



THE LION DEFENDERS OF RUAHA

Across Africa, as around the world, wildlife reserves face growing pressure from issues such as expanding human populations and poaching. A considerable amount of work takes place in the background to find sustainable solutions that safeguard the natural environment and the wildlife, and it is heartening to see their success. To learn more, we visited one of the continent's more remote, yet most outstanding, parks: the vast Ruaha, in southern Tanzania. →

PHOTOS: **WILL WHITFORD** WORDS: **SUE WATT**





JABALI RIDGE / ASILIA AFRICA



Born free: Ruaha is little visited, but highly regarded by those who do, in part for the vast, baobab-littered terrain, but also the rich wildlife – including nearly 10% of Africa's estimated lion population, among them Mr T



“Before the Lion Defenders, people had no concept of what a job was. Now they see the benefits, they want jobs. It's a huge cultural shift from their traditional lifestyle.”

Just twenty minutes after arriving in Ruaha, we spot Mr T lying flat out in the afternoon sun, with a dark matted mane and a belly full of buffalo. Deep in sleep, his paws are twitching, like a dog lost in a dream.

“He's a real character, a very strong lion,” our guide Dulla Fardy whispers. “He'll happily pose for photos but if you step out of line, he lets you know.”

As we watch Mr T, he seems not to have a worry in the world. Sunning himself in blissful ignorance, he's oblivious to the imminent dangers facing his species.

We willingly do our bit for big cat conservation by taking photos of his whisker patterns, each unique to individual lions. Then Dulla opens his tablet and together we complete a questionnaire that includes details on the gender of our lion, his demeanour, which pride he might belong to, his location with GPS coordinates, and whether he has any distinctive features.

This may seem unusual on a game drive, but during 2018 guides and tourists in Ruaha National Park gathered such information on some 2100 sightings of large carnivores, contributing to a staggering 12,000 entries that fill the database of the Ruaha Carnivore Project (RCP), helping to inform their conservation. Ruaha, spanning 20,000 square kilometres, is Tanzania's biggest national park and in such a vast area, the more eyes on the ground the better.

Raw and remote, little-visited Ruaha is mostly frequented by safari connoisseurs who cherish its secret charms. We're staying at the beautiful new lodge Jabali Ridge, owned by Asilia Africa. Known for its ethos of responsible tourism, Asilia works closely with RCP, supporting them on their online donation platform AsiliaGiving, sharing information about

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With Africa's population predicted to double to 2.5 billion by 2050, wild habitat is becoming ever scarcer as man encroaches further onto the lion's diminishing homelands, exacerbating the precarious tensions between people and predator. Laudably, almost 40 per cent of Tanzania is protected for wildlife, with Ruaha one of the continent's last strongholds for lions, home to nearly 10 per cent of Africa's entire population.

But until researcher Dr Amy Dickman from Oxford University's WildCRU team arrived in 2009, surprisingly little was known about

their work and providing that all-important information on sightings.

In total, RCP has trained 30 guides from ten lodges to assist with data-collection on Ruaha's predators.

But lions are losing their fight for survival. Some 200,000 once roamed Africa's plains. Today they number around 24,000, having disappeared from 90 per cent of their range. Shockingly, there are now thought to be fewer wild lions in Africa than rhinos, due to loss of habitat and prey, and conflict with people.

them. It's been a long, tough journey, but ten years on RCP now employs over 70 people, mostly Tanzanians, committed to saving Ruaha's large carnivores by working closely with communities to reduce human wildlife conflict.

“Communities have to be genuinely connected with conservation if they're going to protect Ruaha's lions,” Amy explains. “They have to get benefits from wildlife into their pockets.”

RCP's field camp lies in Kitisi, a sprawling village of mud-and-thatch houses outside the park. There, I meet Assistant Field Operations Manager Ana Grau who shows me how the information we collated on Mr T is transferred onto maps revealing 28 of Ruaha's lion pride territories and ‘hot spots’ of their most common sightings.

Later, in bed, I hear none of the normal nocturnal noises I'd heard at Jabali, no hippos harrumphing or hyenas howling. Instead, there's a commotion of cattle braying and dogs barking. I wonder if there's a lion around, realising that where we hear romance and that indomitable spirit of the wild in a lion's roar, local Barabaig and Maasai people hear hardship and trouble ahead, evoking only anxiety and anger.

Who can blame them? Livestock is their lifeblood. They have little but cattle and goats: no electricity, no running water, no education. When a lion kills a cow, that's US\$400 gone. Young men hunt lions

in retaliation or as rites of passage to becoming warriors. Dead lions are usually celebrated with parties, gifts and girls. Unsurprisingly, it's been difficult convincing them that the big cats killing their cattle are worth conserving.

“The Barabaig are a proud, secretive tribe,” BenJee Cascio, RCP's Lion Defenders Manager explains. “Traditionally they had freedom to roam the country with their cattle. They were regarded as outsiders resistant to change.” With nowhere left to roam, their old way of life is fading. And slowly but surely, thanks to RCP, their cultural hatred of lions is changing: Barabaig and Maasai warriors are becoming Lion Defenders.

Modelled on Kenya's Lion Guardians project, Ruaha now has 17 Lion Defenders whose duties include tracking big cats, alerting people of their presence, helping to reinforce or build new bomas (cattle enclosures), finding lost livestock and – crucially – averting lion hunts. Last year alone, they recovered over 3000 cows and goats valued at nearly US\$425,000 and prevented 21 lion hunts. And livestock killings have fallen by a staggering 60 per cent.

At the simple homestead of a Barabaig family we see an incongruously shiny, wire-fenced cattle enclosure. Kamunga, an elderly man dressed in traditional purple cloth, was one of the first adopters of RCP's lion-proof bomas. “It's a long time since I've lost an animal,” he smiles. “The lions are always circling around and roaring, but they can't get in.”

Lion Defenders have a tough, dangerous job in dissuading angry young men hell bent on a lion hunt. And many, like Daudi, had no education. “I had to learn to read and write Swahili, and to use cellphones and GPS, but I love my job,” he tells me.

They're becoming local heroes. I notice a woman listening intently to our conversation and we chat through the interpreter. Dahweda is 35, a mother of six. I ask how she'd feel if her son became a

Sight manager: Ana Grau shows the author how information gathered from lion sightings is mapped



Safety measures: Lion defender Mandela (pictured top) talks to Kamunga and Dahweda by a boma erected to protect livestock from attack by the big cats



Lion Defender. My interpreter looks awkward, hesitant. Women, it seems, are rarely asked their opinions and she'd have little say in her son's upbringing. "I'd love him to be a Lion Defender," she tells me eventually. "I see that men who do this work care and provide for their family, and care for their community too."

RCP's Community Liaison Officer Stephano Asecheka is pivotal to their work. A charismatic Barabaig, he's the bridge between the communities and the project, between the Barabaig's past and future. "I introduce conservation to our communities and help RCP understand our culture. Before the Lion Defenders, people had no concept of what a job was," he explains. "Now they see the benefits, they want jobs. It's a huge cultural shift from their traditional lifestyle."

Most people here live on less than a dollar a day, so it takes hard, tangible benefits to convince them of the value of conservation. They need involvement and ownership too. RCP's simple yet clever Community Camera Trapping initiative provides just that, simultaneously providing the project with vital information on wildlife in the villages.

The scheme involves 16 villages photographing wildlife on camera traps, earning escalating points for the animals they 'capture' - from 1000 for a harmless dikdik to 15,000 for a lion. Every three months, villages trade points for additional educational, healthcare or veterinary materials, so villages which conserve carnivores and other wildlife receive more benefits. Each year, the programme distributes around US\$80,000 in community benefits, while over one million images are uploaded to the citizen-science programme Snapshot Safari to be classified by volunteers world-wide.

The greatest benefit a community can have is education. RCP feeds 700 children in two schools, increasing attendance and attainment. They run a school twinning programme for teaching materials and fund pupils through secondary school and college. And to help communities understand the wildlife around them, they hold DVD nights of nature documentaries, which 40,000 people have attended to date.

But nothing beats seeing the real thing. Most locals have never visited their neighbouring national park, so RCP takes them to see wildlife from a different perspective. "They never knew lions could be gentle," Amy tells me.

Recently, they've started taking women into the park, to engage them in conservation. "Before, women wanted to marry lion killers," Amy continues. "Now, they want to marry Lion Defenders."

Traditionally, Barabaig men and women would meet at parties celebrating lion kills: the guy who killed the lion gets the kudos. But with 90 per cent of hunts now successfully prevented by Lion Defenders, RCP in a clever twist has turned tradition on its head, throwing parties for villages that haven't had a hunt for a month.

The work of RCP certainly merits celebration, but there's still much to be done to save Africa's lions.

"Tanzania's been hugely successful in maintaining high populations of lions when it's such a poor country," Amy comments. "I want my grandchildren to be able to see lions and if we, the global community, value Africa's wildlife then we must invest in it. African countries can't afford it: the rest of the world must share their burden too."

SUE WATT TRAVELLED WITH THANKS TO EXPERT AFRICA (WWW.EXPERTAFRICA.COM), ASILIA AFRICA (WWW.ASILIAAFRICA.COM) AND KENYA AIRWAYS (WWW.KENYA-AIRWAYS.COM). FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE RUAHA CARNIVORE PROJECT, VISIT WWW.RUAHACARNIVOREPROJECT.COM

AS RAW AS AFRICA GETS

Experienced safari-goers rank the Ruaha as one of the best wildlife parks on the continent. Here's why

WORDS AND PICTURES BY GRAEME GREEN

The cheetah looked decidedly nervous. Between hurried sips of water, the slender cat glanced over her left shoulder, then her right, before risking another mouthful.

It isn't paranoia if there really is something after you. A leopard appeared on the far bank of the Mwangusi river that cuts through Ruaha National Park, the two cats locking eyes across the dry riverbed. Leopards are known to attack and sometimes kill cheetahs. A clash seemed inevitable, the leopard bearing down at speed on the terrified smaller cat. But at the last moment, the cheetah turned and used her superior speed to escape, disappearing into long grass. We'd certainly not seen the last of that marauding leopard though...

Exceptional wildlife sightings come thick and fast in Tanzania's vast, remote Ruaha National Park. At 20,226 square kilometres, it's Tanzania's largest national park, but also one of Africa's least well-known. As a wildlife photographer, I'd wanted to explore the park for several years, tipped off by experts who'd travelled extensively across the continent and singled out Ruaha as one of the wildest places Africa has to offer.

I'd flown in from Dar es Salaam to Jongomero airstrip towards the south of the park. Over two days of game drives, I saw impala, warthogs, baboons and black-backed jackals among the forests, with crocodiles and hippos wallowing in the shallows of the Ruaha river. Elephants crossed the water in processions right in front of us.

"Ruaha comes from the old He-He word 'Ruvaha', meaning 'the old river that never gets dry'," guide Theo Myinga told me. "Without the river, there's no national park. Everything here needs water."

From the thick thorn tree forests of Jongomero, we drove north →



40% larger than the Serengeti, Ruaha receives less than 10% of the visitor numbers, with only ten camps and lodges within the park's borders.



TANZANIA

into the park's central zone, around Msembe airstrip. The terrain was ever-changing: rocky outcrops; green valleys where animals grazed by the river; corridors of tall palms; forests of fat, gnarly baobabs; flat, stretching grasslands, known here as 'Little Serengeti', where giraffe and zebra roamed.

Driving around, there were none of the crowds or lines of vehicles I've experienced in the Serengeti or Ngorongoro, just a feeling of wilderness and space to explore. Forty per cent larger than the Serengeti, Ruaha receives less than ten per cent of the visitor numbers, with only ten camps and lodges within the park's borders. Tourism is concentrated in just 10 per cent of the national park, leaving 90 per cent still largely untouched.

We spent an evening watching elephants ambling up the Mwangusi riverbed, infants attempting to dig in the sand for water with their trunks. Ruaha has one of Tanzania's largest elephant populations, as well as one of the continent's largest lion and cheetah populations, alongside leopard, hyena, giraffe and 574 species of birds. I photographed colourful lilac-breasted rollers and the endemic red-billed hornbills flitting from tree to tree, and spent time with bright blue and orange rock agamas, with baboon troops feeding on baobab flowers and with tiny shy dik-dik couples bolting through the undergrowth. One day, we found a 13-strong pride of lions feeding on a giraffe carcass.

The leopard we witnessed chasing down the anxious cheetah made another even more memorable appearance. By following the sounds of hysterical baboons, we found the leopard resting up in the branches of a baobab tree. Below, oblivious to any threat, an impala munched grass. The leopard's face appeared. Noting the unmissable opportunity, it leapt down, seizing the impala's leg in its jaws.

Later, I headed east into another remote section of the park to Kichaka, specialists in walking safaris. From the tiny hilltop camp, we set out each morning to walk across the hot, sun-baked grasslands and through dense woodlands, along the way encountering kudu and springing impala. One morning on the riverbed, we silently observed a large bull elephant 20 metres ahead.

Our third day of walking took us 15 kilometres from the main camp, past candelabra trees and an enormous ancient baobab. Along the way, we were watched by curious giraffes, heads poking out from above treetops.

After a night in fly-camp tents out in the wilderness, we continued up the Ruaha river, led by veteran guide Jacques Hoffman. In the sand, Jacques pointed out the tracks of lions, as well as buffalo, giraffe and elephant prints. Around us, we could hear the calls of doves, shrikes and fish eagles.

"Just look around and listen to everything that's going on here," said Jacques, who's travelled throughout Africa. "Ruaha is raw Africa, real Africa. The amount of life here is just awesome." 🐾

GRAEME GREEN TRAVELLED WITH AUDLEY TRAVEL, AND STAYED AT JONGOMERO CAMP, KWIHALA JABALI RIDGE AND KICHAKA.



All creatures great and small: The leopard that fell from the branches to catch an impala; a dik-dik, an endemic red-billed hornbill and a lilac-breasted roller

SAFARI PLANNER

GETTING THERE
Ruaha is accessible by road, but it is a long drive from Dar es Salaam, so most visitors fly into the bush airstrips. Coastal Aviation operates a daily circuit, connecting Ruaha with Selous, Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam and Serengeti.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
The drier months of May to November are most popular for visitors, with wildlife being more easily seen. From January to June the bush is greener and prettier, and the park quieter, and birding is particularly good between December and April.

WHERE TO STAY
There are remarkably few camps in Ruaha, although growing

interest in the park has seen some new lodges opening in recent years. Most are located along the southern flank, with tourism activities centred in only about 10 per cent of the park. Some, but not all, camps offer walking safaris.

