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BEHAVIOUR

INTERESTING BEHAVIOURAL OBSERVATION OF A SHOEBILL *BALAENICEPS REX* IN THE BANGWEULU WETLANDS, ZAMBIA

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The Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex* is a large bird, standing 110–140 cm tall, and prehistoric looking (Elliott 1992). It is appropriately named after its heavy, shoe-shaped bill (Figure 1). Sometimes it is also referred to as Whalehead. Although they are stork-like (Ciconiiformes) in appearance, shoebills are phylogenetically most closely related to pelicans (Pelecaniformes), with their closest relative being the Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* (Mayr 2003). The Shoebill is listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN, largely on account of a decreasing population size and loss of habitat (BirdLife International 2016).

Shoebills are widely, but locally, distributed in large swamps from

Zambia to South Sudan (Elliott 1992). Their preferred habitat, for foraging and breeding, is that of seasonally flooded marshes dominated by *Papyrus Cyperus papyrus*, *Phragmites* reeds, cattails *Typha* spp. and grasses, particularly *Miscanthidium* spp. (Guillet 1984, Hancock et al. 1992). Shoebills are piscivorous, preying mainly prey on fish, but they are known to eat all sorts of other wetland vertebrates.



Figure 1. The shoe-shaped or whale-shaped bill of the Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex*
<http://vmus.adu.org.za/?vm=BirdPix-29167>

They prefer Lungfish *Protopterus aethiopicus*, but they do prey on a variety of other fish species including Senegal Bichir *Polypterus senegalus*, catfish (*Clarias* spp.) and *Tilapia* spp (Guillet 1979, Elliott 1992, Mullers & Amar 2015).

Shoebills are well known for their statue-like behaviour when they are hunting; they are sit-and-wait predators (Guillet 1979). They spend 85% of their time standing, preening and sitting, 14% of their time walking, and 1% of their time flying (Mullers & Amar 2015). They strike at prey, on average, once every 2.2 hours, and catch a prey item once every 8.3 hours, on average (Mullers & Amar 2015).

This paper describes an observation of a Shoebill actively taking a bath, a behaviour which appears not to have been recorded in the wild. A sequence of photographs was taken of the event, and these are presented as a visual record of the behaviour.

I visited Bangweulu Wetlands in northern Zambia in April and June 2015. The rainy season in these wetlands usually starts in December and lasts until May, with peak flooding of the expansive grassy floodplains and seasonal swamp areas in March–May. By the end of June, the flood waters start to recede towards the permanently flooded central swamp.

On 28 June 2015, I observed a Shoebill taking a bath. It was midday. The Shoebill walked up to a pool of water and waded in to the water until its legs were completely submerged, so that the Shoebill looked very much like its pelican relatives (Figure 2). It seemed to be swimming and floating along, but in reality it was actually walking. It proceeded to wet its feathers and dunk, almost dive, its head and body under the water completely, and then ruffled its feathers upon emerging (Figures 3 to 5). It waded on through the water, again with completely submerged legs (Figures 6 and 7). The bathing activity lasted three minutes, from 12h44 to 12h47.

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Editor's note: Figures 2 to 7 follow as a sequence of full page illustrations.



Figure 2. Shoebill wading into the water, Bangweulu Wetland, Zambia, 28 June 2015, 12:44:03



Figure 3. Seven seconds later. Diving under the water to submerge itself completely. Bangweulu Wetland, Zambia, 28 June 2015, 12:44:10



Figure 4. Three seconds later. Ruffling its feathers for a proper clean. Bangweulu Wetland, Zambia, 28 June 2015, 12:44:13



Figure 5. Two seconds later. Bathing session of the Shoebill continues. Bangweulu Wetland, Zambia, 28 June 2015, 12:44:15



Figure 6. Two seconds later. Wading along through the water. Bangweulu Wetland, Zambia, 28 June 2015, 12:44:17



Figure 7. Three seconds later. Shoebill partly emerges from the water between bathing sessions. The plumage is waterproof and there is no trace of wetness. Bangweulu Wetland, Zambia, 28 June 2015, 12:44:20