Available from https://tipas.kew.org/site/lake-opeta-wetland/
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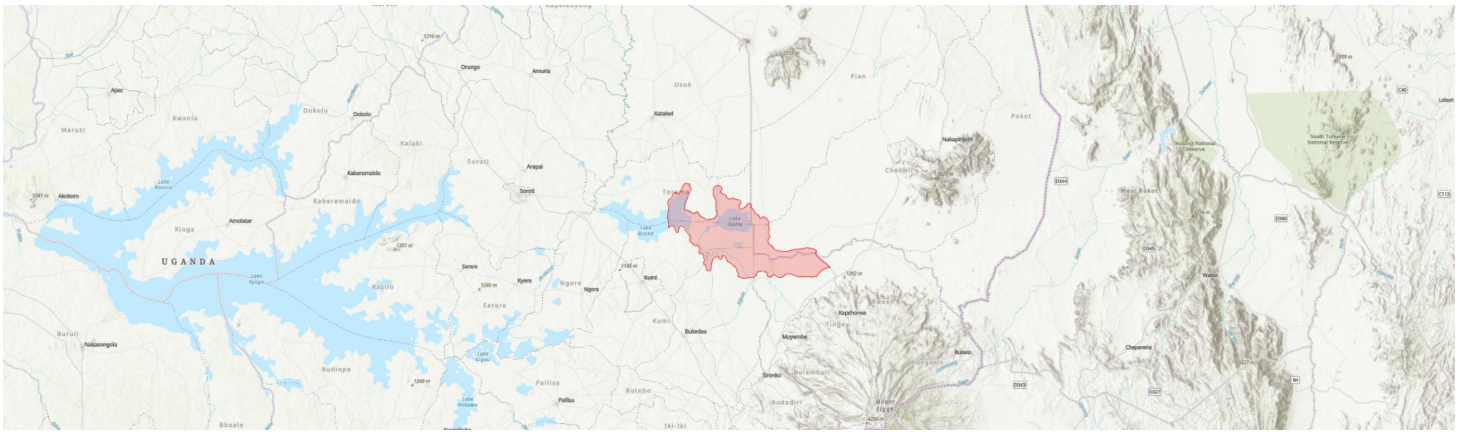
# Lake Opeta Wetland

**UGATIPA29**




Country: **Uganda**
Administrative region: **Eastern (Region)**
Central co-ordinates: **1.60077 N, 34.19305 E**
Area: **566km²**

## Qualifying IPA criteria

C(iii)

## IPA assessment rationale

Lake Opeta qualifies as an IPA under sub-criterion C(iii) as one of the five best sites for nationally Vulnerable habitat freshwater marsh (VU). Encompassing 7.9% of the national resource, this IPA is possibly the largest extent of freshwater marsh national that could be managed as a single site. As freshwater wetlands become more threatened nationally, it is important to conserve the marshes at this site, particularly to preserve the many important ecosystem services they provide.

## Site description

Lake Opeta Wetland IPA (hereafter: Lake Opeta) is one of the most important wetlands nationally. The lake and its surrounding habitats are situated in the Kyoga Basin in northeastern Uganda, in the districts of Nakapiripirit, Sironko, Katakwi and Kumi and is located 25 km from Kumi town. The IPA boundary is based on that of the Lake Opeta Wetland System Ramsar site, while the northern part of this IPA overlaps with Pian-Upe Wildlife Reserve. The main inflow into the Opeta system is through River Sironko (Kasangaki 2009).

## Botanical significance

Lake Opeta is one of the most important areas of freshwater marsh, a nationally Vulnerable habitat type, in Uganda. Encompassing 8% of the national resource (Richards et al. 2024), this IPA is likely the largest extent of freshwater marsh that can be managed as a single site. Wetlands are under significant pressure nationally and are estimated to have declined from 17.5% national coverage in the 1990s to 8.5% by 2021 (Wambede 2021). Several wetlands in Uganda have been heavily degraded due to agricultural encroachment -- rice farming in particular -- resulting from land shortages (Bunyangha et al. 2022). Loss of ecosystem services has been linked to this encroachment, for instance around Mpologoma wetlands degradation has been linked to increased flooding locally (Wambede 2021).
While there are currently no IPA trigger species in criteria A and B in the Lake Opeta wetland system, further surveys may reveal species of interest. The IPA holds Cenchrus setosus subsp. setosus (Syn: Pennisetum ramosum), a Crop Wild Relative to Pearl Millet – Cenchrus americanus (Syn: Pennisetum glaucum).

## Habitat and geology

The main vegetation type of the general landscape in this area is Acacia-Hyparrhenia-Themeda grass savanna (Langdale-Brown et al. 1964). Lake Opeta wetland system lies on flat terrain and is predominantly an extensive marsh of Echinochloa pryamidalis and Vossia cuspidata surrounding the open water of the lake to the east and south graduating into dry Hyparrhenia grassland savannas. The swamp has Lake Opeta most of which is covered by Nymphaea nouchali var. caerulea with Najas pectinata and Ceratophyllum demersum and surrounded by a thin fringe or small pockets of Cyperus papyrus to the eastern side and patches of Miscanthus and Typha (Byaruhanga & Kigoolo 2005, Kalema 2005, Odull & Byaruhanga 2009). The marshy areas are fringed by seasonally flooded communities of impeded drainage with Panicum repens, Sporobolus pyramidalis, Cyperus articulatus C. denudatus and

Cynodon dactylon (Kalema 2005). The drier land patches are composed of thicket and bushland communities of Euphorbia candelabrum, Grewia villosa in mixture with species of Acacia, Ziziphus, Combretum and Harrisonia.
In the centre of the IPA is Tisai Island, which is occupied by a small community of people. As a result, this area is largely transformed to arable agriculture (Google Earth 2025).
The climate of Lake Opeta wetland system is tropical and influenced by the air currents such as the southeast and northeast monsoons. The system has a rainy and dry season. The area generally experiences a uni-modal low rainfall which comes in the long, wet season of April to October, in contrast to the bimodal pattern of the south and west of Uganda (State of Environment Report, 1998). Rainfall is erratic, variable and highly localized, ranging from 500 – 1,000 mm with a mean annual figure of between 500 to 700 mm. Mean annual minimum temperatures range from 15 to 17.50 C and mean maximum temperature from 30 - 32.50 C. Lake Opeta wetland system is underlain by a mixture of Pre-Cambrian and Cenozoic rocks of Pleistocene to recent (NEMA 2009).

## Conservation issues

Lake Opeta Wetland is both an Important Bird Area (IBA) and a Ramsar Site (Odull & Byaruhanga 2009). NatureUganda has been promoting the conservation of Lake Opeta as a potential tourism destination and also prioritizing it for conservation because of its importance for the survival of the Near Threatened Fox's Weaver, Uganda's only endemic bird (Byaruhanga & Kigolo 2005). This site is also of note for the presence of a Vulnerable cichlid fish, Paralabidochromis plagiodon, which is restricted to lakeshores of Lake Victoria, Kyoga and Opeta (FishBase 2024; Morris 2024). NatureUganda has also been lobbying the relevant institutions to upgrade the conservation status of the area while the Wetland Management Department undertakes education and awareness activities in the area.
There is often overstocking of cattle grazing in the wetlands during dry seasons, which may have a long-term impact on the ecology and character of the area. Fishing occurs on the lake, often leading to the subsequent cutting of trees for smoking fish, along with charcoal burning (Kalema 2005). The River Sironko, which drains into the Lake Opeta system, is highly turbid from agricultural activities upstream (Kasangaki 2009), and may potentially impact the quality of the freshwater marshes at this site.

## Site assessor(s)

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**Date of first assessment:**

1st Oct 2024

**Reviewed by:**

Micheal Kibuule, Nature Uganda

## IPA criterion A species

| SPECIES | QUALIFYING SUB-CRITERION | ≥ 1% OF GLOBAL POPULATION | ≥ 5% OF NATIONAL POPULATION | 1 OF 5 BEST SITES NATIONALLY | ENTIRE GLOBAL POPULATION | SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY IMPORTANT | ABUNDANCE AT SITE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

## IPA criterion C qualifying habitats

| HABITAT | QUALIFYING SUB-CRITERION | ≥ 5% OF NATIONAL RESOURCE | ≥ 10% OF NATIONAL RESOURCE | 1 OF 5 BEST SITES NATIONALLY | AREAL COVERAGE AT SITE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Freshwater marshes (VU) | C(iii) | ✓ | – | ✓ | 374.1 |
| Vitellaria (Butyrospermum) wooded grassland (EN) | C(iii) | – | – | – | 0.0000533 |

## General site habitats

| GENERAL SITE HABITAT | PERCENT COVERAGE | IMPORTANCE |
|---|---|---|
| Wetlands (inland) - Bogs, Marshes, Swamps, Fens, Peatlands [generally over 8 ha] | – | Major |
| Wetlands (inland) - Permanent Freshwater Lakes [over 8 ha] | – | Major |
| Artificial - Terrestrial - Arable Land | – | Major |
| Savanna - Dry Savanna | – | Minor |
| Grassland - Subtropical/Tropical Seasonally Wet/Flooded Lowland Grassland | – | Major |

## Land use types

| LAND USE TYPE | PERCENT COVERAGE | IMPORTANCE |
|---|---|---|
| Nature conservation | – | Major |
| Agriculture (arable) | – | Major |
| Agriculture (pastoral) | – | Major |
| Agriculture (aquatic) | – | Major |

## Threats

| THREAT | SEVERITY | TIMING |
|---|---|---|
| Residential & commercial development - Housing & urban areas | Medium | Ongoing - stable |
| Agriculture & aquaculture - Annual & perennial non-timber crops - Small-holder farming | Medium | Ongoing - stable |
| Agriculture & aquaculture - Livestock farming & ranching - Small-holder grazing, ranching or farming | Medium | Ongoing - trend unknown |
| | | |

| THREAT | SEVERITY | TIMING |
|---|---|---|
| Agriculture & aquaculture - Marine & freshwater aquaculture - Subsistence/artisinal aquaculture | Unknown | Ongoing - trend unknown |
| Biological resource use - Logging & wood harvesting | Low | Ongoing - trend unknown |

## Protected areas

| PROTECTED AREA NAME | PROTECTED AREA TYPE | RELATIONSHIP WITH IPA | AREAL OVERLAP |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pian Upe | Wildlife Reserve | protected/conservation area overlaps with IPA | 76 |

## Conservation designation

| DESIGNATION NAME | PROTECTED AREA | RELATIONSHIP WITH IPA | AREAL OVERLAP |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lake Opeta | Important Bird Area | protected/conservation area matches IPA | 566 |
| Lake Opeta | Key Biodiversity Area | protected/conservation area matches IPA | 566 |
| Lake Opeta Wetland System | Ramsar | protected/conservation area matches IPA | 566 |

## Management type

| MANAGEMENT TYPE | DESCRIPTION | YEAR STARTED | YEAR FINISHED |
|---|---|---|---|
| No management plan in place | | – | – |

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