



WILL WHITFORD

DANCES WITH WOLVES

The Ethiopian wolf survives in a beautiful, but now threatened, corner of Ethiopia. It's an area seldom visited by tourists, but is increasingly accessible – and should be on your wish list. **Sue Watt** fell for the charm of the Bale Mountains.

“A lot of things pop up mysteriously here,” James told me as we drove along the edge of the Hareenna Forest. Like the setting of a scary fairy tale, Hareenna is full of twisted, gnarled old trees swathed in lichen and moss, looking as if they'd been swirling around and then frozen on the spot, their boughs like arms reaching out to grab you. Largely unexplored, no one knows exactly what lives in this dense, dark cloud forest.

As resident naturalist for three years in Bale Mountains National Park, biologist James Ndungu has an encyclopaedic knowledge of its flora and fauna, but the forest still holds secrets, even from him. “I was with some researchers one morning when we found this unusual snake, about four feet long, just basking by the roadside in the sun,” he explained. Experts eventually confirmed his snake as a new species. More recently, 22 moths and butterflies previously unknown to science have been discovered here.

The forest covers a vast tranche of the 2200-square-kilometre Bale Mountains National Park, ranked as the fourth-best birding area in all Africa. It's also home to some weird and wonderful creatures. There are black-maned lions, giant forest hogs, African wild dogs, jackals and leopards (including a rare black one) all occasionally seen in forest clearings. Then there are endemic species like the mountain nyala, with their impressive curving horns, little Menelik's bushbuck and the elusive Bale monkeys. But perhaps the most wonderful of all the animals here is the Ethiopian wolf, which preys on the weirdest of Bale's creatures, the giant mole rat.

You wouldn't blame the Ethiopian wolf for having an identity crisis. Classed first as a red jackal, then a fox, DNA analysis has recently proved it is indeed a wolf. Regardless of its classification, it is utterly beautiful – and extremely vulnerable. Only around 500 exist globally, living in the various highlands, and around half of them can be found

Perhaps the most wonderful of all the animals here is the Ethiopian wolf, which preys on the weirdest of Bale's creatures, the giant mole rat



WILL WHITFORD

in Bale. Despite being the world's rarest canid, they are surprisingly easy to spot.

Travelling along the Sanetti Plateau at over 4000 metres above sea level, we spotted one on our first drive into the park. Like the Hareenna Forest, the plateau has an air of other-worldliness about it. A bleak moonlike landscape dotted with white everlasting flowers and giant lobelia, it's the world's largest expanse of Afro-alpine moorland.

We saw him trotting lightly across the empty horizon, looking more like a fox, with a thick red coat to keep him warm against the bitter cold and with something swinging gently from his jaws. Closer inspection through binoculars revealed his catch to be a giant mole rat, every bit as grotesque as its name suggests, with eyes at the top of its head and big goofy teeth.

While we were busy watching that first wolf, another was busy watching us, standing right next to our Land Rover. Just an arm's length away, we gasped at his beauty when we suddenly noticed him, his orange eyes perusing us inquisitively before he turned on his heels and almost skipped away. We saw several others too, mostly feasting on giant mole rats, or prowling, or skulking down low in pursuit of one. At least the wolves don't need to worry about a food shortage – around 5000 mole rats share every square kilometre with them up on Sanetti Plateau. “This place may seem bleak and cold but it's full of life,” James said. “There's a higher density of rats here than there is in the Serengeti!” →



WILL WHITFORD

BUT CONSERVATIONISTS DO NEED TO WORRY ABOUT OTHER threats to the wolves' survival. Ethiopia's expanding population – currently around 90 million – is putting the land under extreme pressure. Illegal settlements are scattered across the park, and you'll often see people, many on horseback, tending their flocks of goats or herding cattle. All the local families have dogs too, to protect their livestock from predators such as hyena and leopard, and they are a crucial part of rural life. However, the dogs don't share only the land with Ethiopian wolves: they also share their diseases. Outbreaks of rabies and canine distemper have almost wiped out the wolf populations in previous years.

The Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme (EWCP) based in Bale is proactive in protecting the wolves and their unique habitat, and thankfully numbers are now recovering. Their main tasks include monitoring the wolf populations and disease management: over the past two years they have vaccinated some 4200 dogs in Bale alone and are researching vaccines for the wolves.

Alongside their scientific work, they raise awareness and educate people living in the six areas where wolves can be found. Besides Bale, these include Arsi Mountains National Park, North and South Wollo, Guassa and Simien Mountains National Park. As ever in Africa, the Bale question is as much about people as it is about its precious wildlife. Until recently the Park had few visitors other than a handful of hardy backpackers staying in local guesthouses, and tourism provided little income as an alternative to farming. This is beginning to change, however, with the opening of Bale Mountain Lodge, the only lodge in the park, which lies in the beautiful Katcha clearing of the Harenna Forest.

Owned by British couple Guy and Yvonne Levene, who first visited the area during a British Army posting in Addis Ababa, this relaxed eight-roomed ecolodge is far more than a personal business venture. "Conservation is our key driver," Guy told me, "but we are conscious of the need to marry our plans with the needs of the local population and to make tourism an integral part of their lives so that together we can reduce other, more negative, activities such as deforestation and overgrazing."

Guy works closely with the EWCP, and a percentage of the lodge income is passed on to them. A research centre has been built at the lodge, where researchers can base themselves and make presentations to guests about their projects. But for conservation efforts to succeed, local people must be brought outside. To this end the nearby



SAFARI PLANNER



■ **Getting there** Several operators offer trips to Bale. Sue travelled with Dinknesh Tours (www.dinkneshethiopiatur.com) based in Addis Ababa. Ethiopian Airways flies daily from London direct to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

■ **Visa** British travellers require a visa to visit Ethiopia, available from the embassy in London (www.ethioembassy.org.uk), by post or on arrival at Addis Ababa's Bole International Airport. A single-entry permit costs £14.

■ **When to visit** Rains usually last from May to September although May to July is good for Spring flowers. October to April are favoured months. Because of the altitude, it can be cold at any time of year.

■ **Further reading** *Bradt Guide to Ethiopia*, by Philip Briggs

■ **More information** Ethiopia Tourist Board (www.tourismethiopia.gov.et), Bale Mountain Lodge (www.balemountainlodge.com), Ethiopian Wolf Conservation Programme (www.ethiopianwolf.org)

It took us two hours to reach Dolo Mena, our ears popping as we drove a spectacular 2000 metres down the steep escarpment from Harenna's chilly clouds

village of Rira, the Park's only legal settlement, is benefiting through employment at the lodge. Up to 100 people a day were employed here during its construction and most of the present staff are local. The lodge provides funding for a primary school and a health clinic, and the community benefits from guest activities such as village visits, tours to see how wild coffee and honey are harvested, and from selling bamboo handicrafts.

Further afield, guests can visit Sof Omar caves, the walled city of Harar or, closer to home, the market at Dolo Mena, 45km away. On our last day, it took us two hours to reach Dolo Mena, our ears popping as we drove a spectacular 2000 metres down the steep escarpment from Harenna's chilly clouds, eventually arriving in intensely dry and dusty heat. Amid the chaos and colour of the market, hundreds of Somali, Oromo and Borena people went about their daily routine, buying and selling anything from crockery to clothes to camels. We were the only tourists there and felt we'd glimpsed a private world rarely seen.

On our return to the lodge, we sipped wine under a blanket of stars in the shadow of Mount Gujuralli. In the dark, the Harenna Forest looked ever more mysterious, still holding secrets waiting to be discovered. And somewhere above us, on Sanetti Plateau, the Ethiopian wolves, having survived to see another day, would be settling down in their lairs, huddled together to keep the cold night air at bay. 🐾