

Shoebill

a LTERNATIVELY CALLED THE WHALE-HEADED stork, the shoebill is one of the most distinctive of the large wading birds. Its dominating feature is its huge bill, which bears an uncanny resemblance to a Dutch wooden clog. Indeed, early Arab traders in Africa, who encountered the bird in the marshlands of the Upper Nile, dubbed it abu markub, or “father of the shoe.” Its scientific name, which translates as “King Whalehead,” is no less descriptive.

The shoebill is a solitary bird of the vast African marshes, favoring swamps of floating papyrus (“sudd”), lake-edge marshes, and reed beds. Its taxonomic affinities have been much debated. It appears to be related to both the Ciconiiformes and Pelicaniformes, and probably represents an early offshoot of the ancestors of the two groups.

A Bill for Catching Fish

FORM AND FUNCTION

The shoebill’s eponymous bill is unique among all birds, being nearly 20cm (8in) long and extraordinarily deep. It is sharply edged and has a terminal hook, unlike the pointed or blunt tips of other ciconiiform birds. This is a strong bill, designed to withstand the pressures of capturing large fish.

Shoebills feed alone, standing on vegetation rather than in the water. Even if members of a pair feed in the same area, they separate themselves. The bird stands quietly, holding its bill

Right The flaking bill of a shoebill or Whale-headed stork. The huge bill is adapted to probing muddy waters for fish such as lungfish and gars. It will also opportunistically take frogs, young turtles and crocodiles, and other small animals. Additionally, shoebills have been reported to feed on floating carrion.



downward and peering over it in search of prey. Waiting motionless, or moving very slowly with great care, are apparently vital elements of the bird's tactics, and it may remain frozen for up to 30 minutes or more. Its most characteristic prey items are lungfish (*Protopterus* spp.), which come to the surface of poorly oxygenated water to breathe, and in doing so become vulnerable. The bird strikes bill-first, forward and down, launching its entire body toward the prey. From this collapsed position, it rights itself by jerking back, using its wings if necessary; if it has been successful, the fish will be firmly clamped in its bill. Recognizing the importance of stealth and surprise, the bird moves to another fishing place after each strike.

The shoebill flies well once aloft, and can soar to great altitudes in thermals. It flies with its neck curved over its back, like a heron, in order to support the weight of the head.

Dry-Season Breeders

BREEDING BIOLOGY

The shoebill breeds at different times over its range, but generally in the dry season, when water levels are falling and prey are perhaps easier to come by in the shrinking swamps. As ground nesters, their nesting areas lie well within the swamp and are well defended. Even so, crocodiles may sometimes kill nestlings. Courtship displays are little-known, but appear to include soaring



SHOEBILL

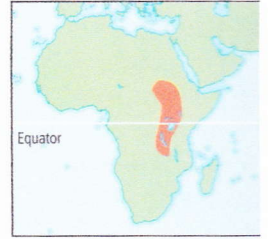
Balaeniceps rex

Order: Ciconiiformes

Family: Balaenicipitidae

DISTRIBUTION

N C and E Africa



HABITAT Wetlands

SIZE Length: 110–140cm (42–54in); weight: 4.4–6.7kg (9.7–14.8lb). Males are larger than females, with longer bills.

PLUMAGE Blue-gray, with dark green sheen on the back. Juveniles are darker.

VOICE Normally quiet; the little-heard flight call is a guttural croak. At the nest, a soft whining or moaning sound; the bird also claps its bill.

NEST A large mound of aquatic vegetation, usually floating in deep water well within a reed swamp or placed on an isolated island. Material is added continually to counteract subsidence and decay.

EGGS 2–3; dull chalky blue to white. Incubation 30 days; nesting period 95–105 days.

DIET Typically fish, especially large ones, but also frogs, turtles, aquatic snakes, and lizards.

CONSERVATION STATUS Lower Risk/Near Threatened

and bill clattering. Given that in most populations the birds are sedentary, it may be that pairs reform. Hatching is asynchronous, as is usually the case in wading birds. The adult may sometimes use its great bill to carry water to the nest to cool the chicks.

This unusual species is widespread but localized within its range. The remote, impenetrable nature of its habitat means that there is no reliable estimate of its numbers. Habitat protection is the main conservation issue, given the bird's dependence on vast wetlands that fluctuate annually. One important refuge, where there is an estimated 1,500 individual shoebills, is the Bangweulu Swamp in Zambia, one of the largest and most important of the wetlands in Africa. Another stronghold is in the vast Sudd of Sudan, but this swamp, along with others, is now threatened by water diversion and drainage. JAF

◀ **Left** Resting its heavy bill on its chest, the shoebill can stand motionless for hours, moving only occasionally to alter the position of its head. Yet once potential prey is spotted, it leaps into action. Shoebills lead solitary lives; only during the breeding season are they found in pairs.