

The Living Dinosaur

By Adam Trujillo

While every species of bird is unique in its own way, there are some species that stand out more than others. One of these is the Shoebill. This bird, endemic to Central and Northeast Africa, stands between 3.5 to 5 feet in height, with an 8 foot wingspan. It has gray plumage with large yellow eyes, and long legs. With its huge height and striking appearance, this bird strongly resembles a dinosaur... or perhaps a muppet.

But despite its size, the most striking thing about this bird is it's big, honking beak. Spanning about 7 inches, the bill is said to resemble a huge Dutch wooden clog shoe (hence the name Shoebill). In fact, the Shoebill's bill is large enough for them to prey on lungfish, turtles, fish, and even young crocodiles.

These large prey items can difficult to catch, so the Shoebill spends most of it's day fishing in the African swamps. This bird hunts by standing stock still and waiting patiently. Sometimes it'll stand still as a statue for hours at a time. Then, once an unlucky fish or turtle swims by, the Shoebill collapses forward with its whole body, engulfing its prey in its bill and shaking it to death.

In addition to catching larger prey items, the big bill helps these birds communicate with one another and other animals. Shoebills will clap their mandibles together to attract mates and scare off intruders. This clapping sounds a bit like teeth-chattering, only louder. They can even clap their mandibles together so quickly that it sounds like a machine gun is being fired!

These birds prefer to live in solitude. Even a mating pair will forage separately across the swamp. If two males come across one another, then it is a fair bet that they will fight, or at least argue with some territorial bill-clattering.

Being a very odd bird, it's taken a while for the Shoebill to be properly scientifically classified. Because of physical and behavioral studies, this bird was once placed in the same order as storks, herons, and ibises (order Ciconiiformes). Still other physical and genetic studies classified this bird as more closely related to pelicans (order Pelecaniformes). But more recently, the Shoebill has been placed into its own taxonomic family, Balaenicipitidae. What with all the confusion, the current taxonomic placement for Shoebills is still being debated, and there might be more changes down the line.

The Shoebill is a fascinating bird, and there might still be more left to learn about it. Unfortunately, habitat loss and capture by humans, amongst other threats, has put these birds in peril. The Shoebill is classified as Vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which estimates that there are somewhere between 3,300 and 5,300 mature birds of this species remaining in the wild in Africa. But hopefully, with more habitat protection and conservation work, we can keep these prehistoric-looking creatures around for a long time.

Photo by Melissa Askew

Caption: The Shoebill lives in the swamps and wetlands of Central and Northeast Africa.