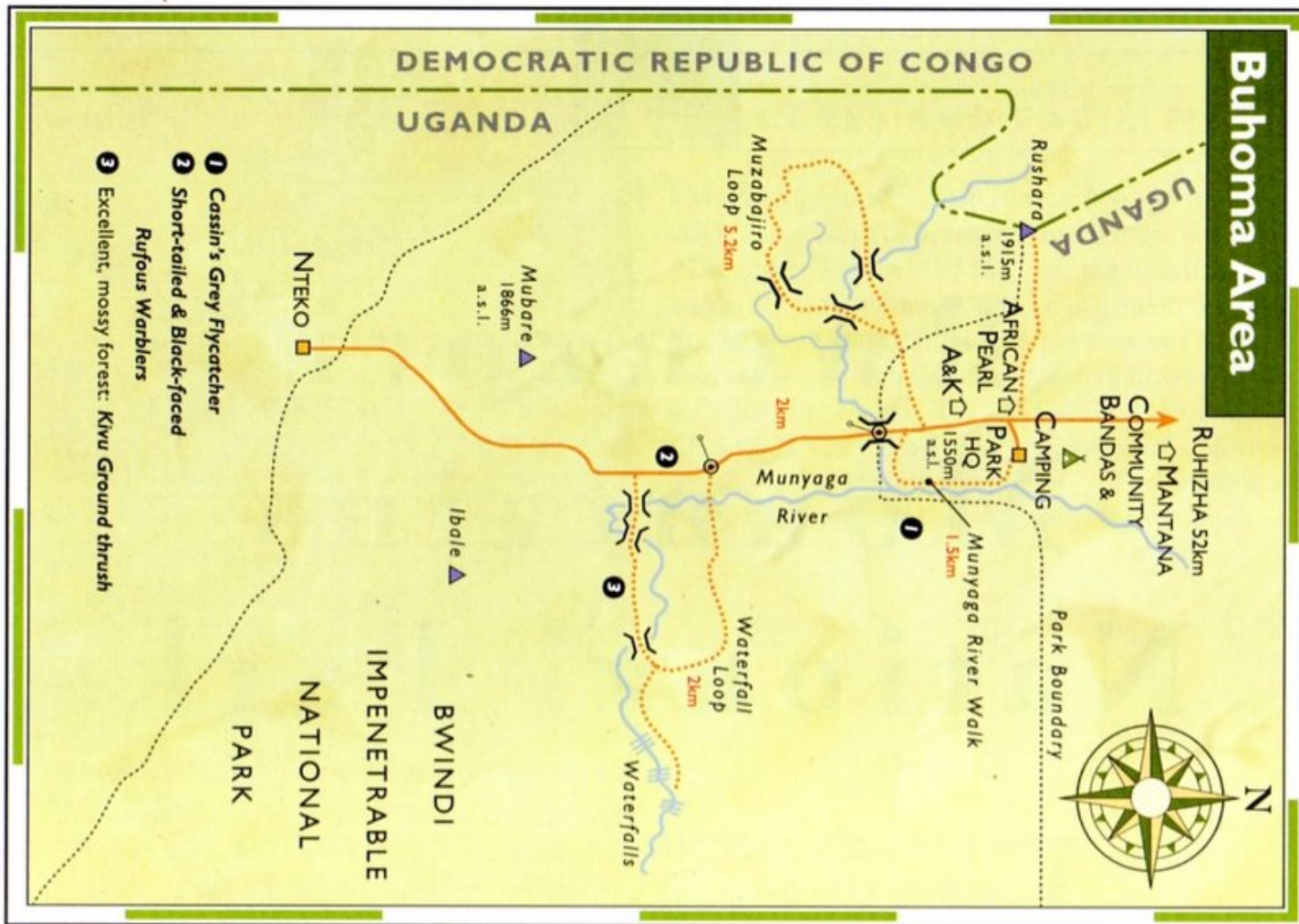
**African Pearl Homestead** has self-contained bandas, \$90 per person full board. For reservations: African Pearl Safaris, P.O.Box 4562, Kampala. Tel. (256-41) 233566 and fax (256-41) 235770.

**Buhoma Community Campsite:** 4-bed bandas, \$7 per person, covered camping, \$3.50 per person, and a restaurant serving basic, inexpensive meals.

It is necessary to use the services of a national park guide when entering the park. This costs \$7 per group for a 1/2 day walk and should be arranged at park headquarters the day prior to departure, particularly if an early start is required.



# Buhoma Area



# Ruhizha Area

