

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY EXPEDITION

TO MWA BVI GAME RESERVE. SOUTHERN MALAWI. CENTRAL AFRICA

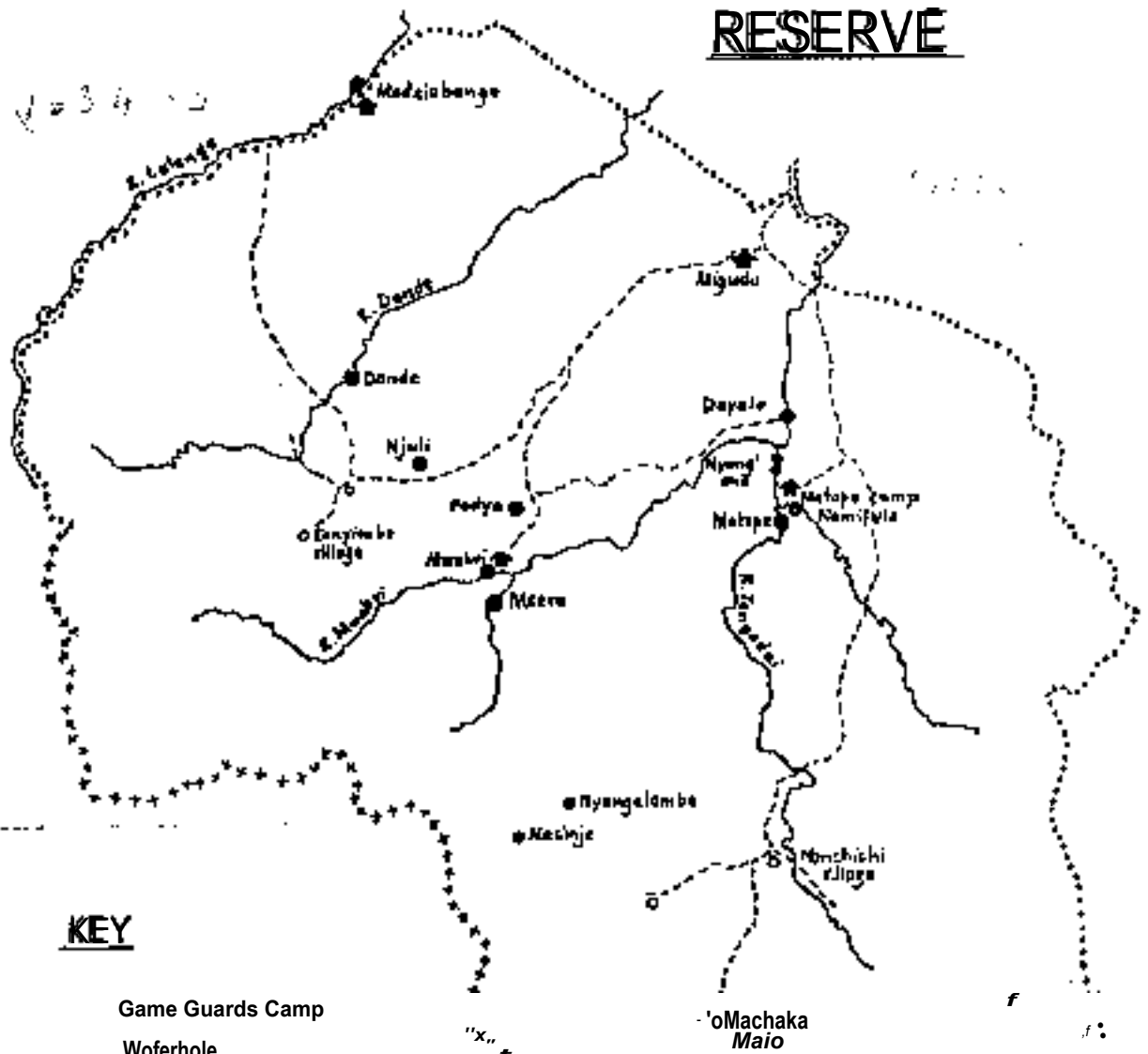
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This is a preliminary report of the results of our expedition. A full report containing all our scientific results will be available shortly *and* anyone wishing a copy should write to P.G.H.Evans, o/o Zoology Dept., Tillydrone Avenue, Aberdeen, AB9.2TN, Scotland.

# MWABVI GAME RESERVE



## KEY

- Game Guards Camp
- Waterhole
- Leopard track
- ..... Reserve Boundary
- ◆-a International Boundary
- Old Maid site

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we **drove** the **twenty** miles or so to Mwabvi camp, our base for the next seven **weeks**. Much of that **day** was spent unloading the Game Department lorry which was laden with food, a gas refrigerator, blankets **and** many other items of equipment. Then we turned our attention **to setting up** camp. The girls laid claim to a large and **interestingly designed** tent, **kindly loaned** to us **and** set up with much difficulty by **Frank Sheridan**, whilst the males **retreated** to the **protection** of two tin rondavals. We had little time **that afternoon to** do more than **just glimpse** the steep **and narrow gorge of** Mwabvi, to watch the Dassies **scampering about** the rocks **and a python disappear** down a **deep black cleft**. **By 6pm.**, night was upon us **and very quickly** the **woods were alive** with **the sounds** of rustling **and the steady** throb of crickets **and** numerous other insects.



Early next morning we were awakened by the distant roar of a **lion** and we were soon **up and eating** a huge breakfast of Ufa made for us by our **cook, Harry**. The **day was** spent **exploring** Mwabvi gorge as far as Ndipitakuti, a narrow chasm of rock, which **translated** from Chichewa means rather aptly 'Where do I go **to** from here?'. In **the dark green waters beneath** was said to **live** a **lone** crocodile, but throughout our stay we saw **no sign** of it **and** there was some **controversy** as to whether it was not in fact a large **Legavan** lizard. Fresh rhino spoor and the prints of leopard and bushbuck were found by the water's **edge, and** in the Brachystegia/Julbernardia woodland behind the camp we fo

Further signs of kudu, sable, grysbok, duiker, bushpig, porcupine and genet.

The next few days were spent with the help of the game-guards Katema, Mjawa, and Kumwendo, locating the main water-holes and acquainting ourselves with the spoor and coats of different species of game animals. Much of our whole work depended on being able to identify such signs. Our first excursion by landrover took us over rough ground overgrown with grasses, following a track once used by local villagers but which had long since ceased to exist. However, the game guards ably guided us to the water-holes of Njuli and Dande. Njuli was a rock basin on the edge of thicket with a view across open woodland of Dacia and Albizzia. There were signs of buffalo, kudu and warthog. Dande was a series of pools in a river of the same name, with lush vegetation growing on either side and up the steep banks. Buffalo, kudu, and sable, bushbuck and suni had all drunk there whilst a band of Blue Monkeys were resident close by. On our return we glimpsed a family party of Nyala and a troop of baboons.

On Sunday July 20th, Steve Rowe, Cornell Dudley, Frank and Clare Sheridan, and Meate Garcia, an ornithologist living in Zomba, came down for a day to lend a hand with the identification of some of the game animals and birds of the reserve. A walk down Mwaby Gorge revealed two new species for Malawi, four Mottled Spinetails, long suspected of occurring in the far south but never proved, and a band of Dwarf Mongooses which provided excellent views for almost five minutes. As dusk fell over the gorge, a lion roared close by and disappeared into the undergrowth, and a steady stream of Trumpeter Hornbills passed overhead, trumpeting as they went.

The next week was spent poring over air photos under a stereoscope, drawing boundaries around apparently different vegetation types, and building hides at all the major water-holes. With the invaluable help of Katema, Mjawa, Kumwendo and the other game-guards our identification of scats and spoor slowly improved. Our knowledge of the trees, however, was far more limited and this proved our greatest problem for some time.

We had hoped that by setting up hides at the major water-holes we would be able to make some assessment of the numbers and variety of species present as they concentrated to drink. However, this did not prove possible owing to there being too much water available elsewhere and to the presence of our scent which was apparently keeping most of the animals away. Some species such as rhino and buffalo which did not need to drink nightly, avoided the water-holes for some time after our arrival. We tried to prevent this by visiting water-holes only every three days but the relatively cool weather conditions at the time and a ready supply of water were probably factors behind the failure of this scheme. Many of the water-holes were situated under a canopy of trees so that there was little light particularly in the hours immediately after dusk or before dawn, when drinking activity was probably greatest. Thus most animals which came to drink during the watches could not be seen clearly and had to be identified subsequently from spoor prints. We decided, there-

We returned to Mwabvi camp and prepared for another early start so as to be in the south before the sun's heat was upon us. This time three of us had decided to stay down there overnight, together with a game-guard. We slept that *night* under the stars with howls of **hyaenas** around us and the distant roar of a lion.

The next morning we divided up to continue the vegetation transects and explore the eastern boundary of the reserve. *My* now the other.-landrover was back in action so the rest of the party came down to join us and provide reinforcements. The day was rather shattered by an eager trio of game-guards Katema, Kasenga and Jim, capturing a madman, poachers and a tourist from Mozambique, and gleefully placing them in handcuffs with request to go to Chiromo to stand trial. So both landrovers returned to Mwabvi leaving guards and myself to enjoy another night under the stars.

Our final few days were spent in similar fashion, completing further transects exploring the far corners of the reserve, straying now and again by accident into zambique, following rivers past abandoned Frelimo camps, investigating unknown thickets discovering new water-holes.

On the 6th September the three of us trekked back, following first the river uku, then the Mozambique border and finally moving *north* into the great thicket of antoko where we found many signs of rhino, disturbed one from the undergrowth, and found hyaena lying asleep by an undiscovered water-hole. We arrived back at camp with preparations well under way for the evening's festivities. It was our last *night* and we were holding party, for all the game-guards, their wives and families.

On September 7th we left Mwabvi, bidding sad farewells to the game-guards who had been our constant companions and guides for the last seven weeks. We spent two nights at abut entertained to a party by Steve, Pete, and Bob and then we slowly wended our way north to Blantyre after visits to Elephant Marsh and to Lengwe for final glimpses of Nyala the shadows of buffalo drinking at dusk. We had six days left to us in Malawi and during this time we were taken up into the woods of Zomba plateau and conducted around wonde National Park, ably guided by Dave Stead from Chancellor College, who had spent his time helping us in Mwabvi. And then we returned to Blantyre to spend a day around the own winding up expedition matters, visiting neighbouring Michiru Mountain and being entertained by G.D.Hayes and then by Frank and Clare Sheridan. On our final day Bill Simpson, the anchor man behind the whole expedition, drove us to Mount Mlanje and we ended to 7,000 ft. to view the great peak, shrouded in heat haze, a fitting climax to memorable expedition.

## TUBULI.UENTATA

Aardvark Orycteropus afer Apparently very common and widespread with diggings attributed to this species by the game-guards occurring in all habitats wherever the soil was deep enough. None was seen.

## HYRACOIDEA

Yellow-spotted Hyrax Dendrohyrax brucei Very common wherever there were sandstone rock outcrops. All individuals seen were thought to be of this species rather than D. arboreus.

## PROBOSCIDEA

**African** Elephant Loxodonta africana Old spoor from the wet season were found along the tracks to Njuli and Dayelo. The game-guards reported seeing a male during 1973 but none was seen during our visit, nor were there any fresh signs of elephants.

## P ISSODACTYLA

Black Rhinoceros Diceros bicornis Mwabvi is the only reserve in Southern Malawi where this species occurs. The Rhino is such a shy and secretive animal (presumably due to excessive hunting) that it is very difficult to estimate the size of the population accurately. However, by a combination of distribution mapping and the setting up of permanent grids to study movements, we conclude that there are probably between 15-30 animals in the reserve. The bulk of these are in the thicket south of Nyantoko with others in Nteya Th>ba and Malema thickets and in the thicket area surrounding the river Dzuculowa. Those in the northern thickets probably drink at Madziobango, Dande and Njuli water-holes. Those from Malema and the southern thickets probably drink mainly at Fodya, Nankhungu, and Mwabvi water-holes, whilst the animals from the thicket south of Nyantoko may obtain most of their water from water-holes in that region, such as Nyangalambe and Masinje water-holes. Furthermore, it is possible that some of these *animals* drink outside the reserve, perhaps at Pangaroman water-hole in Mozambique. There was only one sighting of a rhino when a young animal was disturbed from the river Dande north of the water-holes on 28th August. It was probably accompanied by an adult as there was much crashing in the undergrowth. Rhinos were also disturbed from a water-hole by Ndipitakuti (2nd August) and in the thicket south of Nyantoko (5th September) though neither were seen.

Burchell's Zebra Eoanus burchellii A single animal was seen in open grassland west of the Thangadzi south of Matope on 31st August. One of the game-guards said that he had seen two in the same area three years previous. Fresh zebra spoor were found at Nyangalambe water hole on 27th September.

## ARTIODACTYLA

Bush Pig Potamochoerus phoca signs of this species were found throughout the reserve, usually close to thicket or dense riverine scrub. Since it is very secretive, it is not surprising that we had only one sighting, two adults disturbed during a drive from a thicket area of Brachyete a woodland.