

Tropical Biology Association
A simple guide to Kibale bird families
 By Leon Bennun (additions from Anthony Kuria)

When you see a bird, knowing which family it belongs to is the *critical step* to correctly identifying the bird. Once this is known, then you are more than half-way to knowing its full identity. Each family has its particular characteristics and a good knowledge of these is invaluable to a birder. This short guide gives the key features of each of the main bird families represented in Kibale. With practice, you will quickly become familiar with their main features.

BKnT = 'Birds of Kenya and northern Tanzania' by Zimmerman *et al.* 1999.

BAoS = 'Birds of East Africa' by Stevenson, T and J. Fanshawe. 2002.

BKnT	Family Brief	BEA
60	Bee-eaters: Graceful birds with long, curved beaks (but much bigger than sunbirds, which they slightly resemble). They are very aerial, flying out from a perch to capture insects on the wing (flycatching). Except for the Little Bee-eater, they generally perch high up at the edge of the canopy or in a dead tree. They take many venomous insects and you will often see them banging their prey against a tree branch to remove the sting.	114
62	Wood Hoopoes: Long, curved bills, long tails, glossy metallic green or blue plumage distinguishes this group. They behave rather like woodpeckers, clambering over branches and tree-trunks and probing in the bark for insects. Some species are very noisy and gregarious (living in groups).	119
63	Hornbills: A distinctive group, with disproportionately large and heavy bills, slightly curved and often adorned by a large casqued on top. Long tails, large size, upright stance on a perch and generally black, grey and white plumage are other good characteristics.	122
64	Barbets: Barbets are small (tinker-birds) to medium-sized birds; they are nearly always very thickset and built, with large heads and eyes, short tails and thick, massive bills. Barbets are mainly fruit feeders. When not foraging they may be quite inactive, sitting for long periods on a perch, often concealed by dense vegetation. Most of them have monotonous popping, churring or tonking calls.	128
65	Woodpeckers: Easily distinguished by shape and habits. All have a powerful, chisel-shaped beak that is used to dig for insects in the bark and wood of trees. The head appears slightly hammer-shaped. Woodpeckers clamber rapidly up and down tree-trunks and branches, using their stiff tail feathers as a supporting prop while feeding.	137
75	Bulbuls and Greenbuls: Greenbuls can best be distinguished by lacking any obvious distinguishing features. They look like the archetypical passerine (perching) birds: medium-sized, neither slender nor stout, with unspecialised bills and medium-length tails. Their plumage is mainly drab olive-browns and greens, and they spend most of their time foraging in dense vegetation in the canopy or undergrowth, taking both fruit and insects.	156
76		
81	Cuckoo-shrikes: are birds of the forest canopy, noticeably slender with dense, fine plumage and fairly long, slightly hooked bills. They are generally silent birds, often at the edge of a bird feeding party.	154
83	Bush Shrikes: somewhat resemble cuckoo-shrikes but are stouter and more robust, with large bills that are hooked at the end; they are skulking birds of dense vegetation, often near the ground. Many species are noisy with a wide range of calls, from melodious, bell-like whistles to harsh grating buzzes and churrs.	238

- 86 **Flycatchers:** Another large group that includes several different and probably unrelated 204
87 sets of species. The **True flycatchers** are small to medium-sized passerines, usually rather
88 fat and dumpy-looking, and best distinguished by their habit of sitting very upright on a
perch, scanning their surrounding, then flying out rapidly to intercept a passing insect.
Their bills are thin and weak but flattened and broad near the base. Most of them are
soberly plumaged in dull greys, dark blues and browns. The **Monarch flycatchers** are
often more brightly coloured, and range from slender birds with long tails (like the
Paradise Flycatchers) to stout birds with short tails (like the Wattle-eyes). All have large
heads and eyes and broad, flattened bills. Monarch flycatchers, sometimes gleaning insects
from the surface of leaves or twigs while in flight. They can resemble warblers in
behaviour but are stockier and less delicate birds.
- 91 **Thrushes and allies:** This large group includes the thrushes, robin chats and akalats. 168
to They resemble greenbuls but are stouter and more robust, with relatively large heads and
94 long, strong legs. Many species forage on the ground, or bounce along the boughs of trees.
They eat mainly insects, but some also take fruit. Many species are brightly coloured red or
orange.
- 95 **Warbler:** are another very large group of passerines. They differ in shape but can be 179
to distinguished by their size, delicate appearance (with fine, slender bills and legs), and habits
103 of moving actively about in dense vegetation, picking insects off leaves and twigs. The
apalises have long, graduated tails, often with white edges or tips to the feathers, and are
mainly canopy birds; the **prinias** are also long-tailed and slender, confined to dense
herbage near the ground; the **camaropteras** have shorter tails and dull green and grey
plumage; the **crombecs** have extremely short tails; and the **cisticolas** are predominantly
brown and buff in colour, often with black or white bands and spots in the tail, normally
in grassland or at the forest edge.
- 104 **Sunbirds:** are small, graceful, active birds, best distinguished by their long, curved bills. 221
to They flit about constantly, rarely staying in one place for long, searching for insects and
107 probing for nectar. Many male sunbirds are brightly coloured with attractive metallic
plumage.
- 102 **White-eyes:** are small, warbler-like birds, mainly yellowish-green in colour with a 220
distinctive white eye-ring. They occur in small active groups in the canopy.
- 108 **Sparrows and Weavers:** look like finches and waxbills, but are usually larger in size. 251
to Weavers are often brightly coloured yellow and black (one species, Vieillot's Black 251
116 Weaver, is black with a yellow eye).
- 117 **Finches and Waxbills:** Small birds with relatively stout, conical bills, tapering to a 279
point, that are adapted to manipulating and crushing seeds and fruits. Some also take 276
insects. The smaller species may resemble warblers, but the bills is very different in shape.